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Youth Transitions in the Time of COVID-19 and Political Uprising

When we think about young people in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, our associations are often filtered through recurrent media frames. We have heard again and again that young people are less vulnerable to COVID-19 than their elders, but they may be asymptomatic spreaders. Or, that in regions where the virus has levelled off and then resurged, careless young people are responsible because of their partying in bars or in the streets. We'd like to tell a different story in this essay, one that emphasizes instead the particular burdens that the pandemic is placing on youth – burdens they experience in the present moment and which carry consequences that they will no doubt feel as they move through their lives. These thoughts are based on observations and reading; they reflect our particular positionality as residents of the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and Saint Paul, Minnesota, and as professors at the University of Minnesota. But much of what we have seen here has wider resonance as well.

The process of transition from youth to adulthood has varied widely across time and place. In our contemporary world this transition can occur relatively rapidly and at an early age for those youth who move into the full-time labor market in their teens and who may start a family or set up an independent household at around the same time. For others, who pursue advanced formal education or job training, or who have difficulties finding full-time work, the transition process can take a decade or more. For those coming of age during the COVID-19 pandemic, all bets are off. The ramifications of COVID-19 are wide and they will be long-lasting. Here we will look at a few specific dimensions of the current crisis in terms of their age-specific effects: the impact of the pandemic on education and career preparation; its consequences for transitioning into the workforce; levels of anxiety and depression related to COVID-19; and involvement in political protests that have occurred simultaneously with the pandemic.

Coming of Age in COVID-19 Times

We are already hearing about the “COVID-19 generation.” Cohort effects have been noted in the past, of course – for example, for the Depression generation or the youth of the Sixties. But the impact of COVID-19 on the cohorts who are now in their teens and twenties promises to be especially marked. According to Cynthia Comacchio:

This Covid spring is imprinting all those who are growing up and coming of age in its midst. COVID-19 is their generational marker, defining their cohort identity historically and through every stage that remains to the end of their lives [...] The majority of deaths are among seniors, testifying both to their greater physical fragility and to our disgraceful collective neglect. The majority of developmental impacts are among adolescents. Their outlook, their ideas, their world view, have been affected by this experience in ways that they will not ‘outgrow.’¹⁴

¹⁴ Cynthia Comacchio, “The Generation of 2020: Coming of Age in Covid-Time,” *Active History: History Matters*, May 20, 2020, <https://activehistory.ca/2020/05/the-generation-of-2020-coming-of-age-in-covid-time/>, accessed August 24, 2020.

Other analysts, including several of our colleagues here at the University of Minnesota Life Course Center, have shared research that echoes this concern and points to a further one that is especially significant in political cultures like that of the United States, where there has long been an emphasis on ‘career planning’ and a belief that young people can shape their own futures. According to Richard Settersten and his collaborators, “The pandemic has underscored the reality that life’s possibilities are limited [...] Differences by socioeconomic status are likely to be substantial in this regard because reduced control and choices already characterize the lives of those with few family resources.”¹⁵

A recent report issued by the Social Science Research Council suggests that in a few short months, COVID-19 has undone a decade of progress in what they term “youth disconnection.” This research has been looking at the proportion of Americans aged sixteen to twenty-four who are neither working nor in school. Since the study began, the proportion has been declining: “The number of teens and young adults disconnected from both work and school in the United States fell for the eighth year in a row, from a recession-fueled high of 14.7 percent in 2010 to 11.2 percent in 2018. The COVID-19 pandemic will cause youth disconnection rates to spike dramatically. We estimate that the number of disconnected youth will easily top six million and could swell to almost one-quarter of all young people [...] While it is clear that young people of all stripes will suffer, low-income people of color will be the hardest hit.”¹⁶

Education Upended: Students’ Experiences in Spring 2020

A recent life-course analysis of the impact of COVID-19 starts with the disruption of schooling:

