

Generation Covid: ‘Everything is on hold. It’s scary’

Patrick Freyne Jun 27, 2020



MEDICALLY, THEY WERE SPARED THE WORST EFFECTS OF COVID-19. ECONOMICALLY AND PSYCHOLOGICALLY, IRELAND'S YOUNG WILL SUFFER HUGE CONSEQUENCES FROM CORONAVIRUS

Though not generally as physically susceptible to coronavirus as older people, young people may well suffer most psychologically and economically as a consequence of the pandemic.

The economic evidence is stark. “The job losses that have happened because of the lockdown have fallen disproportionately on young adults, in particular those below the age of 30,” says Barra Roantree, research officer with the Economic and Social Research Institute. “We know that around 60 per cent of 18- to 19-year-olds who were working lost their jobs... and about 47 per cent for those [aged] 20 to 24 and 27 per cent of those from 25 to 30. That’s much, much higher than older workers.”

The psychological evidence is similarly worrying. According to the CSO, 18- to 34-year-olds went from the most likely to report high life satisfaction in 2018 to the least likely in April 2020. Marie-Claire McAleer, head of research and policy at the National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI), tells me about a new Eurofound study which discovered that “20 per cent of young Europeans said they felt lonely all or most of the time... [and] 53 per cent of young people were at risk of depression.”

It’s not like they were doing particularly well previously. Young people were already more likely to work in insecure employment and to live in rental accommodation. Housing costs made home ownership – and even rental – unattainable for many.

McAleer speaks of a consequential “elongation or prolonging of youth” with many unable to achieve the milestones of adulthood. “The evidence shows that youth unemployment is pretty corrosive,” she says. “It impacts on their [long-term] physical and mental well-being in a negative way.”

She also notes that for Irish young people, in a recession following Covid-19, emigration may not be the option it was in the past. “We’re looking for the incoming government to undertake a rapid review and have a credible costed stimulus package to support young jobseekers into education, apprenticeships and employment opportunities.”

Roantree says targeted income supports and house building are also required to address wider issues of generational inequality. “There seems to be consensus now that there will be more State involvement in lots of areas of life... but there hasn’t really been an acceptance that that requires a higher level of financing, and therefore more taxes. [So] you’re making it hard to do it in a way that is progressive [that] doesn’t take more proportionally from lower income people, a

lot of whom are young adults.”

THIS WEEK I spoke over Zoom with five young people who are part of the NYCI and EU Youth Dialogue-affiliated Young Voices programme, to talk about how the virus has affected them and their peers. These are optimistic and engaged, all involved in a variety of community and advocacy organisations.



JACK O'NEILL: 'I HAVE TRIED MY BEST TO KEEP SANE... I'VE DEVELOPED - EXCUSE MY LANGUAGE - A "NO-SHIT" ATTITUDE.' PHOTOGRAPH: TOM O'HANLON

HOW ARE THEY AT THE MOMENT?

Jack: Eighteen-year-old Jack O'Neill, a sixth-year student from Portarlinton, Co Laois, replies: “My own experience is that it’s rather boring. I’ve been stuck at home... My dad is stuck at home now and my mother’s a nurse so she’s been kept busy as all hell.”

“There’s nothing to do. I don’t have a lot of close friends so I can’t talk to anybody that much, but that doesn’t bother me too much ... I have tried my best to keep sane . . . I’ve developed – excuse my language – a ‘no-shit’ attitude.”

Daniel: Twenty-three-year-old Daniel Airey, a final-year creative digital media student in Technological University Dublin in Tallaght, says: “I’m a wheelchair user. I have cerebral palsy. So I suppose from a Covid point of view, I would be in a high-risk category.”“The other side of it, and please don’t take me up the wrong way, but it almost felt like it was like an indication for everyone about what life is like for people with disabilities on a daily basis, just from a loneliness point of view, because [having a disability] can get quite lonely sometimes. And that’s why I’m incredibly grateful to be part of something like this because it gives me a sense of purpose.”

Megan: Twenty-three-year-old Megan Atkinson, a final-year student in sociology and social policy at Trinity College, who lives in Bluebell in Dublin, answers: “If you’d done this interview back in March, it would be very different. I was scared for my own health and my family’s health. Now there’s a bit less apprehension.”

Ciara: Twenty-year-old Ciara Fanning, a first-year business, economics and social studies student at Trinity and outgoing president of the Irish Second Level-Students’ Union (ISSU), says: “I’m definitely feeling a lot of exhaustion from being on technology. I’m sick of it. I’m on my phone or laptop all day. It’s your entertainment, your communication and also your information.”

She laughs. “And living at home after [a year of] college, I found myself slipping into my fifth-year personality, reverting back to that.”

Jo: Sixteen-year-old Jo Wootton, a transition-year student from Carrick-on-Suir in Tipperary, says: “My sister and me are both really anxiety prone. When this whole thing started, we were super scared. It was exhausting... I went through phases of not talking to my friends for a week and then talking to them.

