

YOUTH.sg:

The State of Youth in Singapore



COVID-19
Special Edition

2021



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WE HEAR **Y**OUTH
HERE FOR **Y**OUTH

At NYC, we believe in a world where young people are respected and heard, and have the ability to influence and make a difference to the world. Together with our partners, we develop future-ready youth who are committed to Singapore by instilling in them a heart for service, resilience and an enterprising spirit.

■ Our Vision

Thriving youth who are **Future-Ready** and **Committed to Singapore**

▲ Our Mission

Create **Opportunities for All Youths in Singapore**

To be **heard**, to be **empowered** and to be **the change**

● Our Background

NYC was set up by the Singapore Government on 1 November 1989 as the national co-ordinating body for youth affairs in Singapore and the focal point of international youth affairs.

On 1 January 2015, NYC began its operations as an autonomous agency under the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY) and housed two key institutions: Outward Bound Singapore (OBS) and Youth Corps Singapore (YCS). Together, the agency drives youth development and broadens outreach to young Singaporeans and youth sector organisations.

Mr Edwin Tong, Minister for Culture, Community and Youth and Second Minister for Law is the Chairperson of the 16th Council. The Council comprises members from diverse backgrounds such as the youth, media, arts, sports, corporate and government sectors.



Preface

The National Youth Survey (NYS) studies the major concerns and issues of schooling and working youths in Singapore. It is a time-series survey that tracks and provides updated analyses of national youth statistics and outcomes to inform policy and practice. To date, NYS has been conducted in 2002, 2005, 2010, 2013, 2016, and 2019. Findings and analyses from each cycle of NYS are subsequently published as YOUTH.sg: The State of Youth in Singapore (YOUTH.sg).

This edition of YOUTH.sg consists of six separate issues covering the topics of



**Values &
Attitudes**



**Education &
Employment**



**Social
Support**



**Social
Cohesion**



Wellbeing



**COVID-19
(Special Edition)**

Each issue features youth statistics and insights from the NYS. Complementing the NYS insights are relevant studies and in-depth analyses by practitioners in youth research and development to provide readers with an overview of the state of youth in Singapore.

Contributors comprise NYS' academic collaborators (A/Ps Ho Kong Chong, Ho Kong Weng, and Irene Ng), NYC, Youth STEPS' academic collaborators (Dr Chew Han Ei, A/P Vincent Chua, and Dr Alex Tan) and other contributors (Ministry of Manpower, National Arts Council, National Volunteer & Philanthropy Centre, and Sport Singapore). Together, the YOUTH.sg intends to shed light on and explore specific emergent trends and issues of youths.

**This publication has been put together by the Research team at the
National Youth Council.**

Notation

NA Not Available

Notes

Percentages may not total up to 100% due to rounding.
Survey figures may vary slightly due to sample weighting.

Living through COVID-19 together, apart



The COVID-19 pandemic has proven to be an unprecedented crisis around the world. While Singapore has been able to overcome global crises in the past, the pandemic has presented unparalleled challenges for our open and globalised nation.

With the Novel Coronavirus (commonly known as COVID-19) rampaging across the globe, Singapore, like many other countries, witnessed the rapid spread of confirmed cases and took drastic measures. Between 7 April to 1 June 2020, Circuit Breaker measures limiting the movement of Singaporeans, on a scale never seen before in the nation's post-independence history, were implemented.

Borders were closed and businesses shuttered. By August 2020, Singapore reported a recession that looked to be greater than what was experienced during SARS in 2003 and the 2007-2008 global financial crisis (Cheong, 2020; Ministry of Trade and Industry, 2020; Tang, 2020).

As our bustling city came to a standstill, everyday life was upended for all segments of the population. While some struggled with home-based learning and work-from-home arrangements under one roof (Ang, 2020), others who were separated from family and friends battled loneliness (Renjan & Fung, 2020; Tai, 2020).

Against this backdrop of panic and uncertainty, Singaporeans of all ages rallied together to support each other and remained resilient in the face of the crisis. Our kampung spirit shone bright during the darker days, paving the way for a common ground for Singaporeans to look back and reflect on for years to come.

