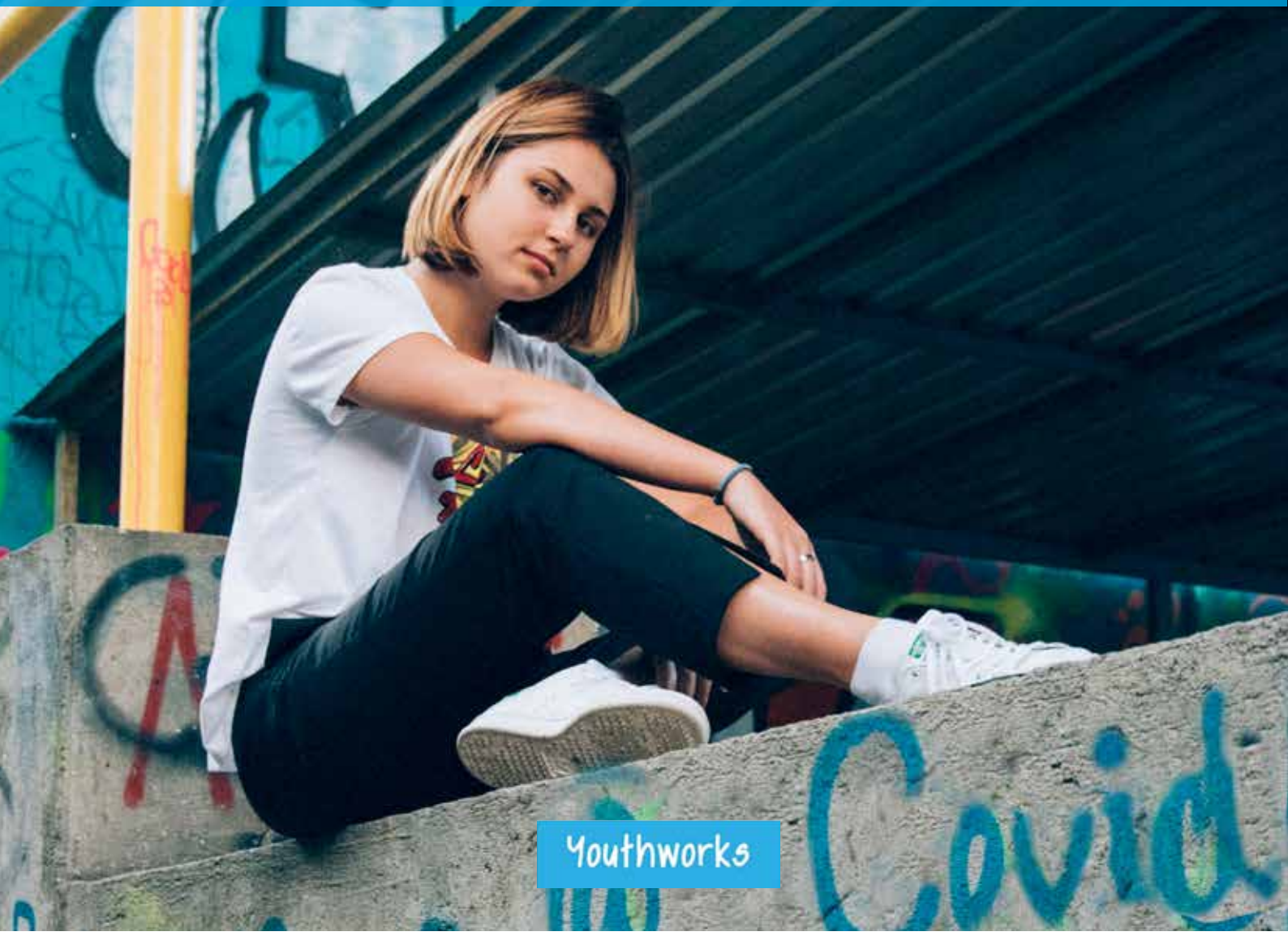
Locked down and online:

Teenagers' wellbeing and online lives in the COVID-19 winter lockdown 2020-21



theCybersurvey

Adrienne Katz and Aiman El-Asam

Contents

The backdrop to this 'lockdown' data collection.	3
Executive Summary	4
About the samples	6
Respondents' vulnerabilities	7
COVID fallout – who was most affected?	8
Wellbeing in winter 2020	10
Year on year change	14
Friendship and trusted adults during a pandemic	19
Harmful content and fake information about COVID	26
Cyberaggression	30
Sharing nude and intimate images	34
Implications and recommendations	35

The Cybersurvey is run by Adrienne Katz of Youthworks Consulting. It was founded in 2008, Youthworks has formed a partnership with Dr Aiman El-Asam of the Department of Psychology at the University of Kingston, London.

With thanks to Lara Colley-Chahal and Euan Sukul for assistance.

During the two winter lockdowns, between November 2020 and 8th March 2021, it was extremely difficult for schools to participate in our survey. They were working at full stretch to support families, cope with the pandemic and run a service for vulnerable children. The virus peaked again in January, bringing a crisis mode to every aspect of life.

We are sincerely grateful to those who managed to enable young people to take part, producing a sample of 2033. Thank you to all those young people for taking the time and care to respond.

Design by: www.profiledesign.net
Cover photo: daniil-kuzelev, Unsplash. Image page 35, Clapton Academy students, Hackney Council.

THE BACKDROP TO THIS 'LOCKDOWN' DATA COLLECTION.

Concerns about child poverty, neglect and abuse rose sharply during the pandemic. Children were less visible. Services reduced face to face visits and greater numbers of children were 'home schooled' as some parents kept them home out of fear or inability to bring them, even when schools were open for vulnerable children. Nearly six million adults and 1.7 million children were struggling to get enough food between September 2020 and February 2021, according to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs committee[1]. Nearly 20 per cent of England's state school pupils now receive free school meals, a total of 1.63 million out of 8.2 million[2]. Statistics about death and disease were daily fare.

Lockdowns appeared to worsen domestic abuse and violence. Calls to the Met Police about domestic abuse between March 25th and June 10th, leapt by 12% compared to the same period the year before, often from concerned neighbours[3]. Referrals to care soared. Cafcass outstanding case numbers reached a record level of 42,256 in December 2021[4].

Children's mental health problems increased, straining an already over stretched service. The Royal College of Psychiatrists' analysis of NHS figures, showed that 80,226 more children and young people were referred to mental health services between April 2020 and December 2020, up by 28% on the same period in 2019[5].

A survey of NHS providers (May 2021) found 85% of trust leaders could not meet demand for eating disorder services[6]. The Cybersurvey previously found teens with eating disorders are at particular risk of encountering online risks and harms[7].

Now they were potentially alone and online all day when professional support went virtual.

School life, routines and learning were upended. OfCom reported that 1.8 million children had no device from which to access remote learning. As the 3rd lockdown began, 559,000 had no access at all, 913,000 only had access to learning via a parent's mobile phone[8]. While efforts were made to provide devices, they proved uneven[9]. In addition, many devices had to be safely prepared before being handed out – this took time.

Some children were in comfortable loving homes with parents working from home, trying to keep up morale, teaching their children, setting up fun events with friends and family online and getting them out for exercise. This did not prevent children feeling helpless and despondent.

In early 2021, the charity Young Minds found that many young people felt a sense of frustration, uncertainty about the future and a loss of hope. Some had begun self-harming, having panic attacks or suicidal thoughts, while others expressed growing anxieties about food, eating or weight, missing human contact, or losing motivation to carry out basic tasks or to look after themselves. ¾ appeared to find the fourth lockdown harder to cope with than previous ones[10]. This was the backdrop when this data was collected, influencing ideas on how to help children.

[1] Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5801/cmselect/cmenvfru/1156/115605.htm

[2] The Big Issue: Food Poverty in the UK

[3] https://www.standard.co.uk/news/crime/london-domestic-abuse-calls-soar-lockdown-b79082.html

[4] Community Care February 4th 2021

[5] Royal College of Psychiatrists' analysis published April 2021 accessed in Pharmaceutical Journal 23 June 2021.Article by Julia Robinson.

[6] NHS Providers 2021 Children and young people's mental health survey.

[7] Katz, A. & El Asam, A. 'Refuge and Risk,' Youthworks in partnership with Internet Matters.

[8] OfCom, reported in SecEd 6th Jan 2021

[9] Office of The Children's Commissioner for England, August 2020. /

[10] Coronavirus: Impact on Young People with Mental Health Needs. Young Minds. 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Listening so that we can act

It is vital to hear from children and young people during the pandemic. While the samples before and during the pandemic differ in size and slightly in age cohorts, the messages suggest how children and young people can be helped to recover from this massive disruption to life as we knew it. Young people alert us to new and developing issues they face, vividly describing how they felt about life in the winter lockdowns.

The Cybersurvey is an annual survey exploring online life and wellbeing among 11-17year olds. Data is gathered in the autumn term. In 2020/21 collection lasted from November 2020 until February 2021.

Wellbeing year on year 2019/2020

- More young people said they had a mental health difficulty in 2020, 12% vs 8%. 68% felt nervous and anxious, among whom 23% felt this way 'most of the time.
- Twice as many worry about life at home.
- Sleep, concentration and appetite, were reduced. 6% fewer teens felt happy most of the time. They also said: other people are less likely to 'notice that I am not OK.'
- Worries became more dominant in 2020: 30% say, 'sometimes my worries affect my life' and 34% 'sometimes can't make my worries go away' compared to 25% and 32% in 2019.

Were you or your family badly affected by COVID?

- Young Carers and teens with a long-standing physical illness, were the most likely to say they or their families were badly affected by COVID (27%).
- Also badly affected were: Those who worry about life at home (24%) and more than 1 in 5 of deaf teens (21%).

Overwhelmed with worry

- 29% of teens of all ages say: 'most of the time, I cannot make my worries go away.'
- 45% say: 'my worries affect my life' (15% most of the time, 30% sometimes).
- At age 16, as many as 43% sometimes 'fear bad things will happen.'

COVID brings dread

Among those who say they or their family have been badly affected by Covid:

- 74% say 'I can't make my worries go away.'
- Over 1/3 fear that bad things might happen 'most of the time' (34%), a further 40% worry about this 'some of the time.'

Misinformation about COVID

- 42% of all teens who responded had seen content they considered to be misinformation about COVID-19.

Covid and Friendships

Covid-affected teens are 4.5 times more likely to say 'I have missed so much school this year, I have lost my friends' compared to young people with no vulnerabilities. (14% vs 3%).

Harmful content

Asked whether they have 'come across' harmful content of various types, we note year on year increases in the viewing of content about:

- Bulking up your body 28% to 34%
- Talking about suicide 25% to 31%
- Pressure to be very thin 23% to 27%
- Unsought nude images 23% to 26%

Content about bulking up your body was more frequently reported than pro-anorexia content in 2019 and this trend has amplified in 2020.

Friendship

Young carers were 5 x more likely than non-vulnerable teens to feel they have lost their friends due to missing school.

While some teens prioritised friendship, ramping up their chatting online and rekindling old friendships from primary school, as many as one in five agree or strongly agree: 'I feel alone.'

Hardly ever or never feeling positive

In 2020, the following young people said they hardly ever or never feel positive:

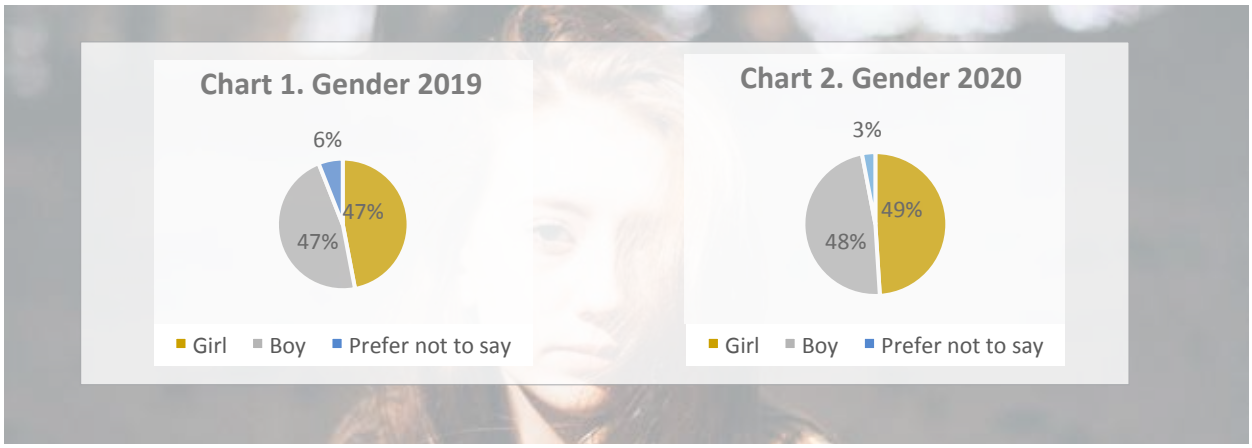
- 51% of those with an eating disorder and 44% of teens with a mental health difficulty.
- 43% of teens who worry about life at home.
- 36% of teens with who get angry or irritable easily.
- More than 1/3 of teens with hearing loss and 31% who have speech difficulties.
- 29% of each of the following groups hardly ever or never feel positive about things: young people in or leaving care; those who feel they or their family are badly affected by COVID19; autistic teens and 28% of young carers.

Cyberbullying and Cyberaggression

While Cyberbullying has remained stable overall, at 20% of the sample, one third of Covid affected young people have been cyberbullied. Cyberaggression has increased since 2019: sexist insults (16 vs 12%), homophobic insults (17 vs 15%), racist insults (14 vs 13%) and insults about appearance (25 vs 23%).

ABOUT THE SAMPLES

In 2019, The Cybersurvey saw a record 14,994 young people take part, however, in 2020 the winter lockdowns were an unexpected obstacle. This made collecting a sample a challenge and we are immensely grateful to the schools who managed to help us achieve a sample of 2033 in such conditions, before schools reopened on March 8th 2021.



