THE OPTIMISM OF CANADIAN YOUTH IN A HOPELESS PANDEMIC

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The year 2020 was one for the history books. Youth across the globe faced unprecedented shifts to their daily lives, filled with drastic changes and challenges that this generation never witnessed before. Canadians between the ages of 12 and 17 years old have had their worlds turned upside down due to the COVID-19 global pandemic and both them and their families will continue to face long term social and economic impacts from this crisis; but researchers caution that the pandemic will also have a toll on youth mental and physical health that will linger for years down the road.[1] Practical solutions to lessen their stress and help them adjust during this difficult time must be observed.

Despite this sense of hopelessness, there is much evidence to suggest that this demographic has been remarkably resilient in these uncertain times, demonstrating adaptability, creativity and innovation.[2,3] To echo Ilona Dougherty's sentiments

1 Hawke LD, Monga S, Korczak D, Hayes E, Relihan J, Darnay K, Cleverley K, Lunsky Y, Szatmari P, and Henderson J. 2020. Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Youth Mental Health among Youth with Physical Health Challenges. *Early Intervention in Psychiatry* 2020 Oct 12.

2 Bartlett JD, and Vivrette R. Ways to Promote Children's Resilience to the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Child Trends* (2020).

3 Pabalan P. #YouthOnCOVID19: Young people's resilience is the boost we need right now. *World Bank Blogs* (2020).

within this publication, it is clear there is a unique value young people have to offer. This article will draw on the results of two youth surveys to highlight the lived experiences of Canadian youth between the age of 12 and 17 years old during the COVID-19 crisis. It will demonstrate upon analysis of youth attitudes, school and home environments, and outlook towards the future that the majority of survey respondents remained relatively optimistic in the midst of a hopeless pandemic.

METHODS

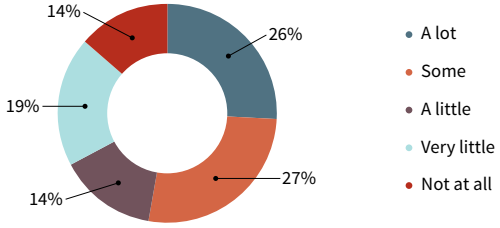
The Association for Canadian Studies (ACS), in partnership with Experiences Canada, administered two rounds of web-based surveys – including both quantitative and qualitative questions – in the Spring and Summer of 2020 to youth across Canada between the ages of 12 and 17 years old. The Spring youth survey was administered via Survey Monkey from April 29th to May 5th, 2020 and a total of 1191 responses were collected with a probabilistic margin of error of ±3%. At the time, it was the largest and most detailed nation-wide COVID-19 survey among this age group.

The Summer survey was also administered via Survey Monkey from June 12th to 25th, 2020, but a smaller sample of 344 responses were received, resulting in a probabilistic margin of error of ±5%. Despite including an incentive this time around where respondents had the option to enter for a chance to win one of five $10 Tim Hortons gift cards, the response rate for the first survey could not be matched. This can be attributed to the timing of the survey which was very close to the end of the school year.

YOUTH ATTITUDES NOT ALL GRIM

Several studies have suggested that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Canadian youth have been experiencing increased levels of anxiety. Although these negative feelings are prominent and must not be overlooked – particularly given the current generation's struggle with mental health issues – the ACS survey findings paint a more complex picture. The Summer survey found that although 50 percent of youth reported that COVID-19 had a lot or some negative impact on their mental health, a significant 47% of respondents reported a little, very little, or no impact at all on their mental health (see Graph 1).

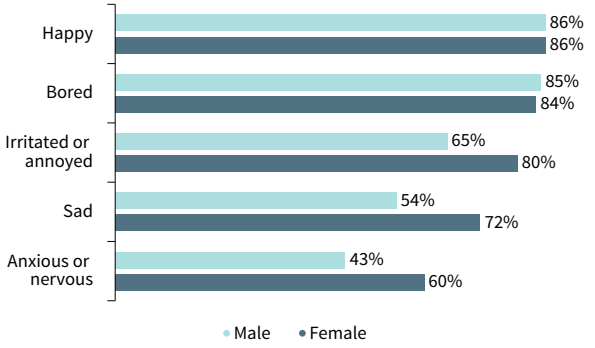
GRAPH 1. NEGATIVE IMPACT THE COVID-19 CRISIS HAS HAD ON YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH



The Spring survey results also suggested that youth experienced a mixed range of emotions since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and expressed feelings of happiness more than any other single attitude. This showcases that despite the challenges the pandemic brought, this segment of the population has remained quite positive. When asked to identify on a four-point scale (often, sometimes,

rarely, or never) how often respondents felt a series of emotions, Graph 2 reveals that both male and female youth reported feeling happy more often than any other sentiment since the start of the COVID-19 crisis.[4]

GRAPH 2. SINCE THE START OF THE COVID-19 CRISIS, YOUTH HAVE OFTEN AND SOMETIMES FELT...



Yet a closer examination in Table 1 demonstrates that a significant number of those youth who reported often and sometimes feeling happy also reported feeling sad since the start of the crisis.

Although issues around mental health and the negative emotions of sadness and anxiety as a result of COVID-19 must be addressed to ensure the success of our youth, the graphs and tables above do not paint such a bleak picture of youth attitudes during these challenging times. The resilience of Canada's youth must be praised, speaking to the unique set of skills young people have to manage disruptions to their education and the continuity of their skills development at such a critical time.

