

The Digital Divide: Internet access for care leavers



THE NATIONAL
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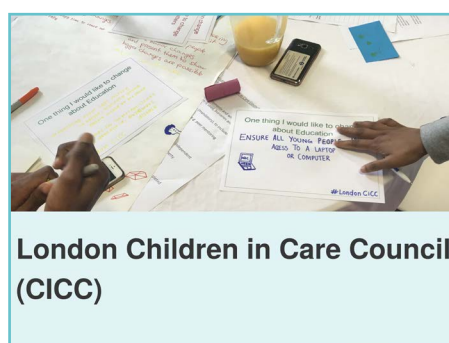
Yorkshire &
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Partnership for Young London

believes in a future where every young person's right to wellbeing is recognised and fulfilled. With young people making up a third of London's population, we have to respect that they are crucial to its future.

Partnership for Young London

The Pan London Children in Care Council is funded by the Association of London Directors of Children's Services with the City of London Corporation. The group facilitates a range of services and activities and aims to ensure that care experienced young people are placed at the core of decision making. For more details about the programmes on offer please contact Sara Ahmed sara.ahmed@cityoflondon.gov.uk



London Children in Care Council (CICC)

The Digital Divide: Internet access for care leavers

September 2020

This report was undertaken in partnership with the [Network of Regional Youth Units](#) and the [National House Project](#). This work gathered the views of 90 care experienced young people on their digital access during Covid19. The focus for the review was to gain insight into the impact of digital exclusion on young people and influence future planning and delivery to ensure that young people are not adversely affected by digital poverty in the current climate.

Introduction

Digital exclusion is an issue faced by care experienced young people that can impact their everyday lives. The move to a complete digital landscape means that now, more than ever, many are at risk of falling behind and facing isolation.

This report is based on the views of 89 care experienced young people regarding the importance of internet access. We wanted to know if they had ever had any difficulties surrounding access and how a lack of access may affect employment, education, socialising, accessing services and mental health. We found that over 90% of those we surveyed said that internet was essential to their everyday lives.

Care experienced young people rely on the internet to access education and employment opportunities and a lack of access or insecure connection hinders this. Almost three quarters (73%) of care experienced young people said that if they did not have access to the internet, their ability to do work (school or employment) would be hurt. They also said that they had missed out on various online courses and qualification opportunities as a result of this. With care experienced young people being less likely to attend higher education, this pushes them back further. The growing importance of basic digital skills in society means that the digitally excluded are extremely vulnerable and at greater risk of facing barriers and underachieving.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the issues of digital exclusion amongst care experienced young people with many finding the internet a place for refuge from isolation. We found that 73% of participants strongly agreed that the internet was essential to their mental health. Young people have expressed that they feel alone, hurt and frustrated by this lockdown. This impact is extremely significant for those with care experience, who suffer with poorer mental health. In order to help curb these feelings, young people need access to a secure internet connection to socialise and access mental health services during this period.

A concerning number of young people (39.3%) were unsure if they were entitled to digital access (internet package and laptop) from their local authority. Without mandated digital access, there is a significant inequalities impact, with care experienced young people being affected disproportionately. This is essential to young people's everyday life and digital exclusion endangers their futures.

Key Findings

1. **An overwhelming majority of young people (91%) strongly agreed that internet was essential to their everyday life**, with less than five percent disagreeing and the rest unsure.
2. **Almost three quarters of young people (73.9%) said that they use the internet 21 to 28 hours a week (3 to 4 hours a day)**, with less than a fifth (17%) saying 14 to 21 hours a week and only one percent 7 or less hours a week.
3. **Almost half of young people (46.6%) had their internet connection drop out at least once a day**, with a fifth (20.5%) saying this happens less than once a week.
4. **Most young people (61.8%) said they internet was very important in accessing education**, with over a quarter (28.1%) saying they were unsure and ten percent saying not important.
5. **Almost three quarters (73%) of care experienced young people said that if they did not have access to the internet, their ability to do work (school or employment) would be hurt**, with just under fifteen per cent saying it would not and the rest unsure.
6. **Most young people (70.7%) strongly agreed that if they did not have access to internet, they'd miss out on benefits/ opportunities**, with only five percent disagreeing and the rest unsure.

