

Growing-up under Covid-19

Summary report from the second
cycle of participatory action
research – Singapore



June 2021



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Introduction

This summary report covers activities undertaken on the Growing-Up Under Covid-19 project during the period December 2020 to June 2021, with a focus on the country panel for Singapore.

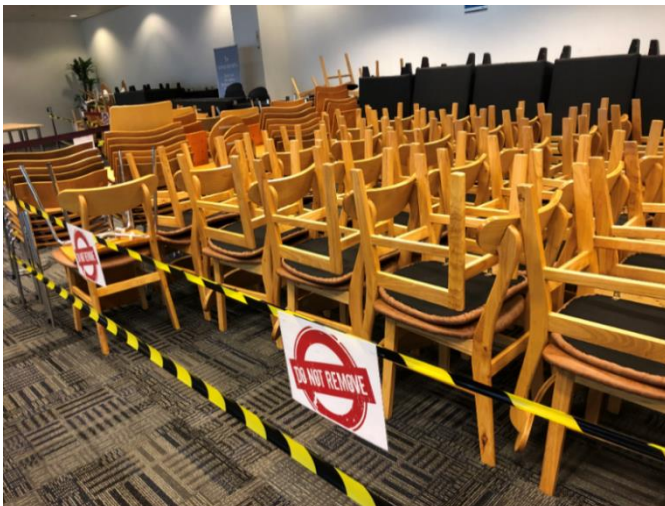
Background context – Singapore

Singapore has gone through a tumultuous period since the beginning of the year. Initially hailed as a virus success story as it had few to no reported Covid-19 cases at the start of 2021, the country imposed more stringent restrictions from April 2021 due to an increasing number of infections and the outbreak of several virus clusters¹. The rise of Covid-19 cases resulted in group gatherings being capped to two people from May (down from a maximum of eight). Dining out was similarly banned, work-from-home measures were imposed as the default² and the stay-at-home notice for foreign travellers entering the country from high-risk countries was increased from 14 to 21 days³. The spate of infections was traced to insufficient restrictions on intermingling between airport staff working with high-risk travellers and the general public at the country's international airport⁴.

The subsequent emergence of several clusters including at a well-frequented local shopping centre, a disability service and support centre, and a local fast-food outlet, heightened concerns and contributed to more restrictive measures implemented⁵. In spite of the latest increase in cases, however, Singapore's daily number of virus cases remain about 10% of the UK's, adjusted for population size. An aggressive contact tracing and testing regime, a well-run vaccine roll-out, and majority adherence to the new regulations have limited community transmissions⁶.

Research activities informing this report

Figure 1: An example of upturned chairs in a school, which are no longer used due to social distancing



Young people in the Singapore panel have gathered at biweekly group discussions to talk about their perspectives and update each other about their life changes, including their experiences growing up under Covid-19. These biweekly group discussions have provided young people with an avenue to share their thoughts openly, voice concerns and seek support.

Discussion topics ranged from perspectives on the government response to the recent increase in Covid-19 cases, concerns around data privacy related to Singapore's contact tracing digital application, changes to school life, adaptation challenges under the 'new normal', as well as environmental stressors and the 'pressure to achieve' living in fast-paced Singapore.

¹ Lai, L. (2021). S'pore to cap social gatherings at two, ban dining out until June 13. *The Straits Times*. 15 May 2021, [link](#).

² Abu Baker, J. (2021). Up to 5 in a group allowed from Jun 14; dining-in may resume on Jun 21 in phased easing of COVID-19 curbs. *CNA*. 10 June 2021, [link](#).

³ Co, C. (2021). Singapore to extend stay-home notice to 21 days for travellers from higher-risk places. *CNA*. 4 May 2021, [link](#).

⁴ Tan, Y. (2021). Covid-19: What went wrong in Singapore and Taiwan? 20 May 2021, [link](#).

