Young Lives

March 2021

COVID-19 Phone Survey Headlines Report

Listening to Young Lives at Work in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana: Third Call

India went into a nationwide lockdown from 23 March to 8 June 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Subsequent relaxation of the lockdown and related restrictions has taken place through a number of phases, with a strong focus on reviving the economy. 'Unlock 5', starting on 1 October 2020, further relaxed restrictions on public activity with a set of guidelines and standard operating procedures for businesses. States were given the flexibility to declare virus containment zones, and to reopen education institutions and public places.

The weekly average of new COVID-19 cases and related deaths peaked in September 2020. Though new cases increased temporarily in November 2020, related death rates have declined (with occasional spikes) since October 2020. As of 4 February 2021, India had reported 10.75 million confirmed cases and a death rate of 11.44 people per 100,000.[1]

This report investigates the ongoing impact of COVID-19 on the education, employment, food security and mental health of Young Lives respondents in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, tracked since 2001, and who are now aged 19 and 26.[2] The findings presented are based on a preliminary version of the data collected during the third call of the Young Lives phone survey, conducted in November 2020.

HEADLINES: THIRD CALL

1. **There has been a strong return to education, with 82% of the 19-year-olds previously enrolled in education now attending classes again**; however, just under half (46%) of these classes are still online.
2. **Around one in five 19-year-old students who were enrolled in education in 2020 were not engaged in any form of learning, suggesting many students have lost a whole year of learning.**
3. Of the 19-year-olds who have enrolled in education, but **whose classes continue to be suspended,** it is a vulnerable group of female students living in the poorest households, whose parents are not formally educated and/or belonging to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes who are most affected.
4. **There remains a significant digital divide in access to online learning.** Students from the poorest households, those living in rural areas, and those whose parents had no formal education were most likely to be unable to attend virtual classes.
5. **Since the lockdown, there has been a strong recovery in employment levels for young people, exceeding pre-pandemic rates**: the rates now stand at 53%, compared to 42% before the lockdown. **The exception is for young women in the Older Cohort (aged 26),** where employment levels remain 4 percentage points below pre-pandemic levels.
6. **The increase in self-employment ('own account' work) and the shift towards agricultural jobs, observed in call 2, have slightly reversed**, but the proportions are still larger than before the pandemic.
7. **The proportion of Younger Cohort households who reported running out of food in the previous 12 months has increased since 2016** (5%, compared to 2% in 2016), with higher rates for male respondents, those living in the poorest households and those in rural areas.
8. **There has been a positive change in mental health**, with reduced reported rates of anxiety and depression.

1 See https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/data/mortality

2 More information on the Young Lives phone survey, the fieldwork manual and the third call questionnaire can be found here. Data will be soon available here. Background on the Young Lives survey overall (including sampling strategy and previous rounds) is also available at www.younglives.org.uk.

Methods

The third call of the Young Lives phone survey took place between 1 and 30 November 2020. A total of 2,751 young people were interviewed (1,868 Younger Cohort respondents aged 19, and 883 Older Cohort respondents aged 26 years old).[3] This corresponded to 98% of the sample located in the most recent tracking, conducted in December 2019, and 99.8% of the second call sample (only three respondents from call 2 could not be interviewed).

In the analysis below, respondents from both the Younger and the Older Cohort are merged into one sample, unless otherwise stated. Our analysis is informed by data collected since 2001 through 'regular' Young Lives surveys, to assess how the impact of COVID-19 is affecting individuals with different socio-economic backgrounds and histories. We divided Young Lives households into top, middle and bottom wealth terciles on the basis of their wealth status in 2016 (Round 5 survey) using the Young Lives wealth index (Briones, 2017). Households in the bottom tercile of the wealth index have worse access to public services, the quality of their housing is lower, and they own fewer durable goods.

