

UDAYA

Understanding the lives of adolescents and young adults

The UDAYA study carried out a survey with adolescents (10 to 19 years old) in the states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, India to record their transition into young adulthood. More than 20,000 adolescents were interviewed in 2015-16 (Wave 1) and followed up in 2018-19 (Wave 2).

Challenges in continuation of learning in the shadow of the pandemic

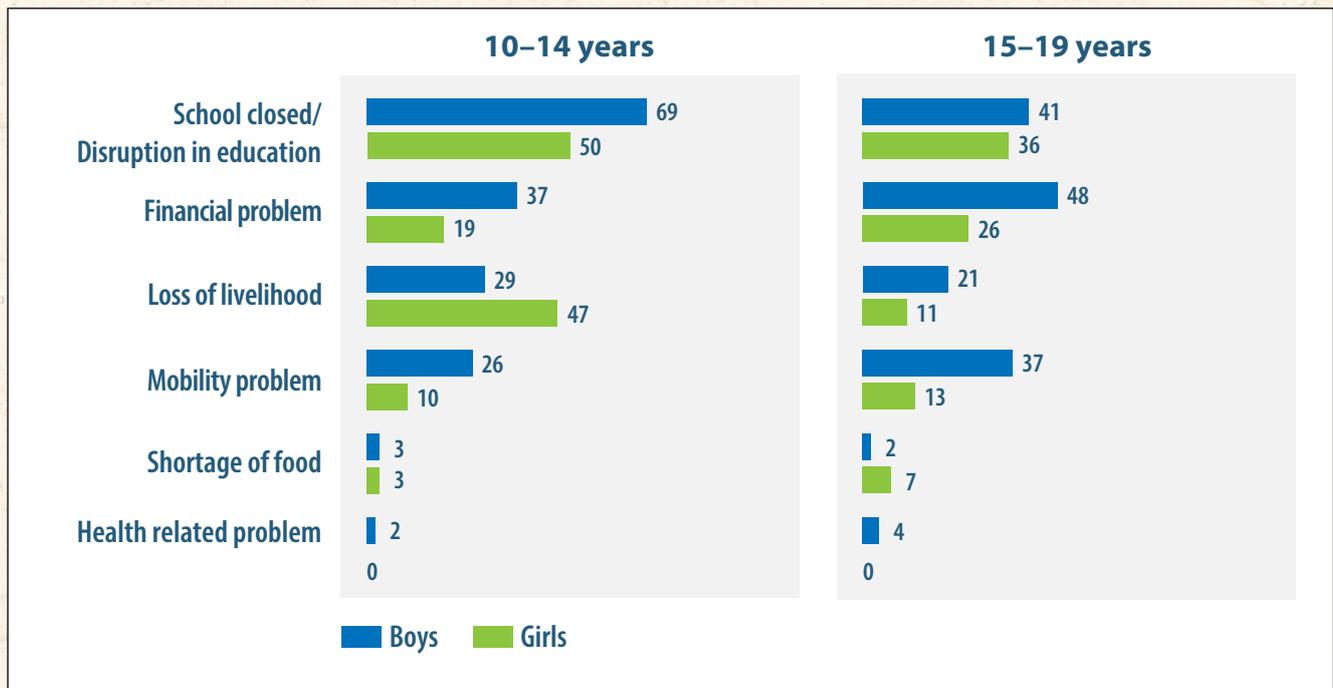
Since early 2020, the world has been grappling with the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic – a global public health emergency that has affected millions of people worldwide. In India, about 29.5 million confirmed COVID-19 cases have been reported officially between January 2020 and middle of June 2021¹. In order to control spread of the disease, the government has had to take stringent measures such as lockdowns and discontinuation of classroom learning. The impact of school closures was felt widely, especially by those from the most vulnerable households in rural areas. Students with digital access had to adapt to unfamiliar distance learning systems that were often plagued by disruption in connectivity. School closures and lockdowns also led to loss of interpersonal engagement, further affecting the physical and mental health of young people, and increasing their exposure to violence at home². Several organisations carried out rapid surveys, including follow-up surveys with UDAYA study respondents, to understand the pandemic's impact on adolescents and young people. Learnings from the surveys point to their particular vulnerabilities, which need to be addressed through policies to mitigate the impact of the second wave and possible future surges of COVID-19.