⁵ The Straits Times (2021). Bukit Merah View market and other Covid-19 clusters in S'pore: What we know so far. 15 June 2021, [link](#).

⁶ Wong, T. (2021). Singapore: What's it like in the best place to live during Covid? *BBC*. 1 May 2021, [link](#).

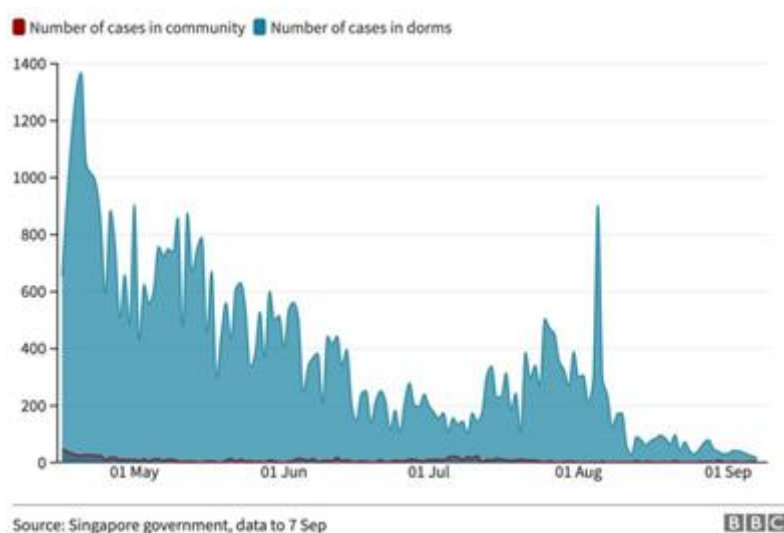
Some panel members also shared updates about the extra-curricular activities they participated in, such as sign language lessons and community volunteering activities. They also spoke about their visual and written outputs linked to their action research area of interest.

Concerns about the new spike in cases

Young people highlighted the difference between the recent spike in community cases and the earlier Covid-19 outbreak in Singapore in April 2020. The majority of Covid-19 cases reported earlier the previous year were based in migrant worker dormitories⁷ and highlighted the inequality between Singaporean residents and migrant workers due to crowded communal living arrangements and inadequate hygiene standards⁸. Young people had highlighted then the vulnerability of migrant workers in Singapore, the overcrowded and squalid conditions which migrant workers lived in which had been reported in news media, and its juxtaposition against Singapore's high GDP and the lifestyle of its generally middle-class population.

Conversations with young people additionally drew attention to negative attitudes of certain segments of the Singapore population towards foreign workers, and how for some parts of the population, foreign workers remained not entirely welcome, in spite of their economic and sociocultural contributions to the country⁹. Nonetheless, while concerns had been raised around the outbreak in foreign workers dormitories during Phase 1, there was a broader sense that the government was able to keep things under control and that the general population were less at risk. This was bolstered by reports which contrasted the low number of cases in the community as compared to the number of cases in foreign worker dormitories (view graph below).

Figure 3: Reported cases of Coronavirus in community and dorms



In contrast, the new spike of Covid-19 cases was highlighted as 'worrying' and 'worse' than the initial outbreak as it felt more personal, less contained and was spreading within the wider population. As one young person noted, 'it's around

⁷ Ratcliffe, R. (2020). Singapore's cramped migrant worker dorms hide Covid-19 surge risk. *The Guardian*. 17 April 2021, [link](#).

⁸ Lim, J. (2020). Coronavirus: Workers describe crowded, cramped living conditions at dormitory gazetted as isolation area. *The Straits Times*. 6 April 2020, [link](#).

⁹ Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (2021). Foreign workers lack pathway to citizenship in Singapore. *Global is Asian*. 5 January 2021, [link](#).

the community and you don't know where it's coming from, [...] we don't exactly know where the source is coming from' (18, Male). Compared to the primary concentration of cases within foreign worker dormitories in the previous year, the new active clusters tended to be in public areas¹⁰. Young people voiced concerns about the challenge of identifying, isolating, testing, and caring for individuals, particularly as the active clusters included a local school and a tutoring centre¹¹.