At the National Youth Council (NYC), we have witnessed the unwavering resolve of our youths in 2020. As the first protracted global health crisis which reached into all areas of life for many young Singaporeans, COVID-19 had precipitated a wave of heightened uncertainty, compounding new challenges onto evergreen concerns. Nonetheless, young Singaporeans took the situation in their stride despite the multitude of challenges and uncertainties faced.

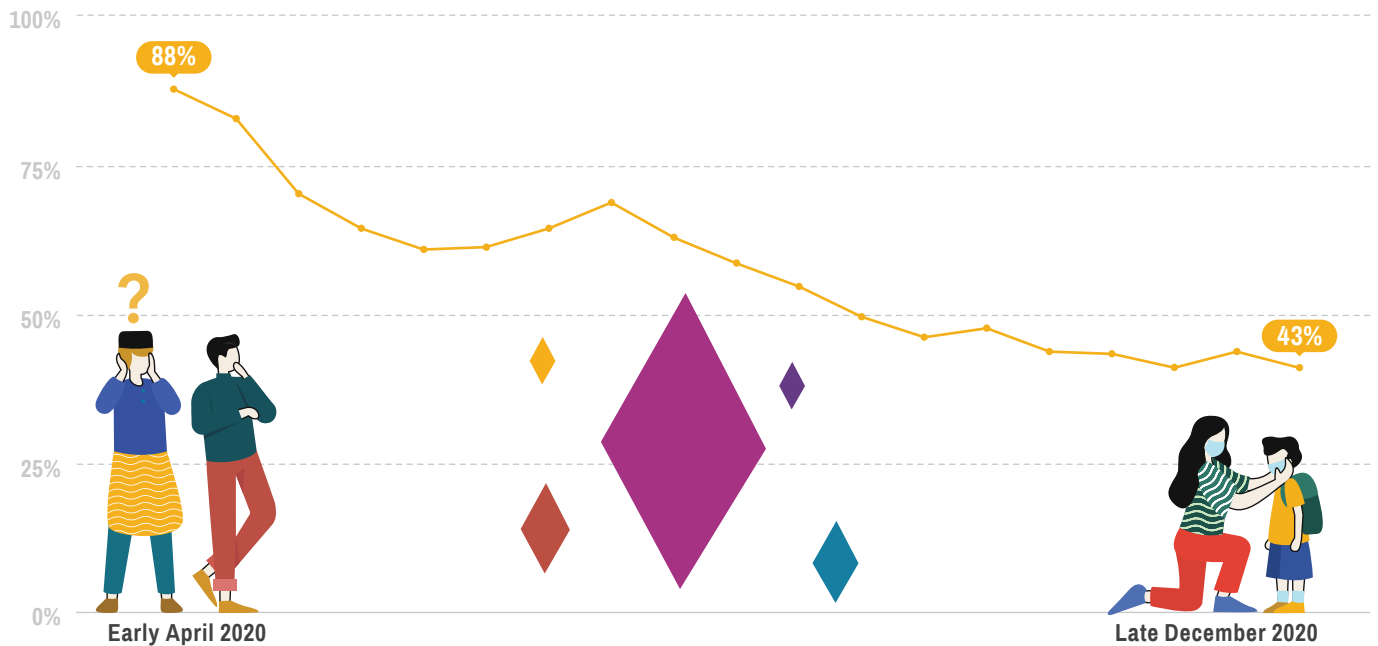
This special edition of the YOUTH.sg 2021 features a snapshot of the concerns, struggles, and resilience of youths during this unexpected time. Bringing together insights from representative polls of Singapore youths conducted in 2020, the in-COVID trends presented in the following sections illuminate the state of youth during the height of the pandemic. Looking back at 2020 through the youth lens serve as a reminder of our shared experiences of youths in Singapore as they live through COVID-19, apart.

The spirit of care burned bright among our youths despite concerns over the pandemic

Youths, like the rest of the population, were highly concerned about the COVID-19 situation in Singapore. Concern levels were extremely high in early days of the outbreak, when little was known about the virus and the outbreak was threatening to spiral out of control. As the situation improved due to safe distancing measures and better understanding of the virus, thankfully, concern levels gradually fell from 88% at the start of Circuit Breaker to 43% by the end of 2020 (Chart 1).

