

COVID-19 Phone Survey Headlines Report

Listening to Young Lives at Work in India: Fifth Call

Introduction

Following the first wave in 2020, India experienced a devastating second wave of COVID-19 cases in April and May 2021, related to the Delta variant. The second wave resulted in a significant increase in both infections and fatalities, often overwhelming India's health care systems and having substantial economic and social impacts as new restrictions were imposed. Concerns are now growing over the extent and impact of a third wave, driven by the highly transmissible Omicron variant.

After a relatively slow start, initially due to supply shortages, the national vaccination programme has accelerated in recent months. As of 2 February 2022, 68 per cent of India's total population have received one dose, with 51 per cent fully vaccinated.¹ Booster doses are now being provided to frontline workers and those over 60 years old with vulnerable conditions, and vaccinations are now available for 15–18 year olds.

In contrast to the strict national lockdown in 2020, the government decentralised policy decisions to state administrations during the second wave of infections, and is continuing to do so for the current third wave. Despite less severe restrictions, the economic impact has nonetheless been substantial, with the economy contracting by 6.6 per cent and unemployment rising by around 8–12 per cent in the second quarter of 2021. Around 250 million students in India were affected by school and university closures at the start of the pandemic, and despite some relaxation of restrictions in 2021, the sudden third wave has halted plans to get education back on track.

HEADLINES: FIFTH CALL

1. There has been a significant increase in overall levels of perceived poverty during 2021: struggling or poor/destitute households increased from 36 per cent before the pandemic, to a staggering 52 per cent in August–October 2020, with only a modest reduction (to 46 per cent) by October–December 2021.
2. Of particular concern, the number of young people belonging to Scheduled Castes or Scheduled Tribes who reported that their households were poor or destitute increased from 12 per cent before the pandemic to 16 per cent by August–October 2021, with a *further* increase to 19 per cent by October–December 2021 (compared to 7 per cent across all other groups).
3. Inequality in the rollout of the national vaccination programme led to those living in poorer households being less likely to have received a first vaccine dose by October–December 2021 (only 56 per cent, compared to 74 per cent of those from wealthier households). Vaccination rates were also lower among women and respondents from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.
4. A growing digital divide is limiting young people's chances of a successful education and increasing their likelihood of dropping out. More than 1 in 5 (22 per cent) of 19–20 year olds who did not have access to the internet at home had left education by October–December 2021, compared to only 7 per cent of those with access.
5. The quality of teaching (currently online) had fallen by October–December 2021, compared to before the pandemic, according to almost half (47 per cent) of 19–20-year-old students.
6. There has been a substantial increase in the gender employment gap among 19–20 year olds, from 16 percentage points before the pandemic to 36 percentage points in October–December 2021. Similarly, the gender employment gap among 26–27 year olds has also increased (from 39 to 49 percentage points).
7. Mild food insecurity is extremely widespread and increased significantly during 2021, with 44 per cent of respondents worried about running out of food (compared to 13 per cent in 2020). Those in the poorest households and those belonging to Scheduled Castes or Scheduled Tribes were most affected.
8. Young people's mental health has worsened slightly as the pandemic has progressed: 11 per cent reported symptoms of depression in October–December 2021 (compared to 9 per cent in November 2020) and 10 per cent reported symptoms of anxiety (compared to 8 per cent in November 2020).

¹ Data from [Our World in Data](#), accessed 2 February 2022.

[Earlier Young Lives research](#) showed that widening inequalities and the adverse economic and social impacts of the pandemic could derail progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In particular, the combined pressures of interrupted education, increased domestic work, and widespread stresses on household finances, following the first wave in 2020, had a profound effect on young people from poor socio-economic backgrounds, with a disproportionate impact on vulnerable girls and young women.

This report summarises the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the education, employment, food security and mental health of Young Lives respondents in India (tracked since 2001 and now 19–20 and 26–27 years old). The findings are based on a preliminary version of the data collected during the fourth and fifth calls of the [Young Lives phone survey](#), conducted in August 2021 (Call 4), and October and December 2021 (Call 5).