"I guess it is spreading within learning centres or schools, which is very concerning because those [areas include] very big concentrations of students every day [...] if it really hits the schools, it will spread very quickly" (Male, 18, Singapore).

Returning to home-based learning

Singapore re-introduced home-based learning (HBL) for all primary, secondary, and junior college students from mid-to end-May¹² as a result of the sharp spike in community Covid-19 cases¹³. The re-introduction of HBL dovetailed with the rollout of a series of other precautionary measures, including a reduction of occupancy limits for shopping malls, and the delay of the planned travel air bubble between Singapore and Hong Kong¹⁴. Panel discussions offered an avenue for young people to voice their perspectives and concerns amidst limited coverage in local media of the thoughts of young people on the new measures.

The majority of young people on the Singapore panel understood the necessity for the new HBL measures. HBL was noted to have advantages, including increased time spent with family and time saved on travelling to school. This translated into more time for rest and interaction with friends and family. As one young person noted, *'But with my parents obviously, now I'm able to eat lunch with them because I'm at home and they're also at home. So basically, [...] it's just more positive because I can talk with them [and our] relationship is stronger'* (16, Male). Another highlighted that HBL provided some respite, allowing them more liberty to work at their own pace at home and that it was a positive change from the everyday classroom environment.



Young people felt that they were more emotionally prepared to deal with the recent HBL measures in the most recent roll-out, having learnt from their HBL experiences from the previous year. The short one to two-week HBL period, dovetailing with the commencement of June holidays, was reported to be helpful as it meant that young people knew the HBL period was for a limited period only.

Figure 4: An example of a popular game, 'Among Us'. A young person noted that her class would use Skype to chat and play the game together

¹⁰ Haseltine, W. A. (2021). Singapore's Outbreak Highlights A Challenging Road Ahead For Covid-19 Containment. *Forbes*. 24 May 2021, [link](#).

¹¹ Raguraman, A. (2021). Classes at private and home-based tuition and enrichment centres suspended. *The Straits Times*. 18 May 2021, [link](#).

¹² Lai, L. (2021). S'pore schools to start full home-based learning from May 19 amid spike in Covid-19 cases. *The Straits Times*. 16 May 2021, [link](#).

¹³ Lim, J. (2021). Pupils from Kong Hwa School and St Stephen's test positive for Covid-19; more schools move to home-based learning. *The Straits Times*. 14 May 2021, [link](#).

¹⁴ The Straits Times (2021). Singapore tightens Covid-19 measures from May 16: 10 questions on the new rules answered. 14 May 2021.

'I think last year I didn't really like it because I felt more distracted at home [. . .]. You can have your friends calling you. But I'm able to handle myself better [now], and I'm able to focus better' (Male, 16, Singapore).

Feelings of missing out

Comparing the earlier and current phase of the pandemic, young people reported similar feelings that they were missing out on key life experiences, events, and memories. Young people underscored there were activities and events that they could not get back. This included around an Outward-Bound camp that was only for students of their grade, but which was cancelled because of the new Covid-19 measures. As one young person noted, *'in Secondary 3, we usually have this camp called OBS [Outward Bound Singapore]. It's cool. [But] it's cancelled now, and we will never experience that'* (15, Female). The same young person highlighted that the new more restrictive measures imposed had resulted in the cancellation of her local extra-curricular swimming classes, and that she was looking at the prospect of spending their upcoming June holidays at home with fewer activities to do.

Another young person reported that she had been volunteering at meet-the-people sessions in Singapore assisting in one-to-one meetings between the elected members of parliament and his constituents who lived in her local area. She had truly appreciated the opportunity to work alongside their local MP and understand the needs of local members in their community and was disappointed when these sessions were subsequently cancelled because of the new restrictive measures in place.

