



THE
IMPACT
OF COVID-19
ON **SAUDI** YOUTH



مؤسسة محمد بن سلمان الخيرية
Mohammed bin Salman Foundation
مساهمة الخيرية مؤسسة

KEARNEY

In This Report

03

Youth & Covid-19 in Numbers

04

Generation Covid: What it means to be young in a pandemic

06

The Impact of Covid on Saudi Youth

06

Education:
Were we ready to go digital?

08

Economic Opportunity:
In Between Worries of Unemployment and the Promise of Entrepreneurship

11

Social Cohesion:
From Isolation to Redefined Social Dynamics

12

Personal Health and Wellbeing:
Growing Vulnerabilities and Growing Consciousness

15

How Saudi Youth are Leading the Way Against Covid-19

16

Learning from Covid: A Stressor and an Accelerator

18

About the report

Youth & Covid-19 in Numbers



50%
of youth are now reconsidering their educational plans

1 in 3
students think their learning appetite has been extremely affected

~14%
of Saudi youth lost their jobs during the pandemic

80%
of Saudi youth are deeply worried about their future employment prospects

1 in 4
Saudi youth say their homes are only slightly equipped to work from home

1/3
of youth reported being more productive during the pandemic than before

~50%
of youth are now thinking of starting their own business

70%
of Saudi youth appreciate that Covid allowed them to spend more time with family

~30%
of youth fear social isolation

1 in 2
respondents stated that the pandemic has made them much less physically active

1/4
of youth are experiencing mental health challenges due to the pandemic

93%
of youth are more attentive to their physical wellbeing as a result of Covid-19

Generation Covid:

What it means to be young in a pandemic

The world is undergoing an unprecedented global crisis that has utterly altered our lives in every imaginable aspect: school, work, travel, entertainment, and much more. Although the end of pandemic is now in sight, it continues to redefine our daily interactions and shape our future plans. To date, global travel and movement restrictions, business closures and soaring health repercussions have led to a drop in global GDP of over 5%, deeply disrupted markets, and fundamentally altered social dynamics.

For global youth, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has been particularly deep and disruptive. Young people entered the Covid-19 crisis in a unique position of vulnerability. This generation, now known as the 'Generation Covid' or the 'Lost Generation'¹, are experiencing fundamental changes in how they live, study, work and socialize. As the UN Secretary General António Guterres recently noted, "the world cannot afford a lost generation of youth, their lives set back by Covid-19 and their voices stifled by a lack of participation."² It is indeed not a great time to be young.

Globally, the pandemic has revealed significant cracks in the existing social order, further marginalizing already disadvantaged segments of the population. The transformation of the health crisis into a socio-economic storm has exacerbated the precarity of young people owing to their age-specific vulnerability. Youth across the world have been systematically, deeply and disproportionately impacted; particularly, young

women, younger youth and youth in lower-income countries who are more vulnerable in precarious times such as this one. Girls and young women are particularly vulnerable, with women on the frontlines – making up 70% of the global health workforce while taking on the majority of unpaid care duties. Issues of access to education, lack of decent work, social isolation, and mental illness are among the many challenges that youth are grappling with.

Our youth are also facing particularly great uncertainty about their future. They are increasingly concerned about their livelihoods and economic wellbeing, with almost 500 million jobs lost and the individual financial recovery expected to take years.

Saudi youth have not been exempted from these impacts. A pandemic of such global scope and cross-generational reach has affected all aspects of their everyday lives and deeply disrupted their prior perspectives on their life journeys.

The MiSK Foundation commissioned this study to highlight the magnitude of the impact of Covid-19 on Saudi youth in four areas where it has been most directly felt: education, economic opportunity, social cohesion, and health & wellbeing. Reflections from more than 1000 Saudi youth were captured in a nationally representative survey to assess the challenges and potential opportunities brought by the pandemic.

¹ UNICEF, The Health Foundation, The Lancet, BBC, FT 2020.

² UN News: Tap youth talent to tackle COVID-19 crisis and beyond, UN chief tells Security Council retrieved from: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1062682>

Education



Education is, of course, at the very center of a young Saudi's development. The abrupt digital shift has had massive impact on the quality of learning, and surfaced issues of access to resources, and concerns over educational future plans.

Economic Opportunity



The economic prospects of Saudi youth have been clearly impacted in terms of employment opportunities and employability; productivity in the context of remote working arrangements; and, entrepreneurial activities.

