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# Rebuilding human capital amidst the pandemic

The impacts of COVID-19 on school-aged  
children and youth in Cambodia

October 2022



# Contents

<b>Highlights .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Background .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Methodology and sample description .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Access to and quality of education .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Livelihood activities and income.....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Food security and livelihood coping.....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Access to medical services .....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Main challenges faced.....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Safety concerns .....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Aspirations for the future.....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>Concluding remarks.....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>Photocredits .....</b>	<b>30</b>

# Table of Figures

## Figures

<b>Figure 1:</b>	Sex of respondents unweighted and weighted .....	9
<b>Figure 2:</b>	Age of respondents (unweighted).....	9
<b>Figure 3:</b>	Education of respondents unweighted and weighted .....	10
<b>Figure 4:</b>	Enrolment of children before COVID-19 and in the 2021 school year.....	11
<b>Figure 5:</b>	Main places where youth who are enrolled in school/university in 2021 learn and/or study.....	13
<b>Figure 6:</b>	What is your household’s main income source? .....	14
<b>Figure 7:</b>	Has your household’s income level undergone any changes since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic? .....	15
<b>Figure 8:</b>	Impacts on household income and concerns over food.....	15
<b>Figure 9:</b>	Main sectors where youth were working before COVID-19 and in May/July 2021 .....	16
<b>Figure 10:</b>	Has your ability to earn an income change since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic? .....	16
<b>Figure 11:</b>	How many meals (incl. breakfast) did your child(ren) eat yesterday?.....	17
<b>Figure 12:</b>	Which statement best reflects your child(ren) food situation over the past 30 days? .....	18
<b>Figure 13:</b>	Used livelihood-based coping strategies over the past month .....	18
<b>Figure 14:</b>	Main livelihood coping strategies adopted by parent respondents (multiple response) .....	18
<b>Figure 15:</b>	How many meals (including breakfast) did you eat yesterday? .....	19
<b>Figure 16:</b>	Impact of mobility on youth food concerns .....	19
<b>Figure 17:</b>	Which statement best reflects your food situation over the past 30 days? .....	20
<b>Figure 18:</b>	Main livelihood coping strategies adopted by youth respondents (multiple response).....	20
<b>Figure 19:</b>	Concern over food and access to medical services for children .....	21
<b>Figure 20:</b>	Main challenges schoolchildren are currently facing by sex (multiple response).....	22
<b>Figure 21:</b>	Main challenges faced by youth by age groups (multiple response) .....	24
<b>Figure 22:</b>	How have increased violence/tensions affected your child(ren)? .....	25
<b>Figure 23:</b>	Tensions/violence perceived by households with schoolchildren and concerns over food .....	25
<b>Figure 24:</b>	Main reasons for feeling unsafe.....	26
<b>Figure 25:</b>	What is the most important for you to be successful in the future?.....	27

## Tables

<b>Table 1:</b>	Overview of sample and distribution per country.....	8
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# Highlights

- › In Cambodia, a total of 639 youth aged 15–24 years and 335 parents of schoolchildren aged 6–14 years were randomly surveyed online between May and June 2021, when lockdowns were still in place in Cambodia. The parents reported on behalf of 387 young boys and girls.
- › Survey responses indicate that COVID-19 has impacted **access to education** in Cambodia, in particular for youth. 16 percent of youth dropped out of school during the 2021 school year. The primary reasons for leaving school for both school-aged children and youth were worries about COVID-19 and school closures. Almost one in three school-aged children (31 percent) received no ongoing teaching, either in person or virtually, during the pandemic.
- › COVID-19 also appears to have affected **education quality** on a large scale. More than 80 percent of parents of school-aged children and almost 90 percent of youth surveyed perceived that the pandemic impacted their quality of their learning.
- › The livelihoods of Cambodian households with schoolchildren and Cambodian youth have been considerably impacted by the pandemic, with 65 percent of parents surveyed and 68 percent of youth surveyed reporting a loss of income during COVID-19.
- › About 70 percent of parents surveyed reported worrying about not having enough food in the past 30 days. And approximately one in ten children represented in the survey and 21 percent of youth surveyed went one whole day and night without eating in the month prior to the survey.
- › Over half (51 percent) of parents surveyed reported challenges in **accessing medical services** for their children. The most common challenge was a lack of money to pay for services (49 percent), which suggests the impact of COVID-19 on household income had broader implications for the health of Cambodian children.
- › **Human security** in Cambodia was also impacted by the pandemic. Just over half of parents (51 percent) reported they noticed an increase in tensions or violence in their community and 38 percent of youth reported feeling unsafe in their environments. Of the parents who reported an increase in tensions and violence, almost 80 percent perceived the tensions and violence impacted their children.
- › The health and wellbeing of children is a vital component of the **human capital** of Cambodia. If children are not healthy, do not receive nutritious food, and cannot access education as they grow, they won't be able to reach their full potential as adults. Lack of nutritious food and a lack of access to education/learning materials were the top challenges listed by parents of school-aged children, impacting almost one in three (32 percent) children represented in the survey.
- › Young people are vital to countries' economies and can become meaningful agents of growth and change if they have the right resources to achieve their full potential. To achieve **success in the future**, young people need access to opportunities. The survey found that the top challenges faced by youth were more economic in nature, including high cost of living (26 percent), lack of work (19 percent), limited access to education (18 percent), and inability to meet food needs (15 percent). The youth surveyed perceived that access to education, specialized training and job opportunities were the most important factors impacting their future success.



# Background

Cambodia is classified by the World Bank as a lower-middle income country with a Gross National Income (GNI) per capita of USD 1,530 and average life expectancy of 69.8 years.<sup>1</sup> Despite reductions in poverty and strong economic growth over the past five years, Cambodia is still facing threats to food security, gender equality and livelihoods. The country ranked 144<sup>th</sup> out of 189 countries in the Human Development Index (HDI) in 2019.<sup>2</sup> HDI combines measures related to health, education and income. The low ranking suggests that Cambodia faced large gaps in these areas prior to COVID-19. In 2021, Cambodia was classified as a country with “moderate hunger,”<sup>3</sup> with undernourishment prevalence of 14.5 percent according to the most recent national estimates.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, gender inequality persists with women receiving lower wages than men and less likely to be represented in the formal workplace, in addition to facing cultural and structural barriers.<sup>5</sup> Cambodia is also at increasingly at risk of droughts and floods caused by climate change, which is predicted to reduce Cambodia’s GDP by 2.5 percent in 2030 and 9.8 percent in 2050.<sup>6</sup>

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Cambodian schools closed for more than 200 days.<sup>7</sup> Administrators implemented distance learning programmes, utilizing radio, internet and television, but early studies indicate educational losses during the pandemic occurred across all learning levels.<sup>8</sup> Cambodia ranked 138 out of 189 countries in the 2020 Human Development Index. The HDI is a summary measure for assessing

long-term progress in three basic dimensions of human development: a long and healthy life, access to knowledge, and a decent standard of living.<sup>9</sup> Impacts of the pandemic are likely to have worsened these measures.

Cambodia is one of seven countries part of a global study conducted by WFP’s Research, Assessment and Monitoring (RAM) Division and the School-Based Programmes (SBP) Service. The study aimed to better understand the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on schoolchildren aged 6–14 years and youth aged 15–24 years to help increase their resilience, build back their education and livelihoods, and avoid long-term impacts on human capital. Human capital is defined by the World Bank as “the knowledge, skills, and health that people invest in and accumulate throughout their lives, enabling them to realize their potential as productive members of society.”<sup>10</sup> Other countries covered included **Colombia, Ghana, Haiti, Iraq, Kenya and Zimbabwe**. These countries were selected to represent each of WFP’s regions as well as all three SBP contexts.<sup>11</sup> An additional selection criterion was the relatively good internet coverage in each of these countries, which ensured a good representation of the target groups covered.<sup>12</sup> In Cambodia, approximately 52.6 percent of the population uses the internet, or about 8.86 million people.<sup>13</sup> A global report and seven separate case studies were produced in the context of this initiative. This case study provides an overview of context-specific findings of the survey among schoolchildren and youth in Cambodia.

1 World Bank. 2021. [Cambodia](#) Accessed in October 2021.

2 UNDP. 2020. [Human Development Reports](#)

3 Global Hunger Index. 2021. [Cambodia](#).

4 Sustainable Development Report. 2018. [Cambodia](#)

5 WFP. 2019. [Cambodia Country Strategic Plan \(2019-2023\)](#)

6 National Council for Sustainable Development (NCS), Cambodia Climate Change Alliance (CCCA), Ministry of Economy and Finance. 2019. [Addressing Climate Change Impacts on Economic Growth in Cambodia](#)

7 Globe. 2021. [Fears over long-term impact as school closures in Cambodia stretch on.](#)

8 Globe. 2021. [Fears over long-term impact as school closures in Cambodia stretch on.](#)

9 World Bank. 2021. [Human Capital Index \(HCI\) \(Scale 0-1\) - Cambodia](#).

10 World Bank. 2022. The Human Capital Project: Frequently Asked Questions

11 School-based programme contexts include Context 1: Providing operational support (Haiti); Context 2: Transitioning to national programmes (Cambodia and Kenya); Context 3: Consolidating and strengthening national programmes (Colombia, Ghana and Zimbabwe).

12 A minimum threshold of 30% of internet users within the total population. Data on internet users for 2020 was retrieved from: <https://datareportal.com/>.

13 DataReportal. 2021. Digital 2021: Cambodia.

# Methodology and sample description

This study used innovative web surveys to collect information from random and anonymous respondents in near-real time. Internet users in Cambodia were directed to the survey after clicking on a broken link or entering an invalid URL – instead of receiving a broken link notification, they received a survey form.<sup>14</sup> The analysis draws on responses from parents of schoolchildren aged 6–14 years and youth aged 15–24 years who were identified using specific filter questions and channelled to the appropriate survey form. Two customized but thematically similar surveys were designed for these two groups. The survey in Cambodia was translated and administered in Khmer to meet the linguistic requirement of the country.

The target sample size for the country was 960 completed surveys with the following disaggregation (Table 1) to ensure a representative sample of schoolchildren and youth from different age groups. Moreover, the sample was distributed proportionally to population size by admin 1 level.