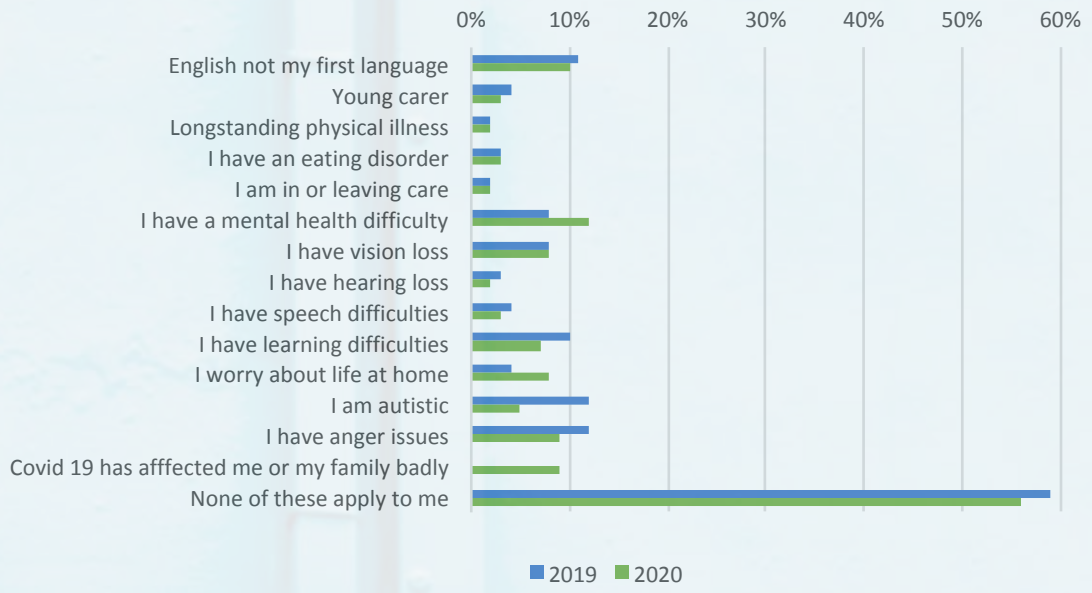
NB. A slight change in the question in 2020 did not produce descriptions of how people identify, resulting in seemingly fewer people who did not choose 'girl' or 'boy' as their gender

More 14-16year olds

2020 provided a smaller percentage of 12year olds and a higher percentage of 14-15year olds than 2019. There was also a greater percentage of the sample who were 16 and over in 2020 (14%) compared to in 2019 (5%).

RESPONDENTS' VULNERABILITIES

Chart 4. About you: vulnerabilities identified by young people.
2019/2020



Despite the limitations of sample differences, there are clear and valuable messages about young people's experiences during lockdowns 3 and 4 which could shape support.

In 2020: the % of teens saying 'I have a mental health difficulty' increased by half.

9% say COVID-19 has affected me or my family badly.

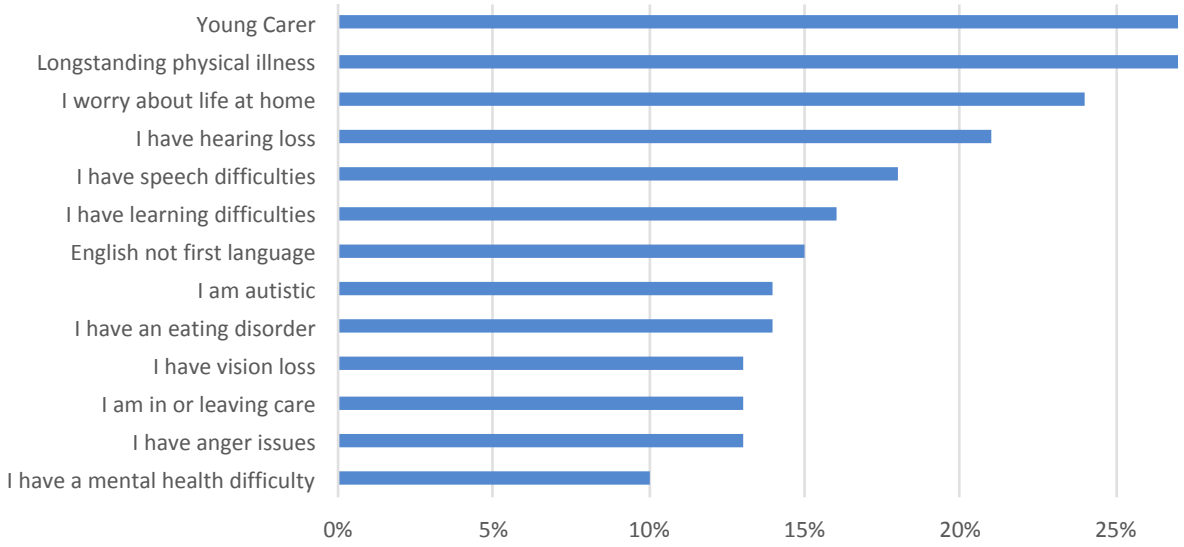
In 2020: the % who worry about life at home has doubled.

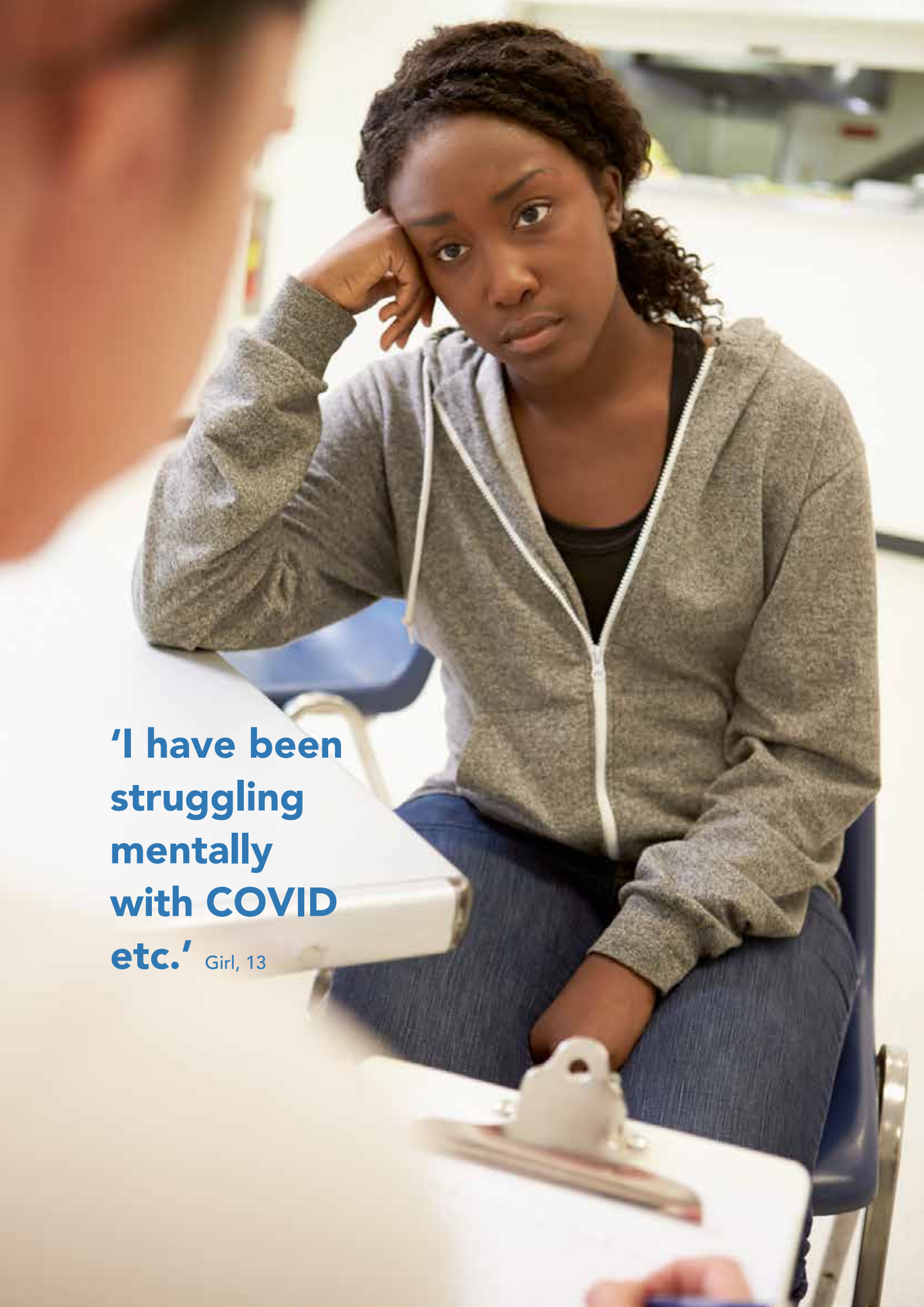
COVID FALLOUT – WHO WAS MOST AFFECTED?

178 young people said they or their family had been badly affected by COVID 19. This could include worries about health, bereavement, job loss problems, food poverty, domestic violence, or family breakup, to name a few. The absence of services during lockdowns increased the burden for families and especially for young carers. The question was designed to capture anyone who felt they or their family had been badly affected in any way by the virus and all that it brought. It revealed an unequally distributed burden among vulnerable young people. Our 52 young carers and 44 teens with a longstanding physical illness were most likely to say they were badly affected. 156 who had worries about life at home, and 43 people with hearing or speech difficulties (57) were also considerably impacted by COVID19.

NB Individuals may have more than one vulnerability.

Chart 5. COVID-19 has affected me or my family badly.
By vulnerable group 2020

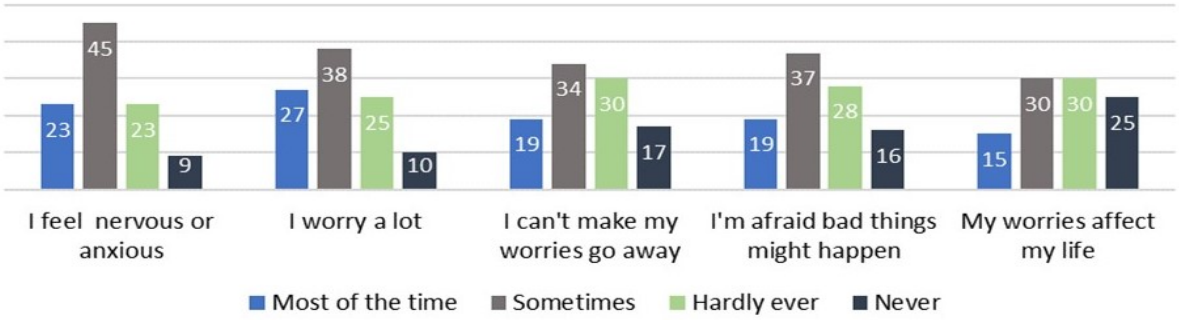




‘I have been struggling mentally with COVID etc.’ Girl, 13

Chart 6. How I feel about myself.

2020. Winter lockdown. % rounded up.



Feelings of anxiety and worry are widespread in 2020 as shown above, not only among families directly affected by COVID in some way, but among all our young people.

I feel nervous or anxious and afraid bad things might happen

More than 2/3 feel nervous or anxious most or some of the time. The most frequently chosen answer to the question 'How do you feel?' is: 'I feel nervous or anxious (68%) while 56% feel afraid 'bad things might happen'.

This is a rational response to what was happening all around them at that time. It underscores how many children might need help to overcome or manage these feelings before they escalate. While some don't feel this way all the time, too many do.

My worries affect my life

Worries appear overwhelming for some: In lockdown, almost 2/3 worry a lot, 27% do so 'most of the time' while 45% feel their worries are so overwhelming that their lives are affected. The extent of this is further revealed by 53% who feel there are times when they cannot make their worries go away (19% most of the time and 34% sometimes). Girls are twice as likely as boys to feel nervous or anxious most of the time. Prior to the pandemic, there were already high levels of worry, anxiety and dread among young people. Back in autumn 2019, 59% worried a lot.