Results

1. The impact of COVID-19 on education

To investigate the impact of the pandemic on education, we focused on respondents from the Younger Cohort (19 years old) who were enrolled in education either when the third phone interview took place or at some point during 2020 (this represents 68% of the Younger Cohort). Unlike the previous survey calls, the call 3 interview was conducted during the academic year.

There has been a strong return to education, with 82% of the 19-year-olds previously enrolled in education now attending classes again. Most institutions had resumed teaching, online or in person, by November, and the proportion of students enrolled in education but not yet attending, owing to the suspension of classes, had fallen to 11% (compared to 28% at call 2).[4] Of the remaining 7% of students who are not now enrolled in education, the most commonly cited reason for leaving was the completion of the course they were pursuing (75% of this group). Reasons related to COVID-19 were reported by 24% of leavers, alongside inability to pay school fees and being forced to take up work.

Despite encouraging signs of a return to classes, **a very uneven picture is unfolding with entrenched inequalities in access to education. Around 46% of students were learning through online classes (similar to call 2).** However, there **remains a significant digital divide in access to online learning** with students from the poorest households, those living in rural areas, those with no internet access, and those whose parents had no formal education most likely to have **no access to online learning**.

In-person lessons have increased from around 1% at the time of call 2 to 22% at the time of call 3. Students living in rural areas had more access to in-person classes than their urban counterparts (26% compared to 18%), indicating a faster reopening of schools in rural areas. In addition, even when students are able to attend online classes (or other types of distance learning such as radio, TV and printed materials), **there is no guarantee of the quality of this learning, compared to face-to-face lessons.**

Around one in five 19-year-old students (approximately 14% of girls and 23% of boys) who were enrolled in education in 2020 were not engaged with any form of learning. Though a significant reduction from call 2 (33%), this is still a cause of real concern as it suggests a significant number of students have experienced almost a whole year of lost learning. The majority of students not engaged with any form of learning were those from the poorest households, those from rural households, and those whose parents had no formal education. **Within the most vulnerable groups, girls are relatively more likely to have stopped attending classes than boys.**

2. The impact of COVID-19 on employment

To monitor the impact of the pandemic on employment, we compared the employment levels of both Young Lives cohorts at four points in time (Figure 1): (1) before the national lockdown (December 2019 – February 2020); (2) during the national lockdown (March–June 2020); (3) in the seven days before the second call (August–October 2020); and (4) in the seven days before the third call (November 2020). The first two periods were measured retrospectively.

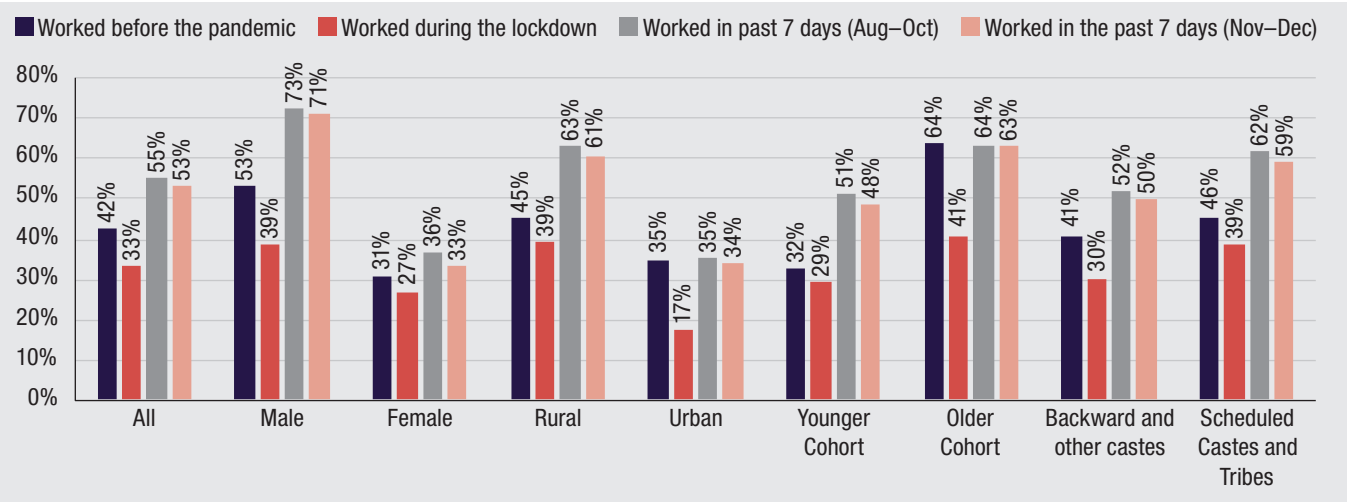
The national lockdown caused a significant reduction in overall employment levels (from 42% before the pandemic to 33% during lockdown), with the greatest impact felt by male respondents, those in the Older Cohort (26 years old) and those in urban areas.