"I really like the time I spent volunteering because I really got to understand more about the needs of the people in my community. I'm just like the bridge between these two sides, and I found it very meaningful. I was very sad when I had to stop these sessions [because of Covid-19]" (Female, 18, Singapore).

Young people reported different reasons between the first and second phase for feeling like they were missing out. A few young people had graduated from junior college in the interim between the earlier and more recent phase and were now in their transition year between junior college and university. These young people found it more difficult to keep up with friends and schoolmates because they were no longer bound together by school and a mandatory timetable.

Young people highlighted their feelings of missing out had been heightened by life choices made as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. One young person had been accepted by an overseas university in the UK but decided against accepting the offer due to the Covid-19 pandemic and uncertainty around its potential impact and disruption. As she noted:

"I spoke with my family members, and we decided it was better not to go overseas at the moment [because of the uncertainty around the Covid-19 pandemic]. I still have some friends who are going overseas [. . .] and I feel sad that I can't go with them" (Female, 18, Singapore)

Coping mechanisms

Young people noted that physical exercise was noted to be helpful in mitigating feelings of loneliness and time spent at home. One young person reflected that he found himself feeling backache from the long hours spent in front of a laptop as a result of HBL, and that exercise stretches recommended by his teacher were effective. Others underscored the use of exercise, with one young person noting that she exercised more after the imposition of more

restrictive circuit-breaker measures and would run at the park connectors in Singapore. A young person highlighted how he would do group workouts with friends during the new restrictive measures imposed, which he appreciated and found very enjoyable:

'I think it was quite cool [that my friends would] call us to work out with them; I think it's quite cool that even during a pandemic we can still have fun' (Male, 18, Singapore).

Others noted that they communicated and caught up with friends over online platforms such as Discord, which positively impacted their mental well-being.

'We use Discord so almost every day after school, we just have a voice call where all of us are there like - around 10 of us and we just talk about how the day has been, how the classes were and all of that' (Male, 16, Singapore)

Young people were adaptive and continued to engage in activities remotely. Another highlighted that while she could no longer go to her local swimming pool as part of her extra-curricular training, she had switched to remote training from home which still allowed her to remain physically active.



Figure 5: Example of thank-you cards made by a young person as part of his community volunteering outreach activities to foreign migrant workers in Singapore

Key messages that young people would like to communicate

Praise for the Singapore government's quick response

Young people praised the Singapore government's handling of the pandemic. Considering the unexpected nature of the pandemic and the need for a rapid response, they positively compared the Singapore government's case handling, effective contact tracing mechanisms and smooth rollout of the vaccine testing to what they witnessed in other countries. Young people felt that other countries tended to be worried about the pushback from implementing policies such as mandatory mask-wearing. In contrast, they felt that the Singapore government was commendable in pushing ahead with rolling out restrictions on group gatherings and mask-wearing in spite of the potential unpopularity of such measures.

'I would say that Singapore government actually handled it pretty well as compared to other countries [...] I'm just very thankful. They did the best. They really tried to do and to roll out a lot of laws and regulations to ensure the safety of us Singaporeans' (Female, 19, Singapore).

Data privacy concerns around Singapore's contact tracing system

Despite their high praise for the government's quick response, young people highlighted key areas of improvement. Young people highlighted data privacy concerns around the rollout of the Singapore *TraceTogether* application, a digital system aimed at facilitating contact tracing efforts. Around 80% of Singapore residents have signed up to the *TraceTogether* programme which relies on a smartphone application or a Bluetooth token to monitor and reach out to individuals who might have been in contact with an infected person¹⁵. While officials had previously ruled out the use of data other than for virus tracking, this was later publicly reversed with the Singapore Parliament notified that it could be used for the 'purpose of criminal investigation'¹⁶.