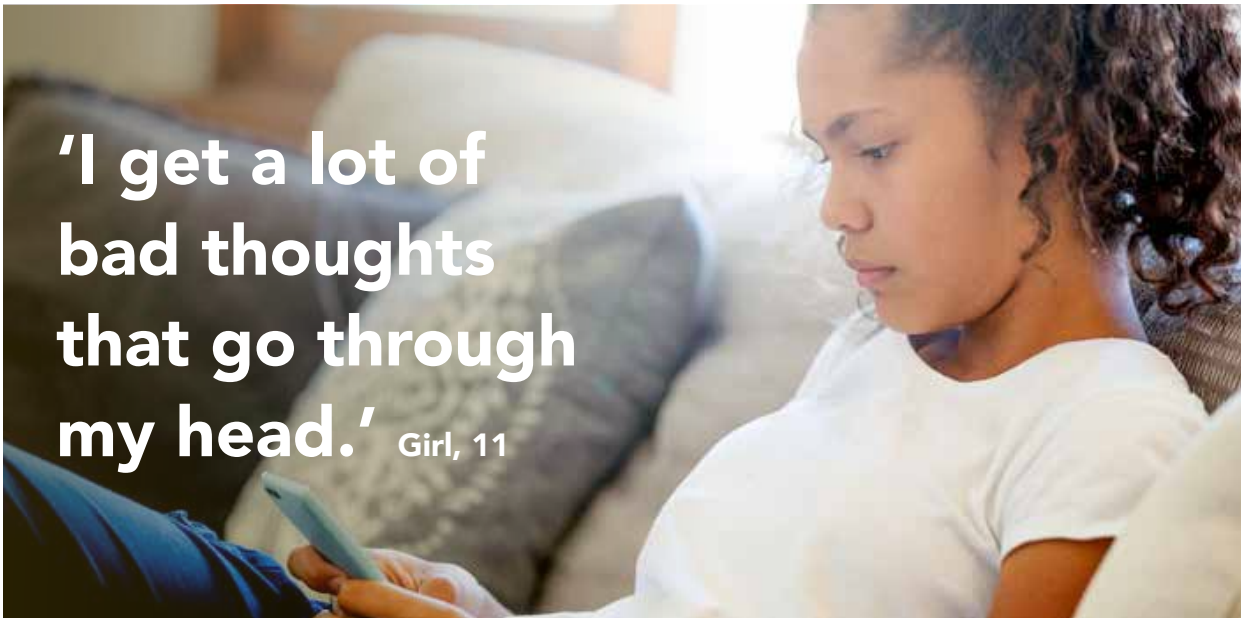
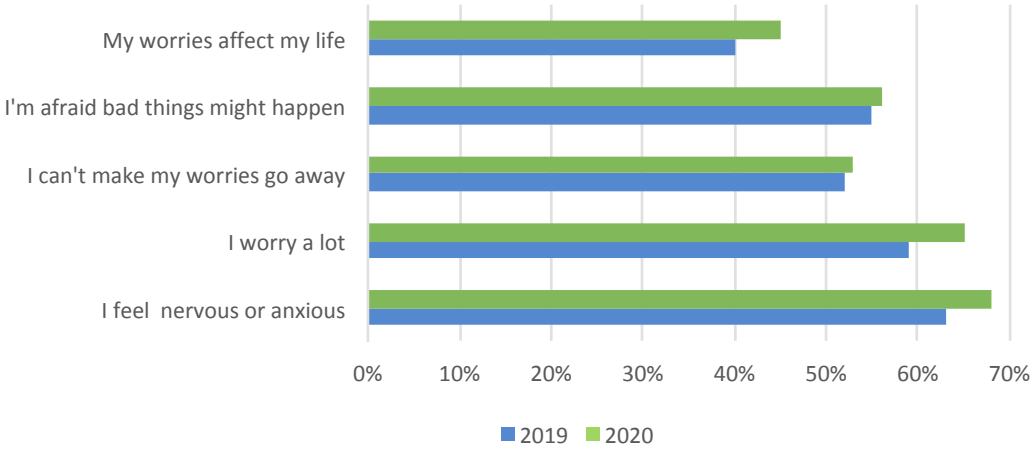


Chart 7. How I feel about myself.
Answer: Most of the time and sometimes.2019/2020



'How I feel' 2020 compared to 2019

Answer: Some of the time and most of the time.

We see year on year increases among worried or anxious teens:

- 6% more say, 'I worry a lot'
- 5% more say, 'My worries affect my life'
- 5% more feel nervous or anxious
- 1% more cannot make their worries go away
- 1% more are afraid bad things might happen

Wellbeing and age groups

11year olds feel more positive, but by the mid-teens, this dwindles

How 11 yr olds feel 'most of the time'

43% feel positive about things
55% feel happy

How 14-15year olds feel 'most of the time'

22% feel positive.
31% feel happy

Self esteem 'most of the time'

Half of the 11yr olds feel 'there are some good things about me,'

Whereas only 1/3 of the 14 and 15yr olds feel this way.

I feel irritable and angry 'most of the time'

More than 1 in 4 young people In the mid-teen years feel irritable or angry

I cannot make my worries go away, 'most of the time'

1 in 5 cannot make my worries go away.

I fear bad things will happen.

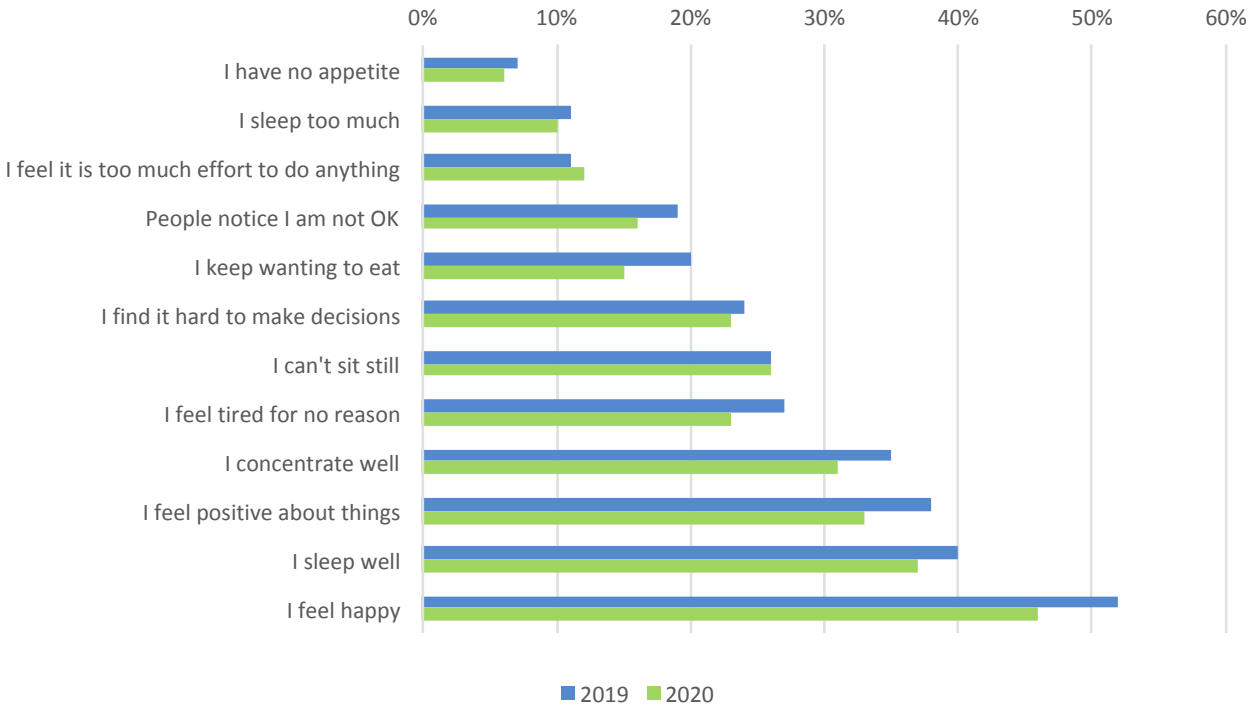
The ages at which teens are most likely to say that 'most of the time' they fear that bad things will happen, are 14-15years: 21% and 23% respectively. In addition, 23% of 11year olds also struggle with this fear 'most of the time.'

How are you?

Sleep, concentration, and appetite all appear to have reduced in 2020. Along with these decreases, fewer teens feel happy or 'positive about things' most of the time. However, during the winter lockdown, teens feel that people are less likely to notice that some children are not OK.

Chart 8. How are you?

Answer: Most of the time 2019/2020.



Youthful optimism takes a knock.

Eating and sleep patterns have been affected.

Pre COVID feelings and outlook compared to life during lockdown

When the answers 'sometimes and most of the time are combined, they conceal shifts in patterns in the way teens answered the questions. While totals are often similar it seems that the changes occur among those who say they sometimes feel this way rather than those who do so most of the time.

Eating and sleep patterns have been affected.

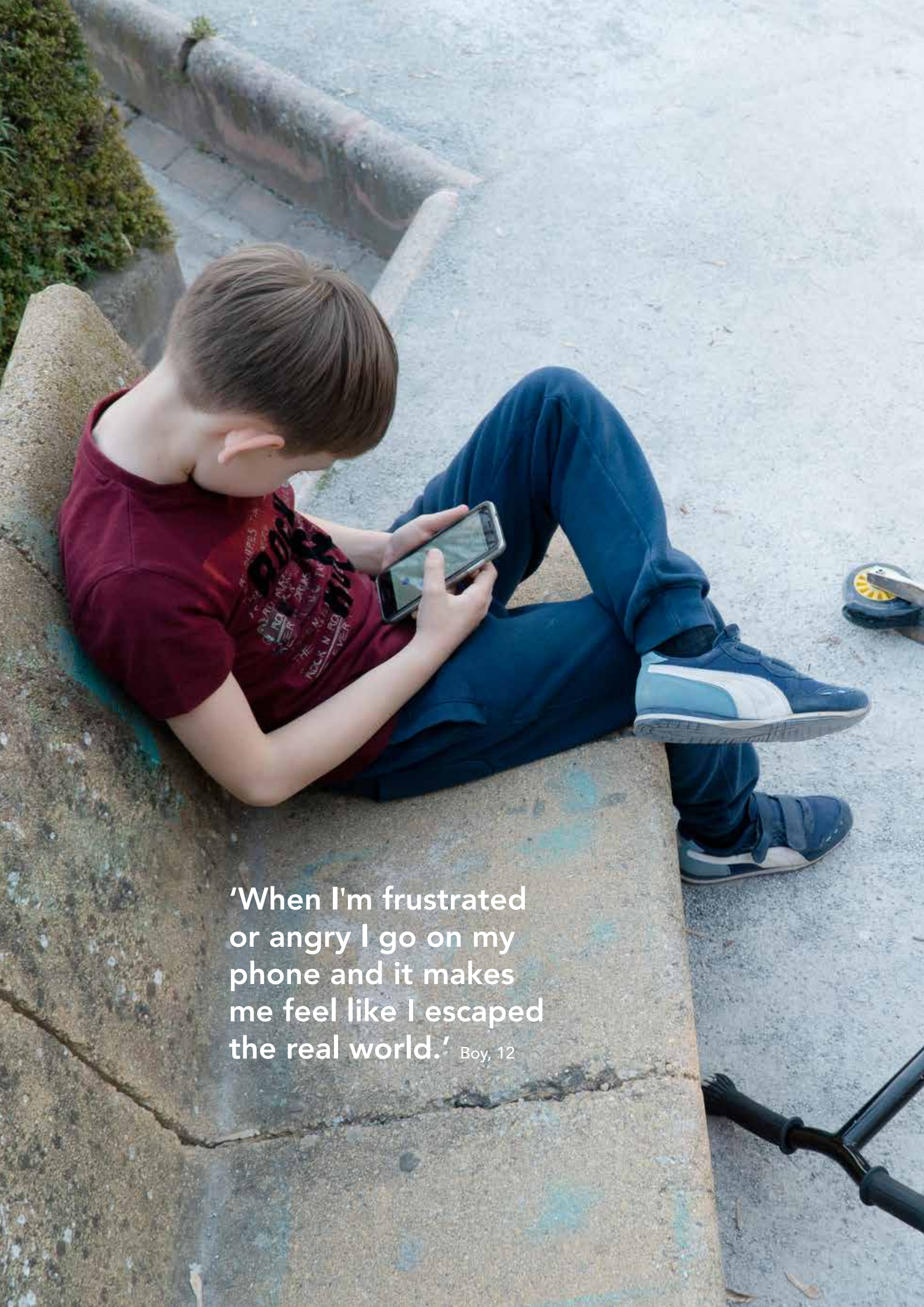
5% more teens feel they sometimes sleep too much during lockdown. Appetite was affected: an increase of 2% in 2020 reporting no appetite, while on the other hand, more teens found that at times during lockdown, they kept wanting to eat (41% vs 35% the year before).

Only sometimes feeling happy

General happiness becomes more sporadic during lockdown, compared to pre-Covid. In 2020 more teenagers only sometimes felt happy (47% vs 41% in 2019). Fewer felt happy most of the time (46% vs 52%).

Feeling positive about things only some of the time

5% fewer teenagers 'feel positive about things most of the time' during lockdown. In comparison to 2019, they were slightly more likely to say they 'sometimes' feel positive.



‘When I'm frustrated or angry I go on my phone and it makes me feel like I escaped the real world.’ Boy, 12

YEAR ON YEAR CHANGE

Vulnerable and locked down

These responses represent all the young people in this sample. But not all teenagers were living in similar circumstances or with the same difficulties or vulnerabilities. For more vulnerable teenagers the picture is somewhat different. For anyone who said they or their family were badly affected by COVID, anxiety and worries are to be expected, but the strain fell disporportionately on some:

Young carers were having an intensely difficult time, and compared to other vulnerable groups, they were most likely to say: 'I've missed so much school this year I feel I have lost my friends'.

Teens with an eating disorder, a mental health difficulty or worries about life at home, had the lowest levels of happiness, followed by teenagers in or leaving care. More than one in four of young people with a self-identified mental health difficulty said they hardly ever or never feel happy.

