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Meta analysis of research on the impact of Covid-19 on the youth sector

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1. What is the aim of this paper?

The EU-Council of Europe youth partnership runs the [Knowledge HUB: Covid-19 impact on the youth sector](#) with updates on research studies and analysis relevant for the youth sector. This meta-analysis is created by the team of researchers within the framework of this project, **which aims to examine data from a number of independent studies** (conducted from April to December 2020) **on relevant subjects, in order to determine overall trends and emerging gaps**. This paper builds on previous briefings that have been exploring the initial findings of research on the impact of Covid-19 on the youth sector, with a focus on the areas which have been most impacted to date: **education and mobility, youth employment, youth work and youth organisations and mental health, well-being, youth participation, digitalisation and AI, social inclusion and national realities**. The paper additionally reflects on general ethical issues relating to research in times of the Covid-19 pandemic.

2. Research in times of the Covid-19 pandemic

While the Covid-19 pandemic is undoubtedly a global crisis, with the generation of evidence raising critical ethical issues that have been captured in the literature, there are specificities relating to this emergency that need to be taken into account in unpacking potential ethical issues that may arise in relation to data collection, analysis and dissemination of information. Hence, all data collection, analysis and communication during and after Covid-19 requires ethical reflection and a strong focus on doing no harm.

The UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti (2020) discussion paper *Ethical Considerations for Evidence Generation Involving Children on the Covid-19 Pandemic* reflects on why ethical considerations are specifically relevant for evidence generation in Covid-19 and elaborates on a variety of direct and indirect experiences and impacts within child (0-18) populations during and after the Covid-19 pandemic that need to be considered. This discussion paper identifies key ethical considerations (a) when undertaking evidence generation involving children during the mitigation stage of the pandemic (emergency phase) and (b) on subjects relating to Covid-19 once the pandemic has been contained and containment policy measures, including lockdowns, have been lifted (post-emergency phase).

In terms of methodology, both quantitative and qualitative methods were used with a clear dominance of online surveys as a method with its fast outcomes and possibility to gather opinions transnationally from a large sample of respondents in the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic (i.e. spring and summer 2020). Due to the urgent nature of the issue, accidental sampling and purposive/judgmental sampling techniques were employed, i.e. sending out questionnaires to mailing lists, posting links to social media etc. However, there are examples of clearer and better designed sampling strategies applied with the passage of time, increasing the representativeness of the studies (Krzaklewska and Şenyuva 2020).

The literature review also shows that researchers have responded in diverse, thoughtful and creative ways to the current Covid-19 pandemic – from adapting their data collection methods, to fostering researcher and community resilience, rethinking researcher–researched relationships while also attending to often urgent needs for care. As they have begun to adapt to the continuing presence of Covid-19, researchers have also begun to reflect more deeply on fundamental research issues and assumptions. For instance, *Researching in the age of Covid-19*¹ – a series of three Rapid Responses books published by Bristol University Press – focuses on “Response and Reassessment”, “Care and Resilience” and “Creativity and Ethics”. Together they showcase new methods and emerging approaches and help academic, applied and practitioner-researchers worldwide adapt to the new challenges that Covid-19 brings.

At the same time, there is a worry that lack of studies being conducted in the second half of 2020 will leave us with a blank spot in regard to how the effects of the pandemic evolve and change (Krzaklewska and Şenyuva 2020). One of the emerging tendencies - to include sentiments and voices of young people in the participatory and action research processes relating to the Covid-19 impact and recovery planning needs to be amplified (as illustrated by examples of UNESCO The Youth As Researchers (YAR) global initiative,² and studies conducted by UNICEF-ETF³ and ECORYS UK⁴).

3. The impact of Covid-19 on education and learning mobility

3.1 Key trends from studies on education and learning mobility

Education is not only a fundamental human right, it is an enabling right with direct impact on the realisation of all other human rights, access to which has been severely challenged by the Covid-19 pandemic. The United Nations studies and briefs warn that the Covid-19 outbreak has created severe disruption in the education systems across the globe and is threatening a loss of learning that may stretch beyond one generation of students. The pandemic affected nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries and all continents. Closures of schools and other learning spaces have impacted on 94% of the world’s student population, up to 99% in low- and lower-middle income countries. The crisis is exacerbating pre-existing education disparities by reducing the opportunities for many of the most vulnerable children and youth – those living in poor or rural areas, girls, refugees, persons with disabilities and forcibly displaced persons – to continue their learning (UN 2020).