In April 2021, UNESCO reported that since the pandemic began, 1.5 billion children and youth were affected by closures from pre-primary to higher education in 195 countries³. The single most significant effect of lockdowns on children and young people was closure of educational institutions and a shift to distance learning. Adolescents and young people who were part of the UDAYA study were asked a question on how COVID-19 affected them. Most of them reported school closure and loss of income and employment at home as major concerns⁴.

How did COVID affect you?

Responses from UDAYA study participants in Uttar Pradesh (%)



Unmarried adolescents and age in 2015-16

Has education through distance learning worked for young people?

Limitations in access to digital media: Despite rising internet penetration and mobile phone use in India, multiple surveys showed unequal access to digital devices and connectivity, hampering students' ability to use learning materials and online teaching. A 4-state survey⁵ conducted by the Centre for Catalyzing Change (C3) in April and July-August 2020 found that overall, 84 per cent of adolescents had access to a mobile phone, but only 17 per cent owned one. Most of the adolescents (90%) did not have a computer at home, while television was found to be the most accessible medium. A majority (80%) of enrolled students reported facing challenges in access to education during closure of schools and colleges. The challenges included non-availability of books/ notebooks (48%), limited access to the internet (31%) and limited access to mobiles (24%).

The gender gap in digital media access: Additionally, studies show a significant gender disparity in access to digital media, thereby exacerbating the impact of COVID-19 on education for girls. The C3 survey found that the proportion of girls owning mobile phones was half that of boys, and there was a 10-percentage point difference in access to the internet. The UDAYA study with adolescents in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar indicated a widening gender gap in digital media access and use before COVID-19. The post-COVID follow-up survey of UDAYA study respondents in Uttar Pradesh in 2021 showed this gap has increased further. While about three-fourth of younger boys (10–14-years-old in 2015–16) and all older boys (15–19-years-old in 2015–16) reported owning mobile phones, less than a tenth of younger girls and little over one-fourth of older girls reported mobile ownership. As a result, girls were at a disadvantage in using remote learning.

Struggle to cope with a new medium of learning: Evidence also indicated a preference for the familiar physical learning materials, though delivering them to students was a challenge. The Annual Status of Education Report (Rural)⁶ of 2020 across 26 states and four union territories found two-thirds of students had not received learning materials or activities from their teachers during the survey's reference week. The top reasons for not receiving the materials were school not sending these (68%) and no digital access (no smartphone,

no internet, connectivity issues—together 40%). Most enrolled children undertook learning activities using textbooks (60%) and worksheets (35%). 22 per cent availed of videos or recorded classes, and 11 per cent attended online classes.

A study by Save the Children⁷ in 11 states and two Union Territories, found that nearly two-thirds of children had access to some form of learning material, of whom two-thirds got only one or two types of materials. Most of the respondents mentioned textbooks and reading books as learning materials. More than half of all children stated having no contact with teachers since schools closed. As a result, they reported facing obstacles including not understanding homework (26%), no help available for learning (28%), not enough data (16%) and too many chores to do (16%). The shift to online learning has been a challenge for teachers also. Oxfam India's study on the status of government and private schools in five states⁸ found 84 per cent teachers facing difficulties in delivering education digitally. About half the teachers struggled with connectivity, including signal issues and bearing additional expenses for mobile data.

Loss of learning – for some, irreversibly

UNESCO estimates that COVID-19 school disruptions have caused learning losses equal to all of the learning gains in the last two decades⁹. Globally, over 100 million children and youth from Grades 1 to 8 were expected to fall below the minimum proficiency level after 2020. For each month of no or little contact between teacher and learner, two months of learning were lost. In Save the Children's study, 80 per cent parents believed that their children were learning little or nothing at all. Learning losses are not limited to the current academic year or the past one year alone. There is also the phenomenon of 'regression/forgetting' where the student is unable to retain what was learnt earlier or prior to school closure. In India, a study by Azim Premji Foundation in five states¹⁰ found that more than 90 per cent of students at all levels lost one language ability and more than 80 per cent lost a mathematical ability from the preceding year. The overall loss of learning – regression as well as learning missed due to school closure – is expected to have a cumulative impact on children well into their adulthood.



