



The Challenges of Inequality and COVID-19 for Young People in Peru:

Evidence from the Listening to Young Lives at Work COVID-19 Phone Survey

This policy brief looks at the impact of COVID-19 on the lives of adolescents and young people in Peru as they transition into adulthood, focusing on how widening inequalities are hitting those from disadvantaged backgrounds hardest.

Peru continues to suffer one of the highest per capita COVID-19 death rates in the world, despite an initial strict national lockdown between March and June 2020, and subsequent regional lockdowns between July and September 2020. A second set of regional lockdowns, and new related restrictions, have been introduced since January 2021, in response to an even more devastating second wave of infections. After a relatively slow start, the vaccination programme has gained momentum and remains the primary focus of the government's COVID-19 response effort. However, it is expected that restrictions will continue to affect daily life until a substantial proportion of the population is vaccinated, which is unlikely to be achieved before the end of 2021.

This brief investigates the broader economic and social impacts of the pandemic, presenting policy recommendations based on findings from the Listening to Young Lives at Work COVID-19 phone survey, conducted in the second half of 2020 (Favara, Crivello et al. 2021). It focuses on five key areas of impact: interrupted education and inequality in learning outcomes; unequal access to decent jobs; worsening mental health and well-being; specific implications for girls and young women, including increased domestic work burdens; and increasing risk of domestic violence.

Young Lives is an innovative longitudinal study following the lives of 12,000 young people in Ethiopia, India (in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana), Peru and Vietnam since 2001. The study is divided into two age groups: 4,000 young people born in 1994 (the Older Cohort, now aged 26) and 8,000 born in 2001 (the Younger Cohort, now aged 19).

The Listening to Young Lives at Work COVID-19 phone survey consisted of three phone calls with each of our respondents in all four study countries between June to December 2020, to better understand the impact of the pandemic on their lives and help to inform COVID-19 recovery plans.

Overview

Over the last two decades, evidence has shown significant improvements in the overall living standards in Young Lives families, mirroring Peru's economic performance. Longitudinal data gathered since 2002 shows that young people are substantially better off than their parents and have higher educational attainment and aspirations for social mobility, despite the impact of persistent inequalities and gender disparities.

New research from the Young Lives COVID-19 phone survey in 2020 reveals that the impact of lockdowns and related restrictions could not only halt progress but also reverse important gains, by entrenching inequalities and hitting those from disadvantaged backgrounds hardest, particularly those from the poorest households, and remote and rural communities (Favara et al. 2021).

Overall levels of poverty have increased significantly in Peru during the pandemic. The National Institute of Statistics and Information (INEI) estimates that monetary poverty increased by 9.9 percentage points during 2020, affecting just over 30 per cent of the population, with significantly higher rates in rural areas (46 per cent) than urban areas (26 per cent) (INEI 2021).¹

Likewise, our results show a significant loss of income and increased expenditure across Young Lives households since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, putting families and their communities under huge economic strain; 77 per cent of households experienced a reduction in their income, while 63 per cent reported increased expenditure demands (notably increased food prices and health expenses), affecting those in rural and poorest households most and exacerbating existing inequalities. Our findings highlight a number of key areas of concern, related to persistent inequalities and the ongoing adverse economic and social impacts of the pandemic on young people in Peru.

- **Interrupted education due to school closures and increased use of online and distance learning is widening educational inequalities;** 18 per cent of 18–19-year-old former students had not re-enrolled in education by the end of 2020, with students from poor households and rural communities continuing to be disadvantaged.
- **There was a substantial but incomplete recovery of jobs** following the first lockdown, with an increasing trend in self-employment suggesting that the quality of jobs may be deteriorating as the pandemic unfolds, though the medium-term impacts remain to be seen.
- **The pandemic is taking its toll on the mental health of young people,** at a time when access to related services is likely to have been disrupted. There has been a significant reduction in young people's well-being, with an increasing risk of worsening

mental health. Following the first national lockdown, 40 per cent of young people in our sample reported experiencing anxiety and 30 per cent experienced symptoms of depression, compared to pre-pandemic average levels of 18 per cent.