The same tendency has been identified at the regional and national level, as indicated in a joint UNICEF and the European Training Foundation (ETF) report *Preventing a Lockdown Generation in Europe and Central Asia: Building resilient societies with young people in the*

1. <https://policy.bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/researching-in-the-age-of-covid-19>

2. <https://en.unesco.org/news/youth-researchers-exploring-impact-covid-19>

3. <https://www.unicef.org/eca/media/14716/file/Lockdown%20generation.pdf>

4. <https://www.schoolsdigital.com/reports/teachers-and-schools-report-main.pdf>

era of Covid-19 (November 2020), which builds on wide-ranging consultations with more than 15 000 adolescents and young people in the Europe and Central Asia Region (ECA). This report shows that Covid-19 interrupted schooling for many young people in the Europe and Central Asia region, and made it more difficult to integrate into the labour market. Facing school closures and uncertainty about their futures, young people said that they feel isolated and are dealing with levels of stress, anxiety and depression.

Much of the current debate and literature also focuses on the quality of education and learning during school closures. The European Commission's *Blended learning in school education: guidelines for the start of the academic year 2020/21* (European Commission 2020) explores the pedagogical opportunities and challenges of a blended learning model. It also identifies key considerations that can help with reflection and strategic planning and guide policy makers in considering the system as a whole; and complement existing guidelines by national authorities and international organisations.

To mitigate the short-term and longer-term impact of school closures, UNESCO's *Covid-19 Education Sector issue notes* (UNESCO 2020) provide important evidence of good practices and links to important references including practical tips for designing policy and programmatic interventions to address social anxiety and build vital coping skills and emotional resilience among children, youth, their families and communities.

The OECD survey *Schooling disrupted, schooling rethought: How the Covid-19 pandemic is changing education* (OECD 2020b), conducted in 59 countries, demonstrates remarkable resilience, flexibility and commitment to education in having established strategies for education continuity during the Covid-19 pandemic while another OECD study, *Shaping the Covid-19 Recovery Ideas from OECD's Generation Y and Z* (OECD 2020a), captures young people's priorities for a better future and outlines innovative ideas and challenges as seen by the youth generation.

Various researches furthermore capture the impact of Covid-19 on non-formal education and learning mobility, including student exchanges (for example, Erasmus student exchange). For instance, European Commission (May 2020), *Coronavirus – learning mobilities impact survey results*, collected the views of over 11 000 mobility participants supported under the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps programmes on how the Covid-19 outbreak affected the ordinary course of their mobility activities. The results show that more than 107 000 participants (75%) in Erasmus+ mobility were affected by the Covid-19 situation. More than 80 000 of these participants came back home while 27 000 stayed abroad. Close to 42% continued their activities with different arrangements (i.e. distance or online learning). For 22% of participants the activity was temporarily suspended while for 36% of respondents the activity was definitely cancelled (European Commission May 2020).

The European Students Network (ESN April 2020) gathered experiences of about 22 000 international students and trainees across Europe in the research report, *Student exchanges*

in times of Crisis, The impact of Covid-19 on student exchanges in Europe, which indicated that about a quarter of mobilities were cancelled – with most students continuing (65%). In response to the pandemic most of the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) transferred their classes online (85%) or suspended them while most of the mobility students also moved to online education (85% of ESN Survey respondents). As qualitative studies show, the fact that learning was moved online constituted a lot of challenges, but most importantly was very positively evaluated.

Further investigation among Erasmus Mundus projects conducted by the European Commission and EACEA through *Survey Report Erasmus Mundus Programme Implementation in the Context of Covid-19* (June 2020) provides useful insights into challenges and coping mechanisms applied by consortia and students to tackle the unprecedented situation of the Covid-19 crisis, as well as feedback to HEIs, the European Commission and EACEA, decision makers and other Erasmus+ stakeholders. Regional and national overviews of the disruption caused by Covid-19 on higher education around the world and on the first measures undertaken by HEIs to minimise this disruption and to continue fulfilling their missions of educating the next generations, of advancing science and knowledge through research, and of providing service to local communities and society at large, is presented in the report *Regional/National Perspectives on the Impact of Covid-19 on Higher Education*, issued by the International Association of Universities (IAU 2020).

To prevent a learning crisis from becoming a generational catastrophe, some institutions produced expertise or position papers in relation to crisis management and post-Covid-19 recovery. The United Nations accordingly urge national authorities and the international community to come together to place education at the forefront of recovery agendas and protect investment in education, encouraging governments and stakeholders to pursue the following policy responses: Suppress Transmission of The Virus and Plan Thoroughly for School Re-Openings; Protect Education Financing and Co-ordinate for Impact; Build Resilient Education Systems for Equitable and Sustainable Development; and Reimagine Education and Accelerate Change in Teaching and Learning (UN 2020).