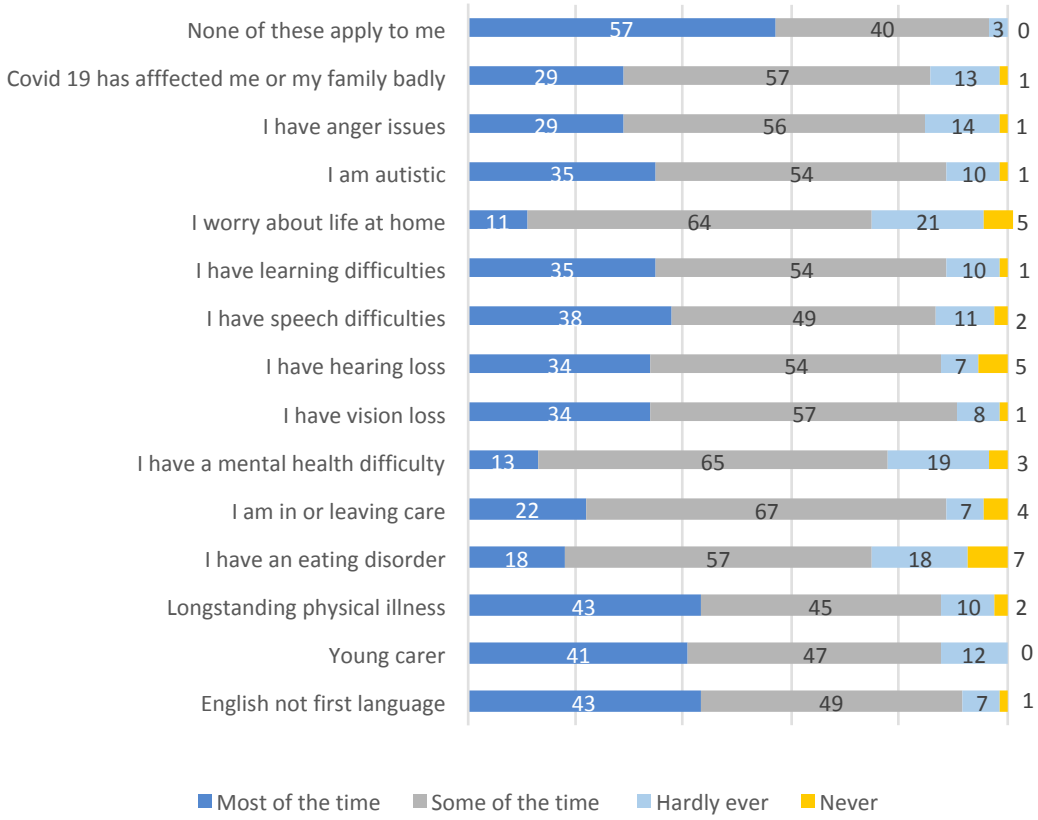
5% increase in teens who 'worry a lot some of the time'

2% increase in teens feeling nervous or anxous most of the time. 3% more feel this some of the time'

A 6% decrease in teens who say 'I feel happy most of the time'

A 4% increase in those who say 'My worries affect my life'

Chart 9. I feel happy. *% By vulnerable groups. 2020.*



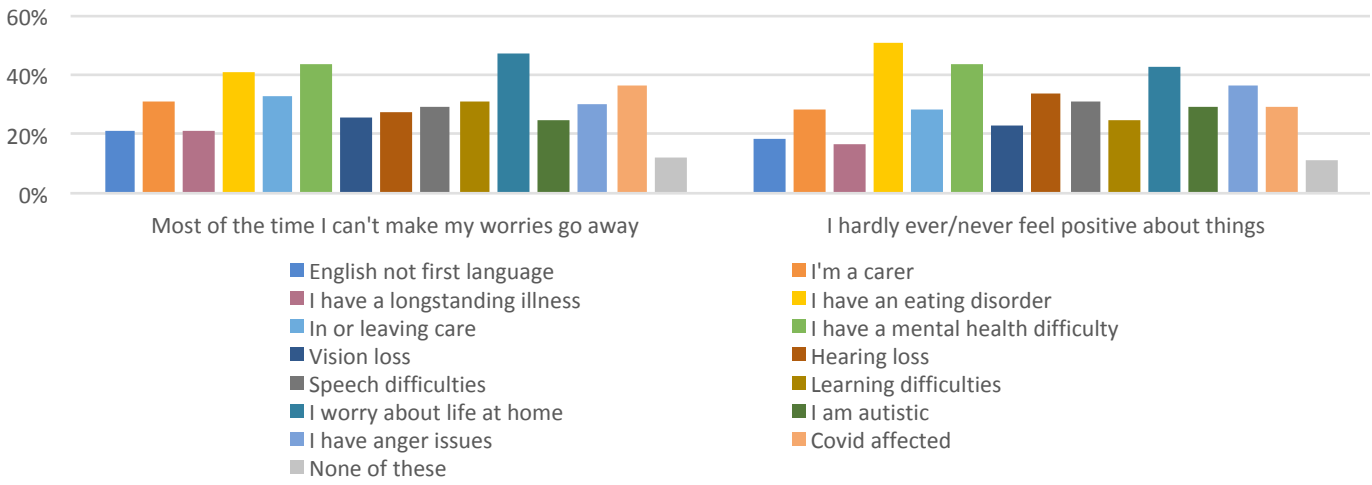
Characteristic of the pandemic period and particularly during the winter lockdown, many individuals felt engulfed by worry and being unable to control life, with routines shattered. It can be difficult to determine who to help. The extent of need is shown in In Charts 9 and 10.

In contrast to young people with no vulnerabilities, 57% of whom feel happy most of the time, only 11% of teens who worried about life at home, 13% with a mental health difficulty and 18% of teens with an eating disorder, did so. Interventions could focus on their needs.

Furthermore, worries were ever present:
The young people in chart 10 said 'most of the time, I can't make my worries go away.'

Responses suggest that people who 'worry about life at home' were almost overwhelmed with worry. They were nearly four times more likely to say they could not make their worries go away than young people with none of the vulnerabilities listed (47% vs 12%).

Chart 10. How I feel.
By vulnerable groups, 2020



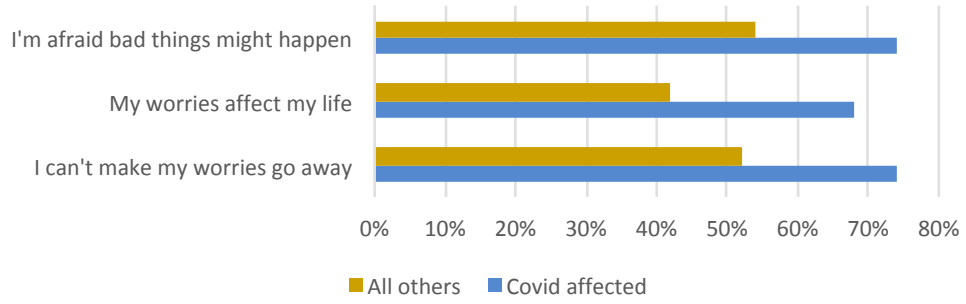
A bleak outlook

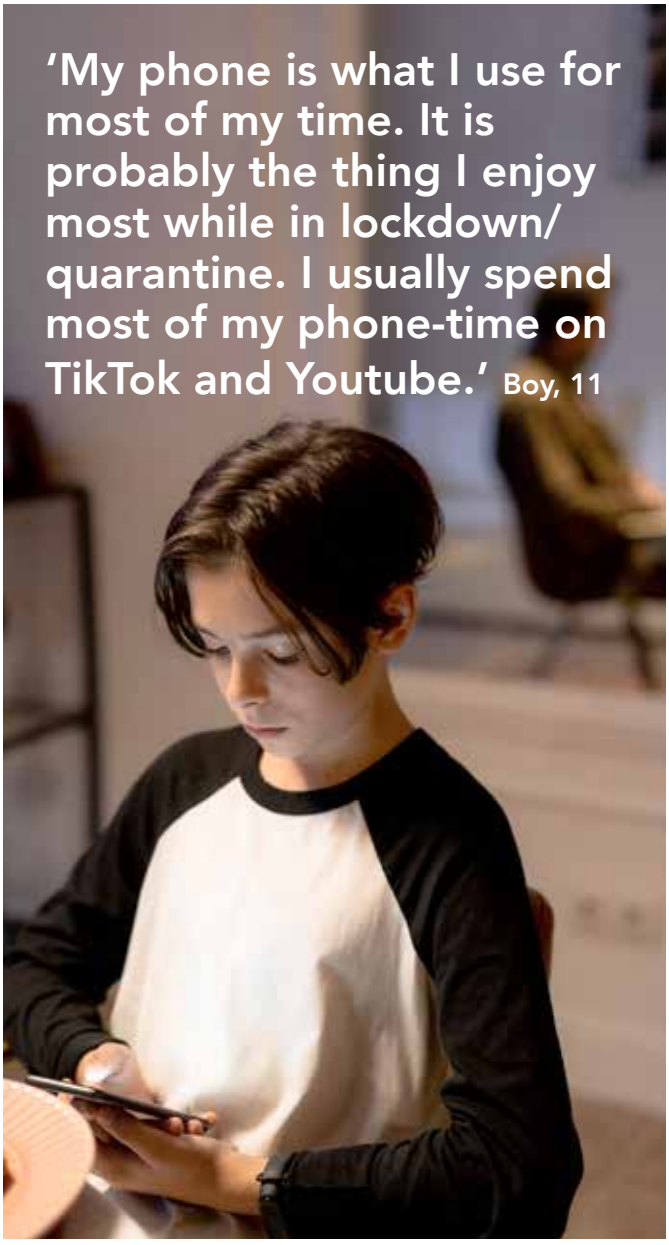
Apart from worry, there are many teens who simply do not feel positive. This lack of the optimism usually expected of young people, may reflect concerns about climate and the pandemic fallout, to name only two. At the time, there was also confusion over exams and job prospects for school leavers, while food insecurity was a central concern for so many. The following young people 'hardly ever' or 'never' felt positive about things in 2020:

- More than half of those with an eating disorder (51%),
- 44% of those with a mental health difficulty,
- 43% of those who worry about life at home,
- 36% of teenagers with who get angry or irritable easily,
- More than 1/3 of teens with hearing loss and 31% with speech difficulties,
- Those who feel they or their family are badly affected by COVID19 and autistic teens (29%) and young carers and young people in or leaving care (28%) represent a sizable minority who hardly ever or never feel positive.

In contrast, those who are least likely to feel so negative, are young people with no offline vulnerabilities, adversities, or difficulties. Only 11% hardly ever or never feel positive. Similarly, among teenagers with a longstanding physical illness and those whose first language is not English, (17% and 18% respectively) this lack of positivity was less evident.

Chart 11. Worry and Dread.
Covid affected teens compared to all others. 2020.





Covid has affected me or my family badly.

While many children became worried during the pandemic, extreme levels of dread and worry engulfed teens who say they or their family were badly affected by COVID. In addition, 62% feel 'it's too much effort to do anything' - suggesting that re-engagement in learning will not be easy until their emotional stability is addressed.

More than two thirds, 68% of COVID affected young people say: 'My worries affect my life.' Of these, almost a third, 32% say this is the case 'most of the time'. By contrast, 42% of their peers feel worries affect their lives, of whom only 13% feel this way 'most of the time.'

How COVID-affected teens feel most of the time

More than 1/3 say:

'I can't make my worries go away' (36%)

'I'm afraid bad things might happen' (34%)

And:

'My worries affect my life' (32%)

'I feel 'It's too much effort to do anything' (20%)

‘I struggle to complete work at home just due to not understanding and my school very rarely does live lessons.’

Boy, 16

More than 2/3 of those who are badly affected by COVID say “My worries affect my life”

FRIENDSHIP AND TRUSTED ADULTS DURING A PANDEMIC

When asked in a survey by charity Young Minds, what the main pressures were during the January 2021 lockdown, young respondents mostly spoke of loneliness and isolation, amid concerns about school, college or university work and a breakdown in routine.

In this chapter, The Cybersurvey explores friendship and isolation. Comparing our 2019 sample with 2020, some young people felt very isolated while others had focused intensely on fostering friendships.

Alone together

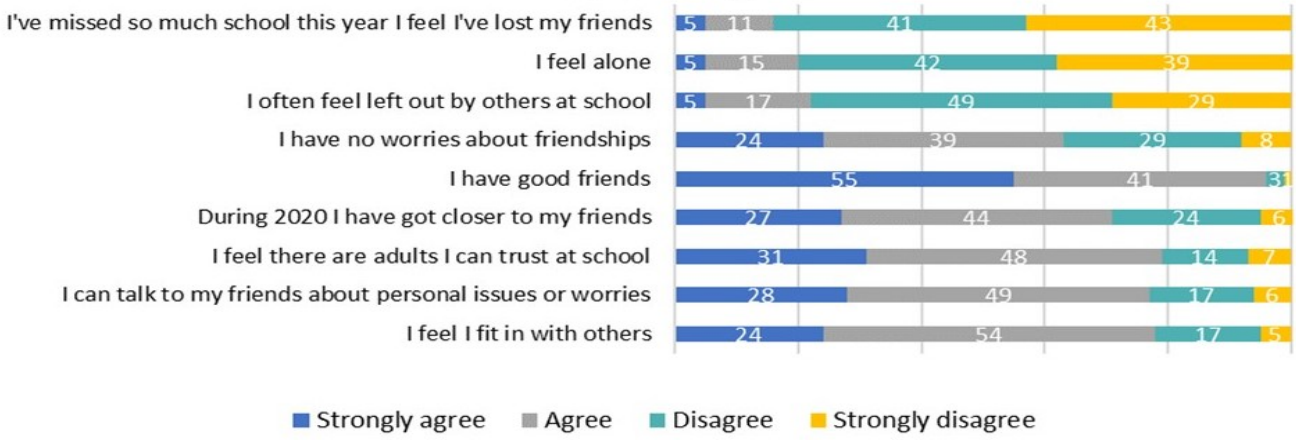
- Almost 1/4 of teens sampled in 2020 strongly agree they have no worries about friendships, and a further 38% agree. But as many as 20% agree or strongly agree with the statement: 'I feel alone.'
- Sharing confidences and worries is finely balanced. 28% can talk to their friends about personal issues or worries, yet 23% feel they cannot do so.
- Covid-affected teens are 4.5 times more likely to say, 'I have missed so much school this year, I have lost my friends', compared to young people with no vulnerabilities. (14% vs 3%).
- 22% of young people say they often feel left out by others at school. They might have been reluctant to return in March when schools reopened.
- Boys are more confident in their friendships than girls. 30% strongly agree with the statement: 'I have no worries about friendships,' whereas only 18% of girls do so. Boys are also more likely than girls to feel there are adults they can trust at school: 36% of boys and 26% of girls strongly agree with this statement.
- In 2019, 28% strongly agreed they had no worries about friendships, whereas in 2020 this has decreased to 22%.
- In 2020, there is a year on year decrease of 7% among teens who strongly agree with the statement: 'I have good friends.'