Data collection was conducted in Cambodia between 25 May and 20 July 2021. Overall, 974 surveys were completed, slightly over the national target. This includes 639 youth and 335 parents of schoolchildren who completed the survey.

The parent survey included a child roster where respondents were invited to provide information for each of their children (up to 5 children). Parents reported on behalf of 387 children aged 6–14 years. While the number of youth respondents was about 30 percent higher than the target sample size of 480, the survey reached approximately 30 percent fewer parents of school children than targeted. The small parent and child sample size limits the ability to disaggregate responses by sex and age for this group.

Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected through the surveys. Topics included access to and quality of education, livelihoods and income sources, food security, livelihood coping, access to healthcare (children), main challenges faced, safety concerns, and aspirations for the future (youth). Because the web survey technology only reaches literate populations connected to the internet, a three-variable weighting system was introduced during the analysis phase to ensure that both sexes, geography (populations by admin 1 level), and people with different education backgrounds were represented according to the prevailing national statistics. Moreover, when and where possible, data was triangulated with secondary sources to complement key findings.

**TABLE 1: OVERVIEW OF SAMPLE AND DISTRIBUTION PER COUNTRY<sup>15</sup>**

<b>480 x Parents of school-aged children (6–14 years)</b>	240 x school-aged children (6–9 years)
	240 x school-aged children (10–14 years)
<b>480 x youth (15–24 years)</b>	240 x youth (15–19 years)
	240 x youth (20–24 years)

<sup>14</sup> WFP contracted RIWI Corporation to implement web-based surveys using its patented Random Domain Intercept Technology (RDIT™). Detailed information regarding RDIT can be found on the service provider's website: <https://riwi.com/>.

<sup>15</sup> The overall sample of 480 completed surveys per target group is based on a confidence level of 95 percent and a margin of error of 5 percent.



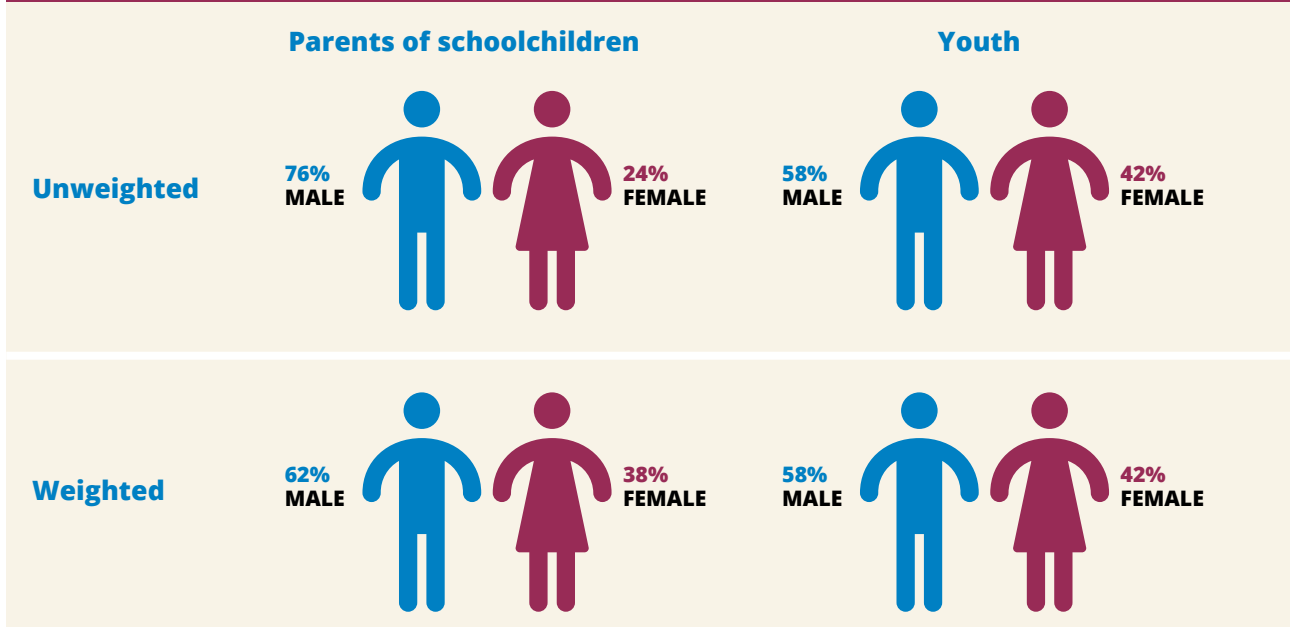
## PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

Surveys across all seven countries targeted parents who had children aged 6–14 years as well as youth aged 15–24 years. Before weighting, the sample of parents of schoolchildren showed an overrepresentation of male respondents, which is likely due to the greater internet usage among men in Cambodia. Although not perfect, the weighting system helped correct this bias. The youth sample was more balanced. The weighting system only had a small incidence on decimal points; hence the weighted sample remains the same for youth. Figure 1 illustrates the sex of respondents before and after weighting.

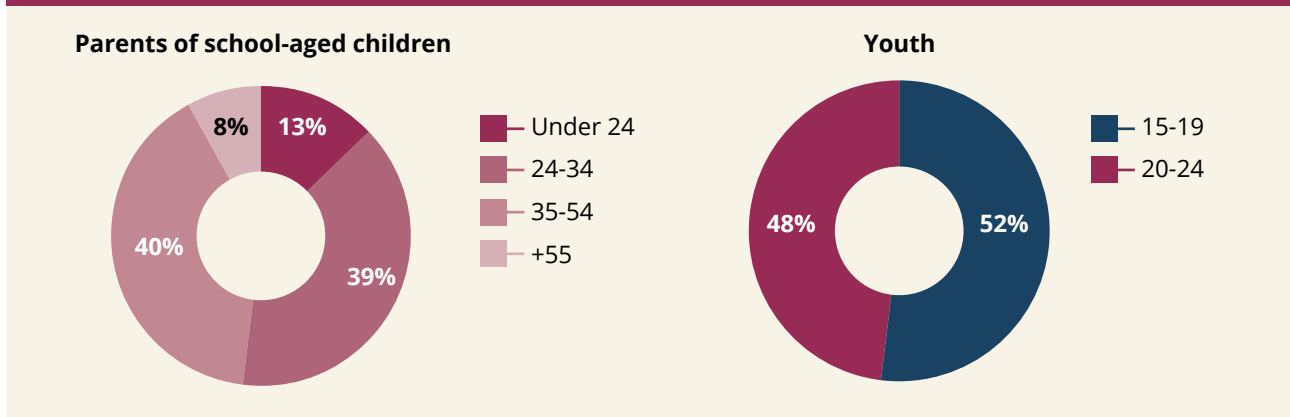
With regards to the age of the respondents, most parent respondents fell between the ages of 35 and 54 years, and youth were fairly evenly distributed between the target age groups 15–19 years (330) and 20–24 years (309). This slight difference may be explained by the fact that younger populations tend to be more active on the internet than older groups.<sup>16</sup>

In terms of education, the sample for both parents and youth shows an underrepresentation of less educated respondents, which is to be expected with the use of a web survey. However, the weighting system helped correct this bias by recalibrating the sample based on

**FIGURE 1: SEX OF RESPONDENTS UNWEIGHTED AND WEIGHTED**

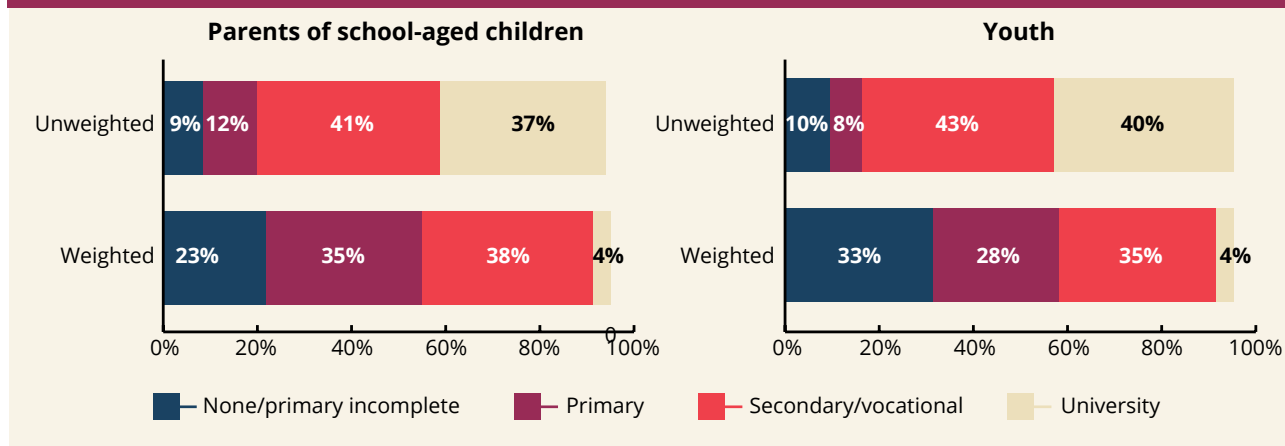


**FIGURE 2: AGE OF RESPONDENTS (AFTER WEIGHTING)**



<sup>16</sup> ITU. 2021. [Statistics](#).

**FIGURE 3: EDUCATION OF RESPONDENTS UNWEIGHTED AND WEIGHTED**



education statistics for Cambodia. This method amplifies responses of those who have lower education levels, which is often a proxy of lower socioeconomic status.

In terms of geography of respondents, 54 percent of youth respondents and 63 percent of parent

respondents were located in large cities or small towns. Forty-six percent of youth and 37 percent of parent respondents were located in rural areas. Sample weights were applied by geography to help correct geographic bias.

## Access to and quality of education

Broad access to quality education is a key factor determining a country's human capital. When children and youth can attend school, they are able to learn skills that can improve their livelihoods and earning potential. Unfortunately, school closures and economic hardship experienced during COVID-19 have impacted the ability of schoolchildren and youth to attend school and receive a quality education.