Factors that exacerbate learning disruption

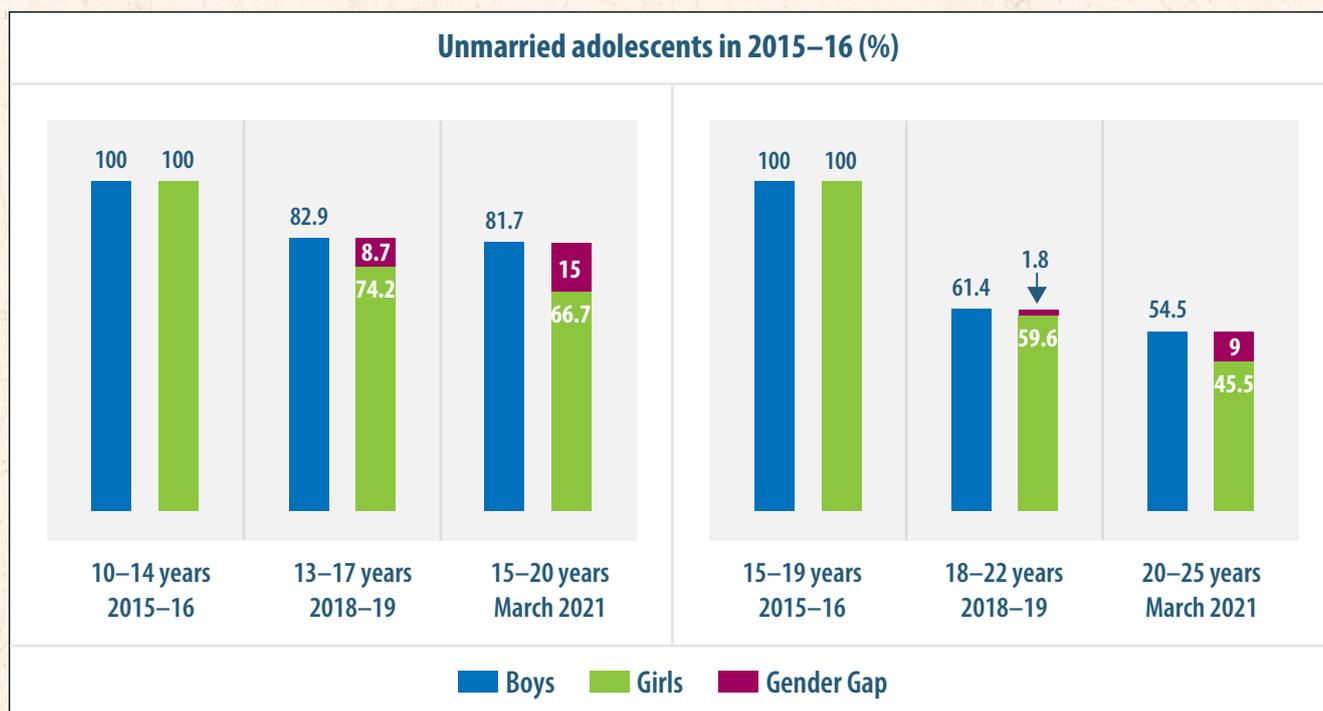
The need to be involved in income generation due to losses incurred by the family, and greater involvement in household chores and caregiving responsibilities added to the disruption in learning. The latter was especially true for girls as they were more than twice as likely as boys to report an increased burden of household chores, according to the Save the Children survey.

India's school midday meal programme and free meals at Anganwadi Centres (AWCs) are major interventions to provide supplementary nutrition to children from socio-economically disadvantaged segments. Together, they cover about 200 million children, and the closure of schools and AWCs due to the pandemic put an estimated 115 million children at the risk of severe malnutrition¹¹. The Oxfam India study found that despite government orders, approximately 35 per cent government school students did not receive their midday meals during the lockdown in 2020. Among students of private schools, half the parents on an average spent over 20 per cent of their income on education. During the lockdown in 2020, 39 per cent were charged increased fees despite state guidelines restricting hikes, and 15 per cent had to pay for uniforms even though schools were closed.