Methods

The fifth call of the Young Lives phone survey took place between 4 October and 15 December 2021, following a shorter [fourth survey call](#) conducted between 2 August and 1 September 2021. A total of 2,719 young people were contacted: 1,855 from the Younger Cohort (aged between 19 and 20 years) and 864 from the Older Cohort (aged between 26 and 27 years). This corresponds to 97 per cent of the sample located in the most recent tracking exercise (December 2019) and 99 per cent of those contacted in November–December 2020 for the third phone call of 2020.²

In the analysis below, respondents from both age cohorts are included in the sample, unless otherwise stated. Our analysis is designed to assess how the impact of COVID-19 is affecting individuals with different socio-economic backgrounds and histories and is informed by the previous COVID-19 survey calls, as well as longitudinal data collected since 2001, through regular in-person surveys.

Results

1. The impact of COVID-19 on health

COVID-19 infections and testing

By October–December 2021, 29 per cent of Young Lives respondents believed that at least one member of their household had been infected since the start of the pandemic in early 2020. This figure had more than doubled since August–October 2020 (13 per cent),

reflecting the catastrophic impact of the second wave in 2021. **Infection rates increased most in urban households (19 percentage points), compared to those in rural areas (14 percentage points).**

Access to testing appears to be excellent, with almost all young people (99 per cent) reporting that they would be able to get a COVID-19 test if needed. Among the few who believed they could not get a test, the most common reasons were that the test centres were too far away (particularly among poor and rural households),³ or that they did not know where to get tested.

Vaccinations

The national vaccination programme continued to accelerate in the second half of 2021, with 65 per cent of respondents reporting that they had received at least one vaccine dose by October–December 2021, compared to only 34 per cent in August 2021 (Figure 1).

While the share of those vaccinated is increasing, our results indicated continuing vaccine inequality, with those from poorer households (56 per cent vaccinated) significantly less likely to have received a first dose by October–December 2021 (compared to 74 per cent in wealthier households). This was also the case for young women (only 59 per cent vaccinated, compared to 71 per cent of young men) and those from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (59 per cent, compared to 68 per cent among other groups).⁴ Age also appeared to matter, with a relatively higher vaccination rate among 26–27 year olds, compared to 19–20 year olds (despite both cohorts becoming eligible on 1 May 2021).

Encouragingly, there was little vaccine hesitancy among our sample, and almost all respondents (96 per cent) reported that they ‘somewhat’ or ‘strongly’ agreed that they would get a vaccine if it were made available to them (this figure includes those already vaccinated). Of the few who disagreed, the most commonly reported reason was concerns over vaccine safety (and the potential for side effects). Notably, among the 40 women who disagreed, almost half said this was because they were breastfeeding (the second-most common reason overall).