- **Girls and young women are particularly vulnerable to the economic and social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, including through increasing domestic work burdens.** Previous Young Lives evidence shows that engaging in increased domestic work is an important factor for girls dropping out of education. Young women were more likely to report symptoms of both anxiety and depression; 48 per cent reported symptoms of anxiety, compared to 33 per cent of young men. Of particular concern, girls whose education has been interrupted are at increased risk of experiencing depression.
- **Increasing levels of domestic violence among both young women and young men require urgent attention** as the pandemic escalates. Almost one in four (24 per cent) of young people who had previously experienced physical domestic violence, reported an increase during the pandemic.

COVID-19 recovery plans need to pay special attention to supporting young people, particularly girls and young women, and those from poor households, rural and indigenous communities, if Peru is to avoid the pandemic having long-term adverse economic and social impacts which may hinder progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals.

Key policy recommendations

1. **Strengthen and invest in initiatives to address persistent inequality in education, which is likely to be further exacerbated by the ongoing pandemic.** This should include a focus on improving the quality of education, alongside identifying disadvantaged students, or particular groups of disadvantaged students, and supporting their specific needs.
 - a. Invest in programmes to **reduce inequality in early years education.** Previous Young Lives evidence has shown that gaps in basic literacy and numeracy skills related to socio-economic status are evident as early as 5 years old (Cueto et al. 2016).
 - b. Local and national governments' education programmes should increase investment in policies to **improve the quality of education at all levels.** Recent Young Lives research focusing on public sector secondary schools has identified specific issues related to educational inequalities.²

¹ INEI defines monetary poverty through a quantification of living standards of what households consume, buy and acquire through the cost of a basic food and non-food consumption basket.

² See Ford (2021a), 'Educational Inequality in Peru: What Works for Improving Secondary School Quality?', for detailed policy recommendations.

- c. **Widen participation in quality higher education.** Promote higher education outreach programmes to target schools in poorer areas and encourage students to apply to quality universities and technical institutes (for example, through school outreach, mentoring, parental engagement, scholarships and bursaries).³
2. **Ensure adequate funding is allocated to education in COVID-19 recovery plans, including higher education and to those students that were about to complete secondary education,** particularly at a time when significant spending has understandably been redirected to health priorities. This should include a focus on supporting students from disadvantaged backgrounds to navigate continuing disruptions to education and avoid the longer-term impacts of lost learning.
- a. **Schools and universities need to be supported to speed up safely reopening and resuming face-to-face classes.** Prioritising teachers in national COVID-19 vaccination rollout plans, particularly in rural areas, could help to ensure a timely and safe return to in-person teaching.
- b. **The quality and accessibility of distance learning** should be comprehensively assessed in order to identify potential learning gaps and improve future approaches to ensure that quality distance learning reaches *all* students. This is particularly urgent given continuing disruptions to education due to the current wave of COVID-19 infections in Peru.
- c. **Enabling flexible approaches to virtual classes,** including in terms of the timing of lessons and homework schedules, could further support young people to continue their education, especially girls and women. This is particularly important where additional household work and childcare responsibilities have resulted in increased demands on students' time.
- d. **Ensure that teachers are trained in the use of technology for student-centred learning,** particularly those teaching in rural and remote areas. This may involve innovative blended approaches combining online resources with other distance learning approaches, including supporting a smooth transition to face-to-face classes once schools can safely reopen.
- e. **Invest in school and university programmes to improve student's digital and IT skills,** targeting those from disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly those from poor households and in rural communities.
- f. **Longer-term policies to help address the digital divide are needed,** particularly given the reliance on online learning during the pandemic. Improving and extending internet and broadband connectivity in rural areas and access to technology in poorer households will help to enable more equitable provision of education, alongside a range of other economic and social benefits. Extending government schemes investing in digital devices, such as the provision of one million tablets in 2020 (Ministry of Education 2020), could further help support vulnerable households.
- g. **Extended catch-up education programmes** are particularly important for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, to address potential learning gaps and avoid students dropping out in the future. Support should not be a one-off exercise and should include adequate funding and resources to enable additional tuition and extra learning materials, as well as targeted teacher training where appropriate. **Increasing the number of teaching hours** can significantly improve learning outcomes for disadvantaged students, when combined with targeted investments to improve school effectiveness.
- h. **Promoting 'back to school/university' public campaigns** may be an effective way to encourage more young people to resume their studies. Initiatives should be gender sensitive, targeting both girls and boys, and focus on reaching those in rural areas and among the poorest households, working with schools, universities and local media to identify those who have recently dropped out of education.
- i. **Cash transfer schemes to reward disadvantaged students who successfully complete secondary and higher education, and/or expanding scholarships** for students from the poorest households, can help to enable a return to classes and the completion of courses. For example, expanding the eligibility and flexibility of the government's national cash conditional transfer programme, *Juntos*, could be an effective way to support adolescents to complete their final years of secondary school.⁴
3. **Ensuring job recovery schemes build on clear evidence** of what jobs young people have actually returned to will help to avoid potential underreporting of job losses and an increase in underemployment and informal working. Recovery schemes should include support for skills development in sectors that are least likely to be affected by COVID-19.