Social Cohesion

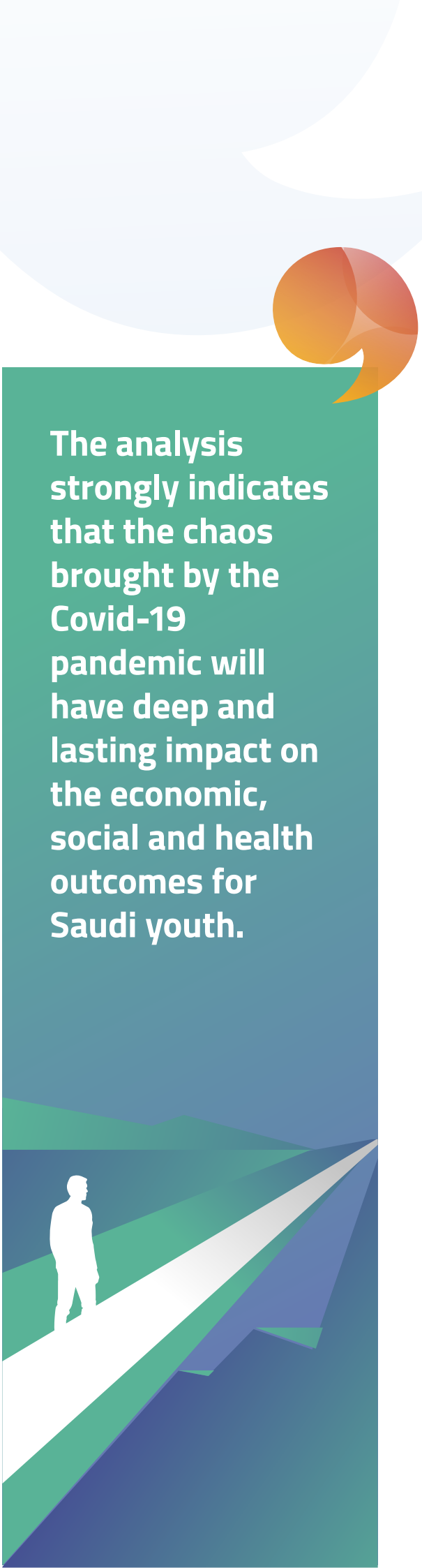


Covid-19 has caused shifts in family dynamics and social interactions, impacting community cohesion and youth's social embeddedness.

Health & Wellbeing



Lockdowns and the related educational, economic and social disruptions that the pandemic has brought, have also taken a tremendous toll on the physical and mental health, and overarching wellbeing of Saudi Youth.



The analysis strongly indicates that the chaos brought by the Covid-19 pandemic will have deep and lasting impact on the economic, social and health outcomes for Saudi youth.

The Impact of Covid on Saudi Youth

From the day they are born, to the day they pursue an educational path leading to a sustained career, Saudi youth's personal and social development is influenced by their families, their communities and the country's efforts to ensure a decent living for every Saudi. This amalgamation of external factors makes the journey of each unique, but also exposes the youth to variations of needs and vulnerabilities according to their age, gender, as well as socio-economic specificities. Despite the differences, Saudi youth, and in fact global youth, share fundamental elements of that journey along education, economic experience, social life and personal wellbeing. Those four life pillars intersect with the areas of impact that Covid has most heavily hit, and their implications on the Saudi youth have to be understood accordingly.

Education: Were we ready to go digital?

The cross-cutting Covid-19 crisis has imposed rapid shifts on the learning experience. It is presenting significant challenges on students in terms of knowledge acquisition as well as social and psychological development, which in turn affects educational and professional growth. In fact, not only has the pandemic impacted the youth's current educational progress, but also altered their aspirations and future plans. **More than 50% of survey respondents claimed that they are now reconsidering their educational plans. The results reveal the ways in which the pandemic has shaped youth's perceptions of education — and the extent to which their near-future plans have been thrown into uncertainty.** Many chose to defer their graduate programs due to remote learning challenges, financial hardships or the precarity of school program completion. Others, on the other hand, considered switching career paths given the emerging shifts in market demand, where reskilling and upskilling have become a pressing need for youth.

The long-term ramifications of the pandemic on education are worrying. Across the world, there are 1.6 billion affected learners, this equates to 91% of the global student population. Those students will not all survive the halts in their learning, as it will have direct implications on their employability, economic prospects and social inclusion.

To maintain educational continuity, thousands of schools around the world had to quickly adapt to digital means. However, the transition has been made quickly, and it seems that in many cases it has not been truly effective. School closures and the forced shift to e-learning had massive impacts on students' **quality of learning** and **access to resources**, globally and for Saudi youth.



Quality of Learning

A striking majority of Saudi youth (80%) expressed concern regarding how school closures and remote work might negatively affect the learning process. This was not only manifested in poor educational performance and exam results, but also in widespread inefficiencies and a difficulty to commit to self-paced platforms. More importantly, **75% of students experienced low satisfaction and a general lack of motivation, with one in every three students indicating that their learning appetite has been extremely disrupted.** These findings can be attributed to the lack of student-student or student-teacher interaction³. Research has shown that a physical school structure and an established routine helps overcome school-related stress and avoid distractions. In fact, a recent study on the impact of Covid on pharmacy students in the Kingdom has emphasized the limitations of the lack of laboratory teaching, experiential learning and general physical interaction on the students' drive and general satisfaction⁴.

Self-study was also cited as a primary challenge to the students' learning journey, given the lack of guidance and supervision. The sudden forced self-pacing has considerably affected learning, as per **48%** of our survey respondents. This proves that such largely autonomous learning experiences require years to succeed. The challenges have been further exacerbated by the lack of teacher preparedness. This is a recurring challenge, not only in the Kingdom but across the world, where new pedagogical tools and adjusted syllabi are needed to respond to changes in timelines and teaching modalities.