Key Findings

7. **A large majority of young people (89.9%) said that internet access was very important in socialising,** with only two per cent saying it was not important and the rest unsure.
8. **Many young people (70.8%) said that lockdown has changed how they speak to friends, family and support workers,** with the rest saying it has not.
9. **Most young people (73%) strongly agreed that internet was essential to their mental health,** with a small portion (7.9%) disagreeing and the rest not sure.
10. **Almost three quarters of young people (74.1%) said that they have felt more isolated during this period,** with less (11.2%) disagreeing with the rest unsure.
11. **More than half of young people (57.3%) strongly agreed that it has been harder to get mental health support during lockdown,** with over a quarter (28.1%) unsure and the rest (14.6%) disagreeing.
12. **Just over half (51.7%) of young people with care experience stated that internet access was very important in accessing local services,** with much less (12.3%) disagreeing and the remaining (36%) not sure.

Methodology

This data was collected from a survey looking at how care experienced young people feel about the importance of digital access and how this has been affected by the Coronavirus pandemic. Results were analysed on:

- A total of 89 care experienced young people filled it in.
- Slightly more women (51.7%) answered our survey than men (42.7%), with less than five percent (3.4%) as non-binary/third gender, one percent preferring not to say and one percent saying other.
- Most young people (67%) said they did not follow a religion.
- Most of the sample (73%) said they did not consider themselves to have a disability, with just under one in six (15.7%) said that they did, and the rest preferred not to say.

Ethnicity	Count	Percentage
White British	53	59.6%
Mixed - White and Asian	1	1.1%
Mixed - White and Black African	2	2.2%
Mixed - White and Black Caribbean	3	3.4%
Black or Black British-Black African	8	9.0%
Black or Black British - Black Caribbean	5	5.6%
Asian or Asian British - Indian	4	4.5%
Asian or Asian British - Bangladeshi	1	1.1%
Asian or Asian British - Pakistani	6	6.7%
Asian or Asian British - Any other Asian background	3	3.4%
Other	3	3.4%

Barriers to digital inclusion



Accessing the internet

We wanted to ask care experienced young people in England how they used the internet and the issues they may face with access.

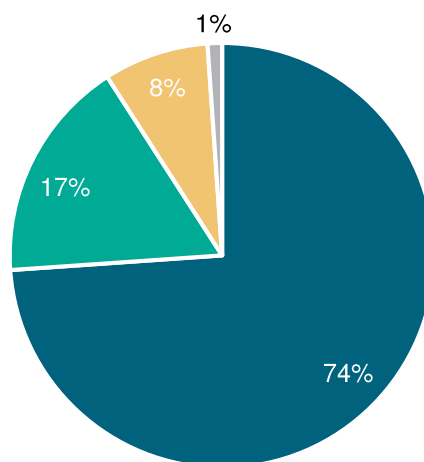
When asked if ‘internet access is essential to my everyday life’, the vast majority (91%) strongly agreed, with very few (3.4%) disagreeing. The rest (5.6%) were not sure.

‘If I don’t have internet access I would feel like I have lost connection with the world because I use internet and social media because I contact my friends and family via social media’ (Aged 18)

Almost three quarters of young people (73.9%) said that they use the internet 21 to 28 hours a week (3 to 4 hours a day), with 17% saying 14 to 21 hours a week. Only 1.1% answered 7 or less hours a week.

How many hours of internet do you use a day?

■ 3-4 hours a day ■ 2-3 hours a day ■ 1-2 hours a day ■ 0-1 hours a day



This shows that care experienced young people are very reliant on having internet access daily.

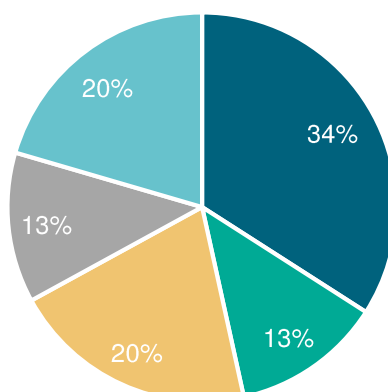
Connection issues

However, over a third of respondents (34.1%) said that their internet connection drops out more than once a day.