### SCHOOLCHILDREN

Before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, 83 percent of schoolchildren represented in the survey were enrolled in school. Parents reported that boys were more likely to be enrolled prior to the pandemic (89 percent) than girls (75 percent). This aligns with findings from the gender parity index, which show that school enrolment was

higher among boys prior to the pandemic than among girls.<sup>17</sup> Parents also reported higher enrolment rates for children aged 10–14 (87 percent) than those aged 6–9 (81 percent). These enrolment figures are much lower than the Gross Enrolment Ratio for primary school (105 percent), which may suggest a sizeable proportion of students in primary school are older than 14. The primary reasons parents listed for not enrolling their children before the pandemic were inability to pay for school fees (44 percent), and that their child was required to work to contribute to household income (19 percent). While free education in Cambodia is available for nine years, supplementary costs are often incurred to parents, which is supported by this finding.<sup>18</sup>

In the 2021 school year, the overall percentage of children whose parents reported they were currently going to school, either in person or

17 Trading Economics. 2021. [Cambodia – Ratio of Female to Male Primary Enrollment](#).

18 Open Development. 2018. [Education and Training – Cambodia](#).

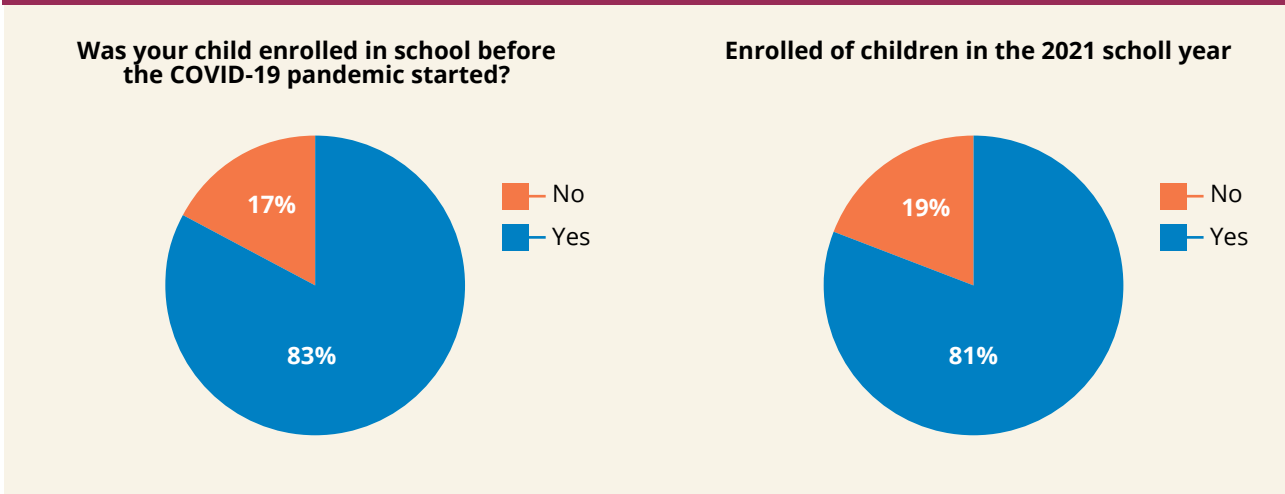


at home, decreased by two percentage points to 81 percent. Among children represented in the survey, the groups that were most likely to leave school during COVID-19 were young boys and students aged 6–9 years (-4 percent and -6 percent, respectively). COVID-19 did not appear to impact school participation among girls or children aged 10–14 according to surveyed parents. However, due to the small number of children included in the sample, the results are only indicative, and further research is needed to generalize these results to the broader population. Among those who reported that their child currently did not go to school, the main reasons cited were concern about COVID-19 (34 percent),

school closures (18 percent), and that their children were required to contribute to household income (13 percent). These responses hint at the impact of COVID-19 and school closures on education access, as well as the ramifications of broader economic impacts.

Out of those children enrolled in school in 2021, almost one in four (23 percent) were reported to be learning entirely from home with support from schoolteachers. At the time of the survey, only one in three (33 percent) children were going to school every day or some days, and 31 percent were not receiving any schooling due to COVID-19. This finding aligns with a Joint Needs Assessment conducted by the Cambodian government, which

**FIGURE 4: ENROLMENT OF CHILDREN BEFORE COVID-19 AND IN THE 2021 SCHOOL YEAR**



19 Globe. 2021. [Fears over long-term impact as school closures in Cambodia stretch on](#)



found that 30 percent of students did not access education at all during the suspension of in-person learning.<sup>19</sup>

School enrolment and participation were not the only components of education investigated. The shift in the ways children were learning and studying during the pandemic undoubtedly impacted pupils' quality of learning. Indeed, 84 percent of parents reported that the quality of their child(ren)'s education was impacted by COVID-19. Concerningly, the top reason for decreased quality of learning was found to be the need for children to work to contribute to the household income, which was reported by more than one in five parents (22 percent). Many parents also listed challenges related to new learning modalities, including less interaction with teachers and peers (14 percent), need for academic support (13 percent), and lack of equipment/internet needed for their studies (11 percent).

Health reasons (13 percent) were also found to be another important reason for reduced quality of education, which does not only include fear of the virus, but also concerns over mental health of children.

One father reported:

“It would help to have internet coverage in all regions, so that children can learn online, making it easier for teachers to help and support their students.”

Another father reported:

“I’m concerned about the quality of education and mental health of my child during COVID. My children do not get out of the house very much, and spend a lot of time in front of electronic devices, which is not good for their intellectual growth and health.”

## YOUTH

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, about 59 percent of youth respondents were enrolled in school or university, while 6 percent had graduated, and 35 percent were not enrolled. More young women (37 percent) were not enrolled than young men (33 percent), and more youth aged 20-24 (39 percent) were not enrolled than those aged 15-19 (32 percent). **About 16 percent of youth respondents reported that they left school during COVID-19.** Young women (-18 percent) and youth aged 15-19 (-19 percent) were slightly more likely to report leaving school than young men (-15 percent) and youth ages 20-24 (-11 percent). When asked the main reasons for leaving school, respondents most frequently cited school closures (37 percent) and worry about COVID-19 (30 percent). The survey did not capture respondents' intent to return to school after the pandemic.

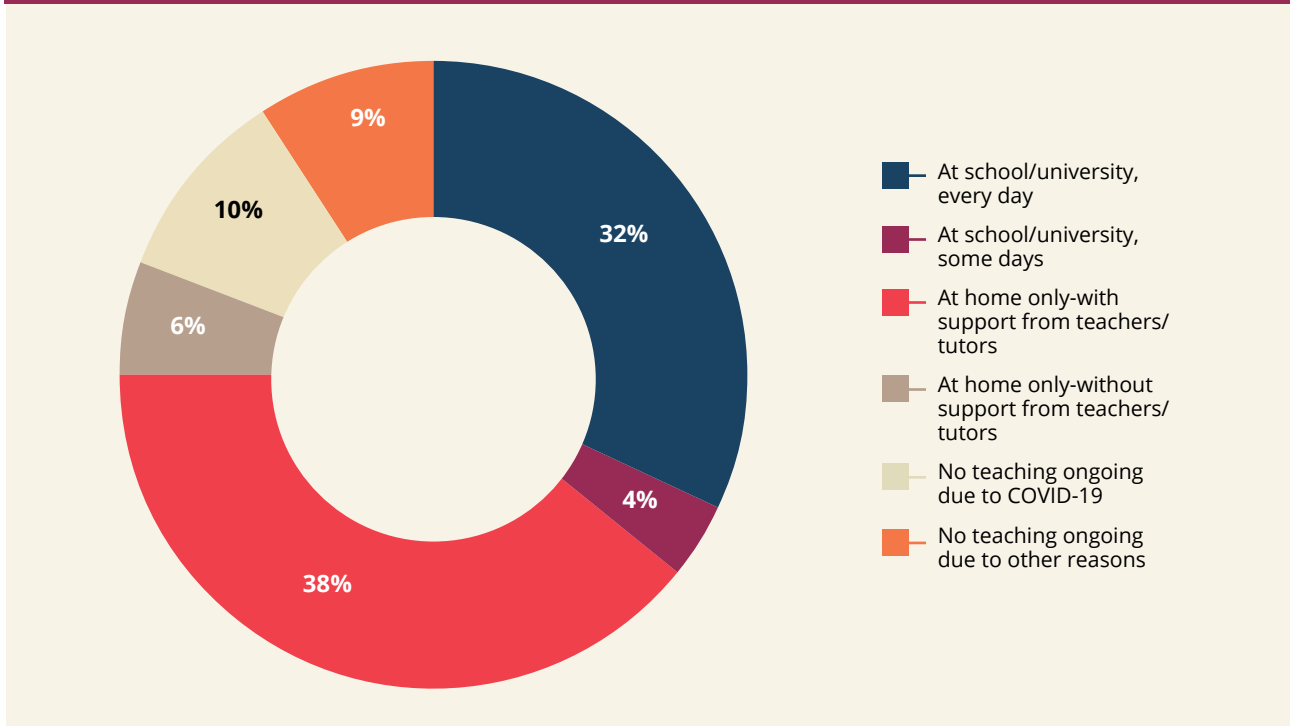
Among those youth who remained in school in 2021, the bulk reported learning mainly from home with support from teachers/tutors, while nearly

one in three were going to school/university every day. This indicates that universities, training centres and other learning institutions for youth may have been able to accommodate in-class learning faster than pre-primary, primary and secondary schools. Worryingly however, is that nearly one in five youth were not able to receive schooling due to COVID-19 or other reasons, despite being enrolled.

Almost nine in ten (87 percent) youth perceived that the quality of their education was impacted by COVID-19 largely due to lack of equipment/internet needed for their studies (25 percent), the need to take care of family members/household chores (15 percent), and less interaction with teachers and peers (14 percent). Two of these barriers to education quality are likely explained by the reported changes in youth's learning modalities. Indeed, one youth highlighted:

**"It was hard to get an education because of internet connectivity and costs."**

**FIGURE 5: MAIN PLACES WHERE YOUTH ENROLLED IN SCHOOL/UNIVERSITY IN 2021 LEARNED AND/OR STUDIED**



# Livelihood activities and income

The impact of COVID-19 lockdowns and global economic changes, such as reductions in tourism and reduced exports from the garment industry, have had broad-reaching effects for the Cambodian economy and the livelihoods and income of its people. According to a World Bank survey, the share of Cambodians who were employed dropped from 82 percent before the pandemic to 71 percent by late 2020. Over a span of 10 months, approximately 25 percent of Cambodian households have been classified as “newly poor.”<sup>20</sup> These economic shocks have particularly broad implications for youth, who already face difficulties entering the labour market as they transition from school and lack proper protection against job insecurity.