TABLE 1. YOUTH REPORTED FEELING BOTH HAPPY AND SAD

SINCE THE START OF THE COVID-19 CRISIS, HOW OFTEN HAVE YOU...		FELT HAPPY		
		Often	Sometimes	Rarely
FELT SAD	Often and sometimes	**47%**	**75%**	88%
	Rarely and never	53%	25%	12%

SUCCESS IN BOTH THE SCHOOL AND HOME LIFE

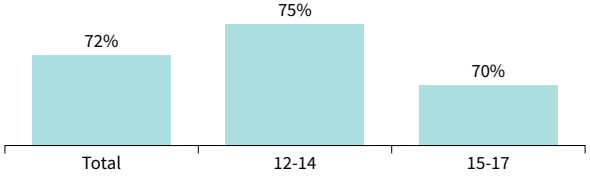
Despite disturbances in their 2020 academic life, ACS Summer survey findings reveal that the majority of Canadian youth believed they were doing a good job getting their schoolwork done from home since the beginning of the pandemic (see Graph 3). Though online learning continues to be a steep learning curve both for youth and parents across the country, youth for the most part have demonstrated quite a bit of flexibility and success in doing so when self-evaluating their efforts.

On the home front, the ACS Spring survey demonstrated that since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, a strong majority of youth have seen

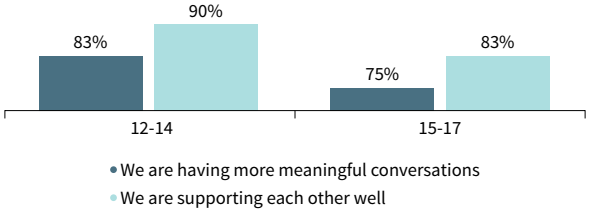
4 Note that respondents were given the option to self-identify as "other" when asked about their gender identity, but low sample sizes did not permit for relevant analysis.

their relationships with their family improve and foster additional support during these difficult times (see Graph 4). This unexpected positive effect of the COVID-19 crisis has led to more meaningful conversations and fostering stronger support systems within the home.

GRAPH 3. TOTAL PERCENTAGE OF YOUTH THAT AGREE THEY ARE DOING A GOOD JOB GETTING THEIR SCHOOLWORK DONE FROM HOME SINCE THE BEGINNING OF THE PANDEMIC



GRAPH 4. WHEN THINKING OF RELATIONSHIPS WITH THEIR FAMILY OR THE SITUATION AT HOME SINCE THE START OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC, PERCENTAGE OF YOUTH TOTALLY AND SOMEWHAT AGREEING TO THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS...



This intergenerational solidarity within the home is also touched upon in Ilona Dougherty's piece discussing how millennials and their parents are getting along better than previous generations. As restrictions and lockdowns force youth to readjust their school life and households spend more time together, it is reassuring to see that approximately three quarters of Canada's youth report good experiences in both regards.

OPTIMISM IN THE PANDEMIC

The ACS Spring survey also included an optional qualitative open answer question asking youth when thinking about the future, in what ways did they think life would be different, better or worse. Youth across the country were given a platform to share their experiences about a unique and challenging time in their lives and an overwhelming number of responses were submitted (879 responses out of 1191). Although there were several replies that expressed fear, concern and anxiety about what the future has in store, hundreds of optimistic comments were submitted that emphasized the lessons learned from the pandemic and how this time has been valuable in shaping the future.

The predominant theme that emerged from the positive responses was one of gratitude. Highlighting a few of these responses, youth shared:

"This pandemic has made us value what we have."

"I [...] think that most people will not take their freedom for granted and we will be more appreciative of our daily lives."

"People will be more thankful of the time we have with each other and being more grateful of physical touch and having the presence of people you care about in your life available to you whenever you need."

> "Appreciate connecting with friends and family – more meaningful."

> "I think we have learned to value interaction, and I think family and friends will be no longer taken for granted."

Several youth also revealed the positive impact the pandemic had on their lives and the world at large, stating:

> "I think it's the change that will help motivate everyone to fix the world at least a little bit."

> "Because of this pandemic, I've been given the opportunity to get enough sleep, go for walks in the morning, spend more time with my sister, and focus on my mental and emotional well-being. I hope that in the future I'll be able to continue living like this even when there is school, and I'm excit[ed] to see my friends again when it's all over."

As people in Canada and around the world suffer due to an invisible virus in terms of their mental and physical health, as well as the social and economic repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is promising to see youth reflect on their experiences in such a hopeful light. Their ability to work through challenges, cope with stress and overcome hardships is unlike any other age demographic.

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CONCLUDING REMARKS

The ACS Spring and Summer 2020 surveys aimed to better understand how youth were coping with the COVID-19 pandemic in order to inform relevant social policy. An unexpected outcome from the survey results was its ability to shed light on the positive perceptions and experience of youth in terms of their attitudes, school and home environments, and outlook towards the future. Thankfully as of Summer of 2020, 12 to 17-year-olds across Canada have for the most part been able to remain resilient and share their stories of hope in the midst of the unforeseen challenges and difficulties that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought upon them. However, more research must be conducted in order to continue to monitor their sentiments and experiences as the pandemic persists into 2021.