Since the lockdown there has been a strong recovery, resulting in employment levels for young people that exceed pre-pandemic rates: rates now stand at 53%, compared to 42% before the lockdown (and 55% at call 2). Pre-pandemic levels of employment have been exceeded for both male and female respondents, for those living in rural areas and for those from both the poorest and wealthier households. **The exception is for female respondents in the Older Cohort (aged 26)** (with rates at 41% now, compared to 45% before the lockdown) and for 26-year-olds living in urban areas (55%, compared to 60% before lockdown).

3 In June 2020, when the phone survey started, the Older Cohort was aged between 25.5 and 26.5 years old and the Younger Cohort between 18.5 and 19.5 years old.

4 The government permitted online classes to resume from September 2020; admissions were only taking place in a few institutions during the call 2 period.

Figure 1: *Employment levels before, during and after national lockdown*



Note: Estimates use sampling weights.

The recovery in employment levels since the lockdown continues to be higher for male respondents (71% at call 3, compared to 53% before the pandemic), the Younger Cohort (48%, compared to 32%), respondents in rural areas (61%, compared to 45%), and those belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (59%, compared to 46%). This is likely to be in response to income losses suffered during lockdown and continuing interruptions in education for some groups. Employment levels recorded at the time of call 3 have all gone down slightly since call 2, suggesting a slow trend back towards pre-pandemic levels.

The increase in self-employment ('own account' work) observed in call 2 (August–October) has been slightly reversed, but the proportion is still larger than before the pandemic. About 55% of the Younger Cohort and 37% of the Older Cohort were self-employed at call 3, compared to 46% and 33%, respectively, before the lockdown (and 61% and 39% respectively at call 2). More engagement in education might have reduced the participation of the Younger Cohort in self-employment. Rural public works programmes might have enabled dependent workers to regain rural jobs.

Similarly, the shift towards agricultural jobs, observed in call 2, has also decreased, though again, the proportion remains significantly higher than before the pandemic. Among those in employment, 51% were engaged in agricultural activities, compared to 55% in call 2 and 39% before the pandemic. The peak agriculture season was over by call 3, which may also have contributed to lower engagement in these jobs. Participation in agriculture has fallen across all groups, particularly for the Younger Cohort (19 years old), though female respondents, those in rural areas and those in the Younger Cohort remain the largest groups (67%, 61% and 60% respectively), similar to patterns observed for self-employed ('own account') workers.

Among those in employment, 10% had not actually worked in the 7 days prior to interview (14% of the Younger Cohort and 5% of the Older Cohort). This did not apply significantly to those working in the top four sectors: agriculture, wholesale trade, construction and manufacturing. The most common reasons for not currently working were being temporarily absent and spending more time studying (both 30%).