Access to resources

In terms of access to quality education, the current pandemic is likely to aggravate existing inequalities throughout the Kingdom. The establishment of remote-learning systems indeed requires minimum levels of digital preparedness, that either schools do not have or that youth have no access to.

Schools with no previous e-learning experience found it harder to implement the Ministry of Education's directive to go digital. Although they managed to gradually adapt, the transition has not been as seamless for all youth. **One fourth of youth considered the transition to have been somewhat challenging, while a further 11% considered it extremely challenging, mainly due to unfamiliarity with the e-learning experience.**

In addition, youth have varying levels of digital accessibility. A global study has revealed that almost 60% students coming from low income families might lose a whole school year by lack of access to the needed technologies and digital tools. Even those who have access to reliable internet, might not have access to their own digital devices⁵. This is likely to widen socio-economic gaps, in the longer run, as such disparities are mostly noticeable in rural and disadvantaged areas with poor or inexistent network infrastructure.

On a brighter note, remote learning has allowed educational and human capital organizations to reach previously untapped regions. For example, in going virtual, the MiSK Human Capital Development programs were able to expand to regions and communities that have not been reached before. In some ways, it is actually proving to be a great opportunity for many young people around the Kingdom.

Saudi youth now have an opportunity to be part of the digital educational revolution, and to accelerate progress towards achieving Vision 2030 to improve the learning environment and teaching methods. Government entities, educational institutions and other youth-centric organizations are advancing efforts to address inequalities of access, providing a unique opportunity for the educational community to hop on the digital wave in a faster pace than ever imaginable. That includes deploying large numbers of digital tools and devices to underprivileged youth and children, launching tens of satellite channels to broadcast course content around the clock for all school levels, and enhancing internet connectivity in many regions for better access.

³ Investigating the impact of COVID-19 lockdown on pharmaceutical education in Saudi Arabia

⁴ Ibid

⁵ "Their education, their dream" campaign by the Uli foundation retrieved from: <https://www.alriyadh.com/1858488>

Economic Opportunity: In Between Worries of Unemployment and the Promise of Entrepreneurship

Economic development is another area in which Covid has had massive implications, that in turn translated into a global GDP drop of 5.5% and a shrink in national economies⁶. Close to 500 million jobs were lost since the onset of the pandemic and the global economic output is expected to contract by at least \$8.5 trillion over the next two years⁷. The contraction of the Saudi economy alone is expected to reach 2.3% in 2020⁸. For a country that is undergoing a historic national transformation, shifting from an oil economy to a diversified one, the pandemic presents even harsher challenges within service industries such as tourism, hospitality, and entertainment, which often rely on a young workforce.

Younger populations are consequently highly sensitive to economic cycles. They are usually the first hit by crises and economic downfalls given their precarious economic standing. Looking back, during the 2008 crisis, 10% of jobs in Europe held by workers under 30 were lost. In Spain, Greece and Ireland, 50% of young working people lost their jobs between 2007 and 2014. **In fact, even before the Covid-19 outbreak, young people faced an extremely challenging labor market.** Youth unemployment rates in Saudi Arabia have hovered around 30% for the past couple of years and are expected to be even more severely affected in the years to come. Looking back, during the 2008 crisis, 10% of jobs in Europe held by workers under 30 were lost. In Spain, Greece and Ireland, 50% of young working people lost their jobs between 2007 and 2014.

Now, the Covid-19 crisis, coupled with sustained pressure on oil prices, increased taxes and stringent economic measures, is expected to create unprecedented challenges for Saudi youth in terms of their economic stability and future prosperity. They do, however, present unique opportunities to overcome present hardships in terms of **employment, employability, productivity and entrepreneurship.**

Employment and Employability

The Director-General of the ILO, Guy Ryder, described the Covid-19 pandemic as “an employment crisis of unprecedented proportions”, and its reverberations on economic stability and future financial security of youth especially are worrying. Youth expressed significant fear regarding the impact of Covid on their economic conditions, where two in five surveyed youth highlighted this as a top concern. If that indicates anything, it is the importance youth are giving to their financial independence, and how the pandemic is impacting it. In fact, in the past years, there has been quite a remarkable shift in Saudi youth’s priorities and lifestyle where more weight is put on their financial and personal autonomy. The economic impacts of the pandemic might have a toll on their ability to achieve that, at least in the short run⁹.

The pandemic brought to the fore increasing concerns about socio-economic disparities, not only between different population groups, but also between people living in different cities. In our survey, economic insecurity is a more pressing concern in some regions than others. Almost half of youth in Al-Bahah and more than 40% of those in the Northern Borders youth state economic concerns (impact of Covid on economic conditions, lack of work, or monthly income reduction) as their most pressing worries.