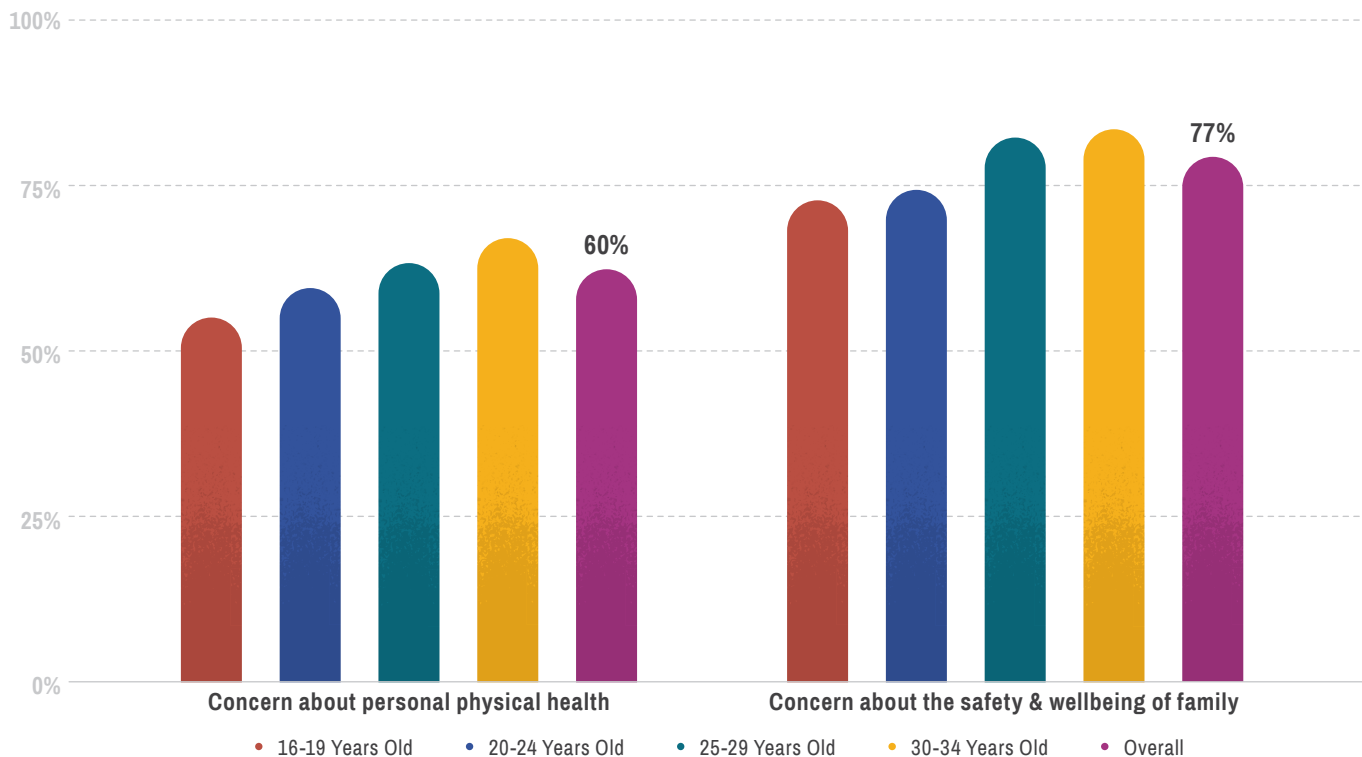
Young people were not just concerned about their own safety. Over the Circuit Breaker period, youths were also concerned for the wellbeing of their loved ones and members of vulnerable groups. Older youths aged 25 to 34, who are more likely to have younger children, elderly dependents or both, consistently indicated higher levels of concern for their loved ones' safety and wellbeing (Chart 2).

◆ CHART 1: YOUTHS' LEVEL OF CONCERN¹ OVER THE COVID-19 SITUATION



¹This reflects the proportion of youths who reported being 'Concerned' and 'Extremely Concerned' by the COVID-19 situation in Singapore.

◆ CHART 2: YOUTHS' LEVEL OF CONCERN² BY AGE



Beyond their immediate family members, youths also expressed concern for vulnerable populations during the pandemic. As cases amongst foreign workers living in dormitories rose, 8 in 10 youths expressed concern over the living conditions of foreign workers, primarily for their health, wellbeing, and livelihood. Youth-led community efforts like initiatives from Geylang Adventures, COVID-19 Migrant Support Coalition, and Vaangae Anna also stepped in to support foreign workers during the outbreak.