The United Nations’ Educational, Social and Cultural Organization estimates that more than 180 countries from all continents enforced school closures during the pandemic, affecting over 1.5 billion students (ninety percent of the world’s student population) at all levels of the education system. Only a handful of countries, such as Sweden and Taiwan, never closed schools. This experience quickly smashed the most basic of expectations in most countries around the world – that youth have the capacity to anticipate and control their educational futures.¹⁷

A survey of undergraduates at the University of Minnesota and several other large research universities that was conducted by the Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) consortium suggests some of the consequences. If most undergrads weathered the move to online learning and were able to complete most of their coursework, some sub-groups of students had a much more difficult time. The survey results show that first-generation college students faced far more challenges than did students with parents who had a post-secondary degree.

The survey of nearly thirty thousand undergrads, conducted between May and July of 2020, found that first-generation students, who comprised a quarter of respondents:

¹⁵ Richard A. Settersten, “Understanding the Effects of COVID-19 Through a Life Course Lens,” *Advances in Life Course Research*, July 22, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.alcr.2020.100360>, accessed August 24, 2020: 1040–2608.

¹⁶ Kristen Lewis, “A Decade Undone: Youth Disconnection in the Age of Coronavirus” (New York: Measure of America, Social Science Research Council, 2020), <https://measureofamerica.org/youth-disconnection-2020/>, accessed August 24, 2020.

¹⁷ Pamela Aronson, Arnaldo Mont-Alvao and Jeylan Mortimer, “Post COVID-19 Transformation of the Transition to Adulthood around the World,” unpublished manuscript: 2–3.

were more likely than continuing-generation students to experience financial hardships during the pandemic, including lost wages from family members, lost wages from on- or off-campus employment, and increased living and technology expenses. They were nearly twice as likely to be concerned about paying for their education in fall 2020 [...] and more likely to experience food and housing insecurity.

Some of these added difficulties in adapting to online learning were related to their relocation from campus to home, where they experienced a “lack of adequate study spaces and lack of technology necessary to complete online learning” and were “less likely to be able to meet during scheduled virtual class times.”¹⁸

Kriti Budhiraja, a PhD candidate in sociology at the University of Minnesota, happened to be doing research on equity and higher education in India when the pandemic struck and so we can compare these SERU findings about students in the United States with her observations in New Delhi. Budhiraja’s own research – begun as an ethnography at Delhi University – had to be rethought: “With universities closing due to the pandemic, and most students in lockdown at home, these phone interviews are what allow me to continue my research,” she reports. These calls were eye-opening. A call with one student was interrupted. A few minutes later he called back: “‘The signal here is very bad,’ he said, ‘right now I’m on the roof, where the connectivity is still better.’” According to Budhiraja, this student and many others also had internet connectivity problems: “‘There is simply no network at so many places!’ He also informed me that a recent storm in his locality had resulted in electricity [poles] being down for two days. ‘If uninterrupted power supply is an issue, how can we think of online exams?’ he wondered.”¹⁹

According to Budhiraja, a survey 1,500 Delhi University students revealed that “seventy-two percent cited poor connectivity as the reason for their inability to attend online classes [...] the reality is that most students from villages, small towns, and working-class neighborhoods in cities who apply to Delhi University pay their local cyber cafes to fill their online forms. Technological scarcity is still a barrier for many students.”²⁰ While the argument here centers on the problem of moving to an online examination system, Budhiraja sees larger ramifications as well: “The divides of class, caste, region, and language that the remote examination brings into sharper relief do not disappear in the context of the on-site examination [...] However, everyday life in the public university offers a possible, if fragile, antidote to the workings of such inequities [...] The public university makes it possible to imagine infrastructures of sharing space and sociality that are, in many instances, unimaginable outside it.”²¹ Much was lost when instruction went online and students returned home. And as was the case for their American peers, many social inequities were multiplied off-campus.