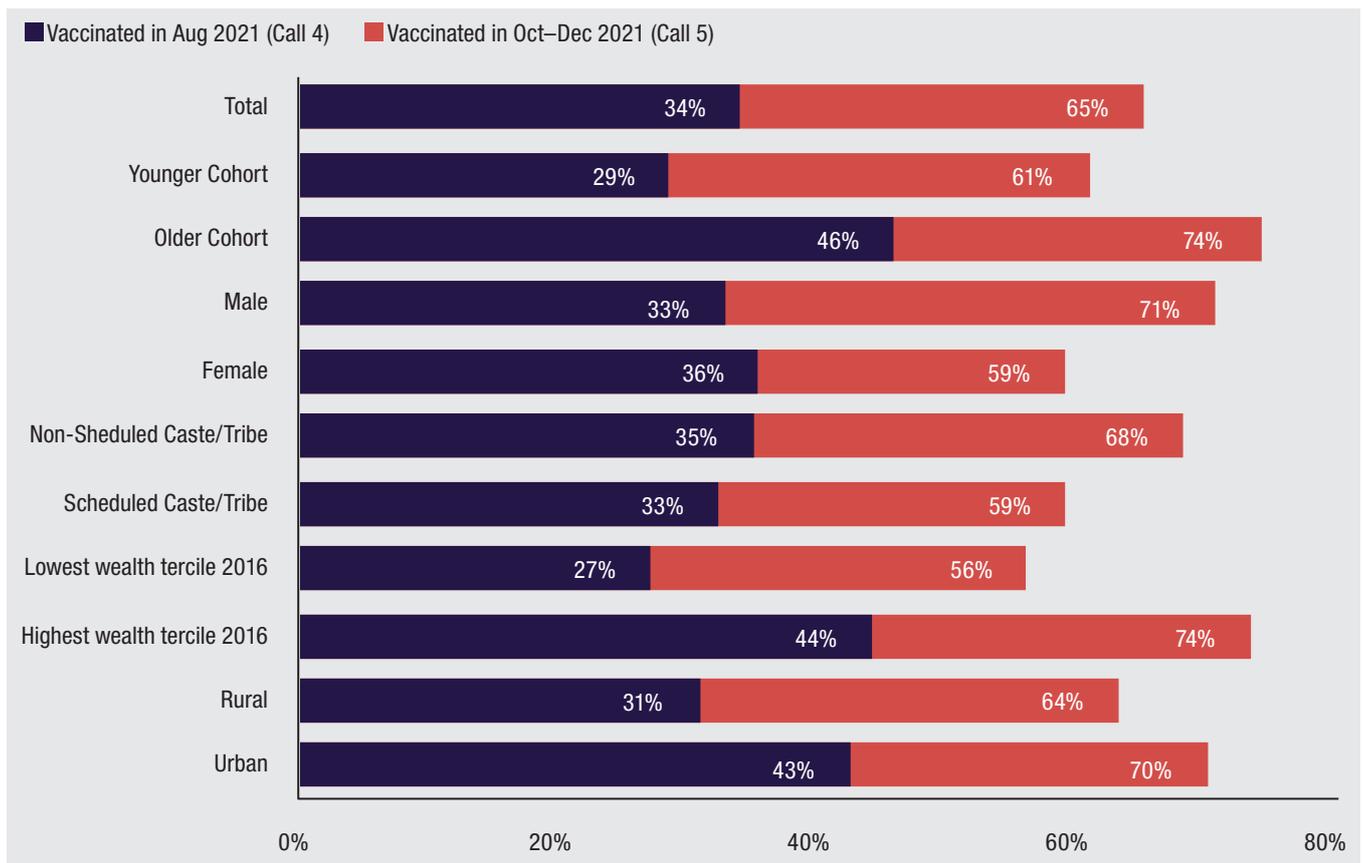
2. The impact of COVID-19 on education

Our analysis of the impact of the pandemic on education focuses on the 68 per cent of our 19–20 year olds who were enrolled in education at some point between January 2020 and their interview date in October–December 2021. Despite an easing of restrictions at the beginning of 2021, schools and universities had largely remained closed since the start of the pandemic, with lessons continuing to be conducted remotely.

² The full sample attrition report for Call 5 is available at <https://www.younglives.org.uk/research-project/young-lives-work>

³ Relative household wealth is determined using the [Young Lives wealth index](#) measured during the Young Lives Round 5 survey, undertaken in 2015/16.

⁴ Relatively low vaccination rates were found among both Scheduled Castes (59 per cent) and Scheduled Tribes (60 per cent), compared to 68 per cent vaccinated among Backward Castes and 70 per cent among other groups.

Figure 1: Vaccination rates in August 2021 (Call 4) and October–December 2021 (Call 5)

Enrolment and dropout

Of those enrolled since the start of 2020, around 1 in 5 (19 per cent) of the 19–20-year-old students had left education by October–December 2021. Young women were more likely to have left (24 per cent, compared to 15 per cent of men), as were those in rural areas (21 per cent, compared to 14 per cent in urban areas). Of the 19 per cent who left education, 11 per cent had completed their studies, while 8 per cent left for other reasons. Among those who left education for reasons other than completing their course, most reported that they had chosen not to continue,⁵ while 1 in 5 did so to look for work.