3.2 Emerging gaps from studies on education and learning mobility

- The short-term and long-term impact of Covid-19 on education needs to be explored from a broad perspective, including school leadership; legislation to support decision making; the management of in-school and distance-learning environments for all learners; the teacher's role, competences, and working conditions; learner assessment; the well-being of staff and pupils; collaboration and school community; and quality assurance (UN 2020).
- Beyond support in logistical and educational matters, qualitative studies indicated the need to consider students' psychological well-being and necessity to provide support in this regard (Krzaklewska and Şenyuva 2020).

- More attention has been given to ensuring the continuity of academic learning than to the socio-emotional development of students (OECD 2020b).
- Social and emotional skills are well established, evidence-based practices, that can be adapted to help equip children, young people, parents and teachers with the knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours they need to cope with daily challenges (UNESCO 2020), and therefore the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on socio-emotional development of students needs to be further examined.

4. The impact of Covid-19 on youth employment

4.1 Key trends from studies on youth employment

The spread of Covid-19 has led to skyrocketing youth unemployment in most European countries and left the labour market in an extremely precarious condition (Tamesberger and Bacher 2020). Other researchers (Fana et al. 2020) identify that Covid-19 increases negative conditions in youth, such as unemployment rate, reduction in working hours, less labour force participation and decrease in wages. In other words, a context that increases labour inequalities.

In addition to researchers, many international organisations have also been concerned with analysing the effects of the pandemic on youth employability. Through their own questionnaires or based on official statistics, these studies focused on knowing the impact of the pandemic, and the confinement measures, on the youth labour market. Without a doubt, those that stand out the most today are *Global report: Youth & Covid-19: Impacts on Jobs, Education, Rights and Mental Wellbeing* (ILO 2020), *Living, working and Covid-19* (Eurofound 2020), and *Proposal for a Joint Employment Report 2021* (European Commission 2020).

The *Global Report: Youth & Covid-19: Impacts on Jobs, Education, Rights and Mental Wellbeing* (ILO 2020) highlights that Covid-19 has pushed youth (aged 18-29) out of the labour market worldwide. This is exemplified in that one in six young people have had to stop working due to the pandemic. This has meant that youth unemployment rates have increased and, in turn, increased demand for employment among youth. At the same time, the young people who are still employed report a considerable increase in their working hours, a high chance of burnout and difficulties in disconnecting from work during the pandemic.

At European level, the *Living, Working and Covid-19 Report* (Eurofound 2020) found significant impacts on youth employment. For example, only 60% of youth employees aged 18 to 34 felt they were doing a useful job. This figure contrasts with the EU average, which stands at 70%, or even with people over 50 years of age, who reach 80%. The previous data are inverted when asking about the labour demand they are having. Youth is at 33%, while the EU average is at 30%, and for people over 50, at 23%. As a last indicator, it is observed that 37% of youth felt exhausted at the end of their working day, while the EU average is 32% and in people over 50, 27%.

The European Commission (2020) published the *Proposal for a Joint Employment Report 2021*. As a first finding, youth unemployment (15-24) has increased more markedly than unemployment for other age cohorts, certifying that this group is more vulnerable to unfavourable economic contexts. As a second finding, the report identifies that within the youth group the pandemic has further impacted several sub-groups, such as young people that are not in employment nor in education or training (NEET), low-skilled young people and young women.

As part of the present meta-analysis, it is considered important to point out the following studies that also confirm the findings of the previous paragraphs: *Youth at Risk: Analysis of the socio-economic consequences of the Covid-19 on Spain's young population* (INJUVE 2020), *The United Nations Youth Flash Special issue on Covid-19 and Youth* (UN 2020), *Covid-19 and the career prospects of young people* (Institute for Fiscal Studies 2020), *Labour market in the light of the Covid-19 pandemic – quarterly statistics* (Eurostat 2020) and *Escaping the growth and jobs treadmill* (European Youth Forum 2020).

4.2 Emerging gaps from studies on youth employment

Due to the immediacy of responding to the pandemic consequences, studies have not yet focused on how this whole situation will affect the professional careers of youth in the medium and long term, especially to avoid a new lost generation. In this regard, one of the groups which seems to have not yet been studied that is suffering the most from the pandemic and teleworking is young professional mothers (Heggeness 2020). The gender employment gap stagnated before the crisis and is now at risk of widening, where young professional mothers are especially vulnerable in the current context.