Saudi youth working in the private sector including clerks and other low-skilled young workers, whose income was already barely making ends meet, have had their income reduced by up to 40% since

⁶ “The Global Economic Outlook During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Changed World” retrieved from: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2020/06/08/the-global-economic-outlook-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-a-changed-world>

⁷ “COVID-19 to slash global economic output by \$8.5 trillion over next two years” retrieved from: <https://www.un.org/en/desa/covid-19-slash-global-economic-output-85-trillion-over-next-two-years>

⁸ “Riyadh slashes welfare as oil and coronavirus effects kick in” retrieved from: <https://www.dw.com/en/riyadh-slashes-welfare-as-oil-and-coronavirus-effects-kick-in/a-53391229>

⁹ “Saudi youth’s new-found focus on independence” retrieved from: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1721716>



the pandemic started¹⁰. In addition, around 14% of the Saudi youth surveyed for this report have lost their jobs during the pandemic. This is double the global rate of job loss for youth, currently at 7%¹¹. Such employment challenges do not only hit low-skilled labor, but also affect highly qualified graduates. As a matter of fact, during the 2014-16 oil crisis, employees were laid off on a last-in, first-out basis; regardless of competencies¹².

Similar to all generations joining the labor market in the aftermath of a major crisis, the Covid-class, as many graduates jokingly refer to their graduation class, are going to suffer from alarming long lasting impacts pertaining to their employment opportunities¹³. **Economic crises are usually correlated with a decreased demand for young workers, as they tend to lack the experience needed to overcome such crises.** This underscores the precarity of youth in the labor market, and the economic sensitivity of their population group.

Young Saudis are deeply concerned about the future of their employment, expressed by more than 80% of respondents. This striking number highlights a general sense of hopelessness, given that Covid-19 worsened their outlook for job prospects. It is nonetheless important to note that the tremendous efforts of Vision 2030 are in many ways cushioning this effect, and that the underlining economic premises are different now than the 2014 pre-Vision context.

That being said, there seems to also be some sense of positivity about the future that the pandemic is creating for Saudi youth. As one respondent mentioned “we need to accept reality, enjoy life and always focus on the bigger picture of infinite possibilities”. This sense of optimism is also seen globally, evidently as one third of youth surveyed in a WEF report expressed their optimism about future prospects¹⁴.

Productivity challenges

The pandemic has highly disrupted daily working arrangements, with over 80% of global workers experienced workplace closures and a shift to remote work¹⁵. Unfamiliarity with new ways of working, unsuitability of homes for remote-work, and the continuously blurred lines between personal and work time, have put a strain on work productivity. A survey in Japan found that the average self-reported worker productivity of respondents working from home was ~40% less than in-office productivity. This can be attributed to the difficulty of using digital work software and a general lack of experience with remote working methods.

So how do Saudi youth feel about working from home? Many have valued the flexibility to work from any location, the avoidance of daily traffic or the long commute to work, and the benefits of spending more time at home. Flexibility has in many cases allowed a better work-life balance and more time for learning and self-development. **A third of respondents reported being more productive during the pandemic than before it.** But the trade-off is often long hours, ‘Zoom fatigue’, and blurred lines between work and personal life – not to mention unequipped homes, including the lack of desks, chairs, a quiet space and reliable internet access. **In fact, one in four Saudi youth say their homes are only slightly equipped, while 5% reported they are not at all equipped.** This represents a costly constraint on their productivity and performance.

¹⁰ “COVID-19: Saudi Arabia to cut salaries by 40%” retrieved from: <https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/saudi/covid-19-saudi-arabia-to-cut-salaries-by-40-1.1588609488167>

¹¹ ILO’s report on Youth and Covid retrieved from: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/documents/publication/wcms_753026.pdf

¹² “Where do Saudi Arabia’s youth stand amid COVID-19?” retrieved from: <https://castlereagh.net/where-do-saudi-arabias-youth-stand-amid-covid-19/?pdf=49854>

¹³ “The impact of financial crises on youth unemployment” retrieved from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228736773_The_Impact_of_Financial_Crises_on_Youth_Unemployment_Rate

¹⁴ “One-third of young people still optimistic despite COVID’s dramatic hit on education and jobs” retrieved from: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/08/youth-pandemic-unemployment-future-prospects/>

¹⁵ “Social Impact of Covid on Saudi Arabia” retrieved from: <https://al-aghaz.com/social-impact-of-covid-19-on-saudi-arabia/>

Another underlying cause of decreasing productivity is the lack of employee interactions and physical contact. **Research has shown that professional isolation tends to negatively affect performance and thwart inherent desires for interactions needed to be socially connected to the workplace¹⁶.** This is mainly due to the negative correlation between perceived productivity and isolation¹⁷.

While the long-term implications of remote work on productivity are still unclear, productivity loss can indeed be gained back through the learning effect, the process by which better education and training will eventually increase productivity and result in higher wages.

Entrepreneurship

For many entrepreneurs, these are difficult times. **The crisis is having a sustained impact on revenue generation, fundraising, sales volumes and burn-rate.** In addition, VC fund managers are more and more focused on reinvesting in existing portfolios to alleviate the impact of the economic downturn, which means less interest in financing new businesses. In many respects, challenges brought by the pandemic on the entrepreneurship sector may be of the most challenging to address. That is especially true in the Saudi context where youth are the engine of the country who will drive sustainable economic growth in the longer term.