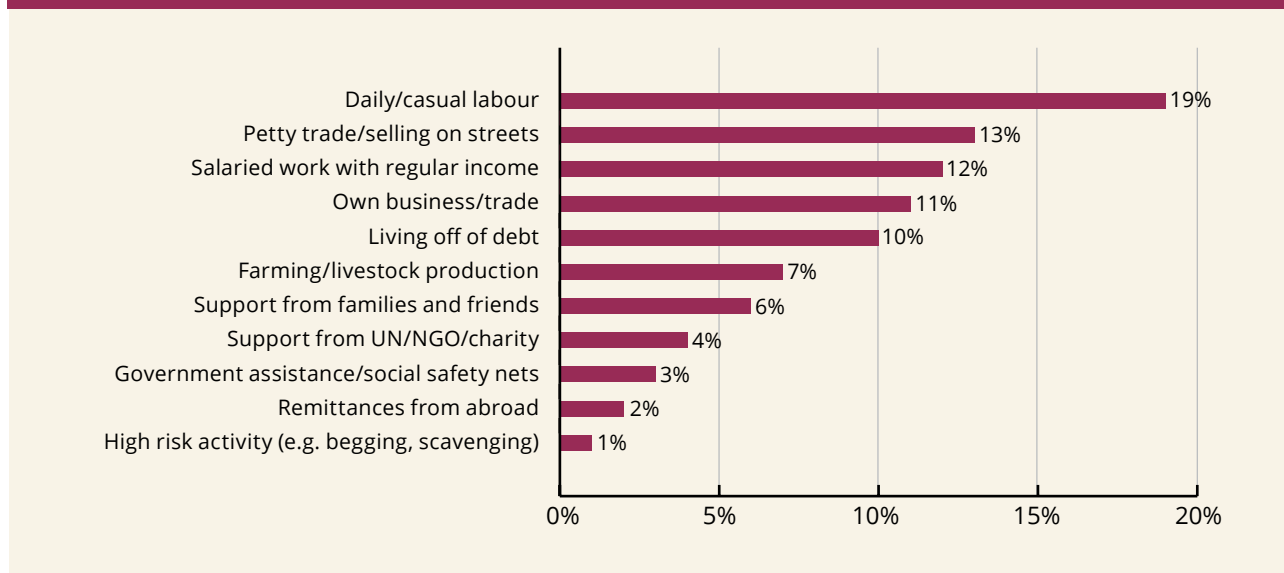
These workers were among the hardest hit by lockdowns and other mitigation measures to reduce the spread of the virus. It is hardly surprising that 65 percent of parent respondents reported a reduction in their household income from the onset of the pandemic. These findings are in line with a study conducted by the World Bank among Cambodian households in 2020, which found that the share of respondents who were working dropped from 82 percent before COVID-19 to 71 percent in May 2020 and remained unchanged until August 2020.<sup>21</sup> This drop is corroborated by the COVID-19

## SCHOOLCHILDREN

About one in five parents of schoolchildren reported working as daily/casual labourers, while another 13 percent reported selling on the streets/petty trade as their main income.



**FIGURE 6: WHAT IS YOUR HOUSEHOLD’S MAIN INCOME SOURCE?**



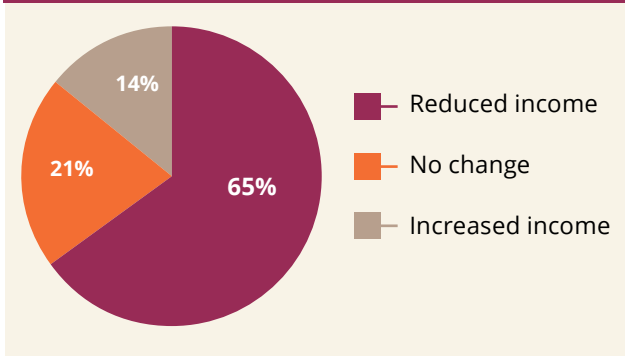
20 The Asia Foundation. 2021. Revisiting the Pandemic: Rapid survey on the impact of COVID-19 on MSMEs in the tourism sector and households in Cambodia. Retrieved from: <https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Revisiting-the-Pandemic-Rapid-Survey-on-the-Impact-of-Covid-19-on-MSMEs-in-the-Tourism-Sector-and-Households-in-Cambodia.pdf>.

21 World Bank. 2020. [Cambodian economy hit hard by pandemic but projected to recover in 2021](#).

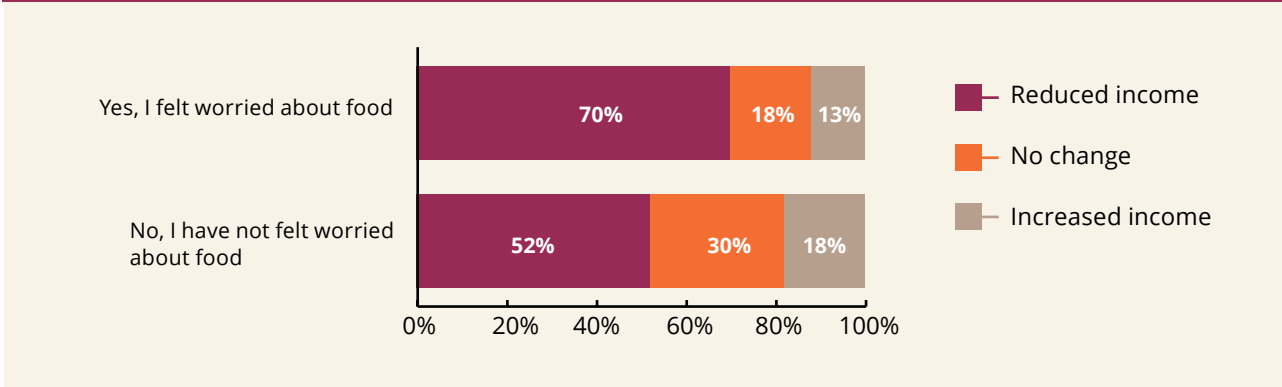
Socioeconomic Impact Assessment (SEIA), which found that about half of respondents experienced a decrease in wages and 10–18 percent lost their jobs during the study period. Around 60–80 percent saw decreases in income over the previous 30 days, with 40–60 percent of them experiencing decreases of 50 percent or more.<sup>22</sup> Reduced income at household level inhibits the ability of families to meet their most essential needs, including food, with likely negative consequences for children. The survey found that 70 percent of parents who reported feeling concerned about having enough food in the month prior to the survey, also reported a reduced income. These findings are unsurprising given that the cost of a balanced food basket in Cambodia spiked three times in 2020 and has continued to trend upward since January 2021.<sup>23</sup>



**FIGURE 7: HAS YOUR HOUSEHOLD'S INCOME LEVEL UNDERGONE ANY CHANGES SINCE THE START OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC?**



**FIGURE 8: IMPACTS ON HOUSEHOLD INCOME AND CONCERNS OVER FOOD**



22 UNAIDS, UNFPA, UNICEF, UN Women, WFP. 2021. [COVID-19 Socio-Economic Impact Assessment](#).

23 WFP. 2021. [Cambodia Market Update](#)

## YOUTH

About 41 percent of youth surveyed reported that they were employed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. A high proportion of young men (51 percent) were working than young women (27 percent), and more 20–24 year-olds (56 percent) were working than 15–19 year-olds.

At the time of the survey, only 1 percent fewer youth respondents reported to be working. However, sectors where youth were employed shifted due to the pandemic. The restaurant and other food services sector fell from 6 percent to 3 percent, while there was an increase in youth working in the trade, transport and storage sector as well as the construction and agriculture sectors. This information is quite useful as it indicates the sectors in the economy that can potentially absorb unemployed youth.

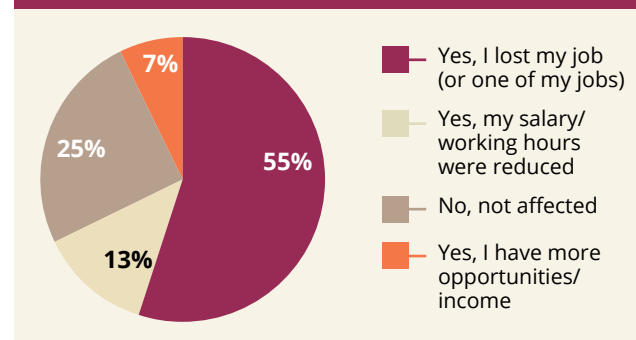
The youth faced many hurdles in their search for jobs and income-earning opportunities during the pandemic, and as work can be highly dynamic with periods of employment and unemployment, it is worth looking at the overall situation of youth since the start of the pandemic. Overall, 68 percent of youth respondents (who were working either prior to COVID-19 or at the time of the survey, or both) experienced a negative impact on their income since the start of COVID-19.