¹⁸ Krista M. Soria, Bonnie Horgos, Igor Chirikov, and Daniel Jones-White, “First-Generation Students’ Experiences During the COVID-19 Pandemic” (SERU Consortium, University of California - Berkeley and University of Minnesota: 2020), <https://firstgen.naspa.org/report/first-generation-students-experiences-during-the-covid-19-pandemic>, accessed August 23, 2020:1.

¹⁹ Kriti Budhiraja, “Why Remote Examination is Unfair to University Students,” *Newsclick*, May 17, 2020, <https://www.newsclick.in/Why-remote-examination-is-a-bad-idea>, accessed August 23, 2020.

²⁰ Kriti Budhiraja, “Why Remote Examination is Unfair to University Students.”

²¹ Kriti Budhiraja, “Why Remote Examination is Unfair to University Students.”

Transitions After Spring Semester 2020

Even more consequential, perhaps, than the spring mid-semester move to online classes were the interrupted plans for what was supposed to follow the semester's end – for all students, but especially for 2020 graduates. These interruptions affected plans for post-graduate education, first jobs, internships, and volunteer work. This became clear when Mary Jo Maynes asked undergraduate students in the two courses she taught in spring 2020 what their plans were for the immediate future, and how they had changed in the face of the pandemic. Maynes was teaching twenty-five undergrads in a senior capstone research course in history and an interdisciplinary course on child labor that was part of the university's 'Grand Challenges' curriculum. Remarkably, all but one of these students managed to fulfill course requirements – many in an exemplary fashion – despite the challenges involved moving to online instruction and often relocating as well. Among this hardworking and talented group, however, nearly everyone was facing the necessity of rethinking their plans for the summer and beyond.

Among the few whose plans weren't disrupted, Aaron²² had been accepted onto a summer internship program that was going to convert to an online format. Similarly, Jeanine's new job was also converted to remote work. But most students' plans were in disarray. Caroline had assumed she would find a job for a year and then decide later about a graduate or professional program; as of May, her plans were uncertain. Hani's way of framing a similar situation was to declare that she was taking an uncertain 'gap year' before applying to graduate school. James and Pamela had both planned to start on the road to an education degree in the fall that involved student teaching. Both of them have temporarily put their plans 'on ice' – which, as the image suggests (See Figure 1) – is an appropriate metaphor for the aspirations of many of the graduates of the Class of 2020. Daniel decided to take extra summer classes to finish his degree early, but he had no idea what he would be doing after graduation. Jen had been accepted into graduate school but decided to defer for a year, rather than risking a cross-country move during the pandemic. She was hoping to find a temporary job. Taara had just learned that her summer pre-med program was cancelled. Anna's internship was also cancelled and so she will return home and hope to do conduct research from there. Lisa was supposed to do research abroad on a scholarship; instead, she will work on a farm and then hopes to return to Twin Cities in the fall to combine an altered plan of research and volunteer work. Alyssa will also be doing farm work, on her family's farm in Wisconsin. While both Lisa and Alyssa are actually happy to have the option of farm work, it is an understatement to say that it's not what they had been intending to do. Correy was planning to start a two-year stint in West Africa in the Peace Corps, but that, too, has been deferred to an uncertain point in the future. Teon was supposed to go back to a summer lab job in China; those plans, as of May, were also 'on ice.'

These Minnesota students' stories display the range of plans and dreams that have been disrupted by COVID-19. Settersten et al. underscore the potential long-term consequences of such interruptions: "One might expect to find the strongest long-term effects for the cohort of graduates whose immediate transition from school to work is hampered by the pandemic, particularly if it lasts a long time. This could result in a kind of 'lost generation' with shrinking opportunities in employment and truncated career and family formation, which would in turn have lifelong consequences."²³ Aronson et al., also examining the COVID-19 crisis from a life-course perspective with an emphasis on youth, remind us that the challenges of job market entry are not new in 2020:

²² Names have been changed here to protect student privacy.

²³ Richard A. Settersten, "Understanding the Effects of COVID-19 Through a Life Course Lens": 6–7.

