healthwatch Haringey

Young People and Mental Health

The Impact of COVID-19 and Lockdowns in Haringey

Phase 2 - June 2023

Contents

Introduction

Young people were heavily impacted by COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdowns from 2020 to 2022, experiencing disruptions to schooling and education, uncertainty over exams and results, reduced employment prospects, not being able to socialise with friends and family, and having to stay in. This impacted on young people's mental health and wellbeing, with increased levels of stress, anxiety and mental ill health.

We explored these issues by carrying out a project looking at the impact of COVID-19 and lockdowns on the mental health and wellbeing of young people in Haringey.

We conducted two online surveys (one for young people and one for parents and carers) and reported our findings, conclusions and recommendations in our 'Young People and Mental Health: The Impact of Covid-19 and Lockdowns' report published in November 2021. https://bit.ly/Young-People-Mental-Health-1

Our report showed young people were struggling with the impact and pressures of the pandemic and lockdowns on their mental health and wellbeing.

Methodology

During 2022 we followed up our first report, which was based solely on online surveys with young people, parents and carers, with qualitative research.

We ran four small focus groups at Haringey Sixth Form College, two in March 2022 and two in December 2022, with their health and social care students, young people aged between 16 and 18 years. Overall, we spoke to 21 young people over the four focus groups.

We explored the key themes and issues identified in our first report in more depth, and this qualitative research, based on in-person focus groups, gave us a more in-depth and richer insight into young people's experiences during this time.

We'd like to thank Joanne Blackburn, Director of Health and Social Care and Early Years, the health and care students, and Haringey Sixth Form College for partnering with us on this project.

Executive Summary

Perceptions of mental health

The term mental health had mainly negative connotations for young people, and it was strongly associated with mental ill health and illness e.g. stress, anxiety, depression.

COVID-19 and lockdowns: Challenges and benefits

Living through COVID-19 and lockdowns had meant a lot of lifestyle changes for young people, and there were positive and negative aspects to this.

The worst aspects of this time for young people was being unable to leave the house, being stuck inside all the time, and not being able to see friends and family. This had led to a lot of young people experiencing stress, anxiety, depression, and a lack of motivation.

But young people were also able to identify and talk about positive aspects of this time. They really valued and appreciated the extra time they got to spend with their immediate family, and felt they built stronger bonds as they were spending much more time with them.

Social media was both a force for good and bad during this time. On the one hand, it enabled young people to keep in touch with friends and family, making them feel more connected, and less alone and isolated. On the other hand, young people often felt bad after looking at social media, comparing themselves unfavourably to others apparently living their best lives.

Mental health state: During lockdowns and now

Young people's mental health state is a lot better now than during the period of lockdowns. The majority of our participants had moved from feeling very bad or bad to feeling very good or good. Yet, even now, 42% of our participants still just feel OK or bad. They are not putting themselves in the feeling good or feeling very good categories.

Tools to improve mental health

We asked young people what they did to relax and what they did to improve their mental health and wellbeing. Many young people talked about seeing, talking to, and spending time with, family and friends, and how important these support networks of family and friends were in terms of maintaining good mental health.

Outside of these family and friends support networks, young people were able to relax and improve their mental health in a range of ways - music (listening to music, singing and playing music), Netflix, youtube videos, gaming, physical activity

and exercise, walking, drawing, reading and writing poetry, reading books, cooking, baking, sleeping, meditation, praying, reading the Bible/Koran, and having time for self-reflection.

College – mental health support

All the young people said they would be confident and comfortable speaking to College staff, including form tutors and teachers, if they (or a friend) were experiencing mental health issues. This was impressive.

The young people had ideas about what more they would like in place in College to support them to have good mental health. This included mental health classes/workshops; a quiet room/rage room where people could go for a time out; and quick and easy access to professional mental health services, preferably through drop-in sessions/clinics/appointments within the College setting.

Home / Community – mental health support

In terms of mental health support outside of the College, at home and within the community, most young people were relying on family and friends. This shows how important and critical these family and friends support networks are in terms of supporting young people's mental health.