6% fewer say 'I have no worries about friendships'

[11] **The impact of Covid-19 on young people with mental health needs**
https://www.youngminds.org.uk/about-us/reports-and-impact/coronavirus-impact-on-young-people-with-mental-health-needs

Chart 12. Friendship. *2020*

% (rounded up)



Trusted adults

The following strongly agree that they have adults at school they can trust:

- I have speech difficulties 43%
- I am autistic 42%
- I have no vulnerabilities 32%
- I have vision loss 31%
- I have learning difficulties 31%
- I have anger issues 30%
- I have hearing loss 29%
- I worry a lot 29%

Friendship and gender

Agree or strongly agree with statement	2019 Girls	Boys	Prefer not to say	2020 Girls	Boys	Prefer not to say
I have good friends	96%	97%	89%	95%	96%	93%
I often feel left out by others at school	27%	18%	36%	26%	17%	40%
I can talk to my friends about my personal issues or worries	80%	73%	63%	82%	74%	55%
I feel I fit in with others	76%	82%	62%	76%	81%	55%
I feel alone	21%	14%	55%	24%	11%	55%
I have no worries about friendships	61%	74%	54%	56%	72%	40%
I feel there are adults I can trust at school	75%	78%	57%	77%	82%	68%
I have missed so much school this year I feel I have lost my friends				17%	11%	37%
During 2020 I have got closer to my friends				73%	69%	54%

- **Did being out of school so long cost teens their friendships?**

During 2020 many, but not all young people missed months of school. 37% of those who prefer not to state their gender feel that because they missed so much school, they lost their friends, in contrast to 17% of girls and 11% of boys.

- **The pandemic brought some closer to friends**

Some young people believe they got closer to their friends during 2020: 73% of girls, 69% of boys and 54% of those who prefer not to state their gender chose this answer.

- **Having a trusted adult in school**

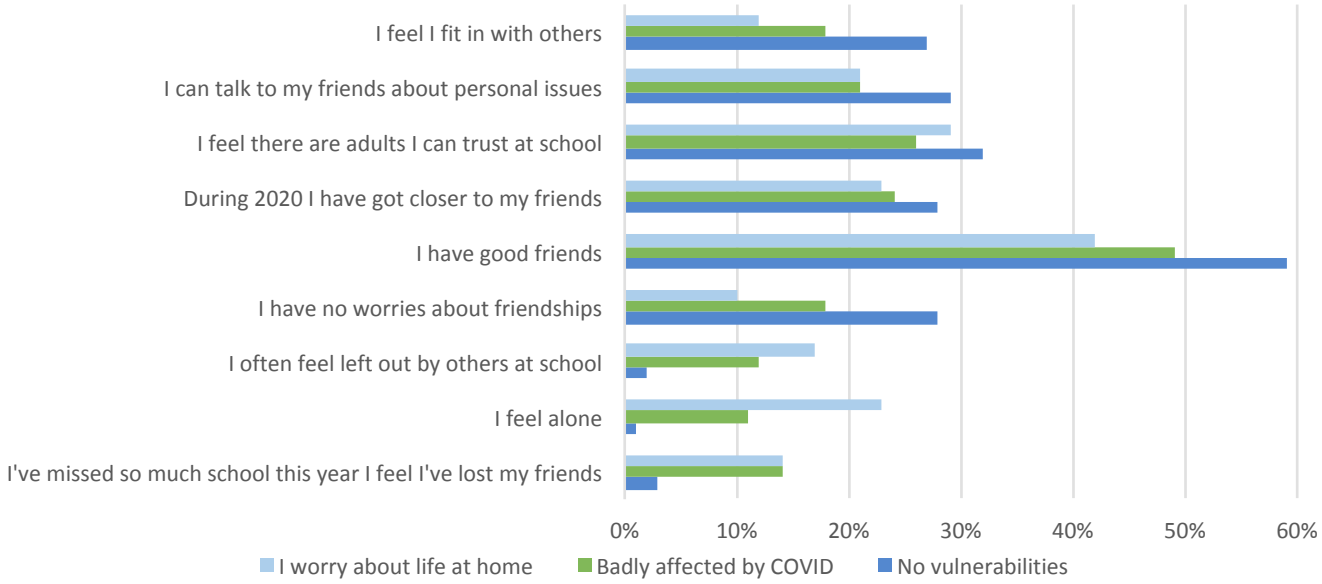
Boys are more likely than girls to have adults they can trust at school (82% vs 77%), but only 68% of those who prefer not to state their gender have a trusted adult at school. These 2020 responses indicate an increase from 2019.

- **2020 has seen some erosion of confidence on the issue of friendships**

In 2019, 62% of both boys and girls strongly agreed that they had good friends, but by the end of 2020 this had decreased to 54% of girls and 57% of boys. Among those who prefer not to state their gender, the difference was more marked, from 54% in 2019 to 35% in 2020.

Chart 13. Friendship and trust. 2020.

By people badly affected by COVID and those who worry about life at home, compared to non-vulnerable teens



Friendship and trust in adults at school was reinforced or reduced

- While some teens reinforced their friendships or rekindled old ones, others found that friendship and trust were eroded by the pandemic.
- The two groups that have come to the fore this year are young people who say 'COVID19 has badly affected me or my family' and teens who 'worry about life at home.'They seem particularly alone and unsupported. Almost one in four of those who worry about life at home say, 'I feel alone.'
- Compared to teens with no vulnerabilities, these two groups are 4.5 times more likely to say, 'I have missed so much school this year, I have lost my friends.'
- Those badly affected by COVID are less likely to have a trusted adult at school they can talk to, compared to their non-vulnerable peers. 26% vs 32%

What messages can we take from this?

Catch-up, as many schools demontrate, should focus on socialising, mutual trust, and support for all. Trusted adult schemes could be promoted within schools so that all staff know they might be selected by a child for sharing a confidence about worries at home, or about COVID, loneliness or feeling friendless. Mentors might be provided using trained students in peer support schemes.

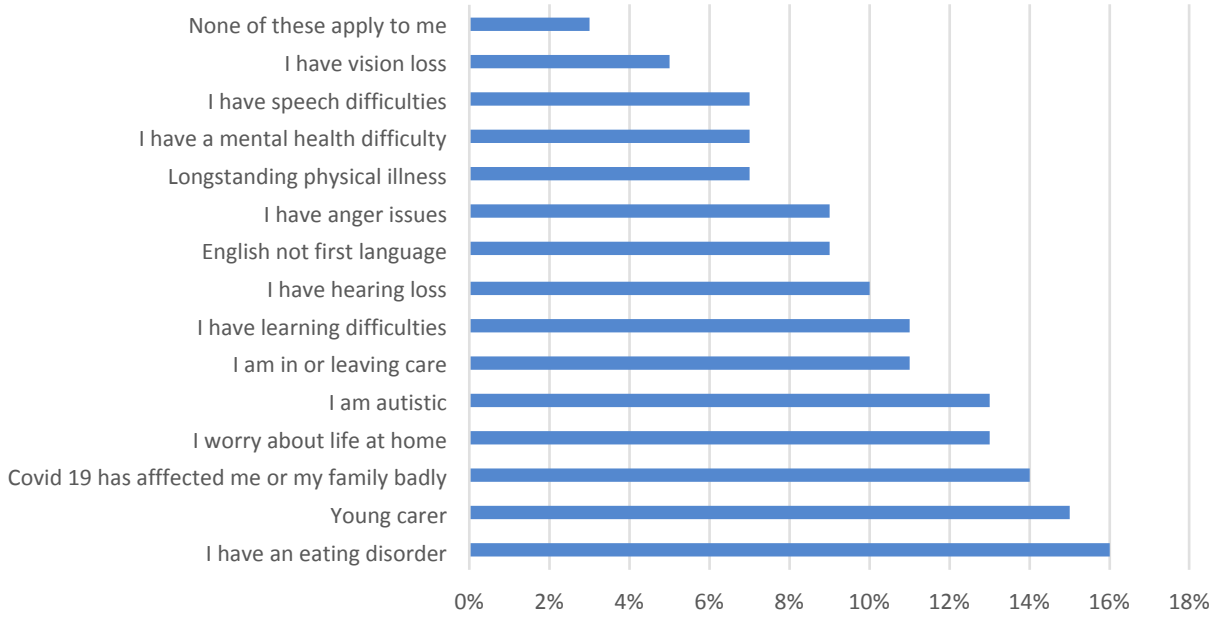
Activities to enhance friendships and promote trust through meeting new people or learning interesting things about others, could help to settle learners.

Friendship for young people badly affected by COVID or family worries.

'Covid 19 has affected me badly - my anxiety has got worse and in general just everything, not seeing my friends, has made an impact on me because my friends mean everything, and Georgia understands me more than anyone and not seeing is actually hard.' Girl, 12

'I'm connected to my close friends who live far away and so chatting to them about my worries on my phone makes me feel much better.' Girl, 11

Chart 14. 'I've missed so much school this year I've lost my friends.'
Answer: Strongly agree, % by vulnerable groups. 2020.



‘Sometimes it *(the internet)* **can make me feel bad if I see some of my friends doing something and I’m not there, but that doesn’t happen recently because of Covid.’**

Boy, 15

Isolation and loneliness hit young carers hard.

- Feelings of isolation compounded by not being in school, have impacted young carers in particular. As services were withdrawn, many had to provide care alone.
- Carers were 5 x more likely to feel they have lost their friends.
- Compared to their peers with no vulnerabilities or responsibilities like theirs, they are five times as likely to strongly agree with the statement: 'I have missed so much school this year, that I have lost my friends.'

'I've been able to form friendships with people my age all over the world- a lot of aspects of socialisation are increasingly being done online, especially with covid. It is sometimes hard to step away from online life but the only difference between online and real life in terms of 'stepping away' is that online is much more accessible'.

Prefers not to state gender, 16+

Prioritising friendship

Young people who got closer to their friends in 2020 seem to have prioritised this – we see an increase in the percentage who chose 'chatting to friends online' as one of their top 5 activities. Some became close to their old friends from primary school.

'It makes me feel okay because I get to talk to my friends' Girl,11

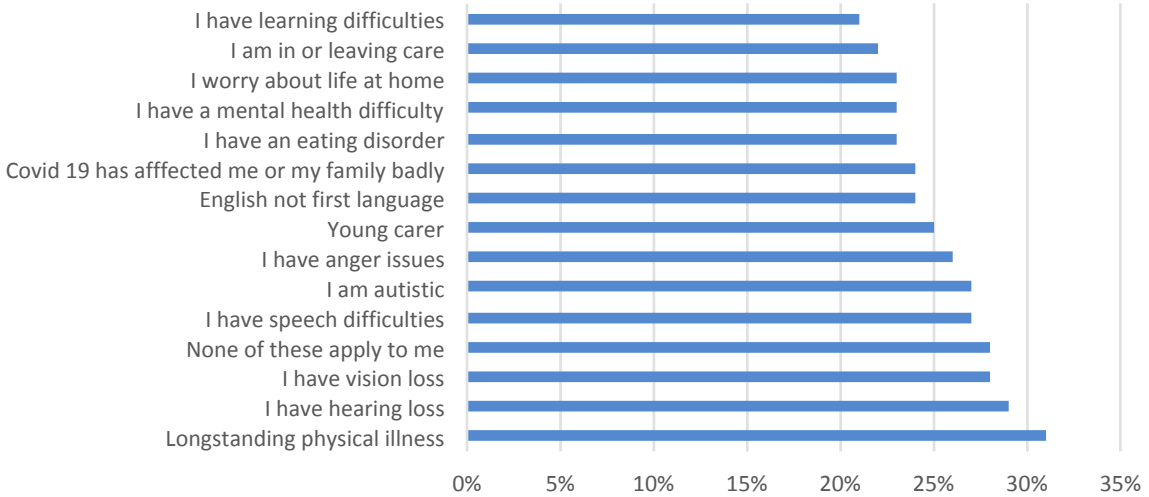
'My phone has made me more friends'

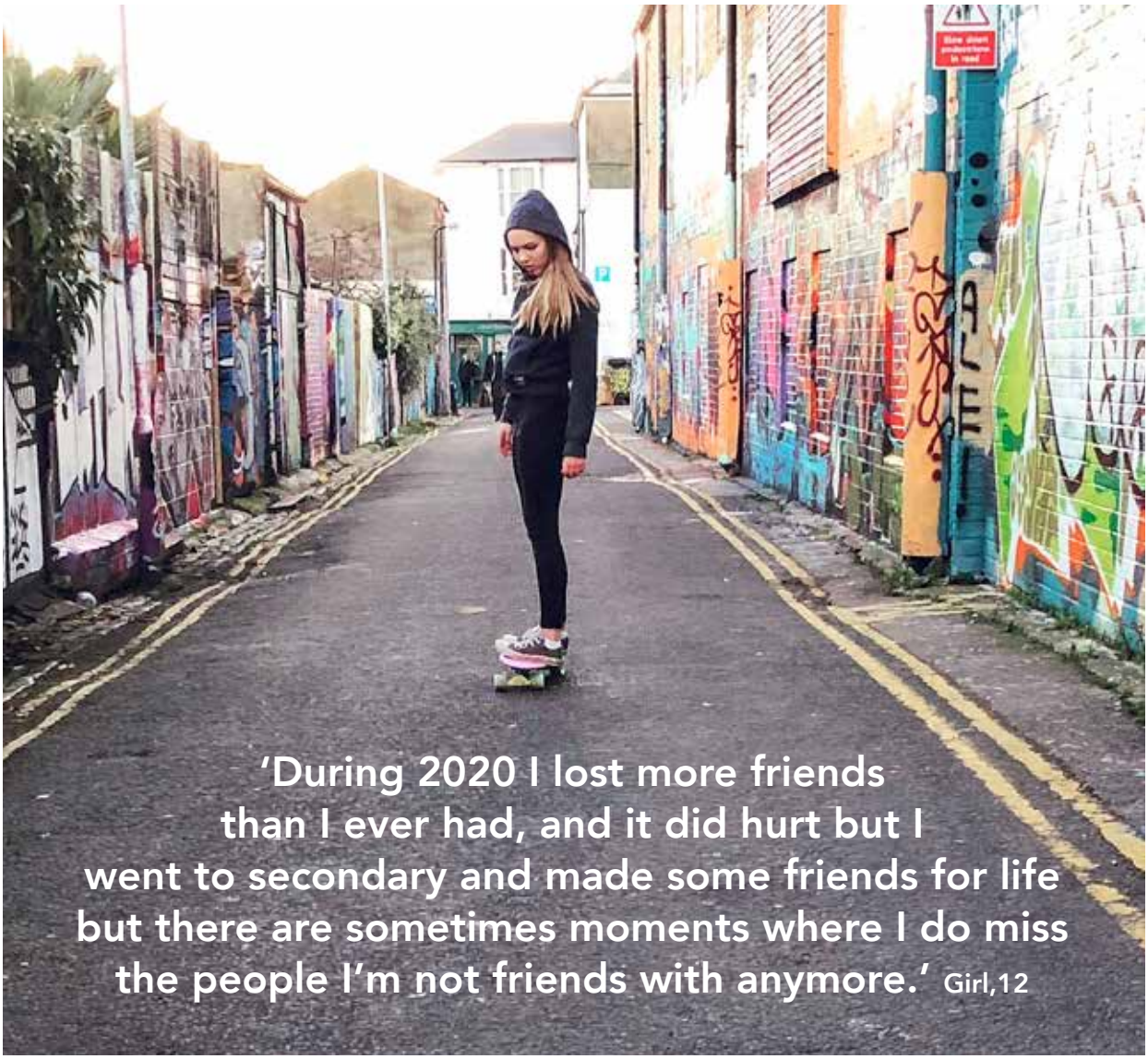
Boy, no age given

Young people with learning difficulties were least likely to feel they had got closer to their friends during 2020, along with those in or leaving care and teens worrying about life at home.