Figure 1. The Class of 2020 has had to put their plans on ice. *Original drawing by Rivi Handler-Spitz, based on stories from University of Minnesota 2020 graduates. Reproduced with permission of the artist.*

Over the last two decades, youth labor market prospects have deteriorated considerably around the world; youth unemployment reached higher levels in 2019 than during the Great Recession. The pandemic has further diminished young people's entry and establishment in the workforce. The International Labour Organization estimates that more than one in six young people lost their jobs during the pandemic, and those with jobs had their hours reduced by nearly twenty-five percent. In many countries, initial restrictions shut down major industries (e.g., restaurant and hospitality, the retail sector) that typically employ large numbers of young people [...] In the United States, the youth unemployment rate more than doubled between January 2020 (11.7 percent) and April 2020 (25.5 percent).²⁴

Age-specific Levels of Anxiety and Depression

COVID-19 is taking a toll on mental health in general, but, here, too, the effects seem especially marked among young people for a variety of reasons, including the frustrating interruptions of the process of transitioning to adulthood. The SERU consortium mentioned earlier found unusually

²⁴ Pamela Aronson et al., "Post-COVID-19 Transformation of the Transition to Adulthood around the World": 7.

high rates of depression and anxiety among undergraduate, graduate, and professional school students screened during the summer of 2020 at Minnesota, Berkeley, and other research universities. The consortium “used patient health questionnaires to screen 30,725 undergraduate students at nine research universities [...] and found that thirty-five percent of them were positive for major depressive disorder and thirty-nine percent for generalized anxiety disorder. The results show the negative mental health impact that the coronavirus pandemic has had on students, especially those who struggled to transition from in-person to remote instruction.”²⁵

These problems were not limited to students, but affected youth more generally, according to the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. A survey conducted in late June 2020 showed that “the prevalence of anxiety symptoms was three times as high as those reported in the second quarter of 2019, and depression was four times as high.” Moreover, these effects “were felt most keenly by young adults ages eighteen to twenty-four.” According to Mark Czeisler, first author of the report, nearly sixty-three percent of respondents in this age group (compared with forty-one percent overall) “‘had symptoms of anxiety or depression that they attributed to the pandemic’ [...] Nearly eleven percent said they had suicidal thoughts in the month leading up to the survey, with the greatest clusters being among Black and Latino people, essential workers and unpaid caregivers for adults.” Czeisler suggested that the rates were so high among young people “because now there are so many questions, especially for young people, about relative risk, duration of the pandemic and what their futures will look like.”²⁶

Another Response: Youth Involvement in Protests

Here in Minnesota, across the United States, and then globally, the COVID-19 spring was also the moment when a huge new wave of protests erupted in the wake of the brutal police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis on May 25. We want to call attention to the generational dimensions of these protests. The video that documented the murder was taken by a seventeen-year old Black girl, Darnella Frazier:

The camera had been rolling for twenty seconds when Mr Floyd, forty-six, uttered three more words that have now become a rallying cry for protesters, ‘I can’t breathe’ [...] Ms Frazier was taking her nine-year-old cousin to Cup Foods, a shop near her home in Minneapolis, Minnesota, when she saw Mr Floyd grappling with police. She stopped, pulled out her phone and pressed record. For ten minutes and nine seconds she filmed until the officers and Mr Floyd left the scene; the former on foot, the latter on a stretcher.²⁷

²⁵ Greta Anderson, “Students Reporting Depression and Anxiety at Higher Rates,” *Inside Higher Ed*, August 19, 2020, <https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2020/08/19/students-reporting-depression-and-anxiety-higher-rates>, accessed August 23, 2020. For full report, see: Igor Chirikov, Krista M. Soria, Bonnie Horgos, and Daniel Jones-White, “Undergraduate and Graduate Students’ Mental Health During the COVID-19 Pandemic” (SERU Consortium, University of California – Berkeley and University of Minnesota: 2020), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/80k5d5hw>, accessed August 23, 2020.