Young people also talked about social workers and youth workers, about youth centres and community centres. Young people of faith talked about priests and Imams, Churches and Mosques. These are all important community assets and networks which play an important part in supporting young people's mental health.

Much lower down the list, young people talked about NHS services – GPs and nurses. But they did not talk about mental health services or mental health organisations or mental health charities, and there was a very low level of awareness of these services, organisations and charities. The only organisation they mentioned was The Samaritans.

Most young people saw online apps and social media as part of the problem rather than the cure. They did not see online apps or social media as something that could help and support their mental health and wellbeing, they viewed it as something that was detrimental to their mental health and wellbeing. They wanted mental health support provided to them in-person by trained professionals quickly and easily, not online or through social media.

The Future

We asked young people how they felt about their future, and it was interesting to see the range of feelings and reactions this question elicited. Some young people felt positive about their future, and were excited to be going on to further education, feeling hopeful and confident. But others felt anxious, stressed and worried about impending exams and next steps.

Recommendations

Our recommendations are aimed at Haringey Council, schools, colleges, and mental health services, CAMHS*, charities and organisations. Our aim is for services to be more responsive to the needs of young people and better able to support them in terms of their mental health and wellbeing.

We recommend schools and colleges consider having the following measures in place:

1. More of a focus on mental health within the core curriculum, raising awareness, challenging stigma, and signposting to mental health organisations and services which can support young people to have good mental health. This could be done through mental health classes/workshops.

2. A safe space (quiet room/rage room) within the school/college, a place where young people can go to relax and calm down – somewhere to have time out when needed.

3. A referral process, and access to, professional mental health services e.g. talking therapists and counsellors.

4. Drop-in sessions/clinics/appointments with mental health services within their school/college, so students can access these services quickly and easily.

We recommend mental health services, CAMHS*, charities and organisations:

1. Work in partnership with schools and colleges so students are readily able to access these services quickly and easily through a school/college referral.

2. Consider setting up drop-in sessions/clinics/appointments within school and college settings, so students can access services quickly and easily.

3. Develop tailored communications, designed for young people, about their services, setting out what services are available and how to access them. This should be available online and in hard copy (leaflets, posters).

*CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services)

4. Ensure these young people friendly communications are widely promoted and distributed at schools, colleges, youth centres, community centres, places of worship; and to young people, parents, carers, teachers, social workers, youth workers, priests, Imams etc

Findings

Perceptions of mental health

We started our focus groups with an icebreaker question which was "When we use the term mental health, what do you think of?".

Young people talked about stress, anxiety, depression, sadness, isolation, loneliness, fear, panic attacks and trauma. Being health and care students, they also used medical terms like psychosis, bipolar, and schizophrenia.

The term mental health had mainly negative connotations and was closely associated with mental ill health and illness.

COVID-19 and lockdowns: Challenges and benefits

We asked the young people what living through COVID-19 and lockdowns had meant for them in terms of lifestyle changes, and what had been the best and the worst aspects of that time.

In terms of the worst aspects, much of this related to being unable to leave the house, being stuck inside all the time, and not being able to see friends and family. Many had found online lessons and online study challenging and hard to follow, and not everyone was able to participate online. Many young people spoke about being bored at home, with few things to do. These factors had led to a lot of young people experiencing anxiety, stress, depression, and social anxiety. They experienced a lack of motivation, felt demotivated and felt lazy and slothful.

However, perhaps surprisingly, young people were able to identify and talk about positive aspects of this time as well. Many young people really valued and appreciated the extra time they got to spend with their immediate family – parents, carers, and siblings. They felt they had built stronger bonds with their immediate family as they were spending much more time with them.

Young people also felt, as their day was less structured and regimented, they were able to have more independence and more choice over what they did during the day and with their time. They had discovered new things to do, and were able to be more creative.

Young people also had more time to think and reflect, and focus on their mental health and wellbeing, away from peer pressure. Some young people found online study a positive experience, as there were less distractions, and they could focus on their course work. Some young people had managed to lose weight, something they had been trying to do.