Young women (65 percent) and youth aged 20–24 (60 percent) were more likely to report losing their jobs than young men (51 percent) and youth aged 15–19 (49 percent). A young woman reported:

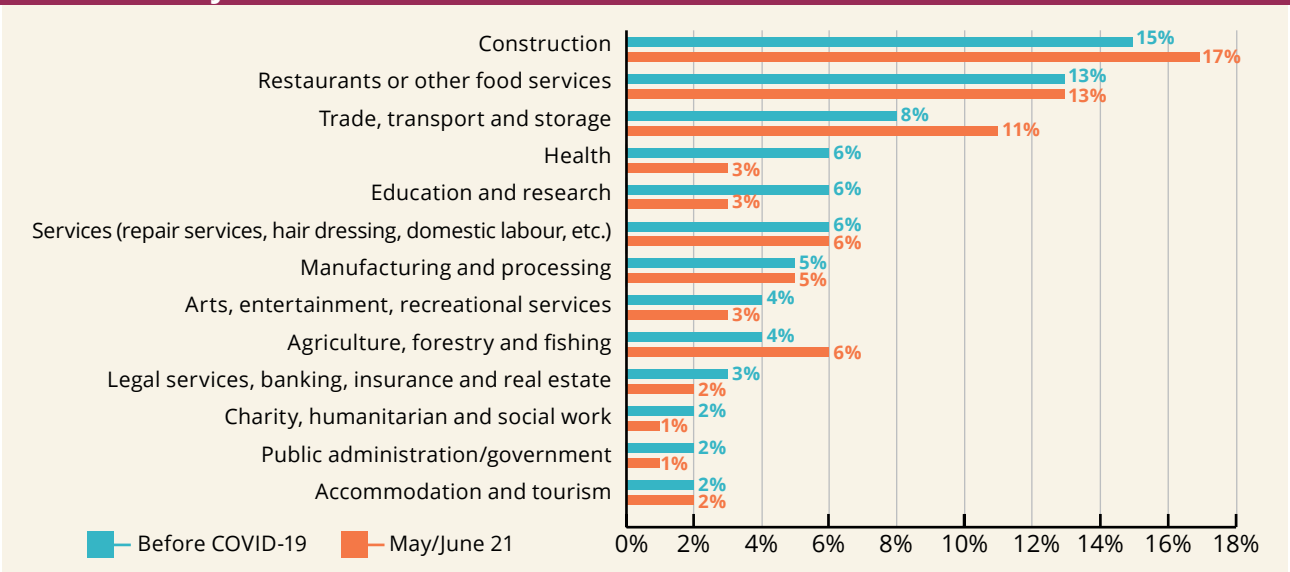
**“It would help the youth to have jobs so they can have an income. Right now, people need money to support their own family.”**

Furthermore, at the time of the survey, around 28 percent of youth reported they had been living away from home for work purposes. In addition, 25 percent reported to have returned home after having lived away over the past year for work. Among these, the main reasons for returning home included for personal reasons (45 percent) and loss of job/income (19 percent).

**FIGURE 10: HAS YOUR ABILITY TO EARN AN INCOME CHANGED SINCE THE START OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC?**



**FIGURE 9: MAIN SECTORS WHERE YOUTH WERE WORKING BEFORE COVID-19 AND IN MAY/JULY 2021**





# Food security and livelihood coping

Food insecurity impacts the current and future health and development of children. Children who experience food insecurity struggle more to acquire new school and job skills as adolescents and adults than children whose development was uninterrupted.<sup>24</sup> This is due to the impact of early environment on brain architecture and neurochemistry in addition to the demonstrated effects of food insecurity on student engagement, grade repetition, and academic achievement. In this web survey, three proxy indicators were used to better understand the food security situation of schoolchildren and youth, including a proxy of food consumption, concerns over food and the use of food-based coping strategies. Youth and parents were asked about the use of livelihood coping strategies to further understand current levels of vulnerability among these groups.



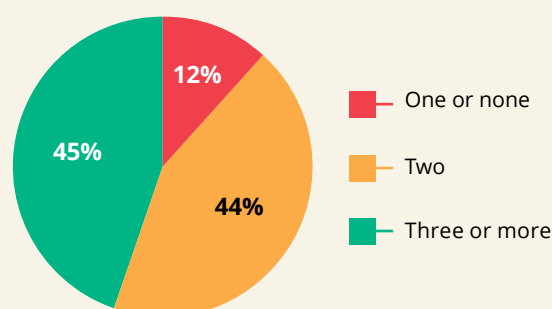
## SCHOOLCHILDREN

Around 70 percent of parents of schoolchildren reported feeling worried about having enough food to eat in the month before the survey. In terms of food consumption, around one in ten children were reported to have eaten one or no meals the day before the survey, while 44 percent had eaten at least two meals. More young girls were found to be eating one or two meals (63 percent) compared to young boys (50 percent).

The survey also found that around 65 percent of children were forced to adopt food-based coping strategies to meet their food needs in the month prior to the survey. This includes one in ten children who were forced to go a whole day without eating. More children aged 10–14 years were found to be skipping meals (14 percent) than younger children aged 6–9 years (8 percent).

To meet their most essential needs, including food, education, health and rent, the majority of parents of schoolchildren were forced to adopt livelihood-based coping strategies to make ends meet in the month prior to the survey. Around 6 percent of parents worryingly reported having exhausted all their coping mechanisms and no longer had the capacity to meet their needs.

**FIGURE 11: HOW MANY MEALS (INCL. BREAKFAST) DID YOUR CHILD(REN) EAT YESTERDAY?**



24 Children's Healthwatch. [Feeding Our Human Capital: Food Insecurity and Tomorrow's.](#)

**FIGURE 12: WHICH STATEMENT BEST REFLECTS YOUR CHILD(REN) FOOD SITUATION OVER THE PAST 30 DAYS?**

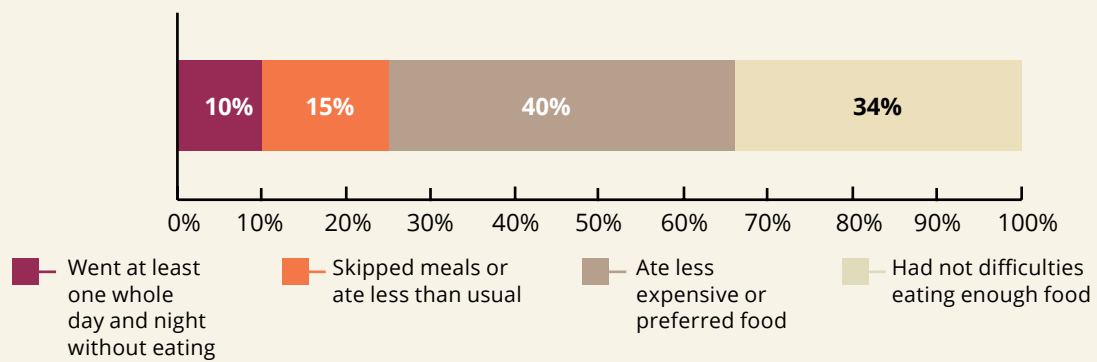
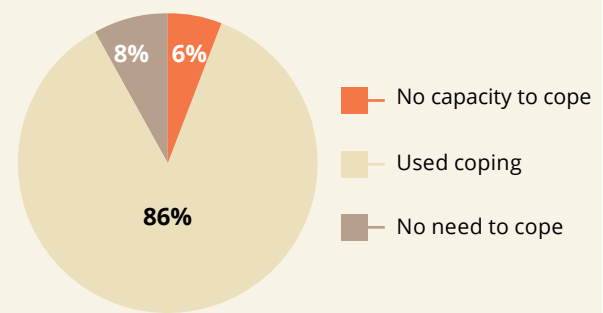
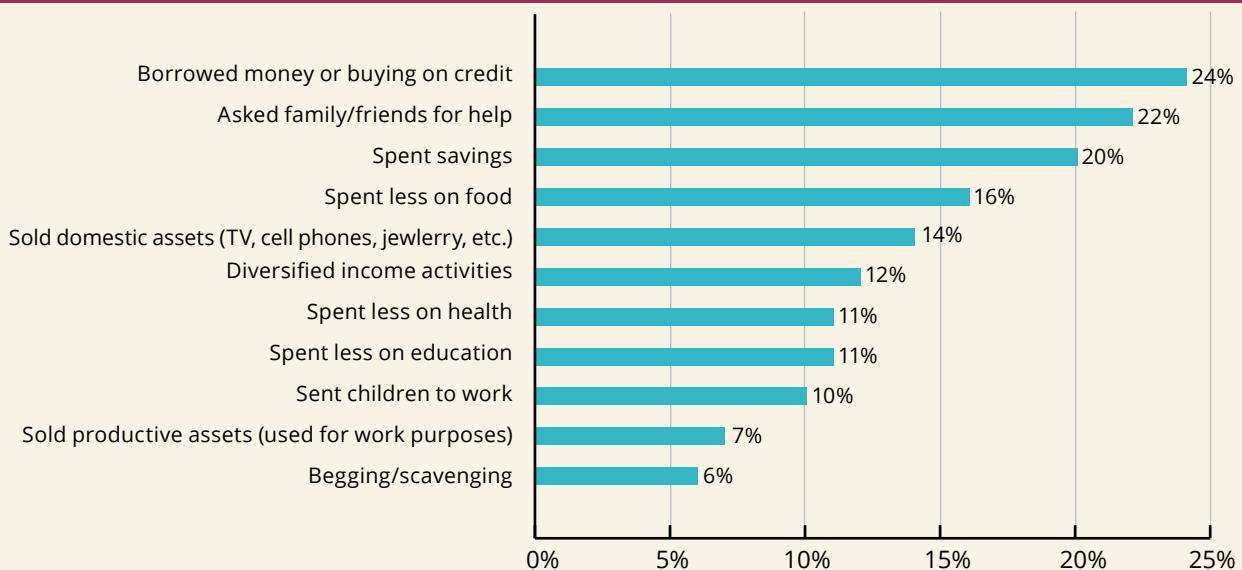


Figure 14 illustrates the most frequently reported coping strategies, including borrowing money or buying on credit, spending savings and diversifying income activities. Spending less on food was reported by around 16 percent of parents in order to make ends meet, which could represent a key food security concern in the long run, especially for children living in the household. These findings are supported by the SEIA, which found that borrowing money was the common coping strategy (30 percent of respondents). It also found that the coping strategy index scores dropped to their lowest level in October 2020, with 58 percent of respondents facing crisis or emergency levels.<sup>25</sup>

**FIGURE 13: USED LIVELIHOOD-BASED COPING STRATEGIES OVER THE PAST MONTH**



**FIGURE 14: MAIN LIVELIHOOD COPING STRATEGIES ADOPTED BY PARENT RESPONDENTS (MULTIPLE RESPONSE)**



25 UNAIDS, UNFPA, UNICEF, UN Women, WFP. 2021. COVID-19 Socio-Economic Impact Assessment.

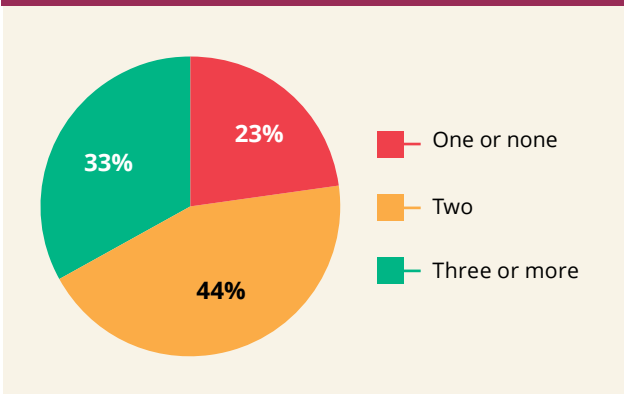
## YOUTH

Findings regarding youth food consumption were found to be more worrying than those for children, with nearly one in four youth respondents reporting having consumed one meal or less the day prior to the survey. A slightly higher percentage of young women (25 percent) were compromising their food consumption than young men (22 percent).