A growing digital divide is limiting young people's chances of a successful education. The likelihood of leaving education for reasons other than course completion was significantly greater among those without access to the internet. More than 1 in 5 (22 per cent) of the 19–20-year-old students who had no digital access (via a computer, laptop or smartphone) dropped out of education by October–December 2021, compared to only 7 per cent of those with access (on at least one device).⁶

Quality of education

Almost half of current students believed that the quality of education was worse than before the pandemic. With most schools and universities remaining closed and teaching continuing to be provided through online lessons, it is unsurprising that many young people believed the quality of their education had declined. Almost half (47 per cent) of 19–20-year-old students (who were enrolled at the time of the survey) reported that the quality of education was worse than before the pandemic (32 per cent reported it was the same, and 19 per cent reported an improvement).

3. The impact of COVID-19 on employment

Previous Young Lives findings on employment indicated that the loss of work during the initial 2020 lockdown had a greater impact on young men than young women; 26–27-year-old men, in particular, were far more likely to find themselves out of work. By comparison, the proportion of women employed is both much lower and appears to have been less affected by the 2020 lockdown.

⁵ The choice to leave education may (in some cases) be a result of young women passing the age of 18, the current legal age for women to get married. Although clearly not intended to lead to education dropout, government schemes aimed at protecting and empowering girls entitle the young woman's family to financial benefits if marriage is delayed until this age. Notably, among the 43 girls who dropped out, the vast majority were from the lowest household wealth tercile, and from rural areas.

⁶ The growing digital divide in the Young Lives countries was the subject of a [recent blog](#).

There was a strong overall recovery in employment levels by the end of 2020, following the lifting of strict economic restrictions. It is important to recognise, however, that there is no guarantee that the quality of the work undertaken (or income received) had not fallen for many young people.

Employment and gender

Despite an overall recovery in employment, the proportion of women in work by October–December 2021 remained slightly below pre-pandemic levels, with a marginal decline observed in both age groups (Figure 2).

By contrast, the share of young men in work increased substantially over the same period, especially among 19–20 year olds, where there was a 15 percentage point increase in employment (relative to pre-pandemic levels). There was also a smaller 5 percentage point increase among 26–27-year-old men. Earlier analysis of our data indicates that the unequal burden of caring responsibilities among young men and women directly contributed to the gender disparity in employment recovery during 2020 (Scott et al. 2021). With schools remaining closed throughout much of the year, this may also be the case in 2021.

There has been a substantial widening of the gender employment gap by the end of 2021. Among 19–20 year olds, the overall gender gap has increased dramatically, from 16 percentage points before the pandemic to 36 percentage points by October–December 2021, largely due to 19–20-year-old men entering the workforce (with an increase from 40 per cent to 56 per cent of this group). Similarly, the employment gap for 26–27 year olds increased from 39 to 49 percentage points over the same period.

4. The impact of COVID-19 on household wealth and food security

Household wealth

To investigate changes in perceived household wealth, we asked respondents to categorise the wealth status of their household as poor/destitute, struggling, comfortable, or rich/very rich. We compare their answers to responses in August–October 2020 (as part of Call 2) and just before the pandemic (recalled during the Call 2 interview). Figure 3 shows how perceptions of household wealth have shifted over the course of 2020 and 2021.

Overall, there has been an increase in perceived levels of poverty since the start of the pandemic, with some signs of improvement since August–October 2020. The number of individuals who considered their household to be struggling or poor/destitute increased from 36 per cent before the pandemic to a staggering 52 per cent in August–October 2020, although there had been a modest reduction (to 46 per cent) by October–December 2021.