Young Singaporeans banded together to volunteer, donate, and even kickstart community-based activities to support their fellow Singaporeans. Some examples of this includes moving towards online volunteering with Youth Corps Singapore's Virtual Red Box, Project Stable Staples which helped rental communities, and Project Merci which displayed support and recognition for essential workers.

Besides grand gestures or large-scale mobilisations, youths also contributed in other small but meaningful ways. About 1 in 2 youths helped to share important information about the pandemic with others, ensuring that accurate and timely information was passed on to their family and friends. About 3 in 10 youths donated to a cause or sent a care package to another person over the period of COVID-19. Giving.sg, an online donation portal, reported record highs in donations to causes related to COVID-19 which helped vulnerable communities, frontline workers, foreign workers and more (Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth & Ministry of Social and Family Development, 2020).

²This reflects the proportion of youths who reported being 'Concerned' and 'Extremely concerned'.

Youths overcame temporary challenges, but pragmatic & health concerns rose to the fore

Even as they were sensitive to the plight of others around them, this period has been no less challenging for young Singaporeans themselves. Navigating and tackling the responsibilities of school and work, and making the transition from one to the other, is complex. With stringent restrictions in place, some of these everyday challenges are further complicated.

In the early days of the pandemic, Circuit Breaker restrictions had an all-encompassing and indiscriminate effect. Youths had little time to adjust and take to their daily lives in a completely new set of circumstances. Simple, mundane activities that were long taken for granted became pressing concerns faced by young Singaporeans. Throughout the Circuit Breaker period, a wide range of challenges impacted every 1 in 2 youths (**Figure 1**).

◆ **FIGURE 1: TOP 5 CHALLENGES FACED BY YOUTHS DURING CIRCUIT BREAKER**





Youths felt that their social life took the greatest hit during the Circuit Breaker. Unsurprisingly, with the suspension of school and closure of recreational venues, the area most youths found difficult to manage was maintaining their social interactions with their peers. With close friends being key sources of support when faced with personal problems (National Youth Survey, 2019), limited peer interactions would have reduced access to crucial sources of mental health support. The distance was also keenly felt by those in romantic relationships or who have close ties with their extended family.

This is worrying as COVID-19 has taken its toll not just in terms of case counts, but also on the psychological wellbeing of everyday Singaporeans. Constrained within their homes, performing daily responsibilities and coping with their mental and physical wellbeing suddenly seemed like an insurmountable task. Reported levels of physical health took a nosedive with the closure of fitness facilities and encouragement to stay home and avoid transmission. Inability to get adequate fresh air and sunlight, maintain a healthy lifestyle, or establish a regular sleep routine were key reasons why youths reported difficulties with their physical health during the Circuit Breaker period.

Some challenges may be more difficult to overcome compared to others. The capability to adapt, respond to, and recover from sudden, drastic changes hinges on a variety of circumstances, ranging from the types of issue faced to the resources and larger infrastructures available to support the individual (Dvorsky et al., 2020). Challenges to mental and physical health emerged as constant concerns among nearly 1 in 2 youths, alongside a persistent proportion of youths

reporting bread-and-butter challenges (e.g., livelihood, work/studies, securing job/internship challenges) throughout 2020. Youths who faced these issues found it harder to cope and such hurdles were especially concerning for unemployed youths and those looking for jobs.

On balance, most youths are coping relatively well. About 2 in 5 youths reported that they had good or very good social emotional wellbeing between April to early July, with similar proportion of youths reporting so throughout 2020 (**Chart 3**).

This is likely due to the ingenuity of our youths to overcome the hurdles they face. Some saw the disruption as an opportunity for self-discovery and self-improvement, while others took a break and enjoyed time with their loved ones. Being the most digitally-savvy generation, many had found their way around physical separation by forging new frontiers online. With digital tools at their fingertips, youths quickly adapted and managed to find workarounds to accomplish their tasks such as using online delivery platforms for food and necessities as well as participating in fitness classes online.