Social media was cited in both categories – the worst and the best aspects of this time. On the positive side, social media had enabled young people to keep in touch with friends and family, making them feel more connected, and less alone and isolated. On the negative side, young people experienced a lot of peer pressure and felt they were often looking at social media and comparing themselves unfavourably to what others were doing and experiencing, making them feel bad.

Mental health state: During lockdowns and now

We asked young people to rate how they felt during lockdown and how they were feeling now. We used a smiley face scale ranging from very good to very bad.

As can be seen from the charts below, overall young people's mental health state is a lot better now than during the period of lockdowns.
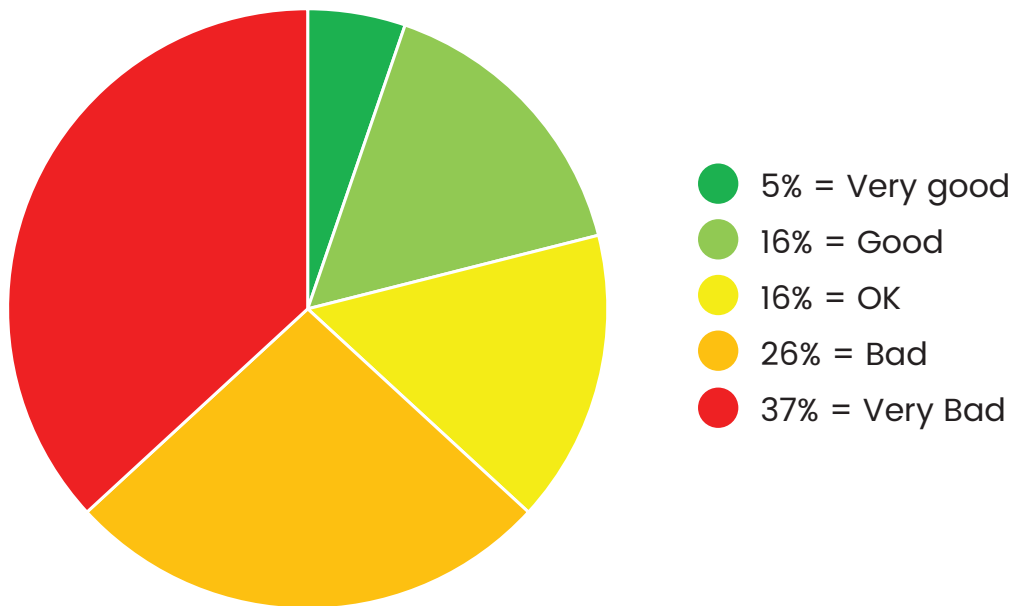
During the lockdowns **63% felt very bad or bad** (37% very bad, 26% bad) with only **21% feeling very good or good** (5% very good, 16% good).

Now (post lockdowns) **58% felt very good or good** (37% very good, 21% good) with only **5% feeling bad**. No one felt very bad.
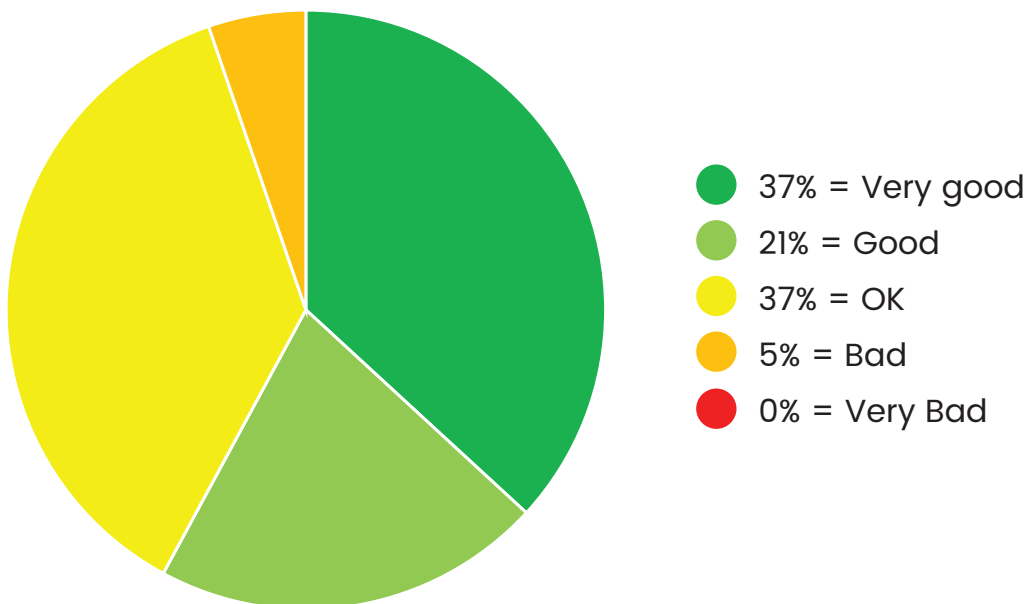
There has been a clear improvement overall in young people's mental state since the time of the lockdowns, with the majority of our participants moving from feeling very bad or bad, to feeling very good or good.

