

The Covid Crisis and Youth

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2020 has been an *annus horribilis* for a great many. The official global death toll has surpassed 1 million and the true figure is probably at least double that. A significant number have been left with potentially long-term life-altering conditions. Even amongst those more mildly affected, a phenomenon known as “long Covid” appears to be rearing its ugly head.

No less significant for many is the economic and social toll it has exacted. For as long as Covid-19 remains a threat, many will choose to curtail their social consumption. We can therefore envisage that, even if they are permitted to remain open, there will be a significant threat to the viability of a number of businesses.

Of course, hospitality venues immediately come to mind – notably (but not exclusively) pubs, nightclubs, restaurants and hotels. However, public transport and venues (including well known purveyors of lunchtime foods) are also likely to be affected. Then there are gyms, theatres, sporting venues and a host of others.

In a previous blog, I noted that a large proportion of the UK population are at higher risk (predominantly due to age). Even amongst those who are younger, a substantial number have medical conditions that increase their risk and there are – tragically – some in low-risk groups who will be left with long term issues.

It is right that we should take action to minimise the chances that they will be affected. Indeed, most of us are taking sensible precautions to reduce our own exposure (and that of others). These vary from the near-costless (wearing a mask, particularly in public indoor settings) to the substantial (working from home if possible, reducing our use of gyms/leisure facilities etc.)

However, the burden of adjustment has not fallen equally across society. There is a huge difference between those who spent lockdown in a detached house with a large garden and those who spent it holed up in a small flat. Of course, our first thoughts should go

to those on the front line, and with several members of my family (including both my siblings) working in the NHS I am profoundly aware of what they do.

However, let us also not forget those – often young – who will lose their jobs or fail to get one as a result of the restrictions imposed to protect the most vulnerable. Similarly, as many millions of parents will be aware, their children have missed valuable school time. Those same young people will be the ones repaying the debts that we are rightly racking up to pay for the crisis.

Their clinical risks are low – children and young adults are not invulnerable but they are mercifully less affected than the rest of us. Once this crisis is over, it behoves us to recognise what has been imposed on them and to make that right.

We know that, so far, they have suffered disproportionately in terms of job losses. We also know that this will have a lasting impact on their employment and earnings. My cohort (who graduated into the Great Recession in 2008 and 2009) have earnings consistently below both neighbouring cohorts at equivalent ages.

Similarly, constraints on their ability to socialise bite much harder than they do for many of us who are older. Most are single and many are uncertain of their place in the world. I do not begrudge those young people who want to socialise. I feel for those who are unable to undertake the activities that those of their age normally would. I worry for their wellbeing.

I hope that these profound sacrifices will not be forgotten. There is also a political angle to this. I am not suggesting that young peoples' political preferences should take priority over those of the rest of us, but I think it behoves all of us to take a step back and consider their views. They will be the ones that live with our choices for years to come.

What can be done to help and support those who – medically – are least vulnerable to the virus itself but are amongst the most vulnerable to having their lives disrupted? I don't have the answers to this, but it is obvious that their education must be a priority.

Since they are relatively less likely to be severely affected by Covid-19, then there is an argument to be made that, providing they are aware of the risks and actively choose to take them, then we should create a safe space where they can. How we prevent this low-risk group (say, under 25s in good health who actively choose to take the risks) from infecting others is the most difficult challenge and it might not be possible. Let us at least consider the possibility, however.

Let us also consider how to widen the opportunities available to our young people once we come out of this. It would be a tragedy if they were to be denied the same opportunities that I and millions of other Britons had (and often failed to take) as a result of leaving the EU. Continuation of the Erasmus programme must therefore be a priority.

We should also work to ensure maximum flexibility over the ability of the young to move, work and settle in other countries. The quid pro quo will be facilitating young people from elsewhere being able to travel and reside in the UK. Being able to experience an alternative culture is a life-changing (and many would say life-enhancing) experience. We have imposed a lot on our young people – it is time to give back.

Access to education needs to be widened – not restricted – and our approach must be multifaceted. There can be no better investment in our future than investing in the young. We should celebrate increasing participation in Higher Education, yet all too often I hear voices denigrating it. Similarly, further education should be expanded for those who do not attend university. Education should not be considered a cost but rather an investment (indeed, economists often like to explicitly recognise this via the term “human capital”).

Beyond that, there is work to be done in ensuring that our housing market is fit for purpose. Those of my parents’ age enjoyed a golden period in which asset prices dramatically rose, whilst the costs of servicing a mortgage steadily fell. Those circumstances cannot be recreated but we can and must do more to ensure that putting a roof over one’s head is affordable for the young.

Finally, we must act to ensure that jobs that use their skills are available. Some of this will involve tailoring education to those jobs

that are available. Some, however, might involve more actively seeking to place young people with prospective employers.

So let this be a call to arms. It is time for us to step up and build a society that our youth can be proud of.