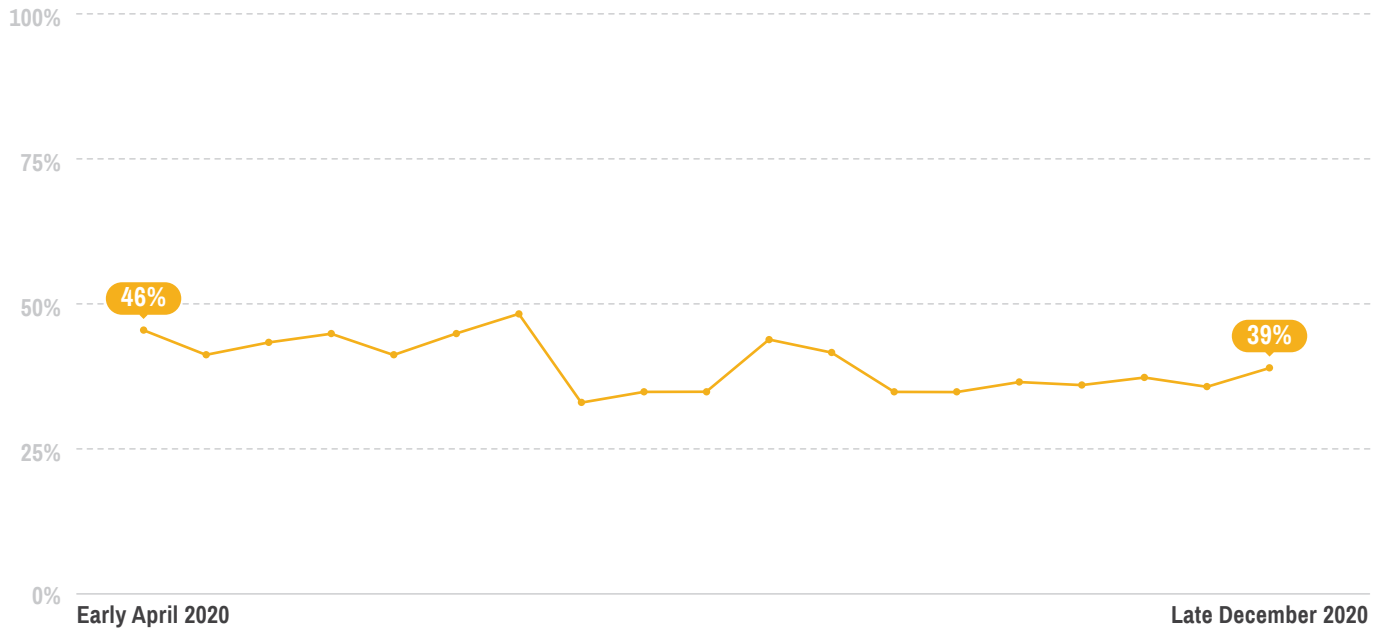
The online space offered a sense of normalcy for young people as they met with their loved ones and found opportunities to cultivate new habits. With friends, common activities included organising online watch parties (Choo, 2020) and recreating virtual versions of their favourite hangouts (Chia, 2020; Lam, 2020). Yet, these digital mediums could not fully replace the joys of face to face connections. Many of the challenges, particularly those related to social interactions, only abated with the lifting of Circuit Breaker measures

and with the resumption of many social activities and opening up of common spaces.

Not only do these experiences highlight the key concerns of our youths, they are also important reminders of the value in having a supportive and cohesive society. While digital tools have provided

temporary respite for youths and facilitated the transitions into alternate arrangements for school and work during the Circuit Breaker, it also revealed the importance of social interactions and the support of our communities as our youths take on a new set of challenges.

◆ **CHART 3: YOUTHS' LEVEL OF SOCIAL EMOTIONAL WELLBEING³ OVER TIME**



³This reflects the proportion of youths who reported 'Good' and 'Very Good' social emotional wellbeing.

As youths adapted to blended models of school & work, shrinking networks & opportunities pose long-term concerns

With physical schools closed, online classes became the default mode of learning. However, this was not all smooth-sailing. About 7 in 10 students reported having faced challenges in their studies throughout the period of full home-based learning. Apart from teething technical issues, there were also reports of how youths from lower income households did not have the necessary IT equipment or conducive home environment to support home-based learning (Yip & Smalley, 2020).

