

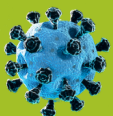
THE *LANCET* COVID-19 COMMISSION
TASK FORCE ON HUMANITARIAN RELIEF,
SOCIAL PROTECTION & VULNERABLE GROUPS

**A ‘Pandemic Generation’¹ is
not inevitable.
Policy and Practice
Recommendations for the
Pandemic and Post-COVID Era
for Children and Youth**

OCTOBER 2022



Katherine Zappone, Isaac Olufadewa, Irwin Redlener, and Karen Redlener



THE *LANCET*
COVID-19 COMMISSION

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The following report has been posted online by the Commission Secretariat, and has not been peer-reviewed or published in *The Lancet*, nor in any other journal. This reports intends to bring together expert views on key topics as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolds.

OVERVIEW

Both within and between countries, some of us are moving more quickly than others to the post-COVID era, and to living our lives again with a sense of hope and an anticipation of opportunity. Many of our children and youth throughout the world are not part of this group, however, because global and national governance has yet to shift fully in their favor, particularly for those living in vulnerable conditions. Researchers and international agencies continue to produce data that both demonstrate the gravity of COVID-19 as a children's crisis and hold potential to guide choices for a children's post-COVID transformational era. For example, children under 18 years, who are already twice as likely to live in extreme poverty compared with adults, are seriously affected by the pandemic's poverty magnification.² Children's and adolescents' mental health has suffered during the pandemic, while approximately 70% of mental services for children and adolescents have been disrupted.³ Other essential services have been interrupted, including school closures, affecting more than 1.5 billion children and youth⁴ and there have been significant disruptions to healthcare, nutrition, water and sanitation, and social and child protection services. Further, there exists child-care and early years learning deficits in developing and developed settings, while millions of children struggle to obtain broadband access and the essential accompanying hardware to gain mentoring, making remote learning essentially not possible. And yet, a spotlight on young people living in Africa, for example, where youth unemployment has risen sharply with an impact twice as strong as for the total population, provides all interested parties with ideas for moving forward, if only these new generations are fully empowered to realize their best potential.⁵

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The children and youth crisis contains distributional consequences. Hope and opportunity are possible for more of our youngest and younger generations only if investment policies are targeted toward reducing inequalities through universal health coverage and comprehensive social protection. Every country requires a social safety net that empowers and enhances the capacities of our children and youth as well as protects them against risks and deadening conditions. Every country must improve access to healthcare that is tailored to the child's unique intersectional identity and that is provided in an appropriate location and a timely fashion.

Towards these ends, and with an effort to prioritize, policy changes include:

- **To start with the youngest and to progressively realize universal child benefits.** Children, and particularly the youngest, are the most likely to live in poverty. Universal child benefit is a practical program that can be rapidly scaled and is both more affordable and more effectively addresses poverty. Such social protection is foundational for educational, health, economic and social empowerment.
- **To ensure a connection between health and educational services for the earliest years of a child's life.** Often this will require systems change in how and where services are delivered. Community primary care settings, that are publicly funded, hold potential for more access to quality care thereby beginning the process to mitigate health inequalities.
- **To build and to institutionalize robust family friendly policies for resilient and effective economies.** A focus on our components is essential: (1) access to child benefits and adequate wages; (2) adequate paid leave for all parents and guardians; (3) flexible and gender-responsive workplace policies (i.e., support for maternity protection); and (4) affordable, accessible, quality childcare.^{2,6}
- **To legislate for and to build public or public/private models of early learning and childcare systems and settings.** This holds potential to universalize social protection and to identify healthcare needs in an equivalent fashion. Private-only care and early learning, without state investment, will do little to mitigate or to reduce all forms of inequality for our youngest.
- **To train health, education and child services staff--parents and guardians--in child protection risks** (i.e., prevention of sexual exploitation, abuse, neglect) during COVID-19 and provide guidelines on how to safely report such concerns.

PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS

GOVERNMENTS AND PARLIAMENTS SHOULD:

- Establish systems and processes to hear directly from representatives of children and young people, and children and young people's NGO organizations on their vision and recommendations for the post-COVID era. The process should be carefully designed in a culturally appropriate way, so that a diversity of voices are included, so that government

and parliamentary members are engaged in direct dialogue, so that the public can view some of the proceedings and testimonies, and whereby a resolution or act of parliament decrees the process and makes a commitment to respond to results, and to find ways to invest in innovations that are prioritized by children, young people and their organizations.

Inter-governmental or country settings, such as the African Union, United Nations, EU, USA, Global South, and ASEAN, could find ways to utilize these national reports in their dialogue and decisions for post-COVID policies and practices. Not in 'children and young people's sessions' but within the bodies of their work on social protection and universal health coverage.

- Make financial commitments to improve access to and availability of mental health support for children and young people in response to the COVID-19 crisis.⁷ This should include setting priorities to develop digital psychological interventions, such as apps and online programs, alongside other services such as text messages, chatlines, forums, and phone calls.⁸
- Extend income support measures for young people to cushion the impact of the pandemic and implement job retention schemes to support the retention of young workers including the use of technology to encourage work flexibility.⁹
- Invest in youth education to minimize the effect of COVID-19 through school closures and education to compensate for the time lost due to the pandemic.¹⁰ Adapt the delivery of education, through digital and non-digital methods from early childhood to tertiary education to ensure continued skills acquisition and learning, with particular attention to the needs of young women and girls.¹¹
- Promote accurate public health information through various communication tools and empower young people to make evidence-based decisions regarding their health, while also proactively contributing to prevention and mitigation.¹¹ This could include enabling enhanced communication among young people both to disseminate health information, such as when symptoms may be managed at home, if appropriate, and to be responsive to emerging needs, during a crisis period.¹²
- In line with UNICEF's six-point plan, increase and maintain funding for emergencies to prevent multiple, catastrophic, and protracted crises and to save children's lives, alleviate their suffering and preserve their dignity. In all humanitarian responses,

prioritize child rights and child protection, in line with the Core Commitments for Children.

CONCLUSION

A panel of experts on these and other issues, working together as a Taskforce for The Lancet COVID-19 Commission, emphasized that the global and national communities must move beyond mere consultation and provide space for marginalized populations to have a seat at the decision-making table, to be part of designing solutions. Only in this way will governments and parliaments meet the needs of the full range of diverse populations. The place to start is with our children and young people. Often it is community organizations that can reach them in ways that governments cannot and have the trust of our children and young people in ways that governments often do not. Government's increased investment in community organizations—and the full make-up of civil society of which they are an integral part—is a sure bet to pay off in the medium to long-term.

Now is the time. A Pandemic Generation is not inevitable.

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