Despite the challenges, numerous local businesses are taking initiative in the fight against Covid-19. **40% of youth revealed that there are more opportunities to start and sustain new businesses and nearly half said they are actually now thinking of starting their own business.** "There is more time to think, and many new problems to solve", said a young Saudi entrepreneur. This says a lot about opportunities the pandemic is presenting. Covid has indeed opened doors and shifted attention to new industries such as e-commerce marketplaces, medical advisory services, and tech-driven platforms which are dominating the pipeline of upcoming startups¹⁸. Remarkably, the survey revealed that **female entrepreneurs have the same or even a higher entrepreneurial appetite, despite the fact**

that the gender gap in entrepreneurship remains. While it's true that the likelihood of youth to embark on entrepreneurial journeys or sustain already established ones mainly depends on the maturity of the ecosystem, which is remarkably growing in the Kingdom, it is also immensely impacted by government and institutional backing and support.

The Saudi government has introduced tax exemptions and legislative initiatives to incentivize creativity and entrepreneurship. Many VCs are also increasingly aware of those opportunities and continuously look to support start-ups responding to emerging needs during the pandemic. Salla is one of the largest e-commerce enablers in the Kingdom, now receiving over SAR 30 million of series A investments to drive Arabic e-commerce market in the region. There are other funding opportunities that Saudi venture capital companies are driving to support digital champions and assist young entrepreneurs in such challenging times. Experts have shared a positive outlook for the entrepreneurship ecosystem, "the capital has always been in a good shape, and support for young entrepreneurs is more present than ever".



¹⁶ "The impact of professional isolation on telework" retrieved from: <https://psycnet.apa.org/fulltext/2008-16251-016.html>

¹⁷ "Social Isolation and Stress as Predictors of Productivity Perception and Remote Work Satisfaction during the COVID-19 Pandemic"

¹⁸ "The state of pre-seed startups in MENA" retrieved from: <https://www.wamda.com/research/state-pre-seed-startups-mena>

Social Cohesion: From Isolation to Redefined Social Dynamics

From shifts in family dynamics due to working from home, and alterations in living conditions, to digitizing most of our communications, the pandemic is largely reshaping our social interactions and relationships. "Our social fabric and cohesion are both under stress", according to the UN Deputy-Secretary-General Amina Mohammed¹⁹. On one hand, concerns over social cohesion ranked highest among youth, reflecting how serious the implications of forced lockdowns and lack of social gatherings and access to public spaces, on social connectedness and community ties. On the other hand, alternative ways of communication are emerging to maintain relations and avoid isolation. This only proves that even with major social transformations in the Kingdom, community still lies at the center of the Saudi value system.



Family Dynamics

The Saudi society is communal in nature, and family values continue indeed to be among the youth's top priorities²⁰. **Three in four Saudi youth appreciate the fact that Covid-imposed lockdowns have allowed them to spend more time with their family**, permitting them to build stronger ties with their immediate surroundings. This is not to deny that imposed lockdowns present challenges for family interactions given the limited frequency of meetings. Many young people were in fact restricted from seeing older family members, notably grandparents by fear of disease transmission. Even though this does not have impact on family values per se, it might still impact family dynamics and gradually, if sustained, reduce quality time spent with the extended family.

The pandemic also pushed many young workers, especially those in healthcare and frontline response, to move out and live by themselves either to protect vulnerable family members or to serve in other regions. **Approximately 30% of surveyed youth between 18 and 30, moved out or are thinking of moving to live alone during the pandemic.** Along with increased sense of responsibility, this indicated an emerging tendency of young people to live alone. Some might see this as a shift from collective value systems to more individualistic priorities, but a value shift of this extent can arguably be very lengthy in nature and is contingent on a multitude of other factors. Independence as a value has been on the rise for the last decade, and only further reinforced by the onset of Covid.

There have also been notably positive shifts in family dynamics. **As more families stay at home**

¹⁹ "Key quotes from leaders on the fight against COVID-19" retrieved from: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/covid-19-action-call-8-apr/>

²⁰ Values survey conducted by MiSK

because of remote work and prolonged lockdowns, it means fathers can now spend as much time as mothers in households, allowing them to take part in childcare duties. This change in parental care responsibility sharing, especially for young parents will have longer term impacts on the youth's mindsets and society's wellbeing. Many global studies have in fact demonstrated that when fathers actively engage with their kids, they positively impact their children across a wide range of outcomes, including cognitive and functional development²¹.

Social interactions

On a larger scale, Covid has also immensely affected youth's social life, their engagement in the surrounding environment and most importantly their friendship dynamics. Friendships represent one of the most reliable support systems for youth; hence the imposed distancing and limited interaction with friends has caused youth to feel isolated and oftentimes unwell. **The social and relational impacts of the pandemic were among the top three concerns for almost 30% of respondents, for whom fear of social isolation is prominent.** Many young people also conveyed that losing their friends was a looming worry. This shows the high value youth attribute to social ties and their need to engage with their close communities. The current challenge may have repercussions on the youth's social development, collaboration and communication skills.

Alternatively, the absence of social gatherings and physical community events was in part substituted by other creative means. We now see virtual wedding parties, birthdays and friends' gatherings. To some extent, this has contributed to sustained communication with close circles of friends. **90% of youth agree that virtual communications are here to stay and will be the norm.** This new mode of communication and social engagements is a manifestation of how digital interactions have redesigned social dynamics.