As exams and assessments came and went, students' apprehensions about their academic outlook waned. When asked about their educational prospects in the near future (i.e. next 2 to 3 months), over 2 in 5 schooling youths felt optimistic by the end of 2020. This has improved from the Circuit Breaker period, when only 1 in 3 youths held optimistic outlook. While challenges faced during home-based learning improved as students returned to school, sentiments remained largely tentative as students felt that their school-related struggles during the Circuit Breaker had likely affected their academic performance.

In addition to the accumulation of human capital, youths were also cognisant that they have missed out on crucial opportunities which offer them exposure to a suite of cultural and social capital and to build soft skills. The pandemic took a toll on our vibrant student life, as co-curricular activities, coveted events such as the Singapore Youth Festival and National School Games as well as opportunities for overseas exposure were shifted online or temporarily put on hold (Lim, 2020).

Work-from-home arrangements had also tested the ability of working youths to juggle personal and household responsibilities alongside work responsibilities. With multiple schedules moving in tandem within one household, familial relations were strained (Global-Is-Asian, 2020). This took a toll on youths, particularly young parents. Although technology may have facilitated a relatively smooth transition to remote work, it is also the foundation for an 'always-on' work culture (Cigna, 2020). Without the physical act of going into an office and clocking out each day, youths were certainly feeling the exacerbated pressure from increasingly blurred lines between work and personal time.

Having weathered these disruptions at school and work, Singaporeans are prepared to embrace more flexible and blended learning arrangements for schools and workplaces. As we venture to the new normal, one study noted that more than 70% of Singapore workers were open to continued use of virtual meeting tools. More than 65% students and educators believed the increased usage of online education will last beyond COVID-19 (Sea Insights, 2020). This presents both an opportunity for change while also introducing new expectations for school and work. As the nation forges ahead, opportunities to build an inclusive society will require sensitivity to the changing wants and needs of our diverse population.

Despite feeling tentative about their prospects in a protracted battle against COVID-19, youths remain hopeful

Though young Singaporeans have persevered through the Circuit Breaker, the global battle with COVID-19 has cast a fog over the future for many youths. At a macro-level, economic uncertainty reinforced concerns of future financial instability. News of limited economic growth, retrenchment exercises and hiring freezes had contributed towards persistently gloomy personal financial outlook. Over the course of 2020, only a third of youths were optimistic about their financial outlook.

Concerns of the economy and employment prospects weighed heavily, and youths were clearly worried. Young people are paying close attention to how we react to the pandemic as a society, which has bearings on their outlook and perspectives. Even after the country eased out of tightened restrictions, many remained anxious as the number of cases continues to climb worldwide. Despite Singapore having transitioned to Phase Three^a on 28 December 2020, over 50% of youths reported feeling worried about the state of things in the new year as they believed the pandemic is not over just yet.

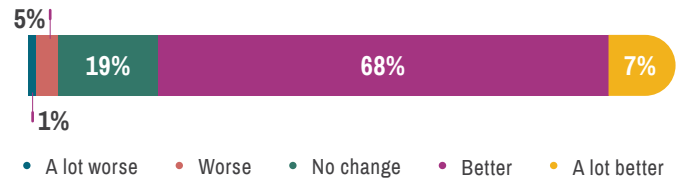
Pressing concerns in the present, coupled with worries over the future, have affected youths' overall levels of subjective wellbeing when compared to pre-pandemic levels. Evaluations of life satisfaction and mental health captured at the end of 2020 saw slight dips when compared with findings from the National Youth Survey 2019. Future uncertainty, personal financial issues, and difficulty in studying or working were some key reasons why youths felt that their mental health was poor during the COVID-19 period. This was more so for those youths who are transitioning to the next life stage, unemployed youths, and youths from lower income backgrounds.

However, perceptions towards the sufficiency of opportunities to achieve their personal aspirations and to have a good career in Singapore held steady at the end of 2020 with marginal declines

compared to 2019. This signals the limited impact of COVID-19 on longer-term aspirations and outlook, particularly as young people reported being hopeful that 2021 would be a better year compared to 2020 (Chart 4).

^aThis phase encompasses further resumption of activities such as increase in group size gatherings, capacity limits of premises, capacity for congregational and other worship services, etc. (Ministry of Health, 2020).