²⁶ Jan Hoffman, “Young Adults Report Rising Levels of Anxiety and Depression in Pandemic,” *New York Times*, August 13, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/13/health/Covid-mental-health-anxiety.html>, accessed August 23, 2020.

²⁷ Joshua Nevett, “George Floyd: The Personal Cost of Filming Police Brutality,” *BBC News*, June 11, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52942519>, accessed August 23, 2020.

Figure 2. Minneapolis, Minnesota, May 26: ‘I can’t breathe’ protest held after man dies in police custody in Minneapolis. Protesters march on Hiawatha Avenue while decrying the killing of George Floyd on May 26, 2020, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Stephen Maturen/Getty Images.

Frazier posted her video on Facebook. It went viral, and the rest is history. The outrage and protest that followed was notable in several ways: it was huge and immediate; it was cross-racial;²⁸ and young people were at the heart of it, in Minneapolis and beyond. This youth presence is documented in media stories and photos of the protests, beginning with the very first one in Minneapolis on May 26 (Figure 2). Journalistic accounts have made it clear just how crucial young people have been to the organization of the protests against racism and police violence. The opening story of a *New York Times* article about teenage girls leading protests featured Zee Thomas, a Black teenager from Nashville, Tennessee: “Ms Thomas had never been to a protest, let alone organized one. And yet five days later, with the help of five other teenagers, she was leading a march through her city, some ten thousand strong [...] The girls didn’t know it at the time, but in cities across the country, legions of other young activists were doing something similar.”²⁹ Some of these young women activists had had prior organizing experience. For example, nineteen-year-old Brianna Chandler has been active in the Sunrise Movement, a youth-led climate justice organization. And, as the *New York Times* reporter reminded readers, recent protests across a range of social justice

²⁸ August Nimtz, “It’s a Big Deal That the Outrage Expressed Over George Floyd’s Death Was Massive and Multi-racial,” *MINNPOST*, May 28, 2020, <https://www.minnpost.com/community-voices/2020/05/its-a-big-deal-that-the-outrage-expressed-over-george-floyds-death-was-massive-and-multiracial/>, accessed August 23, 2020.

²⁹ Interview by Jessica Bennett, “Teen Girls Fighting For a More Just Future,” *New York Times*, June 26, 2020, Updated July 3, 2020 <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/26/style/teen-girls-black-lives-matter-activism.html>, accessed August 23, 2020.

movements have been notable for their leadership by teenage girls such as Malala Yousafzai and Greta Thunberg.³⁰

At the University of Minnesota, President Joan Gabel announced just two days after the killing that “the University will no longer contract with MPD [Minneapolis Police Department] for law enforcement support during large events or for specialized services such as explosive detection [...] University students, staff, and faculty are day-to-day participants in the life of every community in this state, and we must act when our neighbors are harmed and in pain.” Her decision and its speed came in response to a letter by the undergraduate student body president Jael Kerandi demanding that the university cease all partnerships with MPD. Kerandi also launched a petition on social media that drew thousands of signatures overnight.³¹

But it is important to note that, while the Floyd murder was the trigger for massive local and eventually global protests against racism, the response reflects political sentiments among youth that have been apparent for some time now, as well as growing organizational capacities among youth activists who were spurred to new levels of action in the context of COVID-19’s disruptions of normal work and school routines and the fact that the pandemic’s consequences visibly exacerbated pre-existing social, racial, and generational inequities.