On the other hand, there are still few studies analysing the adaptation of anti-Covid measures in the workplace. It seems that teleworking will remain a key aspect during and after the pandemic. Therefore, it is important to know if the youth have the proper technological equipment, if they have quality internet, if they have digital skills and if they know how to make good use of both technological equipment and competences. Moreover, it is essential to provide working environments that ensure work, social and family balance (especially for workers in vulnerable situations).

Finally, governments have implemented various measures to counteract the effects of Covid-19 on youth unemployment. Further research is needed in order to really know the impact these policies are having and, at the same time, generate evidence of what works, why it works and how to put it into practice (to really design measures that reduce the negative consequences of Covid-19 on youth unemployment).

5. The impact of Covid-19 on youth work and youth organisations

5.1 Key trends from studies on youth work and youth organisations

Another cluster of studies comes from surveys of youth work organisations to explore their adaptations to social distancing measures and short- and medium-term goals in the wake of the pandemic. Many of the studies on this topic are on the national or local level, with some key European-level studies and surveys such as the Effects of Covid-19 across youth work and youth activities launched by the CJM, the EKCYP survey Towards a better understanding of the impact of Covid-19 on the youth sector, the Survey on the impact of the corona pandemic on youth work in Europe – in the European Youth Programmes and beyond by the RAY Network, and the Initiatives during the Covid-19 outbreak by EYCA member organisations by the European Youth Card Association. The Blueprint to Recovery by the European Youth Forum also provides a section on the work of youth organisations during the pandemic.

The impact of Covid-19 on youth work and youth sector goes beyond severe economic effects, as no supporting mechanisms were in place to deal with the situation when the crisis began. Youth organisations were forced to develop their own solutions. Among the main trends in this area of research, **structural and economic challenges for youth workers and youth organisations** should be mentioned, as nearly three quarters of the organisations in the youth sector had to **close their facilities temporarily** (RAY 2020), on top of facing **economic challenges** including cuts in their budgets, staff reduction, job insecurity, delays or cancellation of their programmes for the years 2020-21, and reported continuous challenges in existing or pending grant applications (RAY 2020; EKCYP 2020).

Another trend concerns **dropouts and increasing marginalisation**, as different studies underline the issue of **youth work dropouts**, in which youth workers lost access to the young people they normally work with. The drop in engagement level is particularly significant for youth from vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, showing the importance of face-to-face youth work (RAY 2020). Yet, a great deal of analysis has focused on the theme of **digitalisation of youth work**, and particularly how youth workers reported large difficulties in transferring their work to online environments due to lack of **digital resources and digital skills**. In line with what is mentioned above, the digital divide has affected young people themselves, increasingly isolating already marginalised youth with little or no access to online technologies (European Youth Forum 2020). Additional analysis raised important questions concerning the need to find a **new approach for youth work** and non-formal education in online spaces – including quality digital youth work, safe spaces to join youth work activities, but also blended solutions to motivate young people to return to face-to-face activities when possible (EKCYP 2020).

Finally, **best practices from youth organisations** emerged as an important and growing trend, with youth organisations at the national and local level adopting **different practices to**

respond to the current situation: online exhibitions, online daily sports challenges, webinars on how to enrich free time at home and how to keep a healthy lifestyle, social media campaigns, keeping young volunteering active by co-operating with local authorities on the delivery of pharmaceuticals, masks and food to those in need (EYCA 2020). The Council of Europe Good Practices Database provides examples of good practice in youth policy and youth work responses to Covid-19 from member states and partners. It also provides guidance for youth workers, trainers, youth organisations and young people to meet these challenges.

5.2 Emerging gaps from studies on youth work and youth organisations

Emerging gaps in this area revolve around medium-term strategies and integrated approaches adopted by organisations in the youth sector, notably synergies between local, national, and European levels as well as between the public sector, governments, and informal youth service providers. Moreover, different studies have already underlined a crucial issue in the aftermath of the pandemic, namely the exacerbation of existing inequalities, including among groups of already marginalised young people. Further research is needed in order to understand first, which groups of young people have been hit the most and why, and how the youth sector can work towards addressing these. Second, research is also needed not only to understand the case of existing inequalities that have been exacerbated, but also whether we are witnessing new and different inequalities emerging among young people.

6. The impact of Covid-19 on young people's mental health and well-being

6.1 Key trends from studies on mental health and well-being

Many studies have identified the significant impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on young people's mental health and well-being. OECD (2020e) research found social distancing and quarantine measures resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic had a significant psychological impact on young people causing stress, anxiety and loneliness. OECD (2020e) research also found that young adults (aged 18-29) have experienced higher levels of distress compared to other age groups since the onset of the pandemic.