“There were weeks when I wouldn’t text or Snapchat, because you’re in the house, and you have all these awful news reports coming at you 24/7. It does drain you a little bit. And when we did talk, we would feel guilty talking about something light-hearted... ‘Why are we joking? There’s suffering right outside our door’.”

Later, when we hear a Hoover in the background, Jo sighs and says: “My sister has decided to vacuum, so my apologies. She would be moving out by now if not for Covid and I would be ten times happier. That is one thing Covid has done for me. She still lives here.” She is joking. Everyone laughs.

HOW HAS IT AFFECTED THEIR EDUCATION?

Orla Doyle, associate professor of economics at University College Dublin, thinks the pandemic will exacerbate existing educational inequalities. “If the average child misses school for a few months, it’s not going to have a negative effect on their educational attainment overall, because they’re getting supports from home”.

“A lot of research has been conducted [on] what happens when kids go on summer holidays for three months, and it’s brought about this concept that’s called ‘summer drift.’ Children from disadvantaged backgrounds basically lose their academic skills much more than middle and upper-class children.”

This is not to say that the recent challenges have not been difficult for the average student. These interviewees all talk about their struggles adapting to online learning against a backdrop of worry about the future.

Jack: “The delay on the Leaving Cert [decision] drove people to insanity at some points. Every time something happened on the news or Leo stood up to speak, I got messages rolling in asking ‘What’s going to happen now?’ All my classmates were panicking to the point where they felt that they were going to fail the Leaving Cert...”

“After all this they should definitely look at an alternative to the Leaving Cert or the points system. With the Leaving Cert you’re expected to put six years of knowledge all into the one three-hour assessment. It should be better than that.”

Ciara: As president of the ISSU, Ciara Fanning was very involved in discussions about the Leaving Cert. “How long it took to get a decision was very frustrating . . . I think that people forget how difficult it is when you’re a second level student and the Leaving Cert is two months down the road and suddenly your school is closed.”

Daniel: “I’ve just finished my final year in college. We would have had a final-year degree show. So just before lockdown we were kind of all planning that, and I’d actually just nailed down an idea for an installation... which I was really, really excited about. So then everything went into lockdown and it had to be



completely changed... “I was lucky in the sense that I was able to do the work through Zoom. The wonders of technology! But I suppose it made it that little bit more difficult. It was slower... My personal assistant, he was brilliant. He was very engaged with the whole process... But I did feel a lot more isolated.”

Megan: “Some of us were taking on multiple roles. We were carers and child minders... One friend was helping to look after his grandparents... I was minding my nieces... but we were still expected to get the [college] work done.”

Ciara: “We had way more calls from people who were now caring for their parents or grandparents or siblings because they couldn’t have carers into the house. And these are the same students that also working part-time and trying to balance online learning. Young people took on so much more over the past three months than I think people realise.”

MONEY AND THE FUTURE

Maggie Matthews, qualitative research director at Behaviour & Attitudes, has been undertaking a research project entitled Life in Lockdown. She says that, among the young adults who have participated, stoicism has slowly given way to worry.

“They’ve made a lot of sacrifices which in the short term they were willing to make, but the more it looks like their medium- and longer-term [plans] will be affected, the more difficult that is to cope with... It seems like there’s a gap in the future... In other years they might have done a gap year, or learned new skills, but they don’t even know now what skills will be useful in this new world.” There’s a general lack of clarity about their horizons, she says.

This is borne out in my conversation with the Young Voices who talk about feeling like their lives have been placed on pause.

Jack: “I lost my job back in March because of Covid. If I don’t get a job, I won’t be able to get a place [to stay while in college], and with fees I don’t know how I’m going to be able to do it.”

He’s hoping to get into the Air Corps though and he’s optimistic about this. “But it’s pure luck at this stage.”

Ciara: “There’s definitely a sense of young people being at a complete loss in terms of being able to make money... We are definitely going to see an increase in deferrals [of college places] because people aren’t sure what the experience is going to be like but also because they can’t afford to go. I think there’s a lot of hidden poverty that we don’t see yet.”

Megan: Megan was hoping to go abroad and work for an NGO after finishing her degree, partly because she was downbeat about her future in expensive Dublin. “I just don’t think it’d be realistic financially now... I’m a working-class young one and I already know my experience of disadvantage but it’s been highlighted by this...

“I’m one of the first in my family to go to university. I came through the Trinity Access Programme. Education is something I’m hugely passionate about. For me it was my ‘get out of jail’ card... It’s almost like you’re hindered now. Everything is put on hold and it’s a little bit scary... I’m very proud of my working-class roots [but] I don’t want to stay here forever... How do I even go about getting employment now or opportunities?”