Furthermore, concern over having enough food to eat in the past month was quite high, with about 63 percent of youth respondents reporting feeling worried about where their next meal would come from. Young men aged 20–24 were most likely to report worrying about having enough to eat (67 percent). This could be related to a relative lack of family economic support for older male youth or prioritization of other household members for food consumption.

Applying food-based coping strategies due to the lack of food or means to buy food over the past month was reported by more than three in four youth respondents, including around one in five who reported going a whole day without eating and nearly one in four who reported skipping meals in the month before the survey. Although more young men (26 percent) were found to be going a whole day without eating than young women (14 percent), the latter (30 percent) was reported to be skipping meals to a greater extent than young men (18 percent). The same can be stated about youth aged 15–19 years (26 percent) who were reported to be skipping meals more than youth aged 10–14 years (19 percent).

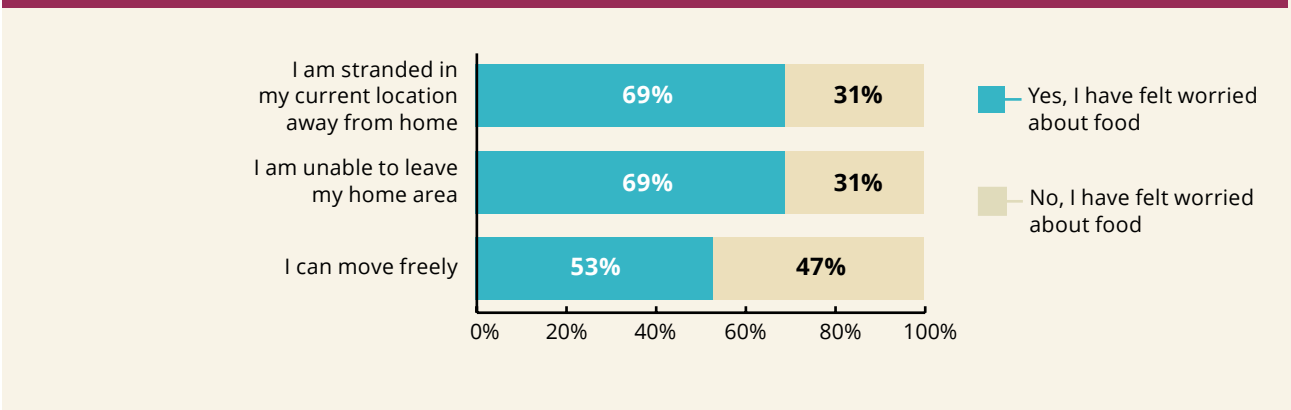
**FIGURE 15: HOW MANY MEALS (INCL. BREAKFAST) DID YOU EAT YESTERDAY?**



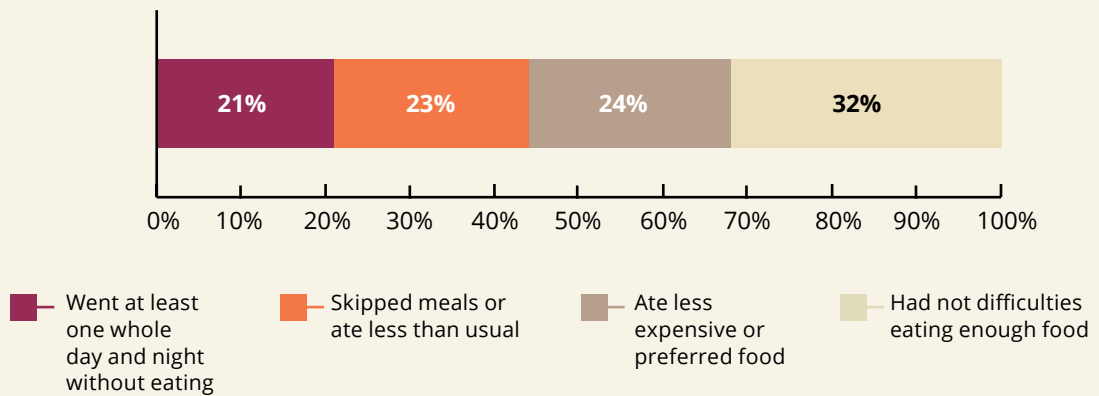
Overall, around 77 percent of youth reported that either they or someone in their household adopted at least one livelihood-based coping strategy over the past month to be able to meet their most essential needs. Figure 18 illustrates the main livelihood coping strategies used by youth and their households. The most common strategy used was spending less money on food, followed by diversifying income activities, spending savings and borrowing money or buying on credit. As one youth stated:

**“Due to the pandemic, many families lost their income and had to resort to getting loans from the bank.”**

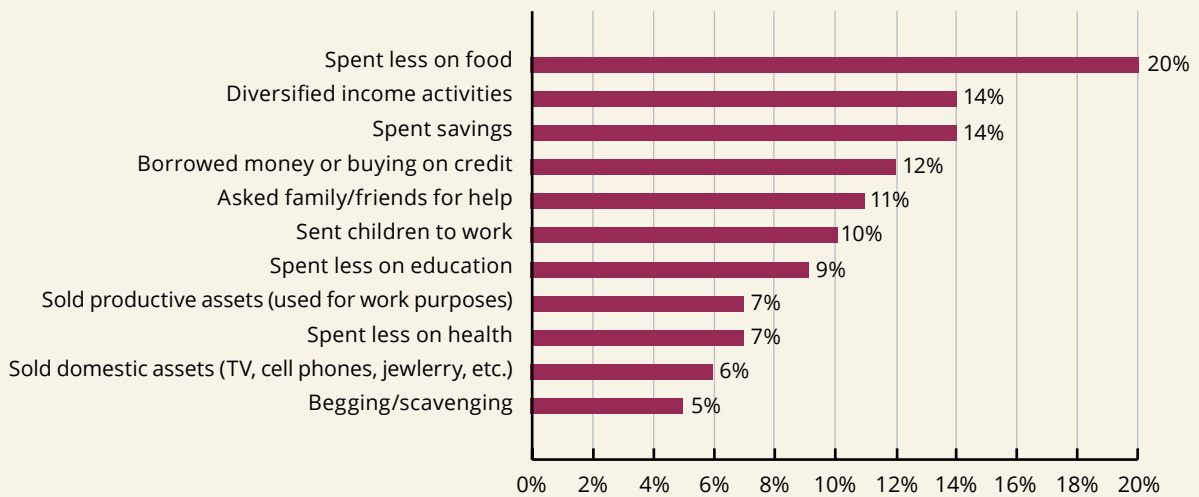
**FIGURE 16: IMPACT OF MOBILITY ON YOUTH FOOD CONCERNS**



**FIGURE 17: WHICH STATEMENT BEST REFLECTS YOUR FOOD SITUATION OVER THE PAST 30 DAYS?**



**FIGURE 18: MAIN LIVELIHOOD COPING STRATEGIES ADOPTED BY YOUTH RESPONDENTS (MULTIPLE RESPONSE)**



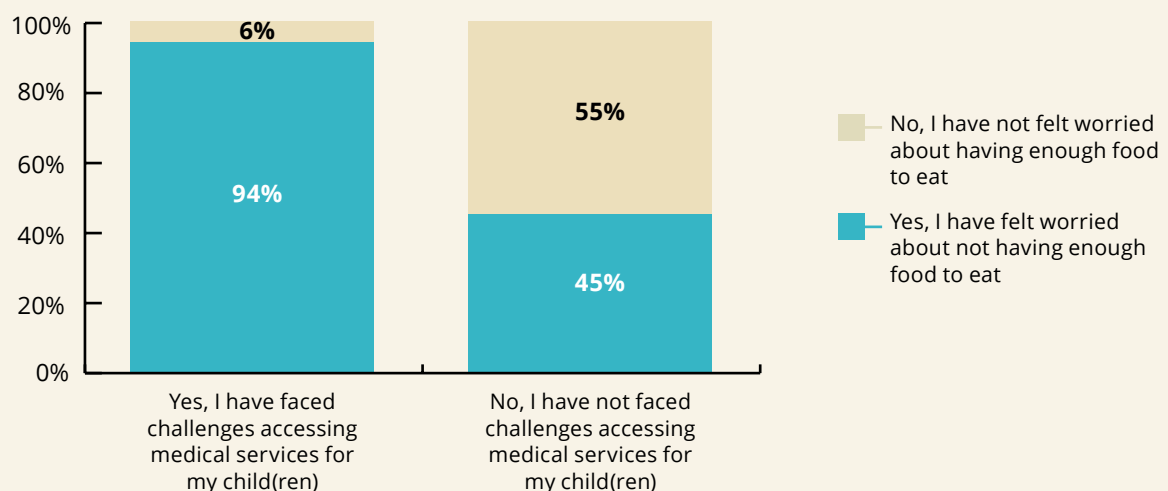
# Access to medical services

For children to learn and reach their full potential, they need to be healthy and have access to medical services. Just over half (51 percent) of the parents who responded to the survey reported facing challenges in accessing medical services for their children during the previous year. Out of those who faced difficulties, lack of money was reported as the main challenge for accessing medical services by around 49 percent of parents. Other challenges included being denied access due to lack of hospital capacity (15 percent) and far distance to reach hospitals or health centres (10 percent). The SEIA also asked Cambodians about access to healthcare through a series of surveys from March 2020 to March 2021. These surveys found that between 16–28 percent of Cambodians did not receive health services or preferred to wait to receive health services due to COVID-19. For those who could not receive care, the largest barriers were lack of access to money, followed by limited transportation, increased prices and fear of COVID-19.<sup>26</sup>

Challenges in accessing medical services and concern over having enough food to eat were found to be closely intertwined. Around 94 percent of parents who faced challenges accessing medical services for their children also reported feeling concerned during the previous 30 days about where their next meal would come. This finding suggests that families with limited economic means are facing concurrent challenges accessing medical services and attaining food security.