3 See Ford (2021b), 'Addressing Inequality in Higher Education in Peru', for detailed policy recommendations.

4 *Juntos* has been implemented in Peru since 2005. See <https://www.gob.pe/juntos>

4. **Active labour market policies for youth**, including matching jobseekers with vacancies, upgrading and adapting skills, providing incentives to individuals or firms, and job creation, are most likely to support effective job recovery. Given the current context, this should include the creation of temporary public job programmes for vulnerable young people (e.g. infrastructure programmes), the creation or extension of job training programmes, providing access to credit for small businesses, and potential subsidies to firms.
5. **Prioritise and expand urgently needed mental health and psychosocial support for young people.** Efforts to increase locally accessible support services should include ensuring services provided by the government through new Community Mental Health Centres safely resume following disruptions caused by the pandemic.⁵ Continued investment in the training of mental health professionals, social workers and community-based counsellors, alongside expanding and improving the quality of counselling helplines, is also important. Implementing programmes in coordination with schools and frontline health workers will help to identify those most at risk.
6. **Initiatives to help address increasing levels of unpaid household work and childcare are particularly important for supporting girls and young women.** Improving and extending access to creche facilities and childcare support, particularly to support indigenous communities in rural areas where services are still limited, despite the efforts of the *Cuna Más* programme,⁶ could help to relieve the burden on girls and women and help them resume their education or employment.
7. **Prioritise measures to address increasing rates of domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic.** This should include targeted outreach to vulnerable young people, particularly those who have previously experienced domestic violence, and should address the specific needs of both young women and young men. Expanding community-based services to respond to local contexts is critical; this may include increased provision of domestic violence shelters, helplines and frontline community workers able to identify those most vulnerable and least able to access support.
8. **Increased investment in preventative measures for domestic violence**, such as awareness-raising campaigns to raise the visibility of the issue and to challenge gender stereotypes and discrimination, is vital. Schools and universities can play an important

role both in helping to identify those at risk and in providing support and advice; this should include appropriate training for teachers to respond to the increased risk of violence during the pandemic.

Key findings

Addressing persistent inequalities in school achievement and improving the quality of education were key challenges before the COVID-19 pandemic

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Peru had shown significant progress in overall educational outcomes over the last two decades, with wide access achieved for primary and secondary education, and improvements in vocabulary, reading and maths skills recorded in most studies or national evaluations. There had also been a rapid increase in higher education enrolment (both universities and technical institutes), with the gross enrolment rate more than doubling from 30 per cent in 2001 to 71 per cent in 2017.