◆ CHART 4: YOUTHS' EVALUATION OF 2021 COMPARED TO 2020



Seeking silver-linings, the pandemic offered opportunities for self-discovery & improvement

When asked to recount on their experiences, over 1 in 4 youths described 2020 to be a disruptive year. Although their lives had been upended, youths were thoughtful, reflective, and even grateful when reflecting on their COVID-19 experience.

The collective hardship faced by youths offered fresh perspectives on their lives. Many acknowledged the difficulty in overcoming the challenges brought about by COVID-19, yet expressed an appreciation for the shared experience which helped Singaporeans to band together. COVID-19 had a surprising silver lining for some youths, as it gave them opportunities to spend more time with their families and the push to pick up new skills. A good proportion of youths (7 in 10) took time to invest in themselves during the Circuit Breaker period, picking up personal hobbies or new skills that would help in their jobs or improve their employability.

Youths are certain of our country's ability to overcome the crisis. About 9 in 10 youths were confident that Singapore will overcome the COVID-19 situation. With their heads held high amidst ever-changing circumstances, youths have displayed the willingness and ability to prepare for the new normal. By the end of 2020, over 7 in 10 youths said that they are adjusting well to the measures in Phase 2, and 4 in 10 youths reported a sense of normalcy in their daily life.

It is clear that these shared experiences had left a lasting impact on every young person in Singapore. The willingness to work on themselves and care for others spanned into the new year, as youths prioritised their financial health, overall wellbeing, and personal performance in 2021 (**Figure 2**). Our youths continue to rewrite the narrative, turning obstacles into opportunities for change and betterment in areas important to them. Youths have the confidence in both the country and themselves to overcome what lies ahead.

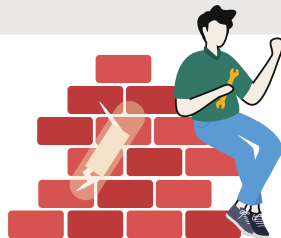
Male,
25-29 years old

"During this COVID-19 pandemic season there's a lot of things I get to learn from it. Like a job that actually you can work from [home]. The quality time that you get to spend time with your family members. No rush no need to think too much..."



Male,
20-24 years old

"We got through this together, we learnt a lot about ourselves, we learnt what matters, we learnt how we should handle it from a pandemic point of view, we learnt to overcome, we can see the cracks in our society better, we fixed the cracks and learnt not to be complacent."



Female,
30-34 years old

"I had to re-learn and re-build a new routine for myself...took some time to get used to the new norm. However, it gave me the chance to try out things I probably would not have, like baking a cake, making boba pearls."



◆ FIGURE 2: TOP 5 PRIORITIES FOR YOUTHS IN 2021



So, what does this mean for youth development?

Young people have prevailed at the height of COVID-19, and will continue to require great attention, resources, and support to do so. While it is important to ensure youth aspirations and attainments are not stalled by the pandemic, youth stakeholders play an ever pertinent

role to nurture caring, competent, and confident youths in the face of a global crisis. As we reach out and uplift our youths during these uncertain times, the trends and insights from the past year point towards areas we should focus on.

Young people require tailored platforms to nurture meaningful relationships & contributions

The pandemic has posed significant obstacles to social interactions. Even though physical barriers have been partially mediated by online communication tools, prolonged restrictions have made it difficult to form bonds beyond our immediate spheres. Opportunities for serendipitous encounters, whether it be an exchange of cultures, care or knowledge, will now require greater intentionality and cultivation.

To find their footing and overcome future uncertainty in a highly dynamic post-COVID environment, youths will require career guidance and community connections. As part of NYC's On My Way platform, participants are exposed to industry professionals and older schooling peers to learn about education and career pathways in specific fields. They are also given in-depth job and self-discovery resources. By equipping youths with greater self-awareness, job knowledge and professional networking opportunities, they can be more confident in their choices in the school-to-work transition, while building bonds in the working world.

As we look out for young people in Singapore, we can also empower them to look out for others. Besides youth practitioners and parents, young people too have a role to make meaningful contributions in the community. The pandemic has heightened our awareness of the need to support vulnerable segments in society, and young people have stepped up to the task. To keep the spirit of care burning throughout the pandemic and beyond, the new ways in which youths showed care during the pandemic need to be sustained and encouraged. Hybrid online and/or offline modalities such as those provided by Youth Corps Singapore can continue to bridge youths and the larger community through activities to pick up new skills, connect with others and do good together. Youth Expedition Project Goes Online (YEP-GO), a virtual version of NYC's overseas Service-Learning programme, shows that care need not be confined just to our shores.