Chart 15. During 2020 I got closer to my friends.

Answer: Strongly agree. By vulnerable groups





Teenagers with a longstanding physical illness and those with hearing or vision loss appear to have got closer to their friends, along with those who are autistic, who may have found communicating online easier in some ways than face to face. 11year olds are the age group most likely to have got closer to their friends. Not facing public exams, many prioritised and cultivated friendships.

Chart 16. During 2020 I have got closer to my friends. *Answer: Strongly agree. By age*

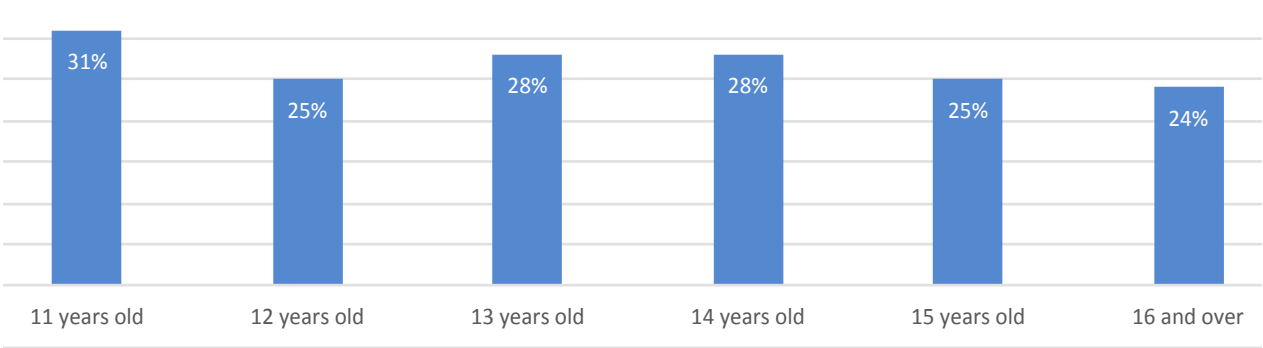
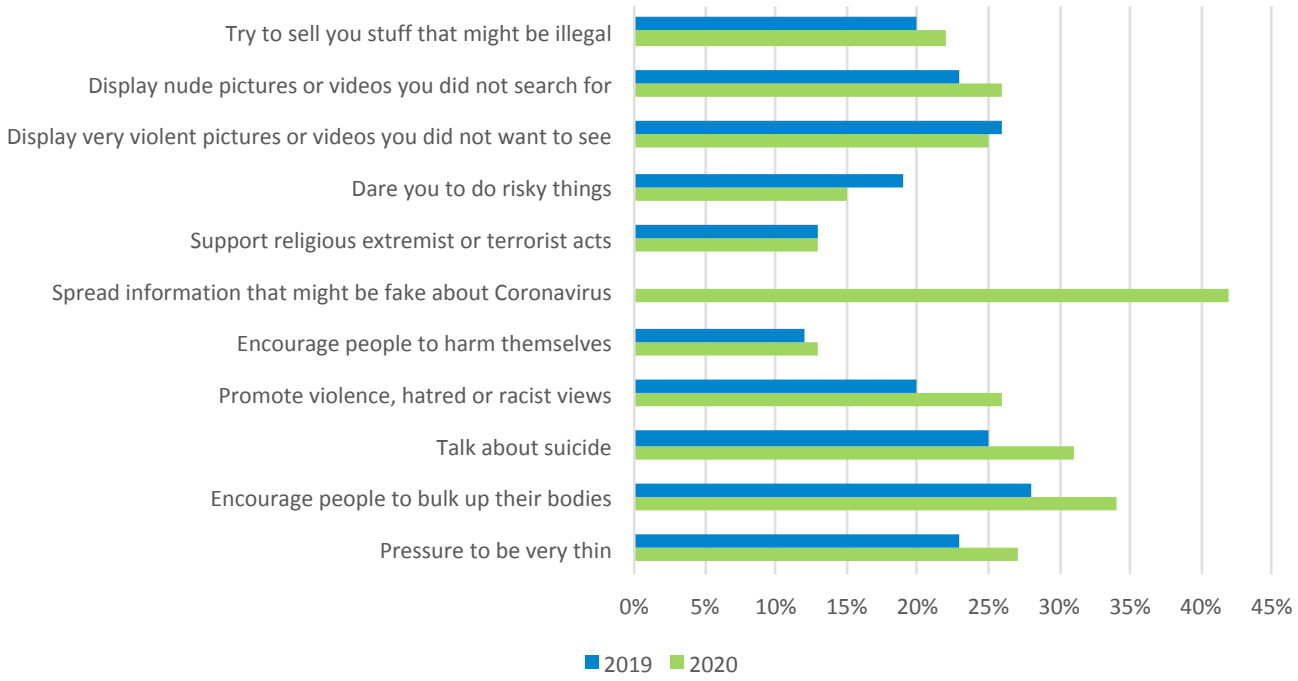


Chart 17. Harmful Content: Have you ever come across websites, social media messages or comments that... *2019/2020*



Barely any change or none

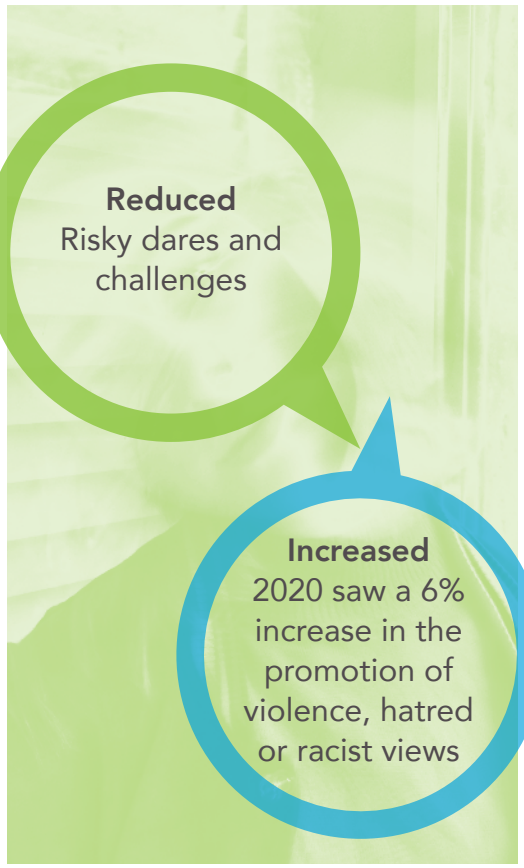
Young people viewed or came across these types of content at the same or similar rate as in 2019:

- Content supporting religious extremist views or terrorist acts
- Content displaying very violent images or videos they did not want to see
- Content about self-harm

But we note:

- A concerning increase in content that talks about suicide (6%). The Cybersurvey 2019 had already reported a rise in content about suicide.
- Content or messages pressurising people to be too thin increased by 4%.

Also concerned with body image, 2020 saw an increase of 6% in teenagers viewing content about bulking up the body. Young people, especially but not exclusively boys, often spent lockdowns and school closure months working out or taking steroids to bulk up. The popularity of this, first seen in 2019, has grown. While working out is not in itself harmful, young boys were ordering products online which promise to enhance their bodies and may be fake or harmful.



Misinformation

42% of young people had seen content spreading information about Coronavirus that they thought might be fake.

Harmful content seen by vulnerable young people – comparing 2019 to 2020

Some patterns The Cybersurvey has identified among the vulnerable groups of teenagers are unchanged and as important as ever. But in 2020 during the winter lockdown, those who 'worry about life at home' emerged as in need of increased and urgent support.

Key messages in 2019 highlighted how adolescents with offline vulnerabilities were far more likely than teens with none to come across, be sent or seek harmful content. It was distressing to note that young people with eating disorders were the group most likely to view a wide range of content that could be so harmful to them.

In 2020 this pattern is further reinforced: teenagers who have an eating disorder remain far more likely to say they 'often come across' a variety of harmful content than other young people. The survey distinguishes between seeing this content 'often' or 'once or twice,' which any young person might do out of curiosity or chance. This year, teens in or leaving care are still coming across harmful content more than most other vulnerable groups.

However at a time of intense worry for so many across the country and worldwide, it is not surprising to see that young people who 'worry about life at home' were experiencing so many of the listed harmful content types.

Content that talks about suicide

By 2019, the percentage of young people who had seen this content was the highest in the Cybersurvey history. Sadly in 2020 it rose again – an increase of 6% (see chart 17).

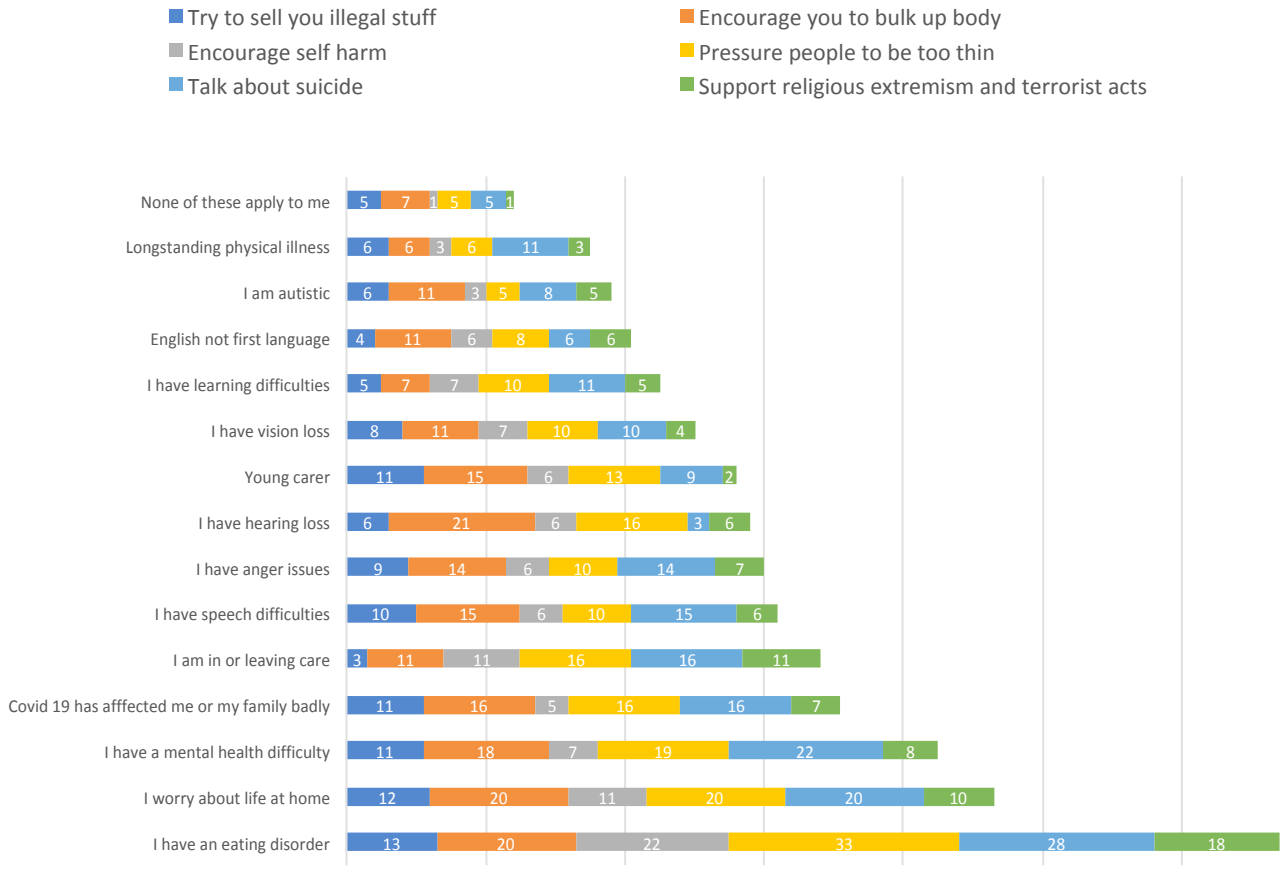
While 5% of young people without vulnerabilities said they 'often' saw this material, fellow teens with an eating disorder were more than five times more likely to see it. They were not alone. Others appeared to be three or four times more likely than their non-vulnerable peers to be viewing pro suicide content.

- Those with an eating disorder are more than 5 times as likely (28%)
- Those with a mental health difficulty are more than 4 times as likely (22%)
- Those who worry about life at home are 4 times as likely (20%)
- Those who say COVID19 affected me or my family badly and those in or leaving care are more than 3 times as likely (16%)
- Those with speech difficulties are 3 times as likely (15%).
- Young people in or leaving care are more than 3 times as likely to see suicide content than non vulnerable peers.