This progress has been supported by an improved capacity of families to invest in education for their children, combined with an increase in government investment, from 3.1 per cent to 3.8 per cent of Peru's GDP between 2009 and 2016 (World Bank 2020). Government expenditure on education has remained at a similar level since then, though this is still below the suggested level of 6 per cent promoted by the National Agreement.⁷

Despite this progress, overall learning achievements remain on average very low and Peru has consistently been at the lower end of international standardised evaluations (e.g. PISA),⁸ with significant inequalities in school achievement. Previous Young Lives evidence shows that students from the poorest households, in remote and rural areas, and from indigenous communities are the most disadvantaged (Cueto et al. 2016).

There is also large variation in the quality of higher education, demonstrated by 35 per cent of universities in Peru recently failing to get government accreditation, and dropout rates are persistently high. Labour market outcomes on completion of higher education vary significantly across different institutions, and while there is impressive gender parity on overall higher education enrolment, there is a significant gender gap in relation to subsequent earnings and employment opportunities (Sánchez, Favara, and Porter 2021).

5 Since 2015, the Ministry of Health has to date invested in 203 Community Mental Health Centres (*Centros Comunitarios de Salud Mental*) as part of mental health care reform across Peru. See <https://www.minsa.gob.pe/salud-mental>

6 *Cuna Más* is an early childhood development programme, launched by the government in 2012 and designed to support the cognitive and emotional development of children under the age of 3 living in poverty. See <https://www.gob.pe/cunamas>

7 The National Agreement is a forum that prepares and approves guidelines on state policies; the original agreement, signed in 2002, includes State Policy 12: 'Universal Access to Free and Quality Public Education' which sets out the ambition for education spending at 6 per cent of GDP.

8 PISA is the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment, a worldwide study to evaluate educational systems by measuring 15-year-old students' educational performance.

Students from poor backgrounds are much less likely to access higher education

Previous Young Lives evidence has highlighted significant inequalities in higher education enrolment, particularly in relation to household wealth and area of residence (urban and rural), even after adjusting for educational attainment and skills accumulated over the course of a student's life (Sánchez and Singh 2018).

Results from our phone survey show that 57 per cent of the Younger Cohort in Peru (aged 18–19) were no longer enrolled in education by the end of 2020. Among those from the poorest households, 66 per cent were no longer enrolled, compared to 47 per cent of those from the least-poor households, with similar disadvantages for those from rural areas, and those from households where Spanish is not the mother tongue.

Interrupted education and a digital divide are widening educational inequalities

Education has been interrupted for the vast majority of students in Peru due to the initial closure of schools and universities following the first national lockdown in March 2020, and subsequent related local lockdowns and social distancing restrictions.

Among the Younger Cohort, 18 per cent of 18–19-year-old former students had not re-enrolled in education by the end of 2020, with those from poorest backgrounds most affected; it is not yet clear how many managed to return at the start of the new academic year in March 2021. The reasons for dropping out of education were predominantly caused by the pandemic, notably difficulty paying fees, cancellation of classes, and lack of means to attend virtual classes (including internet access and availability of computers or laptops).

Where classes have resumed, the vast majority of learning continues to be delivered online or through other distance learning such as radio, television and printed materials. Since the start of the pandemic, only 2 per cent of students had attended classes in person by the time of our second call (between August and October 2020), with most (90 per cent) attending virtual online classes through a laptop, computer, or smartphone. Access to virtual lessons was greater for students from wealthier households and for those whose parents had completed secondary school.

Previous Young Lives evidence has demonstrated a clear digital divide in terms of both digital skills and the use of digital devices (including computers, tablets, the internet and mobile phones), associated with both socio-economic status and maternal education (Cueto, Felipe, and León 2018), which is likely to have been further exacerbated by the pandemic.

The regularity and quality of distance learning is highly variable

The regularity and quality of distance learning is likely to have been highly variable, compared to face-to-face lessons, particularly in disadvantaged areas where teachers were not always well prepared to deliver online lessons.

New evidence from forthcoming Young Lives qualitative research shows a mixed picture in the delivery of virtual classes (Rojas, forthcoming). While some teachers did receive initial training before beginning online lessons, many students reported that their teachers did not know how to use the technology, with a lack of appropriate pedagogical (teaching) tools available. Online lessons were frequently described as monotonous, affecting both the motivation and participation of students, and likely to have adverse impacts on related learning.