While more than one in ten said it dropped out once a day (12.5%), and one in five (20.5%) saying once every few days.

How often does your internet connection drop out?

■ More than once a day ■ Once a day ■ Once every few days
■ Once a week ■ Less than once a week



Almost half of care experienced young people (43.2%) would consider their connection speed average, with almost a third (32.9%) saying fast or very fast and less (23.9%) saying slow or very slow.

Young people with care experience were more likely to have their internet drop out completely than to suffer from a slow internet connection generally.

'Income support- I wasn't able to let them know I started work as I didn't have access to internet or phone to let them know. Now I'm repaying it back due to overpayment. But it was a 0 hour contract so my income wasn't really living wage' (Aged 22)



How do they access the internet?

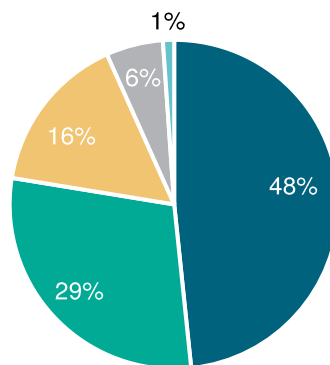
When asked what device they use most to access the internet, most young people (77.5%) said their smartphone with far less (15.7%) using a computer and the rest (6.7%) saying other.

Almost half of the care experienced young people questioned (48.3%) said they used home Wi-Fi to access the internet, with over a quarter (29.2%) using 4G or 5G, just under one in six (15.7%) using 3G or slower, five percent using Wi-Fi hotspot and the rest saying other.

Although using home Wi-Fi was the most common overall, this slightly differed regionally as all the young people from the North West said that they most frequently use mobile data (4G or 5G).

How do you access the internet the most?

- Home Wi-Fi
- 4G or 5G (mobile internet)
- 3G or slower (mobile internet)
- Wi-Fi hotspot
- Other



The impact of digital exclusion



The impact on education and employment

When asked how important the internet is in accessing education (schoolwork, online learning), most young people (61.8%) said (very) important. Over a quarter of young people (28.1%) were unsure with only ten per cent answering not important.

'I was not able to achieve an IT qualification. Because I didn't have access to laptop and Internet during lockdown' (Aged 20)

Almost three quarters (73%) of care experienced young people said that if they did not have access to the internet, their ability to do work (school or employment) would be significantly hurt, with just under fifteen per cent saying it would not and the rest unsure.

Similarly, to education, we found that many care experienced young people (66.3%) found internet access very important in finding employment opportunities. Less than ten per cent said this was not important, with 25.8% unsure.

'Insecure connection means that many applications can't be completed, and deadlines sometimes be met' (Aged 22)

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to an inevitable move to online learning and work which means that young people are increasingly reliant on internet access.

We found that most young people (70.7%) strongly agreed that if they didn't have access to internet, they'd miss out on benefits opportunities, compared to a small minority (5.6%) that disagreed. The rest (23.6%) were unsure.

'I missed out on a digital work experience because the internet was not working so I couldn't sign up in time.' (Aged 17)

When asked if they have actually had to miss out on opportunities due to lack of internet access, the majority (61.4%) answered yes, naming 'social events, networking, opportunities employment and schooling' amongst others.

'I missed out a conference. The connection was very unsecure, and I wasn't able to listen to the conference very well' (Aged 16)

The impact on friends and family

A large majority of young people (89.9%) said that internet access was very important in socialising (talking to friends and family) with only two per cent saying it was not important and the rest unsure.

'I can't afford to keep paying for data to facetime' (Aged 20)

When communicating digitally to people they are close to, almost half of young people (46.1%) use their mobile phone. Over a quarter (29.2%) said they use messaging services (WhatsApp, iMessage), 21.3% used social media and the rest said other.