In line with local news reports raising questions on government transparency around data from the app, young people highlighted the potential data privacy implications of using such the application and their concerns around not fully understanding what data collected from the application could be used for.

"The government says there's nothing inside, but I don't know if it's true - I think it's a bit sketchy to have it, we're carrying it with us at all times." (Male, 18, Singapore)

Another young person unpacked their concerns around the data privacy application in an extended report as part of the research on his area of interest. As he wrote:

"There are real threats that this information and technology may one day be repurposed for surveillance purposes and may in turn result in the people's privacy and security being heavily compromised." (Male, 18, Singapore)

Recommendations:

There is the need for increased transparency and more clarity around how data will be used, including why the digital contract tracing application has to be running in the background for the system to work. This may include:

- ▶ an independent commission around government plans to use the *TraceTogether* application¹⁷
- ▶ safeguards to allay concerns around data privacy or
- ▶ the potential exclusion of *TraceTogether* data from the Criminal Procedure Code ambit completely.

Mental health concerns

Young people highlighted that more could be done around increasing awareness around adolescent mental health needs and the avenues provided for mental health support. They described the challenges as follows:

"The problem with mental health in Singapore [and] in Asian society specifically is the stigma that goes with it." (Female, 16, Singapore)

¹⁵ Illmer, A. (2021). Singapore reveals Covid privacy data available to police. *BBC*. 5 January 2021, [link](#).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Baharudin, H. (2021). Police's ability to use *TraceTogether* data raises questions on trust: Experts. *The Straits Times*. 5 January 2021, [link](#).

"I think [Covid-19 is] taking a toll on them and their loved ones. I feel like my entire class is falling apart, I was quite worried for some of my friends."(Female, 18, Singapore)

Others highlighted that the issue was around changing the mindsets of older generations and community-level stigmatisation of mental illness. Young people were well-aware of the psychological and social impact of mental illness, particularly exacerbated by C-19, but that a whole-of-society approach to destigmatising mental illness remained lacking. Young people spoke about the stigmatisation and repercussions that came with acknowledging and seeking help for mental illness. Part of it was acknowledged to be a function of the pressure to achieve in Singapore's hypercompetitive school system and environment. As one young person noted:

"We [Singaporeans] are the model Asian community striving for the best. But that is so injurious in so many ways for young people that are growing up in the country because they think that they have to be the best in everything... [Mental health] is so stigmatized. No matter how many talks they give us, you know the fact that once you announce that you have [a mental health illness],

I've heard some kids don't get the leadership positions they've worked two to three years because teachers don't think they're fit to do it anymore... It happens on some days, and they can still carry on, but they need help, and you don't give them help by taking away what they care about. Do that by letting them do that and then giving them help on the side as well. I just feel like [mental illness] either is seen too severely or it's not taken seriously enough."(Female, 16, Singapore)

Another highlighted the need for more tailored case management, particularly for marginalised and vulnerable populations during the C-19 period. Citing the case of a foreign student who committed suicide after being caught breaching quarantine measures, the young person noted,

"I think I would have liked if the Singapore government had focused more on the mental health of people because it reached a point where if you don't follow the [Covid-19] laws and regulations that Singapore set about, there's going to be consequences. They reached a point where people were so afraid... So I thought that such a situation could have totally been avoided if Singapore had presented like 'even though you're going to face these consequences, we'll still take care of you essentially'."(Female, 19, Singapore)

Recommendations:

- ▶ Create better campaigns on the de-stigmatisation of mental health illness at all levels of society.
- ▶ Ensure teachers, parents and practitioners working with young people are effectively trained on proactively spotting signs of mental health challenges.
- ▶ Frontline practitioners working with young people should be better trained in tailored case management, including ensuring that young people receive the support they need without being penalised for seeking help.
- ▶ Work with young people to ensure they are aware that they can and should reach out to national and school-level mental health hotlines and school mental health practitioners without fear of backlash or negative repercussions.

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