Personal Health and Wellbeing: Growing Vulnerabilities and Growing Consciousness

Covid-19 is, above all, a public health crisis. It affected more than 70 million people worldwide and the rest of the 7 billion in more ways than imaginable. Some 1.6 million died, and a further 20 million are still infected²². In addition, the health impact cannot only be reduced to the known symptoms no matter how dire, but it should also be examined in their indirect consequences.

Widespread closures, economic uncertainties, social disruptions, and routine interruptions brought by Covid to the world, are expected to have long-lasting impacts on youth's health and wellbeing. **In Saudi Arabia, youth below the age of 34 represent ~70% of the population and only make up ~40% of the total cases of Covid in the Kingdom.** But even though they tend to bear less Covid-related health complications, their physical and mental health are unquestionably shaken because of the pandemic.



²¹ Cognitive Stimulation at Home and in Child Care and Children's Preacademic Skills in Two-Parent Families, <https://srcd.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/cdev.13380>, Fathers matter: The role of father parenting in preschoolers' executive function development, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26209884/>

²² Covid global tracker retrieved from: https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/?utm_campaign=homeAdvegas1?

Physical Health

With the closure of public spaces and fitness centers, the halting of free-play activities and collective sports, the physical health of desk-bound youth was immensely impacted. **In fact, one in two of our survey respondents stated that the pandemic has made them much less active.** Many also experienced longer screen time, irregular sleep patterns as well as unhealthy diets. This means that, the previously sedentary lifestyle of Saudi youth is further exacerbated, which will have an impact on the already high rates of obesity, diabetes and other chronic diseases. The existing pre-conditions will likely be aggravated by long hours spent sitting, studying or working from home, which is the case of the majority of our surveyed youth.

That being said, however, we also noticed that many young people are now more conscious about their health and wellbeing. **A striking 93% surveyed agreed that they are now more attentive to their physical wellbeing because of Covid.** Many would have incorporated in their routine a new sport and healthy physical habits. One of the respondents even had set their own house-gym to sustain his physical activity and maintain a healthy lifestyle. Other lock-down inspired habits include healthy diets; and group sporting activities such as hiking groups, walking groups all respecting social distance.

Mental Health

Not only did the pandemic disrupt youth's physical health routines; but it also had drastic reverberations on mental wellbeing and stability. In Saudi, youth are admittedly more concerned with their mental wellbeing and risk losing their "sanity" as one of the respondents worryingly voiced. **Concerns over mental health were among the top three concerns for over 30% of respondents. Additionally, one third reported being exposed themselves to mental health challenges due to the pandemic.** These

alarming revelations emphasize increasing prominence of mental health issues and intensity by which it hits younger generations. It is interesting to note that youth from smaller cities, or regions known to be less urbanized, report less concern about the impact of Covid on their mental health. A compelling 53% of Najran youth say they are not at all concerned about it, and almost half (47%) of Al-Bahah youth are only slightly concerned. This could be attributed to healthier lifestyles lead in these regions and the more important role the community plays in sustaining individual wellbeing.

Social media consumption emerged as another significant potential threat to wellbeing for youth.

Unsurprisingly, social media consumption data from 2020 confirms COVID-19's notable impact on the average time youth spent using social apps. Compared with 2019, the average time spent per day by children in the US alone on social media apps almost doubled in 2020 across all major platforms²³. Saudi youth are even more vulnerable given that the Kingdom holds the highest social media penetration rate in the world (73% active social media users of the total population)²⁴. With forced physical isolation, young people all over the world were looking for ways to both entertain themselves and connect with others. But many ended up consuming extensive news coverage on the pandemic and its unknown future prospects. The lack of social interactions coupled with unhealthy social media habits have fueled growing levels of insecurities, anxiety and depression. Some studies even show the positive correlations there are between social media exposure and levels of anxiety and depression, during Covid²⁵. This is hugely resulted from increased exposure to negative messages, fake news, increasingly worrying uncertainties and growing instances of cyberbullying. Social media consumption became one of the concerns youth are more conscious about and mindful of.

²³ Connected More than Ever: Qustodio 2020 annual report on children's digital habits

²⁴ "Saudi Arabia Social Media statistics 2020" retrieved from: <https://www.globalmediainsight.com/blog/saudi-arabia-social-media-statistics/>

²⁵ "Mental health problems and social media exposure during COVID-19 outbreak" retrieved from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340701222_Mental_health_problems_and_social_media_exposure_during_COVID-19_outbreak

While the pandemic has undoubtedly had its toll on youth and their mental wellbeing, lockdowns also allowed many young people more time for **self-reflection**. That was among the positive impacts of Covid cited by **almost half** of respondents, contributing to shifting their perception to “what’s important”. It has taught them to focus on relationships that mean the most to them and on doing things that bring them sense of achievement, self-satisfaction and mental wellbeing. As a result, a proportion of Saudi youth will likely adopt a resilient, adaptive and growth mindset by drawing more attention to problem solving, creative thinking and innovation. **While more than half of youth are becoming more aware of mental health issues themselves, 12% are going an extra mile to spread awareness among their peers and community members.** This showcases that Saudi youth are increasingly mindful of how essential it is to take care of themselves and people around them. Talking about mental health has helped many remove the stigma around it and in overcoming personal hardships. Virtual platforms have widely been a helpful tool to share this awareness and instill healthy habits, through allowing more space for storytelling, sharing and listening; something youth wouldn’t devote this much time for, be it not for Covid-imposed lockdowns.