'It's hard when the most important person isn't here' (Aged 21)

Since most care experienced young people don't live with their family, they rely on devices and often internet connection to keep in contact. Poor or no connection makes this much more difficult.

'Me and my family have become a lot more distant' (Aged 19)

Almost half of respondents (40.9%) said that they could not communicate with the people they are close to without internet access.

When asked how this makes them feel, one young person said 'alone, isolated, like I'm different than others.' It was also repeatedly said that young people feel sad, lonely and depressed because of this.

This feeling has been exacerbated by lockdown with a large majority of young people (70.8%) saying that this has changed how they speak to friends and family. Some young people said that they are unable to communicate with family altogether.

'It's made it harder as some of my family don't have access to the internet' (Aged 20)



The impact on mental health

Most young people (73%) strongly agreed that internet was essential to their mental health, with a small portion (7.9%) disagreeing and the rest (19.1%) not sure.

This is especially worrying as previous studies have concluded that the mental health of looked after children is poorer than that of the general population.

Lockdown has clearly intensified poor mental health with most care experienced young people (74.1%) saying that they have felt more isolated during this period. A small number (11.2%) disagreed with the rest (14.6%) unsure.

‘Having people to speak to in person was a main contributor to keeping my head above water’ (Aged 22)

More than half of young people (57.3%) strongly agreed that it has been harder to get mental health support during lockdown, with over a quarter (28.1%) unsure and the rest (14.6%) disagreeing.

‘My counsellor has been harder to reach I cannot speak to a doctor properly. My support worker has less time for me.’ (Aged 20)

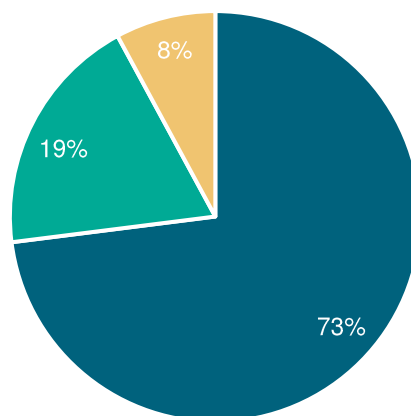
The impact on mental health

When asked what mental health support has been more difficult to access during lockdown, care experienced young people overwhelmingly said therapy sessions and face to face contact with loved ones.

Half of young people (56.2%) agreed that if they did not have internet access, they would not be able to access mental health services locally or digitally, with much less (13.5%) disagreeing and the rest (30.3%) unsure.

"Internet access is essential to my mental health"

■ Agree or strongly agree ■ Not sure ■ Disagree or strongly disagree



When asked what they do when they haven't got access to internet, a young person responded, 'try to keep myself busy and out of the house to avoid isolation'. Many young people listed going out and meeting friends as essential to curb isolation saying they 'go walking and meeting people in social clubs.' This has really demonstrated the correlation between digital access and mental health.

The majority (84.3%) of care experienced young people said that internet access is very important in accessing entertainment (YouTube, Spotify, Netflix), with a small minority (5.6%) saying it was not important.

The impact on accessing services

We looked at how having a lack of internet access may affect young people when it comes to accessing local services.

Just over half (51.7%) of young people with care experience stated that internet access was very important in accessing local services, with much less (12.3%) disagreeing and the remaining (36%) not sure.

When asked what local services they access, young people said their personal advisor, mental health services, housing services, various job search sites and more.

Most care experienced young people (70.8%) have had to change the way they speak to support workers due to lockdown. Many rely on emails and online calls for communication now and thus need a secure internet connection.

'I can't see them face to face I love speaking face to face so I know I don't forget anything it seems speaking on the phone a conversation is rushed for me and I'd prefer speaking face to face' (Aged 20)

When asked if they are entitled to digital access (laptop, internet connection) by the local authority, over a third (36%) said yes with just under a quarter (24.7%) saying no.

Worryingly, quite a lot of young people (39.3%) said they were unsure if they were entitled to digital access by their local authority.

More than half of respondents (59.4%) said they had requested a laptop, printer, phone or free internet package from their local authority before. However, when asked if they received them or not, most young people (68.4%) said they had.