Without targeted interventions, there is a real risk that educational inequalities will continue to increase as the pandemic continues, with potential long-term adverse effects on the life chances and job opportunities for young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

There was a substantial but incomplete recovery of jobs following the first lockdown

Our results showed a significant reduction in employment during the first national lockdown in 2020, followed by a substantial but incomplete recovery of employment levels. By the end of 2020, 63 per cent of young people in the sample had worked in the previous seven days, compared to 68 per cent before the pandemic.

Job losses and subsequent incomplete recovery of employment were particularly marked for young women, the Older Cohort (aged 25–26), and those living in urban areas.

Overall, the gender employment gap has increased sharply, rising from 16 percentage points before the pandemic to 25 percentage points by the end of 2020; while employment for males had nearly returned to pre-pandemic levels, this was not the case for females.

Although the COVID-19 vaccination programme is continuing to be rolled out across the adult population, it is unlikely to be completed before the end of the year, and we may therefore expect continued economic disruption throughout 2021.

Shifting employment patterns suggest that the quality of jobs is deteriorating

Previous Young Lives evidence had shown moderate improvements in labour market outcomes in recent years, including an increase in real wages, a reduction in unemployment, and a slight increase in the share of formal jobs. However, even before COVID-19, a reversal in the trend for youth unemployment had been observed. Moreover, improvements were mainly driven by external factors (given that Peru's economy is export oriented), not by structural changes in the economy. Most young people continue to work in low-skilled and informal jobs, which are typically vulnerable in times of crisis.

Results from our phone survey show a continuing trend of increasing self-employment during 2020, suggesting that the quality of jobs may be deteriorating as the pandemic unfolds, though the medium-term impacts remain to be seen.

The proportion of working young people who were self-employed in our sample increased between August and December 2020 (from 19 to 25 per cent), significantly above the pre-pandemic level (14 per cent). This trend was observed across all groups but has affected young women and those in rural areas most. Self-employment for young women increased from 8 per cent before the pandemic to 27 per cent by December 2020, and from 13 per cent to 41 per cent for those in rural areas.

An initial shift to agricultural jobs observed between August and October 2020 appeared to be declining by the end of year. Among those in employment, 30 per cent were engaged in agricultural activities by December 2020, compared to 36 per cent in August–October (and 29 per cent before the pandemic). This suggests that a sizable proportion of young people moved temporarily to agricultural activities because of the lockdown, but thereafter resumed work in other sectors; a result that may in part also be explained by job seasonality.

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to significant reduction in well-being, with an increasing risk of worsening mental health

The pandemic is taking its toll on the mental health of young people, at a time when access to mental health services is likely to have been significantly disrupted, including services provided through new Community Mental Health Centres.

Our results show a marked decrease in subjective well-being for the Younger Cohort (aged 18–19),⁹ compared to their reported well-being at age 15 in 2016. Our longitudinal data also show a significant decrease in well-being when comparing the Younger Cohort at age 18–19 to the Older Cohort at the same age in 2013. Prior to 2020, the Younger Cohort had consistently recorded higher well-being than the Older Cohort at the same age (measured seven years previously), but this positive trend was reversed in 2020.

Analysis across all four Young Lives study countries suggests there is a strong relationship between the severity of the pandemic and rates of mental health conditions, both in terms of anxiety and depression symptoms. The additional stresses faced by many young people, including school closures, increased responsibilities in the household, economic shocks and increased food insecurity, appear to be directly contributing to worsening mental health (Porter et al. 2021).

Following the national lockdown in Peru, 40 per cent of young people in our sample reported experiencing anxiety and 30 per cent experienced symptoms of depression, compared to pre-pandemic average levels of 18 per cent.¹⁰ Peru showed the highest levels of mental health issues of the four study countries. While these levels had slightly reduced by the third call at the end of 2020, there is real concern that the ongoing pandemic will have a further adverse effect on the mental health of young people in 2021.