Our subjective measure of wealth highlights pockets of deep poverty, exacerbated by growing inequalities, with little evidence of a recovery for households that were pushed into the bottom of the wealth distribution following the onset of the pandemic in 2020. Of particular concern, there has been a significant increase in the number of individuals belonging to Scheduled Castes or Scheduled Tribes who reported that they are living in poor or destitute households, from 12 per cent before the pandemic to 16 per cent by August–October 2020, and a further increase to 19 per cent by October–December 2021 (compared to 7 per cent across all other groups).

Figure 2: Percentage of Young Lives respondents in work since the beginning of the pandemic

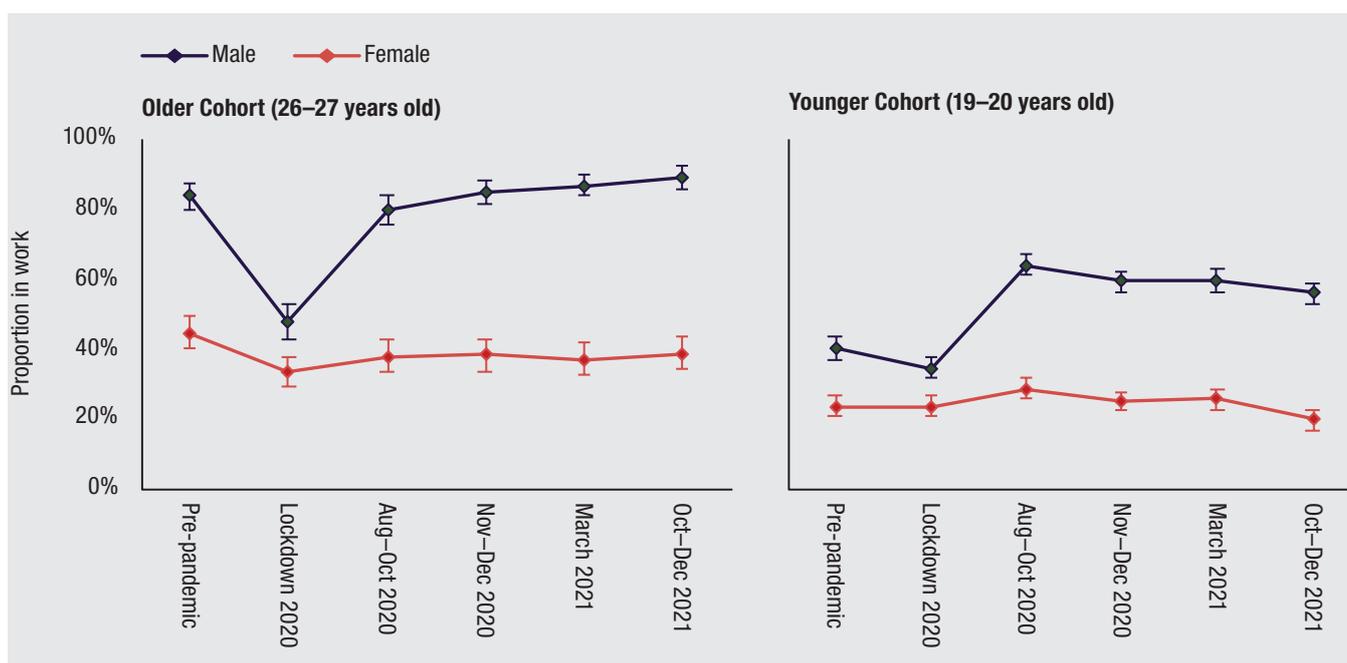
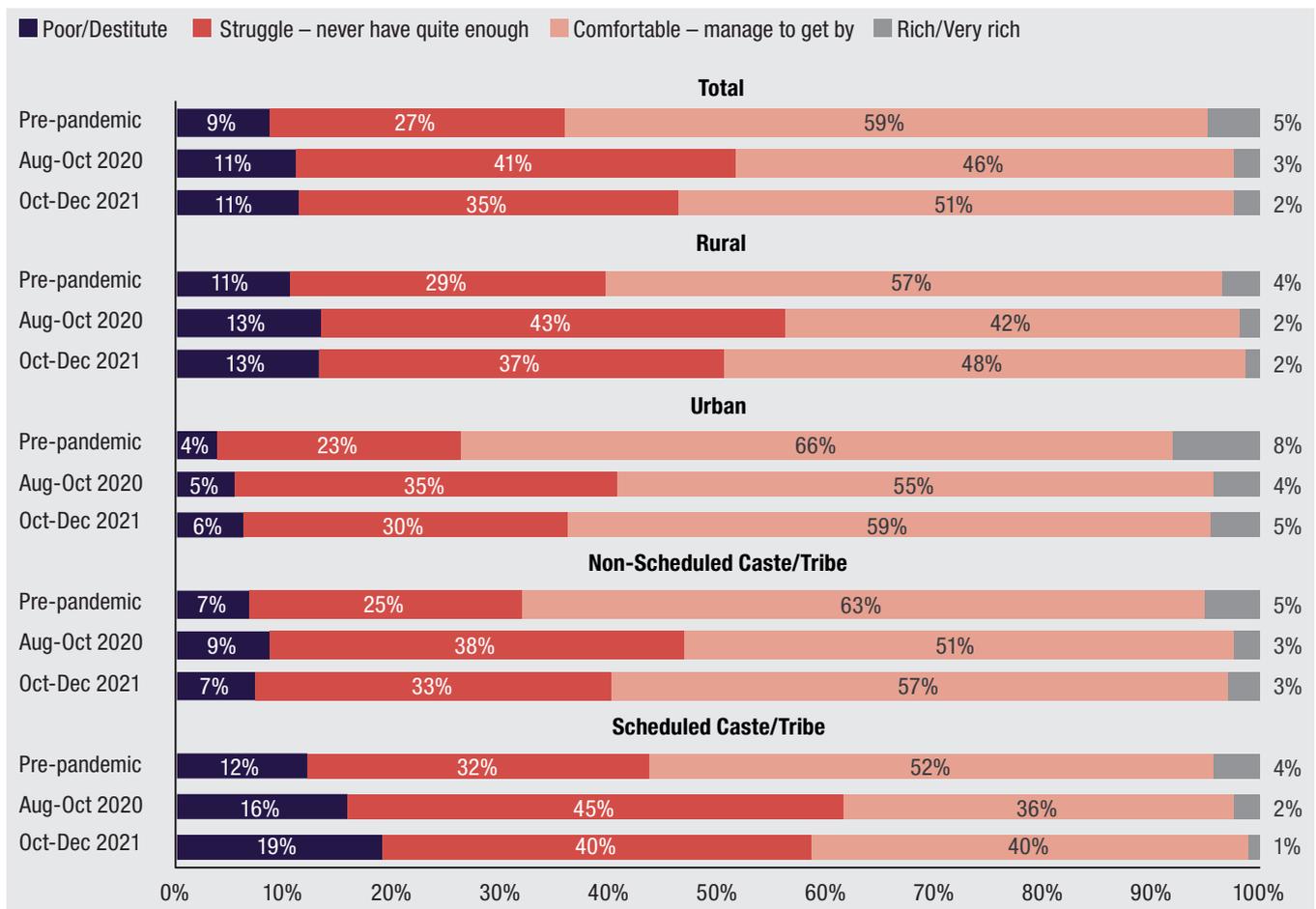