Research shows that school closures have affected young people's mental well-being as teachers and classmates can provide social and emotional support (OECD 2020e). According to JAMA Pediatrics (2020), the Covid-19 pandemic poses a threat to young people's mental health by worsening existing problems and curtailing access to school-based mental health services.

Some studies have found that Covid-19 is negatively impacting the mental health of specific groups of young people. For example, studies have shown that women and girls' mental health and well-being are being affected in an unequal manner (University of Essex 2020). Similarly, Covid-19 is having a serious impact on the mental health of LGBTI+⁵ young people (BeLonG To Youth Services 2020).

However, as well as negative impacts on mental health, some studies have identified positive mental health impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on young people (Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2020).

Finally, in terms of policy challenges, the need to invest in mental health support for young people was identified as one of the most significant short- to medium-term policy challenges facing the youth sector as a result of the pandemic (EU-Council of Europe youth partnership 2020).

6.2 Emerging gaps from studies on mental health and well-being

The main gaps identified in studies on mental health and well-being relate to the long-term impacts and consequences of Covid-19 on young people's mental health and well-being. These long-term impacts will only be evident through conducting further research over time such as longitudinal studies.

Another key gap is to explore further why specific cohorts such women and girls, LGBTI+ young people and other vulnerable groups have been disproportionately affected by Covid-19 in relation to mental health and well-being.

7. The impact of Covid-19 on youth participation

7.1 Key studies on youth participation

The possibility of young people to have a say, influence and decide over issues that affect them is a human right, and it is included in the Treaty on European Union. The novel Covid-19 has affected the spaces and contexts in which youth regularly mobilise and engage with personal, professional, social, civic and political activities. At the same time, authorities asked young people and youth organisations to make significant sacrifices during the pandemic without having taken into account their needs and intentions, nor having the possibility that their voice led to governmental actions (Efuribe et al. 2020).

5. In the analysed research there is no consistent term LGBTI+. It depends on who is referring to the organisation/study. It can be LGBTI in one case, LGBTQ in another, LGBTI+ in yet another. Throughout the entire meta-analysis you will find the three terms mentioned in the previous sentence. It has been decided not to mix these terms, because we prefer to be faithful to what it is used in the original publications.

According to Marston et al. (2020), community participation was essential during these months of pandemic as a way for youth to participate, co-create responses to the pandemic, incorporate their voices to the decision making and build future resilience. Youth participation can be an important resource during and after COVID-19, acknowledging that young people can not only be a target group, but also a resource to create awareness among their peers, establish intergenerational bridges and consolidate governmental actions (Branquinho et al. 2020).

In addition to researchers, many international organisations have also been concerned with analysing the effects of the pandemic on youth participation. Through their own questionnaires or based on official statistics, these studies focus on how young people participate during these Covid-19 times and what impact it has on them and their context. Without a doubt, the ones that stand out the most are: *Safeguarding Civic Space for Young People in Europe* (EYF 2020) and *Building on Rainbows: Supporting Children's Participation in Shaping Responses to Covid-19* (Eurochild 2020). Furthermore, the Salto Participation and Information platform turned out to be a reference tool where youth could express what was happening to them during the year of the pandemic.

Safeguarding Civic Space for Young People in Europe (EYF 2020) highlights that one in eight youth organisations experienced difficulties in organising or participating in public assemblies; and two in five of them felt certain that their participation would not result in some form of action. At the same time, one in four organisations were not fully capable of engaging in advocacy activities, and experienced at least some difficulties in participating in the processes of deliberation and decision making during the pandemic.

Building on Rainbows: Supporting Children's Participation in Shaping Responses to Covid-19 (Eurochild 2020) highlights that there is hardly a single Covid-19-related children's participation initiative at local or national level. This same report stresses that children's participation activities were more provision of information and not any practical governmental action. In this regard, they underscore the importance of generating ways to work directly with children and young people to gather their views about what they need.

Interesting experiences can be found in the Salto Participation and Information platform: (1) *Student voices: Fighting to be heard during the Covid-19 exam chaos* (Bacalso 2020) and (2) *Youth participation during the pandemic in Russia* (Ivanian 2020). The first testimony indicates how youth have actively participated through grassroots mechanisms and organisations, paid attention to Covid-19 decisions and tried to engage in public policy for the very first time. The second testimony shows how young people and youth organisations have found online spaces to continue participating in educational, political and volunteer activities, and also making them available to a wider audience.