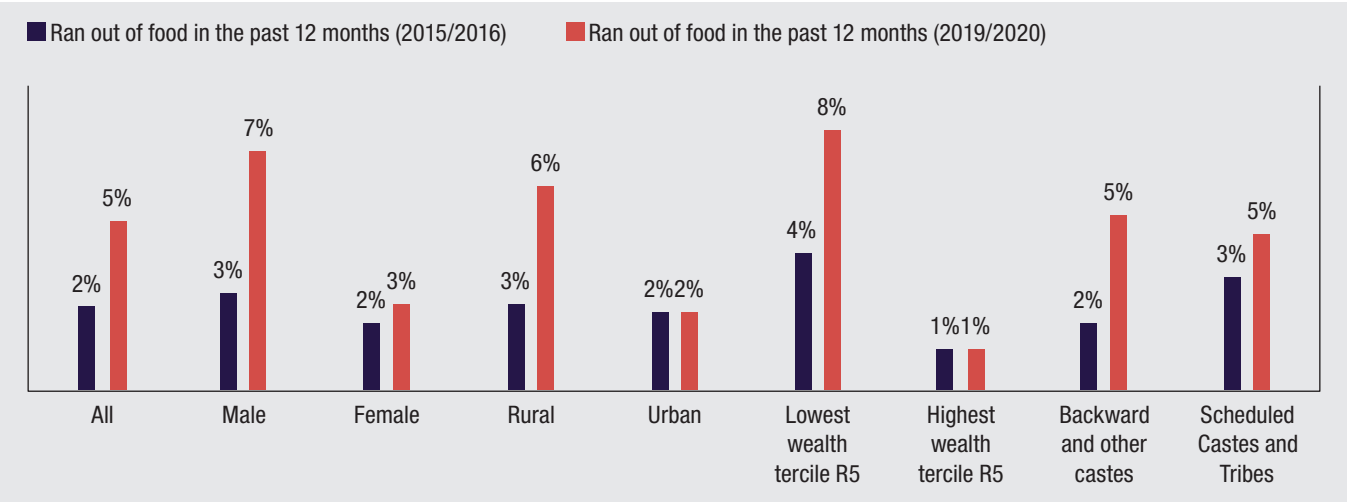
Of those working in the week before their call three interview, the vast majority (97%) had worked at their usual workplaces. Of the small minority working remotely (3%), most were female workers and those in the Older Cohort. The availability of internet facilities did not significantly impact whether individuals worked remotely.

3. The impact of COVID-19 on food security

Overall, **5% of respondents reported that their households had run out of food at some point in the previous 12 months**. Food shortages had a greater impact on male respondents than females (7%, compared to 3%), as well as on the poorest households (8%, compared to 1% among wealthier households) and those living in rural areas (6%, compared to 2% of those living in urban areas).

Young Lives data collected in 2016 for the Younger Cohort (only) provide a comparative pre-pandemic measure of food shortages. Figure 2 shows that **the proportion of Younger Cohort households that ran out of food in the previous 12 months in 2020 was greater than in 2016**, particularly for male respondents (7%, compared to 3% in 2016), those living in the poorest households (8%, compared to 4% in 2016), and those living in rural areas (6%, compared to 3% in 2016). Further analysis on the impact of the pandemic on food insecurity is ongoing.

Figure 2: *Proportion of Younger Cohort households that ran out of food in the previous 12 months (compared to 2016)*



Note: Only Younger Cohort sample is shown. Estimates use sampling weights.

4. The impact of COVID-19 on mental health

We investigated the impact of the pandemic on mental health using the Generalised Anxiety Disorder Assessment (GAD-7) to measure anxiety, and the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-8) to measure depression.[5]

Levels of reported anxiety and depression had fallen compared to those reported at call 2 (August–October): 8% of respondents reported symptoms of anxiety (compared to 11% at call 2) and almost 9% reported symptoms of depression (compared to 10% at call 2). This recent improvement may be explained by falling infection rates and continued lifting of COVID-19 restrictions, and more importantly as economic activity has picked up between call 2 and call 3.