The significant drop in well-being may also have long-term mental health consequences, and a body of evidence documents a vicious cycle between poverty and mental health. Given limited mental health services, particularly in poor communities, the danger is that symptoms of mild depression and anxiety could worsen if left untreated and affect later life outcomes (Favara et al. 2021).

Girls and young women are particularly vulnerable to the economic and social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, including through increasing domestic work burdens

The pandemic is exacerbating the already heavy domestic work burdens faced by girls and young women in all four Young Lives study countries. While findings vary according to the specific circumstances of country lockdowns, our data show that households tend to resort to traditional gender roles at times of stress.

In Peru, 85 per cent of young women spent more time on household work, compared to 72 per cent of young men. Similarly, 48 per cent of young women spent more time taking care of children who were unable to go to school, compared to only 23 per cent of young men. Given the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, we may expect even further demands on the time use of girls and young women during 2021.

Previous Young Lives evidence shows that engaging in increased domestic work is an important factor for girls dropping out of education. Excessive domestic work can create a cycle of gender discrimination that puts a strain on the ability to study and can have a detrimental effect on girls' and young women's progress and grades, affecting their likelihood of continuing with schooling.

Forthcoming qualitative research highlights the need for schools and universities to be more adaptable to the increased household tasks that young people face during the pandemic, particularly for girls and young women and those in rural areas. Several of those interviewed reported that teachers did not seem aware of additional demands on students' time, resulting in many young people not being able to complete their studies at home (Rojas, forthcoming).

Young women in our sample were also more likely to report symptoms of both anxiety and depression (with 48 per cent reporting symptoms of anxiety, compared to 33 per cent of young men). Of particular concern, our analysis shows that 18–19-year-old girls whose education has been interrupted due to the pandemic are particularly at risk of experiencing at least mild depression. Conversely, girls who were enrolled in full-time education and participated in learning activities were significantly less likely to experience depression than those who were not enrolled in education. We found no such protective effect for boys (Porter et al. 2021).

9 Young Lives investigated subjective well-being using the Cantril Self-anchoring Scale (also known as the 'Cantril Ladder').

10 As reported for 18–27 year olds in the Peru Demographic and Family Health Survey (ENDES) 2019.

Increasing levels of domestic violence require urgent attention

Overall, 8 per cent of young people in our sample, both young women and young men, had experienced increased physical domestic violence during the first lockdown.

Of particular concern, analysis using Young Lives longitudinal data shows that those who had previously reported experiencing physical domestic violence (in an earlier survey round in 2016) were significantly more likely to have experienced increased physical violence during the pandemic. Almost one in four (24 per cent) of the young people who had previously experienced domestic violence, reported an increase during the pandemic (Porter et al. 2021).

Increasing levels of domestic violence are being reported at a time when individuals may find it difficult to seek help and access appropriate support due to disruptions in the provision of local services, as a result of COVID-19 restrictions and social distancing measures.

The closure of schools and universities is also likely to have removed an important informal support network for young people at risk of domestic violence. School and universities can play an important role through training teachers to identify students at risk and providing advice for seeking support, as well as through informal peer group networks (Rojas 2019).

The continuing pandemic in Peru, with likely ongoing stay-at-home requirements and/or further lockdowns, may exacerbate the worrying increase in domestic violence, requiring urgent action from policymakers and related support services.

Conclusion

The economic and social impacts of the first wave of COVID-19 in 2020 are already having a significant effect on the lives of young people in Peru. The devastating extent of the second wave of infections during 2021 underlines the urgent need to ensure the effective and timely implementation of the current vaccination programme.

In addition, this brief sets out the case for COVID-19 recovery plans to address persistent inequalities and ensure that appropriate support is provided to adolescents and young people, particularly girls and young women, those from poor households, and rural and indigenous communities, if Peru is to avoid the pandemic having long-term adverse economic and social impacts.

A broad approach is required to ensure targeted social protection programmes are effectively aligned with efforts to get young people back into quality education and decent jobs, provide skills development, and provide vital support services to help prevent and address mental health issues and rising domestic violence.

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