Chart 18. Harmful Content

% seen by teens with each vulnerability. 2020 (1 of 2).

Have you seen sites, social media messagesor content that...?

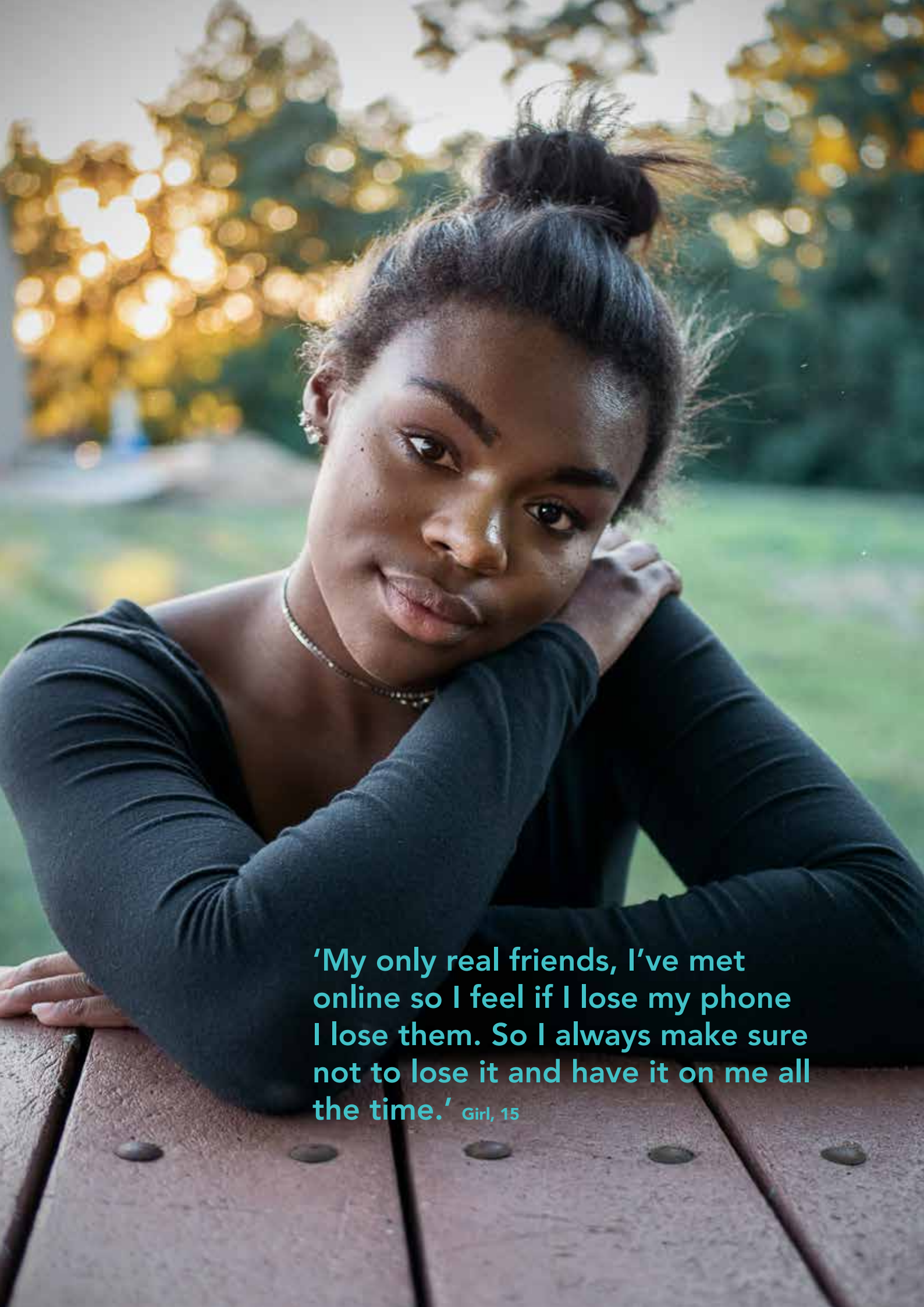


New concerns emerge about young people viewing harmful content

In 2019, young people in or leaving care were second only to those with an eating disorder in terms of how much and how often they saw harmful content. However, in 2020, while they are still very likely to see this material, they are now joined, or are even overtaken by other worried young people:

- Those who worry about life at home, and teens who say, 'Coronavirus affected me or my family badly'.

Support for them should include attention to their online lives or they may be pushed further into crisis by the harms they encounter or the way they are influenced or manipulated online often when seeking connection, support, and validation.



‘My only real friends, I’ve met online so I feel if I lose my phone I lose them. So I always make sure not to lose it and have it on me all the time.’ Girl, 15

Violence, hatred, and false information: the diet of teens with eating disorders

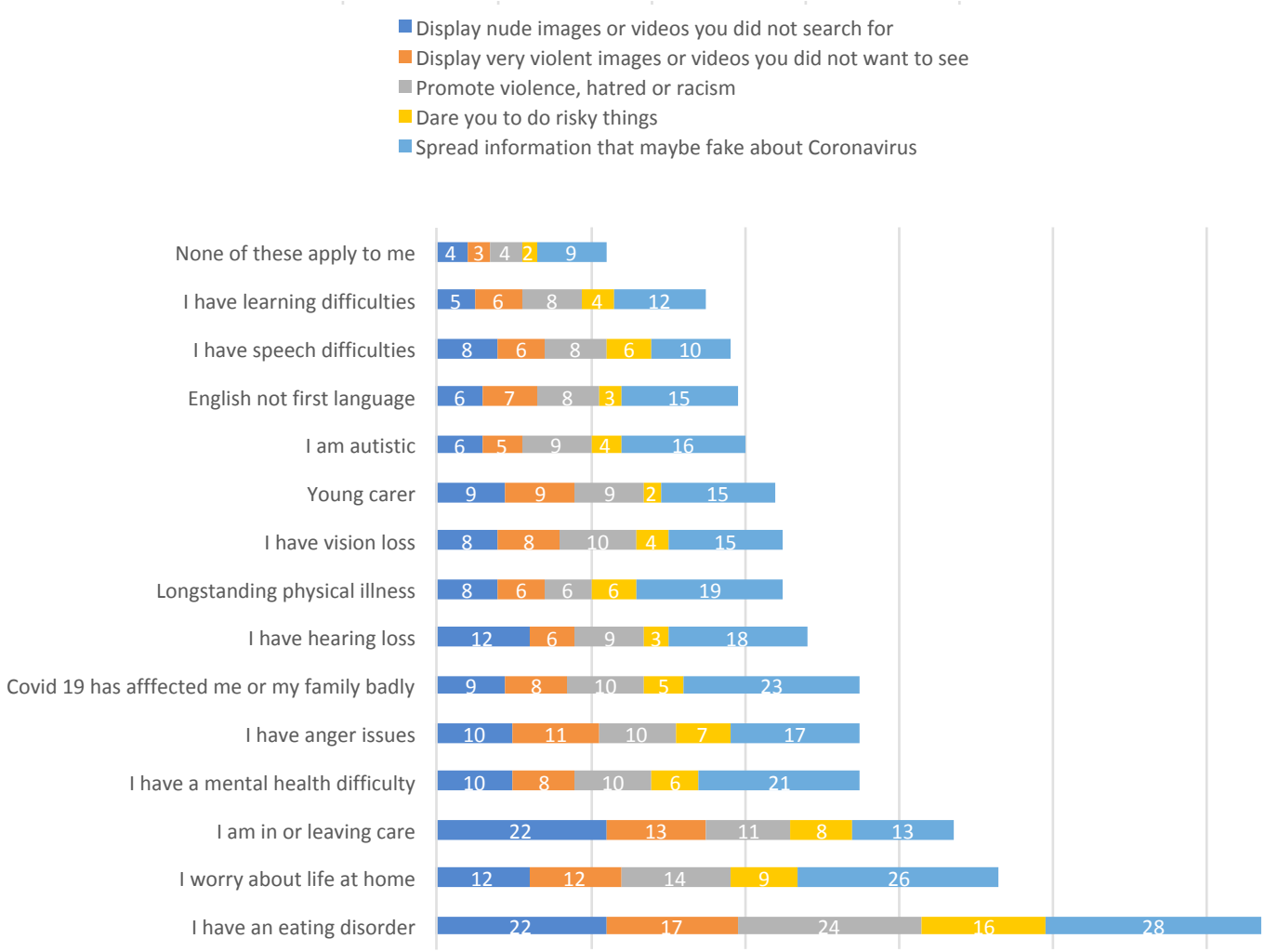
It is not clear why almost a quarter of teens with an eating disorder report seeing content promoting violence, hatred, or racism (24%) but they are also more likely than their peers to report that they 'often' see very violent images or videos which they did not want to see.

More than a quarter, (28%) of teenagers with eating disorders said they had 'often' come across information that may be fake about Coronavirus, which they have in common with teens who worry about life at home (26%). It is likely a teenager could see any content once or twice, 'Often' implies they search for it or are sent it.

Others who have 'often' seen content of this type, include, 23% of those who say they or their family were badly affected by COVID.

Chart 19. Harmful Content

% seen by teens with each vulnerability. 2020 (2 of 2).
Have you seen sites, social media messages or content that...?



What is Cyberaggression?

Cyberaggression differs from cyberbullying in that it is more diffuse. It is not an intentional, targeted sustained campaign against an individual or a group (bullying). Instead, it describes an online environment in which prejudice related aggression can take the form of content, chat, or comments on their feed or below a picture, from people they may or may not know. It creates a climate of microaggressions and sometimes overt aggression, in which some people never feel accepted, valued, or included. The disinhibition effect[12] of being behind a screen in an asynchronous conversation, often anonymously, appears to enable increased aggression and prejudice related behaviour. The survey showed that cyberbullying rates remained fairly stable, while cyberaggression increased.

Changes between 2019 and 2020

While most changes are slight, homophobia and sexism appear to be rising. Sexist behaviour has been in the news since evidence of the sexual harassment of schoolgirls emerged in March 2021, with the survivor testimonies on the website Everyone's Invited. The Cybersurvey data was collected prior to that date and suggests this issue was already worrying teenagers.

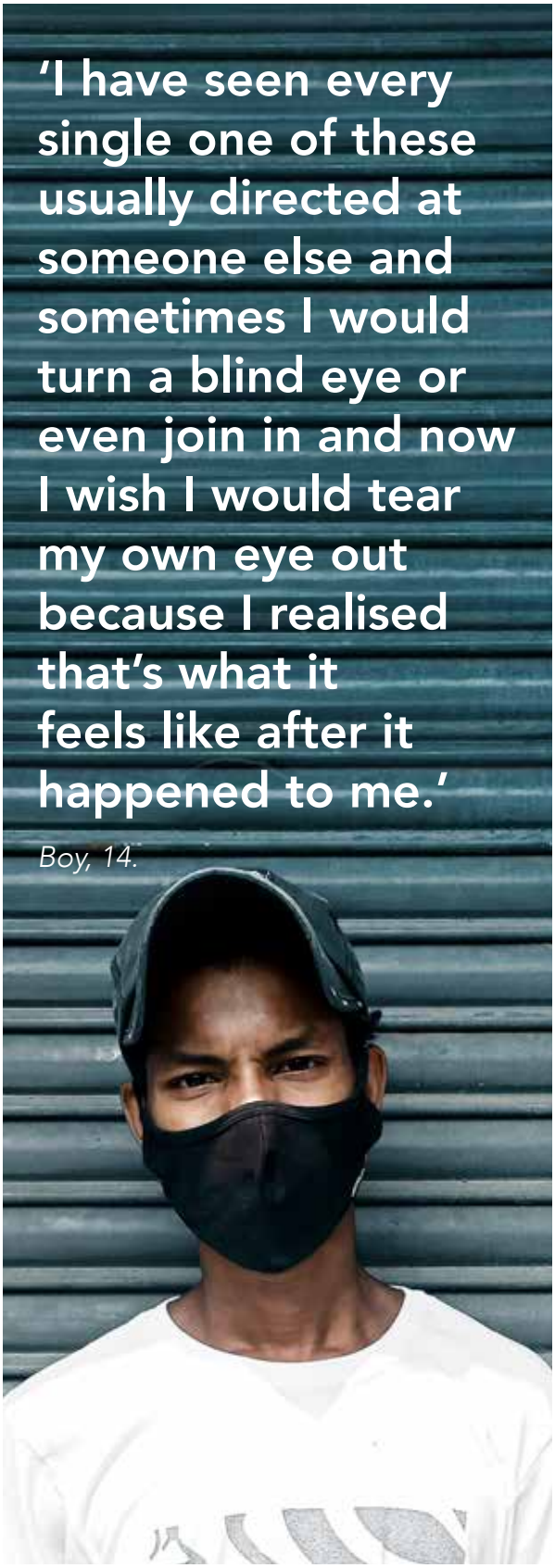
Young people reported slight reductions in:

- Insults about religion, from 5% to 3%
- Threats to harm me or my family from 13% to 12%

Increased sexism and homophobia were seen between 2019 – 2020.