The findings of the Oxfam study indicate that apart from the immediate impact on education, there is risk of spiralling long-term effects due to the economic stress caused by the pandemic. These include children from marginalised socio-economic groups being pushed into child labour, families facing difficulty in bearing the costs of digital access, and fee hikes by private schools straining household resources. UDAYA study's post-COVID follow-up surveys¹² with adolescents and young people in 2021 found that school continuation proved to be especially challenging for disadvantaged segments, widening the gap in gender and socio-economic categories. Among study respondents in Uttar Pradesh, the impact on continuation of education was seen to be higher for girls.

Unmarried boys and girls currently attending school/college

Among UDAYA study respondents in Uttar Pradesh



Building back the learning space for children

It is evident that the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown measures to control its spread have hampered the continuity of learning for children across India. The economic losses to India's future earnings as a result of this setback is estimated by the World Bank to be USD 400 billion¹³. ASER's survey observed a significant spike in numbers out of school for the 6-10 age-group as compared to 2018, majority of whom appeared to be six-year-olds awaiting admissions as schools closed down. The government has recently initiated the process to enrol 6-14-year-old out-of-school children with trainings to bridge their learning gaps as part of the [Samagra Siksha](#) programme. Additional provision for financial assistance has also been made from 2021-22 for 16-18-year-olds belonging to socio-economically

disadvantaged groups to continue education. Targeted financial assistance such as these, and continuation of nutrition support are important first steps towards providing a safety net and bringing children and young people back to the classroom. Additionally, special attention needs to be given to girls, who have been historically at a disadvantage in fulfilling their educational aspirations, and are now at an even greater risk of dropping out.

Considering the severe second wave of COVID-19, returning to learning in the physical environment will need to be calibrated at the local level based on infection rates, emerging strains and vaccine coverage. Learning through more widely accessible low-tech options such as television and community radio, coupled with community-led reading and activity rooms successfully initiated in parts of the country can be scaled up. The impact surveys also underscore the need to ensure delivery of physical learning materials, and handholding of teachers to conduct classes through distance learning. Alternative approaches need to be adopted to assess learning, and to bridge losses so that students are relieved of the anxiety of failure. The impact of COVID-19 on education is far-reaching and its understanding will continuously emerge. Nimble policy responses based on research and regular monitoring of programme implementation will be required to help prevent lasting damage to learning for students now, and their quality of transition into adults in the future.

References

¹[WHO Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Dashboard](#)

²Reopening Schools After COVID-19 Closures, The Lancet Covid-19 Commission India Task Force, April 2021

³Press release: [1.3 billion learners are still affected by school or university closures, as educational institutions start reopening around the world, says UNESCO](#)

⁴[Post-COVID UDAYA follow-up study, 2020-21](#)

⁵Assessment of Issues Faced by Adolescent Girls & Boys During Covid-19 and the Lockdown, C3, September 2020

⁶Annual Status of Education Report (Rural) 2020 Wave 1, February 1, 2021

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Photos

UDAYA Project

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About Udaya Study

The UDAYA (Understanding the lives of adolescents and young adults) study establishes the levels, patterns and trends in the situation of younger (10-14) and older (15-19) adolescents in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Its findings provide insights on how and where to make investments to improve their lives by the time they reach young adulthood and beyond. The study recruited more than 20,000 adolescents aged 10–19 years in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar in 2015–16 (Wave 1) to record their transition from adolescence to young adulthood.

Wave 1 was followed by another survey round in 2018-19 (Wave 2) with the same respondents and achieved an 80% follow-up rate. This makes UDAYA the largest adolescent–centric longitudinal study in India and globally, carried out by the Population Council. The recruitment of adolescents for the study coincided with the adoption of the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, providing an opportunity to track their progress over time.



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UDAYA builds evidence