As part of this meta-analysis, it is considered important to point out the following studies that also confirm the findings of the previous paragraphs: Transparency, communication and trust:

Responding to the wave of disinformation about the new Coronavirus (OECD 2020d), Community participation is crucial in a pandemic (Marston et al. 2020) and Eastern Partnership Youth Engagement Summit Final Report (EU 2020).

7.2 Emerging gaps from studies on youth participation

Due to the immediacy of responding to the pandemic consequences, studies have not yet focused on the challenges associated with digital participation, such as digital inclusion, accessibility, surveillance, privacy and digital literacy. On the other hand, it is urged that research looks into the serious obstacles faced by young people in accessing participation spaces (off and online) during this pandemic and their under-representation in these spaces. According to the European Youth Forum (2020), three out of four youth organisations are never, or very rarely, invited to participate in the formulation of solutions at local level, and three out of six at the national level. It is essential to raise awareness about this, because decisions affecting youth cannot be made without children and young people.

8. The impact of Covid-19 on digitalisation and AI

8.1 Key trends from studies on digitalisation and AI

Digitalisation has developed as one of the most important areas of research in the aftermath of the pandemic. In particular, several studies have focused on the transition from face-to-face learning to online and distance learning for students in school at all grades and across countries. Concerning youth sections of the population, school and education has been the field in which digitalisation has had the biggest impact as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic. A study by the OECD (2020a) was already stressing in March challenges and opportunities for “embracing digital learning and online collaboration”, even in the long term. Among the long-term opportunities, it stressed that “the need to explore how students can learn in different places and at different times will help countries better understand the potential of digital learning solutions” such as more autonomy. Concerns, however, were raised over access to broadband connection at home, especially in remote and rural areas; access to devices, a challenge for lower-income households; and lack of basic digital skills among students and teachers, particularly among younger and less experienced students (OECD 2020b). The EU Commission has also highlighted many of these aspects in its recent strategic action plan for digital education (2021-2027), announcing strategic actions for the deployment of the growing array of digital technologies (apps, platforms, software) to improve and extend education and training, and to equip all learners with digital competences.

A second trend concerns the use of digital technologies and AI to help young people combat Covid-19. An important survey conducted in Germany (2020) in the context of the *Artificial Intelligence for personalised digital mental health promotion and prevention in youth* investigated the associations between social isolation, cognitive preoccupation, worries, and

anxiety, objective social risk indicators and psychological distress and mobile health (mHealth) interventions in youth. Major findings stressed how public health measures during pandemics may be associated with poor mental health in youth and digital interventions may help mitigate the negative psychological impact. In this respect, the WHO has released a comprehensive document, *Youth-centred digital health interventions*, to promote better digital health among youth and adolescents, based on a framework including a targeted literature review, consultations, interviews, workshops and inputs from experts and young people. Another study focusing on LGBTQ youth stressed the importance of synchronous, text-based online platforms “to enable LGBTQ youth to feel safe to seek support while at home”, as a consequence of long-term physical distancing, particularly for those youths being isolated with unsupportive families. Digital solutions should be implemented in order to mitigate the negative psychological impact of public health measures on youth (i.e. mHealth, digital health), as a consequence of social isolation and physical distancing. The importance of cyber-counselling and other digital solutions (secured chats, digital youth work) to support marginalised youth, especially those living in unsupportive family environments.

Finally, the National Youth Council of Ireland (2020a) has also published a guide with important tips to conduct youth work in an online setting. The guide highlights importantly that it is not only media literacy that matters but also issues of safety, consent, confidentiality and ethics. In this sense, a study commissioned by the European Union-Council of Europe youth partnership (2020) has pointed to the challenges that state and non-state actors face in responding to young people’s needs in the online world. According to the study, education and skills, mental health, employment, information and counselling, and online safety constitute the biggest challenges that need to be addressed through “well-designed, evidenced based and tailor-made” solutions where digital tools are part of a human-centric approach.

8.2 Emerging gaps from studies on digitalisation and AI

Issues relating to the digital divide have been acknowledged by many actors, even prior to Covid-19, yet comprehensive studies showing how this may impact young people’s experiences, such as students’ performances, the building of social capital, and youth participation in political and social life more broadly – among others – are still missing. In the current situation, it is important to invest in developing such research, studies and analyses, inclusive of good practices and recommendations. The role played by AI with respect to policies and sectors involving and addressing young people remains unaddressed by current analyses. More perspectives from young people should be integrated in future studies in order to gain a better assessment of their role as users, consumers, and individuals in digital technologies.