The prevalence of

- Sexist messages, rose from 12% to 16%
- Insults about gay (LGBT+) people, rose from 15% to 17%
- Racist messages, rose slightly from 13% to 14%
- Insults about how the individual looks, rose from 23% to 25%
- While Cyberbullying of individuals remained at 20% for the sample overall, 1/3 of teens badly affected by Covid report being cyberbullied. This is a new form of discrimination also seen in Chart 21

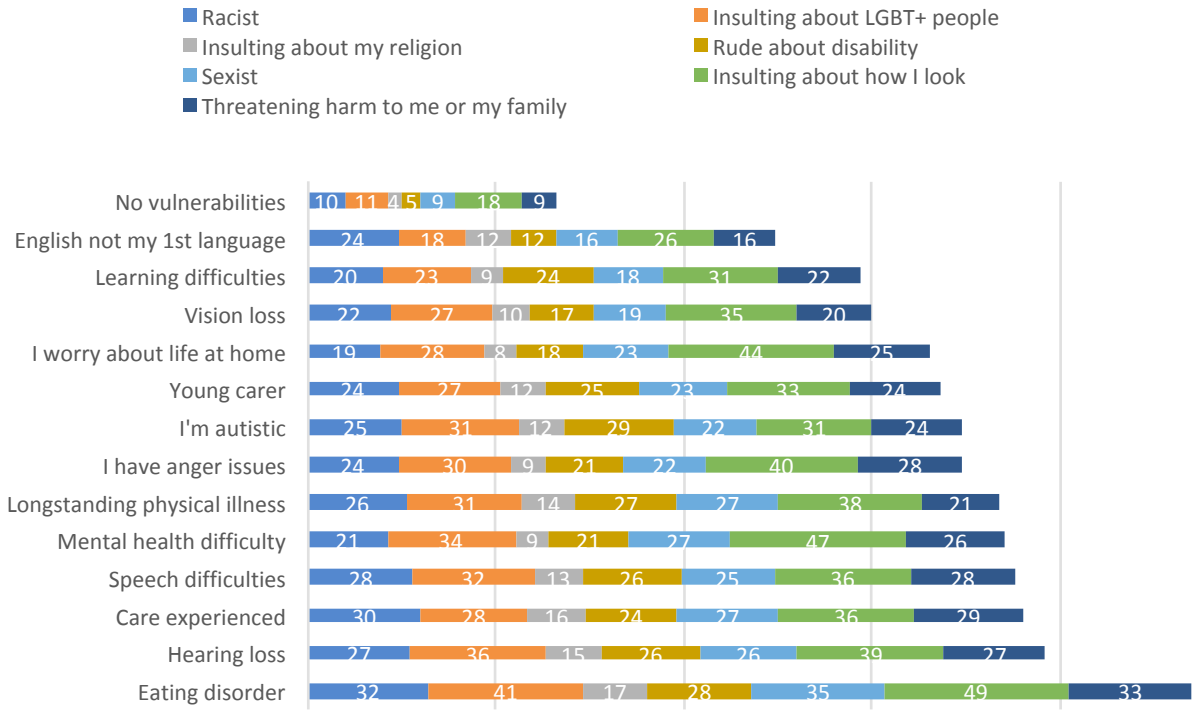


[12] John Suler. CyberPsychology & Behavior. Jun 2004.321-326
http://doi.org/10.1089/1094931041291295 Volume: 7 Issue 3: July 28, 2004

Vulnerable groups at risk of cyberaggression - changes year on year

Vulnerable teens were already at greater risk of cyberaggression than non-vulnerable peers before the pandemic. They inhabited a different and hostile online environment filled with prejudice-related insults or comments. Almost half of those with an eating disorder were subjected to insults about how they look, a third received threats to harm them or their family, 41% received homophobic insults and 32% received racist insults. 44% of young people who worry about life at home received insults or comments about how they look and a quarter experienced threats against them or their family. 29% of children in or leaving care received threats to harm them or their family. This picture changed in 2020.

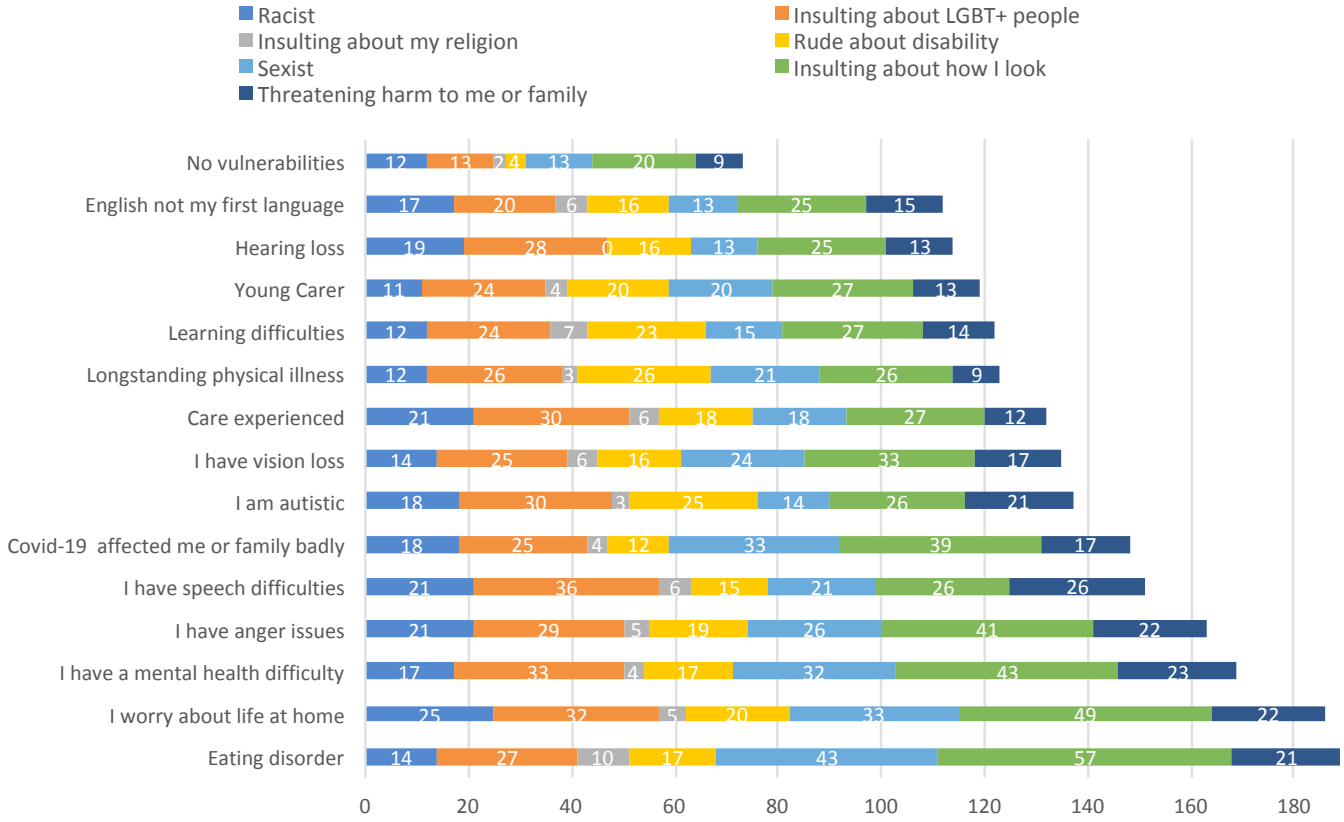
Chart 20. Cyberaggression *experienced by each vulnerable group 2019*



Cyberaggression changed and compounded by the pandemic.

In 2020, young people who had an eating disorder remained the vulnerable group most likely to report experiencing a range of cyberaggressions. 57% of them (an increase of 8%) said this was about 'How I look,' whilst 43% experienced sexist insults, also 8% up on 2019. However, threats to harm them or their family reduced as did homophobic insults and racist cyberaggression. While teens with eating disorders remain the vulnerable group who experienced most cyberaggression in 2020, young people who 'worry about life at home' report considerably increased cyberaggression compared to 12 months before. One quarter of these teenagers received or saw racist comments, up 6% from 19% the year before. Also markedly worsened are the experiences of teens with a mental health difficulty and those with anger issues.

Chart 21 Cyberaggression *experienced by each vulnerable group 2020*



Hostility about aspects of identity or changes brought about by the impact of COVID

- 39% of teens who say 'COVID-19 has affected me or my family badly'
- 39% have received insults or comments about how they look
- 17% saw messages or content 'threatening harm to me or my family', and 25% saw chat or content that was insulting about LGBT+ people
- 18% also saw racist content and 12% mentioned insults about disability. As many as one third saw sexist comments or content, twice the percentage reported by the total sample

By contrast, young people with no vulnerabilities are least likely to experience all forms of cyberaggression, which suggests that it is not simply generalised across the platforms the young people use, but more likely to be targeted between peers who know one another.

This climate of online aggression has grown this year. The discourse is polarised on many issues, with teenagers caught in battles about equality wrongly attacked in a mistaken 'war on woke'. They are also more acutely sensitive to this hostility and more likely to be hurt by it. The increase in sexist material has been a feature of this spring but was present in 2019.

SHARING NUDE AND INTIMATE IMAGES COMPARING 2019 AND 2020

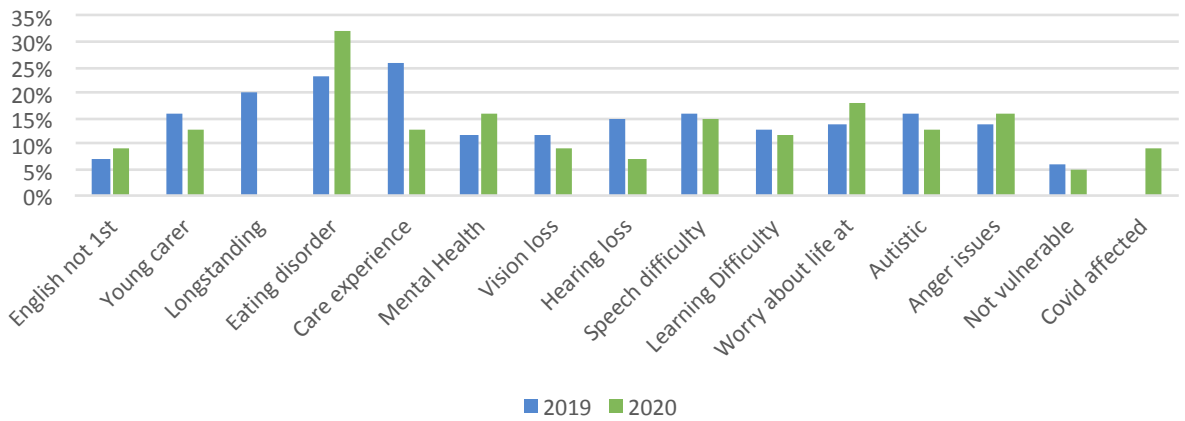
Young people with an eating disorder, a mental health difficulty, anger issues, or worry about life at home, all became more likely to be sharing nudes during lockdown than they were the year before. Those without vulnerabilities tended to share fewer nudes and teens with hearing loss and young people with care experience were half as likely to share nudes during lockdown than the year before.

Teens who were worried about life at home may have turned to online relationships for comfort as they were sharing images more in 2020 – up 4%.

Teens with an eating disorder were possibly seeking a reaction, validation, affirmation or simply to be noticed by sharing images during lockdown – up 9%

Young people with a mental health difficulty also show a year on year increase of 4%

Chart 22. Sexting: 'I have done this.' *By vulnerable groups. 2019/2020*



IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Can the data work for your school?

- Schools are making enormous efforts to respond to this crisis. In this context it is insensitive to make further demands of them. Our hope is that this data may prove useful by adding to their awareness of who to target for support.

Mentoring and trusted adults come into their own as never before

- Many schools have enhanced their mentor programmes, peer support and trusted member of staff access, but this will need to continue at a high level for some time.

Acknowledge the pain

- Young people felt that during the winter lockdown, 'people were less likely to notice that I am not ok' – perhaps adults were more preoccupied with their own anxieties in autumn/winter 2019/2020. Teens were often not in school where this might have been picked up. They may be hiding their anxiety from family members who have tremendous worries of their own or feel they must step up and care for a family member.

Focus additional emotional support programmes on identified vulnerable groups who have:

- eating disorders
- worries about home life
- been badly affected by Covid, in whatever manner
- mental health difficulties
- hearing loss
- young carer responsibilities

Critical thinking and Digital Citizenship are more important than ever

- In light of the findings on harmful or misleading content, schools might wish to intensify these education programmes, which have become even more vital.

Young people will need skills to identify and become resilient to:

- Content about weight and body image, including anorexia/bulking up
- Content promoting violence, hatred or racism
- Misinformation about COVID-19 or vaccines.

Online platforms must tackle harmful content about suicide and self-harm more speedily and respond to reported content

- A report of harmful content should be handled as fast as possible. Reported content that remains visible, renders the user who reported it more sceptical about all features such as block and report. Without hope or trust that something will be done, a vulnerable user becomes increasingly despondent. They become re-traumatised or even re-victimised.

Emotional stability above other pressures to do well

- Emotional stability needs priority, with Cybersurvey results identifying how many young people feel nervous and anxious, and finding how many feel these worries affect their lives. It will prove challenging to address these concerns and keep them at the forefront of schools' and professionals' priorities, rather than simply focusing on closing the gap in terms of missed education. Schools and families will need to be allowed to do this.

Friendship is protective

- Emphasis could be on facilitating friendships and socialising. With the easing of restrictions and the closing of 'bubbles,' schools could encourage students to socialise and engage in activities which promote the establishment and strengthening of friendships. Students might be encouraged to support one another in new ways and avoid or call out discrimination and online abusive behaviour.

Offline life affects online choices

- Foster an awareness and understanding of how problems in young people's offline life may encourage them to engage in risky online behaviours or increase the likelihood that they encounter harms as they seek connection, support, and validations.
- The Relationships and Sex Education curriculum is vital if sensitively taught. Some young people have little idea of a healthy relationship as they are served up various permutations of what is acceptable online, against a backdrop of increased sexist and misogynistic behaviour around them.

Blaming technology and social media is not the answer

So many adults simply take the line that technology and social media in particular, are to blame for all our ills. These are, as one boy explained, 'just a tool' and it is possible to use these tools in creative, supportive and inventive ways that bring a sense of connectedness and enjoyment to children and teenagers. Helping young people to harness the power of technology to socialise and more – to open 'a window on the world' - is the responsibility of a community, our culture regulators and families, not only a single sector such as education.

(This report does not claim any cause and effect. It reflects young people's experiences.)