

Young adults vastly more affected by COVID pandemic in Ireland than older adults

May 12 2021



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"We're meant to be crossing over ... but the bridge is broken": 2020 university graduates' experiences of the pandemic in Ireland

A new study from Trinity College Dublin investigating the impact of the COVID [pandemic](#) on young adults finds that they are vastly more affected than older people, and the reverberations of the disruption to some will last decades. Researchers say this group have paid a high price in the form of foregone opportunities for education, social networks, and labor market integration.

The research, involving university graduates in Ireland, is published in *YOUNG: the Nordic Journal of Youth Research*.

The impact of major crises in our lives is dependent on many things, but the timing of the crisis relative to our life course transitions is one of the most important aspects that influences how we are affected.

Older people have—understandably—been at the center of attention during the pandemic, as COVID affects them more directly. Now that large parts of the older population (in the Global North) are effectively shielded by vaccination, attention is turning to young adults—a group that has been largely neglected or even vilified.

The quote 'We're supposed to be crossing over.....but the bridge is broken,' that comes from one of the research participants is apt—the sense that 'the bridge is broken' at a crucial stage when major transitions are supposed to happen in their lives. In terms of such critical junctures and transitions, young adults are vastly more affected than older people, and the reverberations of the disruption to some will last decades.

Young adults are disadvantaged in facing the pandemic in several different ways. They have not yet developed the coping mechanisms and perspective that allow for, by and large, more successful regulation of negative affective states—whereas older adults have such 'armour' due to their longer time perspective and greater accumulated experience and resources.

Key findings of the research

Participants of the study:

- demonstrated a keen awareness of their mental health, adopting self-care practices such as mindfulness.
- reported positive experiences of life in their 'lockdown homes' with supportive families.
- (some) were embarking on normative adult pathways sooner than anticipated while others opted for postgraduate study to bide time.
- reported heightened worry and anxiety, and most had limited their media use in response.
- experienced a degree of resignation as their plans did not extend beyond the immediate future.
- accepted strict constraints associated with the management of the pandemic in Ireland during the early stages of the pandemic.
- did not view themselves as members of a group that was likely to experience the long-term costs of the pandemic but rather were attempting to negotiate their own pathway through labor market uncertainty.
- demonstrated high levels of solidarity towards family members and other vulnerable groups in society.

Professor Virpi Timonen, School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College and Senior Author said:

" At the start of the pandemic, I found the absence of attention to young adults quite baffling and alarming, and this sense grew as it became clear that the pandemic was going to last for a long time and as the associated restrictions turned out to be comparatively long-lasting and extensive in Ireland.

Working in third-level education, I am attuned to the importance of the final year of college and the immediate aftermath of graduation as a juncture that can have a profound impact on subsequent trajectories. Young adults have—relative to older age groups—weak resources to adapt at a point in their lives that is especially crucial for subsequent social integration and employment pathways.

The fact that this group has received very little positive attention from policymakers is alarming as young adults are the future of any society and extended disruptions in their developmental pathways carry a long-term cost not just to the individuals but society as a whole."

Professor Timonen makes some recommendations for moving forward to limit the damage to young adults as we move beyond the COVID crisis. She said:

" Young adults have paid a high price in the form of foregone opportunities for education, social networks, and labor market integration; yet the large majority continue to evince astonishing levels of solidarity towards older and other vulnerable groups in society. However, the adverse impacts of the pandemic for many will continue for decades, in some cases throughout their lives. It is of utmost urgency for the future of Ireland to turn attention to normalizing [young adults'](#) lives and ensuring that they have better labor market opportunities.

Among the strategies that I would propose, both arising from this research and in more general terms, include immediate initiation of systematic planning for a number of scenarios for the return to colleges in the autumn; programs that combat loneliness at younger ages; greatly enhanced mental health supports; and much stronger focus on labor market openings at entry-level. In the absence of such measures, 'Generation COVID' will struggle and some of its members might even become a lost generation."

More information: Virpi Timonen et al, 'We're Meant to Be Crossing Over ... but the Bridge Is broken': 2020 University Graduates' Experiences of the Pandemic in Ireland, *YOUNG* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/11033088211004792](https://doi.org/10.1177/11033088211004792)

Provided by Trinity College Dublin

Citation: Young adults vastly more affected by COVID pandemic in Ireland than older adults (2021, May 12) retrieved 1 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-05-young-adults-vastly-affected-covid.html>

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