How Saudi Youth are Leading the Way Against Covid-19

As the world grapples with unprecedented challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, young Saudis are demonstrating their continued leadership in their communities and countries. Saudi youth are not only demonstrating their resilience and flexibility in absorbing the pandemic's ramifications on their individual wellbeing, they are also exhibiting their continued leadership in their communities and countries.

In many cases, youth are rising to the challenges of the pandemic, responding directly to health and socioeconomic needs, innovating solutions, and imagining better futures. Thousands of young Saudis have answered the country's call and mobilized to help stop the spread of the virus. More than 23,000 volunteers signed up on the first day of the Ministry of Health's Volunteer Center. Young Saudis represented 75% of total volunteers in health platforms to combat the Covid crisis²⁶. Volunteers have been serving as

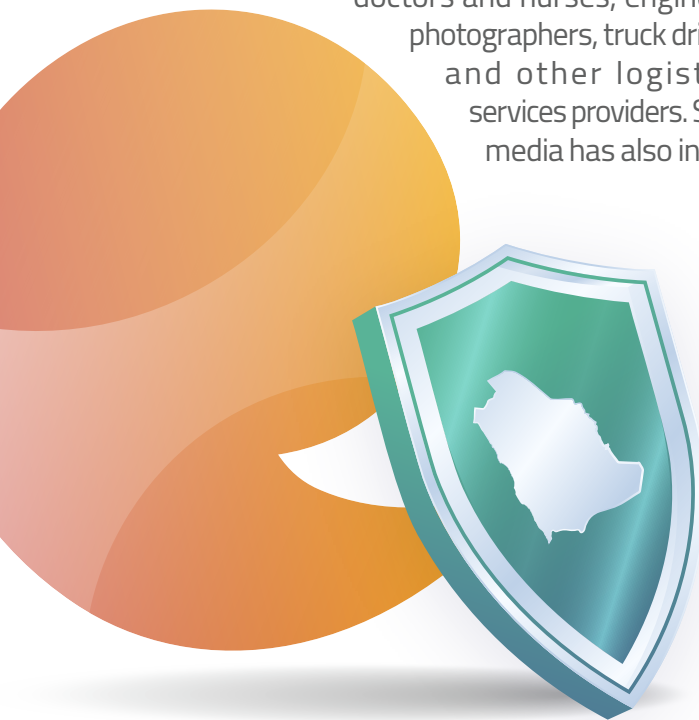
doctors and nurses, engineers, photographers, truck drivers, and other logistical services providers. Social media has also incited

new ways of participation and contributions to the country's response, including youth leading online campaigns to raise public awareness and urge people to follow public health guidelines (roughly seven in ten of our respondents have done so at least once). Our survey also revealed that around 20% of young Saudis reported their increased participation in events, either by organizing, leading or attending online conferences, civic initiatives, round tables.

To support the country's efforts, Saudi youth associations have recruited thousands of volunteers to serve on the frontlines²⁷. Volunteers have worked at quarantine sites, testing sites, and hospitals. The associations launched many educational initiatives through their websites and social media accounts to emphasize on the importance of containing the virus. Some young people majoring in health studies worked on developing digital leaflets that roam the virtual world explaining and detailing the importance of prevention and health isolation.

Youth have also turned to social media to disseminate information on the pandemic. Across Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat, Saudi youth were raising awareness on the importance of maintaining physical and mental health, encouraging their social media followers to comply with social distancing measures, and reminding each other on the importance of coming together as a community.

It should be no surprise that young people are already on the ground leading the Covid-19 response in their communities as well as across the globe. Y20, the youth engagement group of G20 held in Riyadh, KSA is the best reflection of globally engaged youth, who try to advance solutions to collective shared challenges by discussing multiculturalism, sustainable development and global citizenship²⁸.



²⁶ GASTAT - Saudi Youth in Numbers Report

²⁷ Arab News, 2020. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1685911/saudi-arabia>

²⁸ "Youth engagement group of G20 discusses global citizenship" retrieved from: http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-07/30/c_139249640.htm

Learning from Covid:

A Stressor and an Accelerator



In many respects, Covid-19 was not only an unprecedented cross-dimensional stressor, but also an accelerator of what are inevitable changes in education, job markets, societal norms, public participation and what that meant for the individual and community well-being.