**FIGURE 19: CONCERN OVER FOOD AND ACCESS TO MEDICAL SERVICES FOR CHILDREN**



26 Ibid

# Main challenges faced

## SCHOOLCHILDREN

Overall, the top challenges faced by Cambodian schoolchildren as reported by their parents include access to education/learning materials (32 percent) and lack of nutritious food (32 percent). These findings are in line with concerns expressed by parents through open-ended questions. As one mother expressed:

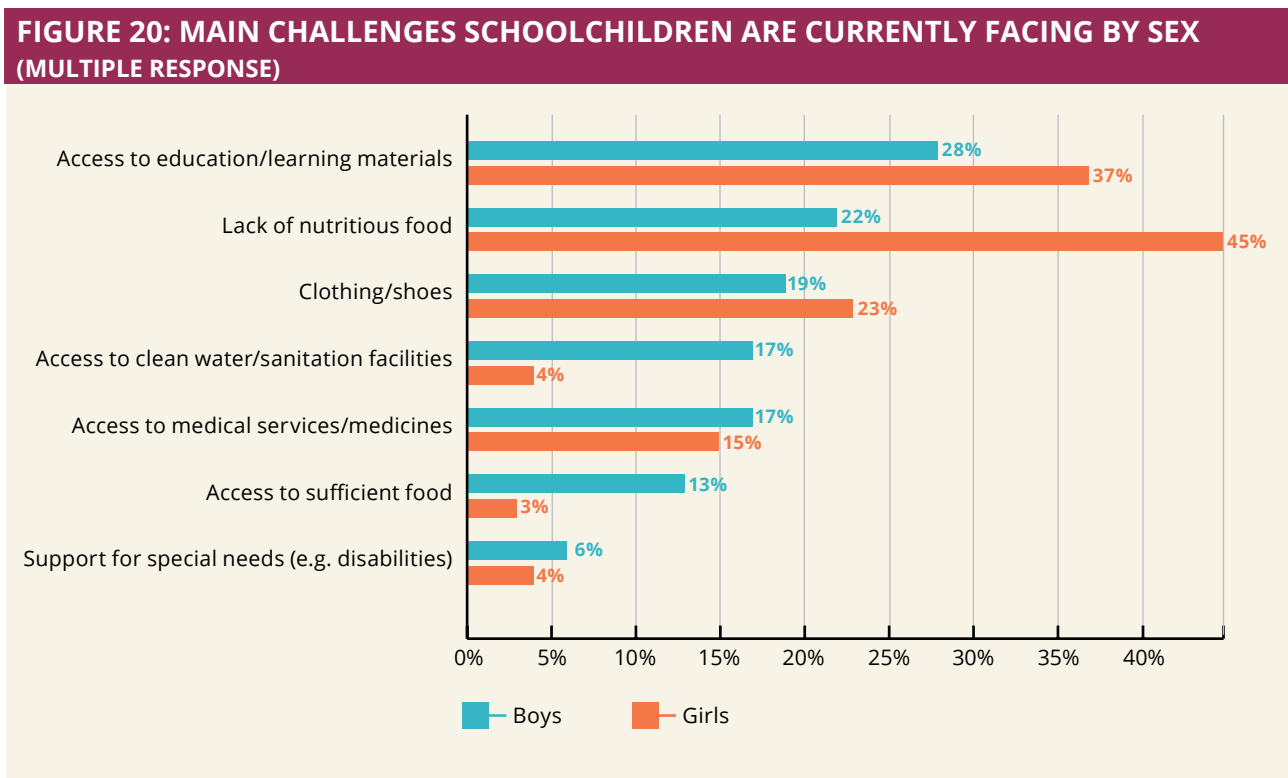
“There’s no time to teach and educate children. Lack of money to send children to the good schools... learning online does not receive a clear instructional explanation from the school lesson.”

A father identified:

“giving enough nutrients to your child and your child’s educational support”

as their main worry. These findings are also supported by the COVID-19 SEIA in Cambodia, which found that one third of respondents reported limiting the portion size of their meals in August 2020, and 70 percent reported their children were attending school less frequently than before the pandemic.<sup>27</sup>

Figure 20 illustrates the differences in challenges faced by sex of children. Access to education and lack of nutritious food were found to be much greater challenges faced for young girls than young boys. Furthermore, disaggregation by age shows that younger children aged 6–9 years were more likely to experience these challenges than children aged 10–14 years.



<sup>27</sup> Ibid



### **IN THE WORDS OF RESPONDENTS -PARENTS OF SCHOOLCHILDREN**

Parents of schoolchildren were given an open-ended question asking what they are most worried about when it comes to raising their children. Education and health were frequently reported. Most important, however, was the concern of parents regarding access to nutritious foods that had been hampered by unemployment and safety concerns within their community.

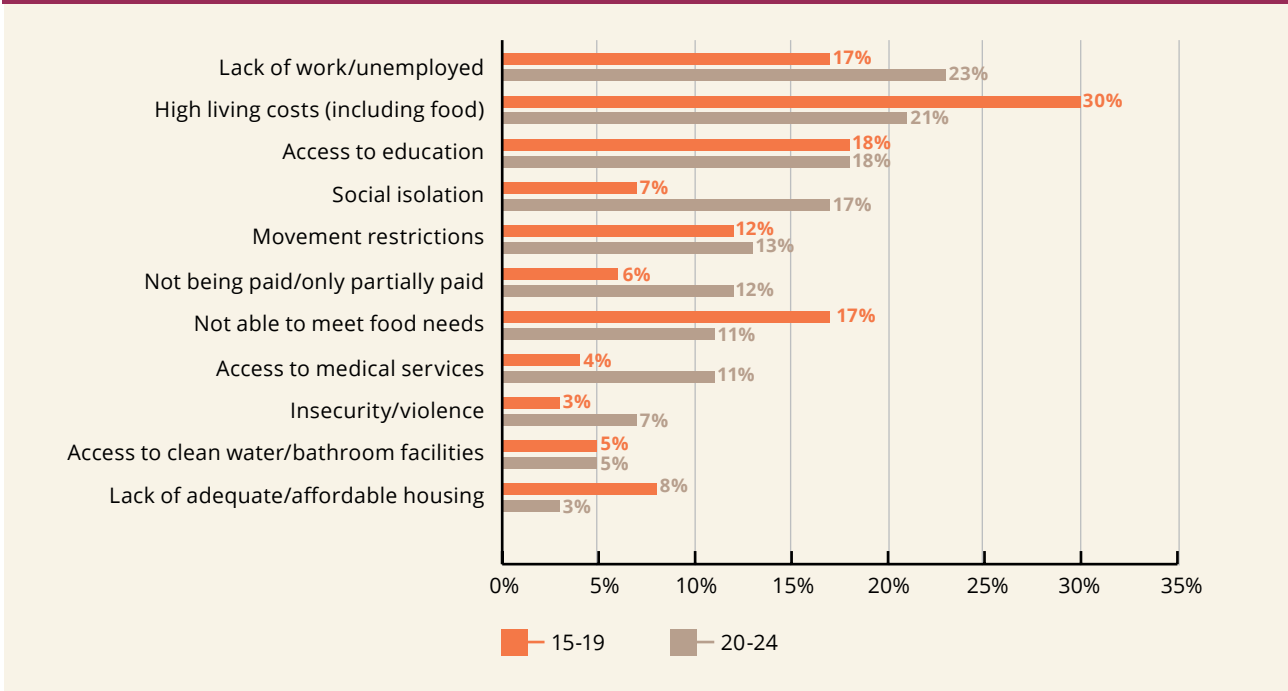
A Cambodian father expressed that,  
“There is difficulty making money to support the family and children during COVID-19.”

## YOUTH

The most common challenges faced by youth respondents were high living costs (including food) (26 percent), lack of work/unemployment (19 percent) and access to education (18 percent). The inability to meet food needs was also reported by around 15 percent of youth. Young women were more likely to cite high cost of living (36 percent) and lack of work/unemployment (21 percent) as their main challenges than young men (19 percent and 18

percent respectively). Figure 23 illustrates the challenges faced by different age groups, and highlights how lack of work/unemployment, social isolation and not being paid/being partially paid are greater challenges among 20–24 year-olds than 15–19 year-olds. This may be related to the larger earning expectations and economic responsibilities of older youth. Conversely, high living costs (including food) and not being able to meet food needs were found to be greater challenges among 15–19 year-olds.

**FIGURE 21: MAIN CHALLENGES FACED BY YOUTH BY AGE GROUPS (MULTIPLE RESPONSE)**





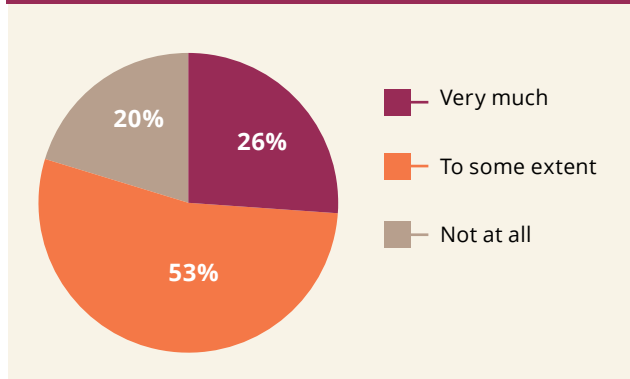
# Safety concerns

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown, tensions have risen across Cambodia. This has included demonstrations such as garment workers protesting about unpaid wages caused by cancelled orders from retailers,<sup>28</sup> and citizens protesting about the lack of food aid provided while they were unable to leave their households during lockdowns.<sup>29</sup> To enforce lockdowns, Cambodian police have made arrests and beaten citizens with canes for failing to comply.<sup>30</sup> All of these events have contributed to a deteriorating safety and security situation, with impacts for children and youth.