Yet, even now, **42% of our participants still just feel OK or bad**. They are not putting themselves in the feeling good or feeling very good categories.

How were you feeling during lockdown?

- 5% = Very good
- 16% = Good
- 16% = OK
- 26% = Bad
- 37% = Very Bad

How are you feeling now?

- 37% = Very good
- 21% = Good
- 37% = OK
- 5% = Bad
- 0% = Very Bad

Tools to improve mental health

We asked young people what they did to relax and what they did to improve their mental health and wellbeing.

Many young people talked about seeing, talking to, and spending time with, family and friends, and how important these support networks of family and friends were in terms of maintaining good mental health. Family included parents, brothers and sisters, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, nephews and nieces. Many young people had been able to see their friends virtually/online during the lockdowns, and this had been a great help. Being around people, family and friends, (in-person or online) was important.

Outside of these family and friends support networks, young people were able to relax and improve their mental health by themselves in a range of ways:
- Music was often cited as being a huge help – this included listening to music, singing and playing music.
- Netflix, and binge watching boxsets, also really helped young people to take their mind off things and relax. Watching YouTube videos was cited for the same reason, including motivational videos.
- Gaming was another popular activity which had the same effect off helping you take your mind off things and relax.
- Physical activity and exercise was important too, and young people talked about going for walks or taking exercise.
- Housework, and cleaning, was another way of being active and doing physical work.
- More traditional analogue activities were also cited as helping you to relax and improve your mental health – these included drawing, reading and writing poetry, and reading books.
- Cooking and baking really helped, and some young people said this was a new skill they had acquired during lockdowns.
- Many young people talked about sleep and sleeping as a way of making you feel better and having improved mental health.

Some young people found the extra time they now had to themselves, for thinking and reflecting, was helpful. They had more time to think and to choose what to do with their time. Writing down goals, thoughts and feelings was helpful to some. Other young people talked about meditation.

For young people of faith, this had been a source of strength and comfort to them during a very challenging time. A few people talked about praying, and reading the Bible/Koran, as a way of helping them to stay calm, relax and feel more positive.

Social media was again cited in both the positive and negative categories. Sometimes using a phone and social media was a way to feel connected and less isolated, but young people also said switching off their phone and having a break and time away from technology helped them to relax, feel less stressed, and have better mental health too.

College – mental health support

We then asked what was available at Haringey Sixth Form College in terms of mental health support and access to mental health services. It was impressive that the young people all said they would be both confident and comfortable speaking to their teachers, form tutors, learning assistants, advisors, head of year, course director, in terms of mental health issues. They all felt they could speak to, and access help from, staff at the College.

We also asked what additional mental health support they would like to see at the College, services they felt would be of most help:

- The young people said they would welcome more of a focus on mental health within the curriculum, raising awareness of mental health, challenging mental health stigma, explaining how you can support yourself or friends if you/they have mental health issues, and outlining the support services available and how to access them. They felt a mental health class or workshop would be a good way to convey this useful information. They also felt a class or a workshop would be a way of challenging stigma and getting young men to talk about their feelings and emotions. There was a feeling that not being able to talk or share emotions, impacted negatively on mental health, and could lead in the most extreme cases to feelings of hopelessness and suicide.