Concluding remarks

This brief provides further evidence on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Young Lives respondents in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, presenting a mixed picture. There has been an encouraging return to education, with 82% of the 19-year-olds now attending classes (just under half of which are still delivered on-line). However, around one in five students were not engaged in any form of learning suggesting a significant number of young people have lost a whole year of learning. However, female students living in the poorest and most vulnerable households are at greater risk of their classes continuing to be suspended, and there remains a significant digital divide in access to online learning. The strong recovery of jobs has led to employment rates exceeding those before the lockdown, across most groups with the exception of 26-year-old women, whose employment level remains 4 percentage points below pre-pandemic levels. The proportion of Younger Cohort households who reported running out of food in the previous 12 months has increased since 2016, but we have seen a positive change in mental health, with reduced reported rates of anxiety and depression. Further analysis of the impact of mental health, food insecurity and other issues is ongoing.

Young Lives is planning to get back to the field for the next regular round of data collection (Round 6) in late 2021, depending on the evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic across our four study countries (Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam). We will also present related policy recommendations from our phone survey in a forthcoming country policy brief.

References

Briones, K. (2017) 'How many rooms are there in your house?' Constructing the Young Lives Wealth Index, Technical Note No 43, Oxford: Young Lives.

Kroenke, K., T.W. Strine, R.L. Spitzer, J.B. Williams, J.T. Berry, and A.H. Mokdad (2009) 'The PHQ-8 as a Measure of Current Depression in the General Population', *Journal of Affective Disorders* 114.1–3: 163–73.

Spitzer, R.L., K. Kroenke, J.B. Williams and B. Löwe (2006) 'A Brief Measure for Assessing Generalized Anxiety Disorder: the GAD-7', *Archives of Internal Medicine* 166.10: 1092–97.

5 GAD-7 and PHQ-8 consist of seven and eight statements, respectively, reporting if the respondents experienced any of the anxiety and depression symptoms listed and how often. To calculate the GAD-7 and PHQ-8 score, values of 0, 1, 2, and 3 are assigned to frequency of symptoms reported ('not at all', 'several days', 'more than half the days', and 'nearly every day', respectively) and summed together. Mild, moderate and severe anxiety are defined using 5, 10, 15-point cut-offs (Spitzer et al. 2006) and 5, 10, 15 and 20 cut-off points are used to define mild, moderate, moderately severe and severe depressive symptoms (Kroenke et al. 2009).

Acknowledgements

This report is part of a series providing headline findings from the third call of the 'Listening to Young Lives at Work Phone Survey', conducted in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam between November and December 2020.

The report was written by Revathi Ellanki, Marta Favara, María de los Ángeles Molina and Catherine Porter. We also extend our thanks to Renu Singh, P. Prudhvikar Reddy, Kath Ford and the research team in Oxford for their support in writing this report.

We particularly wish to thank the Young Lives respondents and their families for generously giving us their time and cooperation.

We acknowledge with thanks the support received in all research activities, including field surveys from the Research Team at CESS (Centre for Economic and Social Studies), our Research Partner in India.

Many thanks to colleagues at the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO), and in particular to Carlo Cafiero, Maximo Torero and Sara Viviani for their technical assistance in the process of validating the food security data and developing appropriate measures.

Thanks also to Isabel Tucker for copy-editing, Garth Stewart for design, and Julia Tilford for oversight of the publication of all Young Lives summative reports.

Special thanks to the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) for funding Young Lives at Work and enabling this rapid research in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The views expressed are those of the authors. They are not necessarily those of, or endorsed by, the University of Oxford, Young Lives, the UK government or other funders.

Young Lives at Work is funded with UK aid from the UK government

UKaid
from the British people

Young Lives is an international study of childhood poverty and transitions to adulthood, following the lives of 12,000 children in four countries (Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam). Young Lives is a collaborative research programme led by the University of Oxford and conducted in India in partnership with the Centre for Economic and Social Studies (CESS) and Young Lives India.

Young Lives, Oxford Department of International Development (ODID)
University of Oxford, 3 Mansfield Road, Oxford OX1 3TB, UK

www.younglives.org.uk
Tel: +44 (0)1865 281751 • Email: younglives@qeh.ox.ac.uk • Twitter: @yloxford

Young Lives