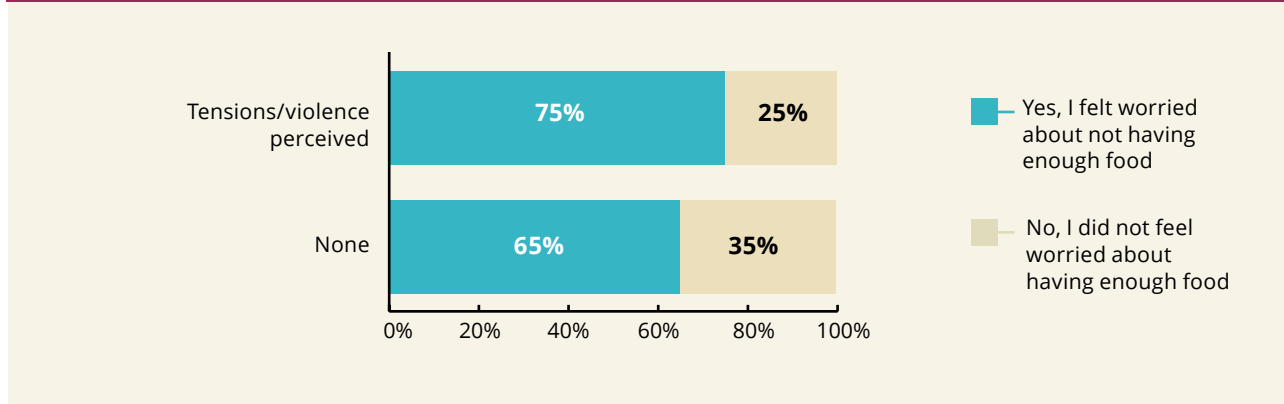
## SCHOOLCHILDREN

About half of parents of schoolchildren (51 percent) reported noticing an increase in tensions and violence in their communities over the past year. The main type of violence perceived included discrimination against sick people (22 percent) and early signs of tension/civil unrest (18 percent). Since the start of the pandemic, there have been protests across Cambodia in response to severe lockdown measures, where the government banned people living in “red zone” neighbourhoods from leaving their homes in order to slow the spread of COVID-19. This may explain responses related to tension/civil unrest.<sup>31</sup> Worryingly, 80 percent of parents reported that these increases in insecurity have affected their children, which raises serious protection concerns. Further studies would be required to understand what dynamics are at play in this context. The analysis also found that safety concerns are closely intertwined with food security concerns. Indeed, parents who perceived increased tensions/violence were also 10 percent more likely to have felt worried about having enough food to eat over the past month.

**FIGURE 22: HOW HAVE INCREASED VIOLENCE/TENSIONS AFFECTED YOUR CHILD(REN)?**



**FIGURE 23: TENSIONS/VIOLENCE PERCEIVED BY HOUSEHOLDS WITH SCHOOLCHILDREN AND CONCERNS OVER FOOD**



28 Business & Human Rights Resource Centre. May 2020. [Cambodia: Garment workers protest unpaid wages as COVID-19 disrupts supply chains.](#)

29 Radio Free Asia. April 2021. [Cambodians protest food shortages in Phnom Penh, as COVID numbers climb.](#)

30 Reuters. April 2021. [Cambodian police defend caning of lockdown offenders for breaching COVID-19 rules.](#)

31 Ibid

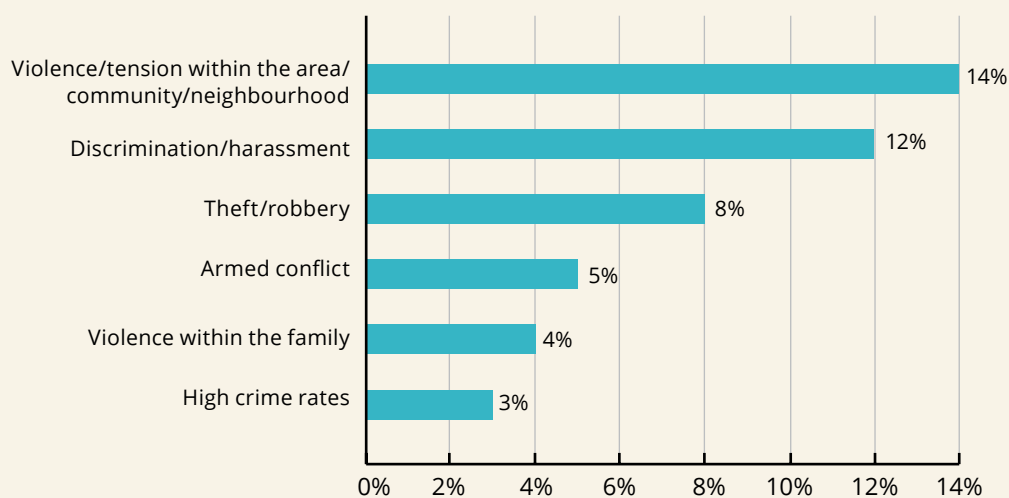
## YOUTH

At the time of the survey, about 38 percent of youth reported not feeling safe in their environment. Young women (48 percent) were more likely to report feeling unsafe than young men (31 percent), and younger youth aged 15-19 (47 percent) were more likely to report feeling unsafe than youth aged 20-24 (26 percent).

Figure 24 illustrates the main reasons for feeling unsafe as identified by youth. Interesting is the

mention of discrimination and harassment as one of the top reasons for feeling unsafe, which is very much in line with findings among parents of schoolchildren. Young women (7 percent) were more likely to report violence within the family than young men (2 percent). Conversely, young men (17 percent) were more likely to report violence/tensions within the community and theft/robbery (10 percent) than young women (12 percent and 6 percent respectively).

**FIGURE 24: MAIN REASONS FOR FEELING UNSAFE**





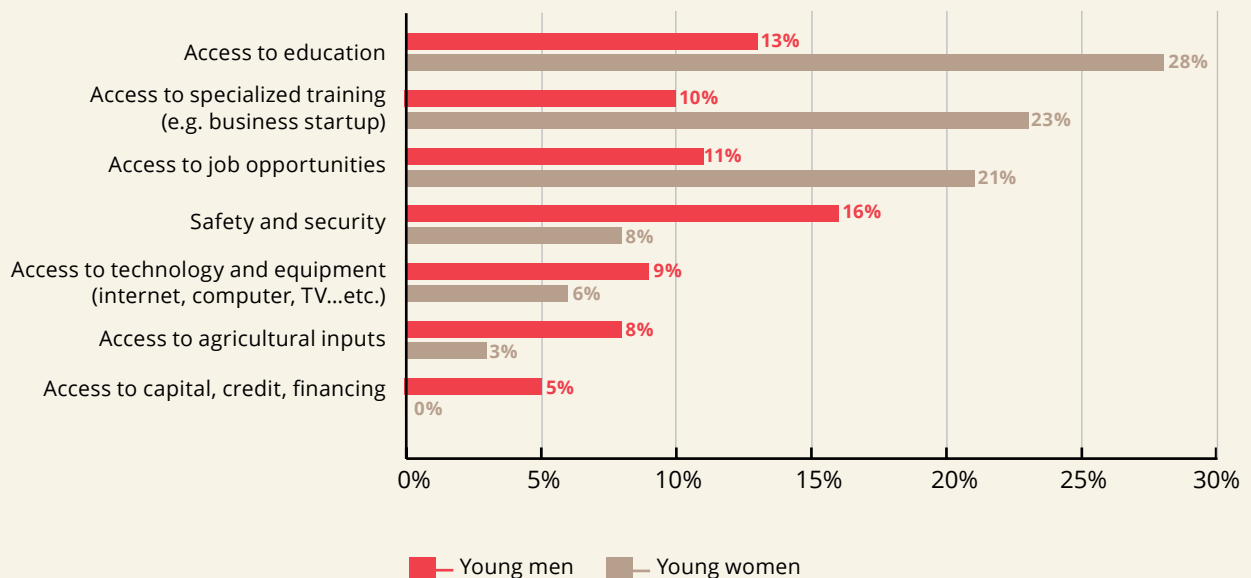
# Aspirations for the future of the younger generation

Cambodian youth have reported that access to education (19 percent), access to specialized training (15 percent) and access to job opportunities (15 percent) were their top needs to reach their full potential and be successful in the future. Younger youth identified access to education (25 percent), access to specialized training (20 percent), and access to technology and equipment (12 percent) as their main needs and to a greater extent than older youth (11 percent, 8 percent and 2 percent respectively).

In contrast, older youth aged 20–24 (19 percent) listed access to job opportunities as the most important factor for their success compared to younger youth (13 percent).

Figure 25 illustrates that young women were more likely to list education, access to specialized training, and access to job opportunities as most important, while young men were more likely to list safety and security and access to resources such as agricultural inputs and access to capital, credit and financing as most important for their future.

**FIGURE 25: WHAT IS THE MOST IMPORTANT FOR YOU TO BE SUCCESSFUL IN THE FUTURE?**



## IN THE WORDS OF RESPONDENTS – YOUTH

Youth who responded to the survey cited education, work, healthcare, food, and money as resources that would help them through the pandemic. Youth also cited internet access as an important resource to help them with their studies during the pandemic.

In the words of one young woman,  
“It would help the youth to have jobs so they can have an income. Right now, people need money to support their own family.”



# Concluding remarks

Cambodians represented in this report faced a variety of challenges after the COVID-19 pandemic. School closures, movement restrictions, and economic impacts greatly reduced youth and children's access to education and quality of education. Economic impacts also had vast effects on income, livelihood coping mechanisms, food security and even medical access. The reduction in resources, education and healthcare may have broad implications for human capital in Cambodia long after COVID-19 restrictions are lifted. Further study is needed to understand the nuances of this impact, particularly for populations that do not have access to the internet as they were not represented in this survey.

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