- They also talked about being stressed and sometimes anger and rage building up inside you. They thought it would be good to have a focus on physical exercise to relieve pent-up stress and tension. And they also mentioned a quiet room or a rage room, where young people could go if they were feeling anxious, worried, stressed, or angry, where they could relax and calm down – a safe space to have a time out.

- They also talked about accessing professional support services, like talking therapy, a professional therapist, or a counsellor. This would have the added value of the conversation and discussion being confidential, and that may not be the case with a member of staff. The spoke about valuing being able to have a choice of therapist/counsellor too, based on the issue they had, the professional's relatability, and their cultural competence. They all said they would use professional mental health services if they were available on-site on a drop-in basis.

Home / Community – mental health support

We then asked what was available at home and within the community in terms of mental health support i.e. if you were having mental health issues who would you speak to and where would you go?:

- By far, the most popular answer here was family and friends, demonstrating the importance of family and friends support networks. In terms of family, young people mentioned Mum, Dad, Uncle, and siblings.
- Young people also talked about social workers and youth workers, and youth centres and community centres as being places they could go to access mental health support, demonstrating the importance of these workers and centres in terms of supporting young people's mental health and wellbeing.
- For young people for whom faith was important they talked about being able to speak to priests and Imams, and accessing mental health support through a Church or a Mosque. Faith networks are also important in supporting young people's mental health and wellbeing for young people of faith.
- Young people did talk about accessing mental health support through the NHS, by speaking to a GP or a nurse, but this was low down on their list of options.
- The Samaritans was an organisation and a helpline that young people were aware of as being a number they could call if they were in real crisis, and having suicidal thoughts and feelings.

We also asked what additional mental health support they would like to see at home and within the community, services they felt would be of most help:

- Most young people saw online apps and social media as part of the problem rather than the cure and a cause of mental ill health. They felt social media often meant young people were under a lot of pressure to live up to the kinds of lives and lifestyles promoted on social media, and social media could also be used to bully and intimidate young people leaving them anxious and fearful. For these reasons they did not see online apps or social media as something that could help and support their mental health and wellbeing, they viewed it as something that was detrimental to their mental health and wellbeing.
- What young people wanted access to, to support their mental health, was access to professional therapists and counsellors in-person, without having to wait on a long waiting list, who would provide a confidential service, who would be relatable, and preferably you would be given a choice as to your therapist or counsellor so you could choose someone who had a particular expertise and who was culturally competent.

The Future

To end the focus groups, we asked the participants how they felt about their future. It was interesting to see the range of feelings and reactions this question elicited.

Some young people felt positive about their future, they were excited to be going on to further education, and felt hopeful and confident, expecting success in their exams and their future career.