This nationally representative survey gives us a glimpse into some of the ways that young people in Saudi Arabia are experiencing the effects of Covid-19. Our findings show that while Saudi youth are presented with unique opportunities, they are undergoing collective distress fueled by changes in their immediate circumstances combined with ongoing suddenly extreme uncertainty:

1



The abrupt shift to digital learning compromised the quality of learning and surfaced existing disparities of access. Unfamiliarity with remote learning tools and the lack of peer interaction have brought the heaviest tolls on young learners and their learning motivation. Varying levels of access to digital devices or reliable internet connectivity put less privileged learners at even more vulnerable positions. If not carefully addressed, such challenges may hinder youth's educational aspirations and halt the Kingdom's pursuits for higher educational performance to build national capabilities.

2



The pandemic continues to exert pressure on youth's employment prospects and economic security. From job losses to income reductions, to productivity challenges, youth across the world and admittedly in Saudi, are bearing some high costs of the crisis. It is true however, that the flexibility work from home has brought to some allowed opportunities to self-develop and learn new skills.



3



Despite the economic impact, young Saudi entrepreneurs are presented with unique opportunities. To start a business, as challenging as it could be, seems to be an encouraging path for socio-economic growth. The entrepreneurial landscape in the Kingdom looks promising and youth seem to already prove their potential and creativity, thanks to growing government and private sector support.

4



The social strain of lockdowns on young Saudis' friendships is immense. Not seeing peers at school or in gatherings increases feelings of loneliness among youth, with many fearing the loss of friends. What this means for the future of friendships is yet to be discerned, but the short- and medium-term social wellbeing of youth is clearly strained.

5




Despite disruptions to social interactions as they know it, family and community solidarity still lie at the center of Saudi youth's value systems. Many physical community events have been widely substituted by virtual communication which helped and will continue to help sustain connections and maintain social ties.

6



Lockdowns and restrictions not only worsened Saudi youth's physical health, but also exacerbated existing mental health vulnerabilities. Youth are the most exposed, both to their local and the global context, putting them more at risk but also making them more aware, conscious and mindful of their own health and wellbeing as well as their society's. It is indeed a challenge for youth and all national players to preserve collective and individual wellbeing through destigmatizing mental health issues, spreading awareness around them and letting youth lead the way towards addressing them.



Going forward, for Saudi youth, making a successful transition to their future depends in large part on access to good-quality education, decent economic opportunities, strong social interactions, and a healthy state of mind and body. We have an opportunity and a responsibility to take measures that will ensure that our youth can thrive today and tomorrow. We must therefore prioritize policies that take account of the complex and intersecting nature of the issues facing youth, many of which pre-date the pandemic and have been brought into sharp focus by the crisis. To actualize the role of youth as catalysts for a better future, we must also recognize their unique capabilities, needs, and aspirations as a stepping-stone for the way forward.

About the report

The report features original analysis of Kearney and the MiSK Foundation. It draws on insights from Saudi Youth in a survey conducted by Phronesis Partners. The survey was conducted using an online questionnaire administered to over 1000 individuals who have agreed to take part. The total sample size was 1105 youth aged 18–34 split across the 13 Saudi regions.

About Misk Foundation

Misk Foundation, established by HRH Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz in 2011, is a non-profit foundation devoted to cultivate and encourage learning and leadership in youth for a better future in Saudi Arabia.

To this end, Misk focuses on the country's youth and provides various means to foster, empower, and create a healthy environment for young creative talents to grow and see the light.

Misk Foundation invests in empowering the youth of Saudi youth in three main pillars; education and technology, culture and arts, and entrepreneurship. These pillars of knowledge will support and advance our country's future. Enabling the youth of Saudi Arabia to learn is a means through which technological, literary, cultural, social, and business advancements are made.

Misk Foundation pursues these goals by both designing programs and partnering with local and global organizations in diverse fields. Through a variety of incubators, Misk is helping to develop the intellectual capital and unleash the potential of the youth of Saudi Arabia.

We believe that our organizational presence will support and enhance the efforts to establish a knowledge-based society, which will, in turn, bring fulfillment and add value to the Saudi society.

For more information, visit
 www.misk.org.sa




مؤسسة محمد بن سلمان الخيرية
Mohammed bin Salman Foundation
مؤسسة المسك الخيرية
misk foundation

About Kearney

Kearney is a leading global management consulting firm that delivers immediate impact and growing advantage for its clients. We are passionate problem solvers who excel in collaborating across borders to co-create and realize elegantly simple, practical, and sustainable results. Since 1926, we have been trusted advisors on the most mission critical issues to the world's leading organizations across all major industries and service sectors. Kearney has more than 60 offices located in major business centers across the world. From our Middle East offices, Kearney supports both private and public sector clients as well as nations to excel and prosper by combining our regional expertise and global business insights to achieve results.

Kearney's National Transformations Institute is dedicated to helping senior government and business leaders to anticipate and steer the diverse and accelerating transformations that are happening across the globe, based on rigorous strategic foresight. The Institute develops thought leadership on key emerging topics shaping the future environment faced by institutions across the world. It also convenes world-class regional and global forums that serve as a platform for leaders across the globe to engage with peers and subject matter experts on key strategic issues.

For more information, visit
 www.kearney.com

KEARNEY

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19
ON SAUDI YOUTH

KEARNEY



مؤسسة محمد بن سلمان الخيرية
Mohammed bin Salman Foundation
مؤسسة محمد بن سلمان الخيرية