9. The impact of Covid-19 on social inclusion

9.1 Key trends from studies on social inclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in severe economic and social impacts around the world and shook the world along existing fault lines of exclusion, inequality and disadvantage, revealing deep-set gaps in access to essential services and secure livelihoods among social groups in many societies. The studies and briefs collected in this section summarise the socio-economic impacts of Covid-19 on young people and provide evidence on inequalities around the Covid-19 pandemic reflected through exposure, vulnerabilities and coping capacity. For instance, the Covid-19 pandemic has exposed multiple injustices and forms of oppression experienced by the most vulnerable groups, which includes young people experiencing poverty, incarceration, foster care, homelessness, and those with marginalised identities (OECD 2020a; UN DESA 2020).

Young people are particularly vulnerable to the disruptions the pandemic has caused, and many are now at risk of being left behind in education, economic opportunities, and health and well-being during a crucial stage of their life development. Young people are more likely to be unemployed or to be in precarious job contracts and working arrangements, and thus lack adequate social protection. To turn the tide on inequality, countries should: accelerate the setting up of systems to ensure universal provision of quality services such as health care, education, sanitation and social protection; identify the differentiated impacts of Covid-19 and empower vulnerable groups through the collection and communication of disaggregated data; invest in jobs and livelihoods in resilient and sustainable sectors; and act through the multilateral system to respond to disparities across countries (UN DESA 2020).

Studies, furthermore, highlight how children may be victims of increased levels of poverty, an exacerbation of the learning crisis through schools' closure (including the digital divide), and threats to child survival, health and safety. Policy briefs reveal how the Covid-19 pandemic has affected immigrants and their children in terms of health, jobs, education, language training and other integration measures, and public opinion, and describes (host) countries' policy responses (OECD 2020c). The briefs also identify policy responses and a series of immediate and sustained actions for governments and policymakers, highlighting that this crisis calls for global solutions, intergenerational solidarity and innovative, inclusive policy solutions (UN 2020).

Some of them focus on how to ensure that a gender lens is well integrated through response, recovery and prevention efforts to Covid-19 in development co-operation (OECD 2020b). Besides, to avoid exacerbating intergenerational inequalities and to involve young people in building societal resilience, governments need to anticipate the impact of mitigation and recovery measures across different age groups, by applying effective governance mechanisms

and developing policies that reach vulnerable and marginalised youth, including migrants and refugees, youth living in rural areas, adolescent girls and young women, indigenous and ethnic minority youth, young persons with disabilities, young people of different sexual orientations and gender identities, and homeless youth (OECD 2020a).

Finally, it was pointed out that the response to Covid-19 must be done in a way that protects the human rights of all young people that form a key element in an inclusive recovery and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) during the Decade of Action (UN DESA 2020).

9.2 Emerging gaps from studies on social inclusion

- Many vulnerable young people such as migrants or homeless youth are in precarious situations. They are the ones who can easily be overlooked if governments do not pay specific attention, as they tend to be already in a situation without even their minimum requirements being met on health, education, employment and well-being.
- Limited national capacities to collect, analyse and disseminate data disaggregated by age, gender and other population characteristics, especially for addressing the most marginalised and vulnerable youth groups during and after this pandemic.
- A lack of youth engagement in the development of health, economic and social interventions in response to Covid-19 and in its recovery.
- Insufficient promotion of youth innovation targeting the prevention and treatment of Covid-19, and the management of its socio-economic impacts.
- A lack of respect, promotion and protection of the human rights of young people, including the right to non-discrimination.

10. National realities

10.1 Key trends from studies on national realities

Studies on the national realities of the impact of Covid-19 on the youth sector have been conducted by various stakeholders including government departments responsible for the youth sector, national youth councils and agencies, universities and research consortiums.

A common trend in studies on national realities is the impact of Covid-19 on the youth work sector. For example, the YouthLink Scotland (2020) survey of youth work sector leaders and their immediate response to the pandemic, *The Covid-19 Crisis: The impact on youth work and young people*, highlights challenges such as access to immediate funding, digital barriers, mental health and cuts to services. The UK Youth (2020) study of 235 youth organisations on the impact of Covid-19 on young people and the youth sector highlights issues such as a

reduction in youth workers, reduction in funding and a shift for youth services to engage with young people digitally.