Opportunities for young people to gain relevant skills & maintain a global outlook are crucial

For our youths to flourish, youth development in today's context entails providing young people with a secure environment amidst the upheavals, where equal opportunities are available to encourage exploration and stepping outside their comfort zones (Arnold,

2017). The pandemic has both increased upheavals and altered opportunities. As learning is disrupted by restrictions or shifts to online modes of teaching, crucial activities providing holistic education through experiential, hands-on learning and exposure are halted. But young people have taken the initiative to pick up new skills, which opens the possibilities to re-examine how they learn and what they learn.

Closer to home, the youth sector has an important role to bridge gaps in learning and exposure. Opportunities such as the YouthTech Programme, an initiative launched by NYC for youths to gain work experiences in the increasingly important area of technology and digitalisation, serve to create pathways for youths into various sectors to learn new skills and gain tangible experiences. Ensuring that our young people remain connected with the wider world, NYC continues to offer opportunities for regional exposure through our Asia-Ready Exposure Programme (AEP) e-learning modules.

Recognise the importance of allies & advocates for co-creating a future of flourishing with youths

The far-reaching impacts of COVID-19 on all areas of life have taken its toll on the mental wellbeing of youths in Singapore. The upheavals to milestone attainment and lingering changes to daily routines have brought about a sense of languishing⁵, where one can easily feel aimless and stagnant (Grant, 2021). The road ahead will have to focus on buoying youths' wellbeing both in the present and for the long run. Youths who are looking for self-help resources on mental wellbeing can turn to Youthopia.sg, a content site tailored for Singaporean youths, offering a suite of resources on building mental resilience, promoting digital wellness, and platforms for real-time support.

The pandemic has also set in place the conditions for greater retrospection and mindfulness, with youths re-prioritising their diverse commitments and aspirations. Looking ahead, youths will require guidance and support to achieve balance in life while pursuing their life goals. As young people find their way in the unknown, our larger society can share the task to guide youths in this journey. Beyond family and friends, mentors at work or in the community can impart

⁵Languishing is posited as part of a mental health spectrum and refers to the absence of mental wellness (Keyes, 2002).



valuable knowledge and insights to help youths overcome challenges, make informed decisions, and have a role model in their lives. Recognising this need, NYC and non-profit organisation Mentoring Alliance for Singapore are co-leading the Mentoring Alliance for Action to boost mentorship in our community. But most importantly,

as teachers, parents, employers and stakeholders in youths' lives, we have to recognise the roles we play in shaping expectations and environments at school, work, and home. Flexibility and empathy can help our society forge new meanings to work-life balance and wellbeing, together.

And what will the new normal hold?

COVID-19 did not just put normal routines on hold. Within a short span of two months, Circuit Breaker measures redefined normality for the nation. Mask wearing, remote work and learning, as well as social distancing are now part of our everyday consciousness. Many of these experiences are a first for youths in Singapore, but they forged on.

The pandemic has been a stress test of our youths' tenacity and resolve to ride out difficult times. A glimpse into the experiences of young people during the height of COVID-19 in 2020 shows that we have done well as a society. Navigating a myriad of challenges head on, the pandemic had brought out the grit, resilience, and heart of our youths. We witnessed how youths had adapted, innovated, and collaborated during difficult times, without forgetting those around them. With this confidence and mindset, youths can continue to thrive and shape Singapore in the future.

This special edition of the YOUTH.sg 2021: The State of Youth in Singapore shines the spotlight on the stories of young people during an important period of our nation's history. As Singapore embarks on the long journey towards recovery from the pandemic, the impact of COVID-19 remains to be seen in the long term.

THUS, WE CANNOT CLOSE THE CHAPTER JUST YET.

Looking ahead, there is much to be done. Interruptions to the accumulation of human capital and social capital can dampen our efforts towards youth development. Youths' experiences and challenges in this time are signposts for our work ahead to enable youths to flourish in the future. The NYC is committed to journey alongside youths in Singapore and prepare our society for what's to come.

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