Daniel: “For me things just kind of stopped. We didn’t get that big thing at the end of the year where you finish your lectures and get to say your goodbyes. I’m hoping to do a Master’s in September but it’s quite nerve-wracking because I’m not sure how it’s all going to work, whether it can work from a personal assistant point of view and if I can have the correct supports available to me... “I feel a bit uncertain. With the media industry, with social distancing, there’s not going to be very many jobs going around. It is very worrying.” (Daniel later emails to say he has been accepted for the Master’s course).

Ciara: “I see a lot of people my age slip into a slump of not knowing what comes next and thinking you have no control over that. We’re very conscious that if we do end up in a period of austerity, that young people can’t be sacrificed the way they were in 2008.”

Megan: Do they feel listened to by government? They all agree with Megan when she says: “The fact that they’re even considering getting rid of [the Department of Children and Youth Affairs] or merging it is a reflection of what the Government actually think of young people. Even the fact they were considering this speaks for itself.”

GETTING BACK TO NORMAL

Daniel: “In recent days, I’ve been itching to get out. I went into town last weekend. My first time on public transport since it all started and it was really weird looking at virtually empty buses.”

Jo: “The first time me and my friends met up we didn’t hug and were two metres away and we followed all the rules, but we felt really guilty... ‘Should we really be doing this?’... At the start, I was in my ‘get things done’ phase... I was going into town to get stuff to bake. Now my sister is like ‘Will you go down to the shop?’ and I’m like ‘Do I have to leave?’” She laughs. “It’s not good.”

Ciara: “I remember going to the supermarket for the first time and I felt so anxious. I think we’re going to have anxiety with stuff that we took for granted in February. Now, even if I’m in Dunnes for 20 minutes, I feel like I’m not supposed to be there. I feel nervous about leaving the house.”

MENTAL HEALTH

When it comes to mental health, it looks like the pandemic will also compound existing inequalities. Psychotherapist and author of 15-Minute Parenting Joanna Fortune worries particularly about young people “growing up with poverty or domestic violence”.

She thinks social distancing has affected all young people but that most are resilient and will recover as long as it doesn't continue for much longer. “Parents are saying their children are showing signs of loneliness, isolation, low mood, increased anxiety, hyper vigilance”.



“The whole Leaving Cert debacle was chaotic. At that stage I was inundated with calls from parents of teenagers, some of whom I’d seen many years ago... and it was very context specific... That was not well handled.”

For these interviewees, mental health and the lack of mental health services is a big issue.

Jack: He mentions friends he was worried about: “Being at home and trying to talk about feelings over the phone to somebody, it’s just it didn’t help. It didn’t work. You can’t console a person as well as you could if you were in person.”

Jo: “I think the biggest shock is going to be going back [to school]. There needs to be something there for people... because I think the teachers will have to push us really hard when we get back there... There’s 400 people in my school and there’s one guidance counsellor. So do the math. We need more qualified mental health experts available to schools because of the toll this will take.”

Later she says: “We can’t make it just a Covid thing, that they’re here for six months and then they’re gone. There’s already a problem in this country, in terms of mental health and young people.”

Ciara: “I think the mental health impact this has on young people is unprecedented. Everyone knows that we’re heading into a recession, but I think we can’t overemphasise how important it is to have the mental health support when people go back in September”.

“I do think that people aren’t going to realise how much the past three months has affected them until we’re supposed to snap back to normality... Between 16 and 20 is a really formative stage of your life... To miss out on three months of my first year of college feels really weird.”

Daniel: “In the situation that I’m in, I’m particularly conscious of my mental health. I have an incredibly supportive family but if it does lower to a dangerous level, it makes an already difficult situation even worse.” Later he says, “for people with disabilities, lack of access to services is not a new issue.”

Joanne Fortune says: “Schools need to be resourced to transition kids back... Children [will be] coming back in a heightened state of arousal with increased levels of anxiety... We don’t need to wonder about that. They will definitely need additional support.”

HAVE THERE BEEN POSITIVES?

Daniel: “My hope coming out of this is that it levels everybody. That this isn’t just a fresh start for me or you or your grandparents, that it’s a fresh start for everybody. I’m hoping that people will be a lot more open to hearing our voices. The biggest thing for me is that if I’m given time, and if people with disabilities are given time, we can make an impact... and make valuable contributions... Without supports, people with a disability can’t live on their own terms and that’s been exacerbated a bit by what’s happening.”

Jack: “The good side is that everybody has been able to reflect a lot. It sounds kind of harsh, but I’ve been able to figure out who my friends really were. I was able to see where I sat in my life during Covid, and there weren’t many people I talked to... It made me open my eyes, actually.”

Jo: “I think I value my time outside the house or with my friends a lot more because it’s taught me how quickly that can go away. I think another huge positive is that it’s gotten a lot of young people who wouldn’t be involved to start speaking to the Government. I think a lot of young people now have had a taste of being an activist and will keep on that path.”

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