

Real-time research aims to support 'lost and anxious' young people through COVID-19 pandemic

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Southampton researchers have spoken to young people 'virtually' about their pandemic experience. Credit: University of Southampton

Understanding the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on young people and how they can be better supported during the pandemic is the basis of a new study led by a group of University of Southampton researchers.

Young people are widely believed to be taking less notice of the current 'lockdown' than others, and they have been criticised by some commentators for endangering themselves and the wider population.

Scientists from the University are now engaged in identifying ways to make messaging about the pandemic more relevant for [young people](#), and are in talks with [local authorities](#) and national government agencies over how best to support them in staying at home.

Over the past week, Southampton researchers from the Faculty of Medicine MRC Lifecourse Epidemiology Unit and the Southampton Education School have mobilized local young people to gain insights into how they understand government messaging, how they are dealing with the restrictions on their freedom of movement, what support they feel would help them to stay at home and their views on potential approaches to safely come out of a national lockdown.

An early finding of the research is the young people felt it was going to be difficult for them to stay at home during lockdown without being engaged in purposeful activities.

Year 11 and 13 study participants recorded feeling particularly lost and anxious because their education had been suspended abruptly with their national exams canceled and them now facing the prospect of a long summer with nothing to do.

When asked, they came up with number of ways they might keep themselves occupied, including:

- Supporting their [local community](#) and its more vulnerable members;
- Access to free mobile data or courses to enable them to learn new skills;
- Work packages to prepare for upcoming A-level or university courses.

Study lead, Professor Mary Barker, said:

"Lockdown for young people is clearly a very difficult experience. They may also be amongst the least adherent presumably because they perceive themselves to be least at risk. In our conversations with young people, we have found them to be well-informed, articulate and very clear about the support they need.

"It is beholden to us to listen to their voices and with them to find ways of minimizing the long-term negative impact on them of this extraordinary, unprecedented experience."

Together with two groups of young advisors, the research team conduct a more in-depth study following a number of young people in Southampton and surrounding area over the next few months as they experience the impact of the pandemic.

The study involves holding a series of remotely conducted focus group discussions after which the young people are asked to keep social media diaries, complete assessments of their diet and physical activity and of their mental health and well-being.

Simultaneously, discussions are being held with local providers about ways in which they might involve young people in volunteering activities during the pandemic and how they might be engaged in purposeful activities that would help them prepare for the future.

Professor Keith Godfrey, also involved with the study, underlined how while it was right that the lockdown was enforced for the protection of older people and those with chronic conditions, the impact on young people at such a critical time in their lives must be taken seriously.

He added: "The global climate movement has demonstrated how young people can drive the global policy agenda in positive ways, and there are similar opportunities for the world to benefit from their vision in relation to COVID. Moreover, wider society will be permanently changed by the emergency and the views of young people will be critical in shaping the post-COVID world."

Provided by University of Southampton

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