The impact of Covid-19 on vulnerable young people has also emerged as a common trend in national studies. For example, a study by the National Youth Agency (2020) in the UK, *Vulnerable Young People: Covid-19 Response*, analysed the condition of vulnerable youth with emerging needs triggered or caused by Covid-19. Similarly, research conducted by the National Youth Council of Ireland (2020), *Youth Work Sector Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic*, found that young people who were already deemed “most at risk” became the most disconnected from youth services and support as a result of Covid-19.

Mental health impacts on young people is another key trend in national studies. For example, the Emerging Minds Network in the UK Co-SPACE Study (2020) is tracking children and young people and their families to see how they are coping with the challenges of Covid-19, while in Ireland the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2020) conducted a national consultation with young people on mental health and well-being in relation to the impact of Covid-19. Other national studies across Europe on mental health include *Immediate psychological effects of the Covid-19 quarantine in youth from Italy and Spain* (Universidad Miguel Hernández and Università degli Studi di Perugia 2020) and research conducted in Germany, *Social isolation, mental health, and use of digital interventions in youth during the Covid-19 pandemic* (German Research Foundations and Federal Ministry of Science, Education and Culture of the state of Baden-Württemberg 2020).

10.2 Emerging gaps from studies on national realities

The most common emerging gap relating to studies on national realities is that many countries’ governments and youth sectors have not yet had an opportunity to respond to the impact of the pandemic in terms of research. There is evidence that countries with youth research infrastructures and funding in place prior to the pandemic have been quicker to respond than other countries.

Another emerging gap relating to research on national realities is the long-term impact of Covid-19. It is clear that the impact of Covid-19 on the youth sector will not be fully understood for some time as the pandemic is still ongoing. Finally, youth policy responses to the Covid-19 pandemic at a national level is another gap where more research studies could be developed.

11. Conclusion

This meta-analysis of research studies on the impact of Covid-19 on the youth sector has identified a number of key trends. Overall, research studies examined show that ***young people have been disproportionately affected by the Covid-19 pandemic compared to other cohorts of the population***. Impacts such as school and university closures, lack of opportunities for learning mobility and the rise in unemployment have all been felt more strongly by young people than other age groups. Studies have also found that young people's mental health and well-being has also been affected more than that of other age groups due to restrictions on young people's mobility and social interactions.

Another key trend arising from the research reviewed has been the impact of Covid-19 on vulnerable and at-risk young people such as marginalised, migrant, homeless and LGBTI+ young people. These groups of young people have been affected significantly more than the general population of young people. It appears that pre-existing inequalities experienced by vulnerable and at-risk young people have been exacerbated by the pandemic. Some studies have also identified a gender divide in terms of women and girls being impacted more by Covid-19, which indicates again inequalities relating to how the pandemic is being experienced by different groups of young people (Mastrotheodoros 2021).

A key trend in research studies on the impact of Covid-19 on the youth sector has been digitalisation, particularly in the area of youth work. Digitalisation of the youth sector has progressed quickly as a result of the pandemic and has many positive impacts such as enabling education and youth work to continue online and providing young people with access to mental health and well-being information and supports such as online counselling. However, studies also show that a digital divide has emerged with regard to young people's unequal access to technology and online activities. Therefore, when the youth sector is creating much-needed digital innovative solutions, it needs to be mindful of the digital divide and ensure that measures are in place to address this area of inequality.

When it comes to emerging gaps in research on the impact of Covid-19 on the youth sector, many countries are yet to respond to this need. While the national realities of the impact of the pandemic on the youth sector have emerged from some countries, particularly those with a strong history and infrastructure in youth research and policy, the full picture of the impact of Covid-19 on the youth sector across Europe is yet to emerge.

In terms of gaps in knowledge on the impact of Covid-19, there is an opportunity for youth sectors in all countries to learn from each other through sharing information, best practices and innovations. Databases such as the Council of Europe Good Practice Database provide examples of good practice in youth policy and youth work responses to Covid-19 from member states and partners. Knowledge hubs such as the one developed by the EU-Council

of Europe youth partnership also aim to share research and knowledge on the impact of Covid-19 on the youth sector in Europe on an ongoing basis.

Finally, **perhaps the most significant emerging gap in the research on the impact of Covid-19 on the youth sector is the long-term impacts of the pandemic.** As the pandemic is ongoing, so too are its impacts. Much like the virus itself, our understanding of the impacts of Covid-19 is evolving as we learn more about it and research it in more detail. Therefore, more long-term or longitudinal research studies are needed before we fully understand the full impact of Covid-19 on the youth sector and young people. In this regard, participatory and action research could be of particular relevance in order to gain young people's sentiments and views not only about the impact of the coronavirus crisis but also in planning effective sustainable measures for the post-Covid-19 recovery.

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