But others felt anxious, stressed and worried about impending exams and next steps. They were worried the lockdowns had meant they had missed a lot of time studying in College and this would impact their exam results. They were nervous and anxious about moving on to further education and university and what this would entail – moving to a new institution, and potentially a new area, away from family and friends, where everything would be new. This was a scary prospect for some. Some were already worried about housing, with high rents and no prospect of being able to buy and own their own property.
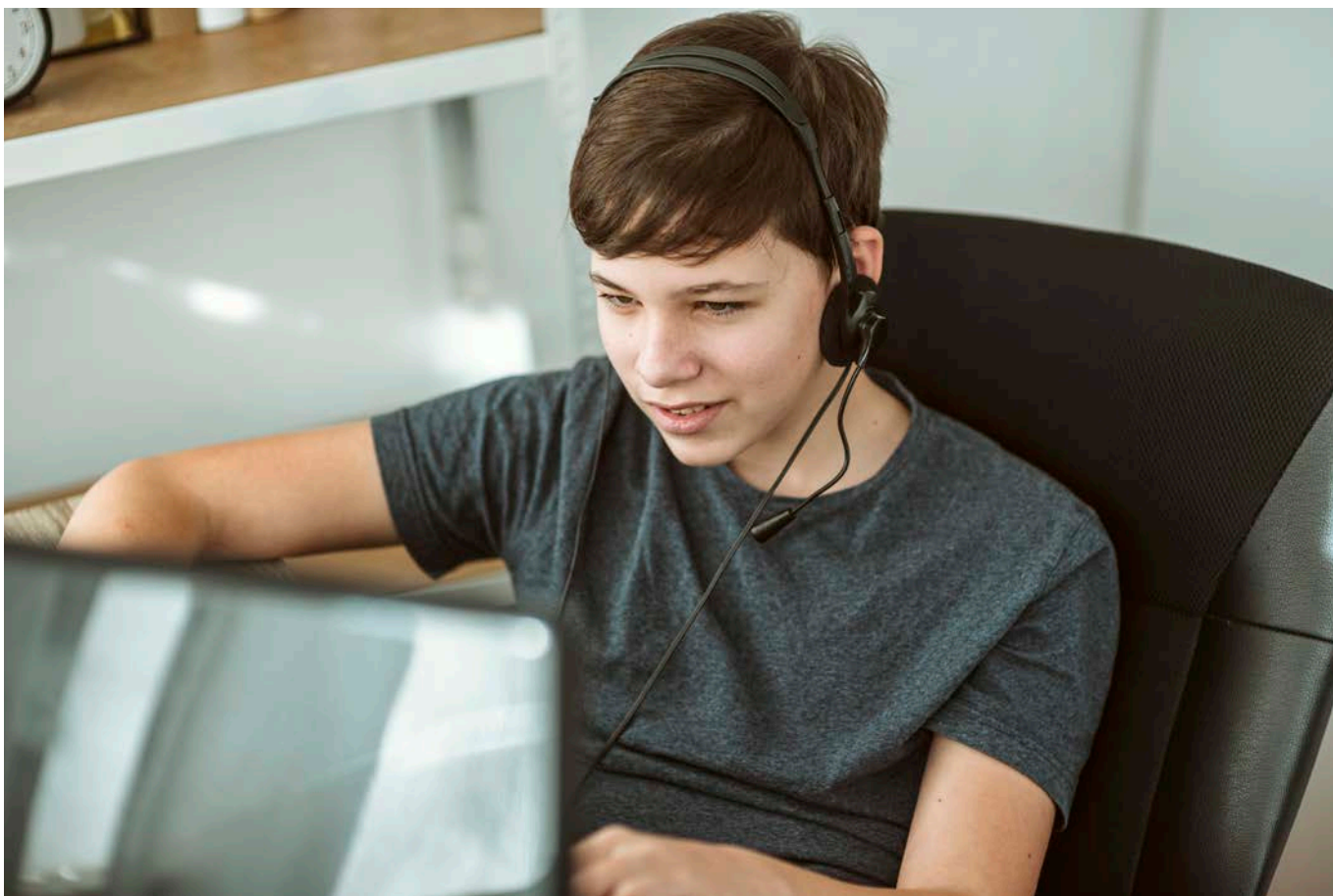
Appendix A: Focus Group Questions

1. **Icebreaker**

   When we use the term mental health, what do you think of?

2. **COVID-19 and lockdowns - challenges and benefits**

   a. How has your life changed during COVID and lockdowns?
   b. What are/were the worst aspects of this time?
   c. What are/were the best aspects of this time?

3. **Mental health state**

   a. How were you feeling during lockdown?

   b. How are you feeling now?

4. **Tools to improve mental health**

   What do you do to relax?
   What do you do to improve your mental health and wellbeing?

5. **College – mental health support**

   a. What is available at your College in terms of mental health support?
   b. Who would you speak to?
   c. Where would you go?
   d. What mental health support would you like to see at College?
   e. Which of these would be of most help?

6. Home / Community – mental health support

a. What is available to you in terms of mental health support?
b. Who would you speak to?
c. Where would you go?
d. What mental health support would you like to see?
e. Which of these would be of most help?

7. The Future

How do you feel about your future? (education, job, career, money)

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