Figure 3: Changes in subjective household wealth since the beginning of the pandemic

Food security

To analyse changes in food security over the course of the pandemic, we compare responses from November–December 2020 (Call 3) and October–December 2021 (Call 5). In both calls, we asked whether the respondent (or those in their household) had worried about running out of food in the past 12 months, due to a lack of money, and also whether they had actually run out of food during that period. A ‘yes’ response to the first and second questions would be consistent with (at least) mild and severe food insecurity, respectively.⁷

Food insecurity has become more widespread since the end of 2020, with an increase in mild food insecurity, but (encouragingly) a decline in severe food insecurity. By October–December 2021, 44 per cent of respondents had worried about running out of food at least once in the past year. This represents a substantial increase in mild food insecurity (31 percentage points)

compared to 13 per cent reported in 2020. Conversely, the percentage of respondents reporting severe food insecurity (measured as actually running out of food) decreased from 5 per cent to 1 per cent over the same period.

Those in the poorest households and those belonging to Scheduled Castes or Scheduled Tribes were most likely to report mild food insecurity in 2021 (55 per cent and 52 per cent, respectively), with a higher-than-average increase since 2020 (38 and 37 percentage points) demonstrating widening inequalities.

5. The impact of COVID-19 on mental health

As in previous calls, we investigate the impact of the pandemic on young people’s mental health using the Generalised Anxiety Disorder Assessment (GAD-7) to measure anxiety and the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-8) to measure depression.⁸ Anxiety and depression are defined here as at least mild symptoms of either condition.

⁷ We used comparable questions from the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES) used in Call 3 of the phone survey (Ballard, Kepple, and Cafiero 2013) and the Household Food Insecurity Access Scale (HFIAS) employed in Call 5 (Coates, Swindale, and Bilinsky 2007). Under the definition used in the HFIAS, worrying about having sufficient food to eat is consistent with at least mild food insecurity, whereas running out of food is consistent with severe food insecurity.

⁸ The GAD-7 and PHQ-8 consist of seven and eight statements, respectively, recording if the respondents experienced any of the anxiety and depression symptoms listed and how often. To calculate the GAD-7 and PHQ-8 scores, values of 0, 1, 2, and 3 are assigned to the frequency of symptoms reported (‘not at all’, ‘several days’, ‘more than half the days’, and ‘nearly every day’) and summed. Mild anxiety or depression is defined using a 5-point threshold on either scale (Spitzer et al. 2006; Kroenke et al. 2009). The scales were adapted for use during a phone survey: see Porter et al. (2021) for details.

Following a moderate improvement in rates of both anxiety and depression by November 2020, there has been another decline in young people's mental health as the pandemic has progressed. In October–December 2021, approximately 11 per cent of young people reported symptoms of depression (compared to 9 per cent in November 2020), while 10 per cent reported symptoms of anxiety (compared to 8 per cent in November 2020).

Although the burden of COVID-19 cases and pressure on the health system had reduced substantially by the end of 2021 (compared to the devastating second wave earlier in the year), it seems reasonable to speculate that these events may still be affecting young people's mental health. Previous Young Lives research has also established an association between food insecurity and poor mental health among young people in India (Porter et al. 2022).

Concluding remarks

India experienced a devastating second wave of COVID-19 infections during 2021, which has led to alarming evidence of growing inequalities, despite the effective rollout of the vaccination programme and less severe restrictions.

Poverty has increased, particularly among respondents from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, with shocking increases in (mild) food insecurity for both this group and those living in the poorest households. More than half of young people from Scheduled Castes and Tribes were worried about running out of food in 2021.

By October–December 2021, the vaccination rollout had not progressed at the same pace for everyone, with fewer young women and those from Scheduled Castes and Tribes receiving their first vaccine dose. There has been a remarkable increase in the gender employment gap, compared to before the pandemic, resulting in a 20 percentage point increase among 19–20 year olds (largely driven by rising male employment) and a 10 percentage point increase among 26–27 year olds. For those still in education, a clear digital divide has left many students at risk of leaving education entirely. Each of these factors may well have played a part in the increased prevalence of both depression and anxiety observed among young people in the second part of the year.

Ensuring that the governments of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh put in place effective policy responses to protect the most vulnerable is now of vital importance, without which we may see many young people unable to recover, putting progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals even further off track.

Young Lives is planning to return to the field for the next regular round of data collection (Round 6) in 2023. This survey round will assess the continuing effect of the pandemic on young people's lives three years after the coronavirus outbreak.

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