The extent of youth organizing and involvement in the protests was underscored at a teach-in on “Protest and Policing” organized by an ongoing Interdisciplinary Collaborative Workshop (ICW) that includes faculty, students, and community leaders from the University of Minnesota and three Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) – Spelman and Morehouse Colleges in Atlanta, Georgia, and Howard University in Washington, DC. Some of the most inspiring speakers at the teach-in were students and youth activists from the three cities involved in the ICW partnership. Twin Cities community activists included, for example, Rahhel Haile, a 2014 graduate of the University of Minnesota-Morris, who is the co-founder and executive director of policy and program at the Minnesota Youth Collective.³² She and her organization are, in the words of the teach-in organizers, “dedicated to building the political power of young people without co-opting their movements. Combining grassroots and electoral justice work, her work with community members around political education on abolition and policy when defunding the police has intensified since George Floyd’s murder.”³³

Haile was joined at the teach-in by Amber Jones, who graduated from the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities in 2015. She is currently the outreach coordinator for the Council for Minnesotans of African Heritage, an agency of the State of Minnesota. The teach-in organizers note that “Amber has done everything from leading community engagement initiatives in large institutions to build better relationships with African American communities, to organizing several policy and advocacy campaigns for systemic change at multiple levels of government. She is committed to increasing access & participation in social, economic, and political processes among communities of color; to cultivating the next generation of leaders; and to encouraging unity and self-determination among people of African descent.”³⁴

³⁰ Jessica Bennett, “Teen Girls Fighting For a More Just Future”.

³¹ Max Chao, “UMN Adjusts Relationship with MPD Following Death of George Floyd,” *Minnesota Daily*, May 27, 2020, <https://www.mndaily.com/article/2020/05/br-umn-changes-relationship-with-mpd-following-death-of-george-floyd-5ecf20a2b9653>, accessed August 23, 2020.

³² <https://www.mnyouthcollective.org/>.

³³ For a description of the collaborative, see the teach-in website : https://sites.google.com/umn.edu/icw-teach-ins-policing-protest/racial-justice-protests-and-social-change-july-29_1?authuser=0

³⁴ Teach-in website.

Among the many other impressive activists from elsewhere speaking at the teach-in was Mary-Pat Hector. Hector is a recent graduate of Spelman College and a current graduate student at Georgia State University. “At twenty-two years old Mary-Pat Hector knows how to change the world. She began community organizing at the age of twelve years old. By the age of nineteen, she became the youngest woman and person of color to run for public office in the state of Georgia, losing by only twenty-two votes.”³⁵ Hector is the program strategist at Rise, Inc, an organization that includes more than forty thousand students and supporters from colleges and universities across the nation.

These are challenging times for people of all ages, but especially, evidence suggests, for young people whose life-cycle transitions have been interrupted by COVID-19. Levels of unemployment and despair are even higher than they had been before 2020. But arguably, the COVID-19 spring and the contemporaneous act of police brutality that launched an uprising have also brought new forms of empowerment for many young people, and new confirmation of the deep-rooted injustices that had brought many of them to activism even before COVID-19 or George Floyd’s murder. It is important to recognize these possible generational effects along with the others. As Jael Kerandi put it, when she thanked the signatories of her petition: “Never underestimate the power of your voice. This is for the mothers of George Floyd, Jamarr Clark, Philando Castile, and many others. Thank you to the two-thousand-plus signatories listed below, this couldn’t have been done without you. The fight is not over, the marathon continues.”³⁶ Her call within and across generations was echoed by Zee Thomas: “After the protest, I really couldn’t sleep at all. I was on Twitter, as usual. And there was this one tweet from a mother. And I remember it so clearly, because I started crying. She said, ‘I’m happy that my daughter will grow up in a world that these young girls will change.’ And that’s a moment where I felt really powerful, because my main goal, as a person and as an upcoming activist, is to make sure that people know that things will change. Eventually.”³⁷

³⁵ Teach-in website.

³⁶ Lucy Diavolo, “After Student Body President Demands, the University of Minnesota Announced It Will Cut Some Ties with Minneapolis Police,” *Teen Vogue*, May 28, 2020, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/student-body-president-demands-university-of-minnesota-minneapolis-police-department>, accessed August 23, 2020.

³⁷ Jessica Bennett, “Teen Girls Fighting For a More Just Future.”