



# LIVES ON HOLD, OUR STORIES TOLD (LOHST): RESEARCH BRIEFING NO.2

The impacts of Covid-19 on the mental health and wellbeing of young people seeking asylum.



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Introduction</b>	<b><u>3</u></b>
<b>Findings</b>	<b><u>8</u></b>
Escalation of mental health difficulties during the pandemic	9
The stresses of pandemic-related delays in asylum processes	<u>10</u>
Difficulties in accessing mental health services in person and online	12
Culturally-informed and responsive support services	14
Legacies of Covid-19 and their impacts	<u>16</u>
<b>Recommendations for policy and practice</b>	<b><u>17</u></b>



# INTRODUCTION

This research briefing outlines the key mental health-related challenges associated with the Covid-19 pandemic from the perspectives of unaccompanied young people seeking asylum. It also highlights some of the strategies they found helpful in coping with these difficulties and the types of services and support which they found valuable. The findings emerged from a two-year ESRC-funded study – the LOHST Project (Lives on Hold our Stories Told) which explored the impact of the pandemic and related delays on young people (16-25 years old) within the asylum system in England. The sample were drawn primarily from young people seeking asylum from Albania (n=40) with additional participants from a range of other countries of origin (n=29). The interviews with young people were conducted during and in the immediate aftermath of periods of lockdown.



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The importance of young people having an opportunity to voice the mental health challenges they experienced is clearly articulated by Dori, aged 20 from Albania,

**As asylum seekers we are present through different stages of debates, decisions, review of laws and policies etc. However, even though decisions, crucial political and socio-economic moments are about us, we have no say in what is happening and what will happen to us. In terms of my mental health, this is what heavies my mind with fears and worries; the inability to do anything, and the concern that if you raise your voice for what directly or indirectly concerns you might have negative implications on your case (especially over a long period of time) can be mentally crippling – which is how I feel.**

Seeking asylum in the UK had already been associated with significant demands on young people’s mental health and wellbeing well before the onset of Covid-19 (Pfeiffer et al. 2022; Chase and Allsopp 2020). A growing literature on the impact of seeking asylum on young people’s mental health and wellbeing points to three core aspects of the asylum-seeking process which are known to affect people psychologically: stressors related to pre-migration and the reasons underpinning their asylum claim; stressors and trauma related to the journeys they encounter; and what are commonly termed ‘post-migration’ stressors - those which occur once a person has arrived in a country of destination (Pfeiffer et al., 2022). The challenges of adapting to a new language, culture, and environment (Li et al., 2016; Fazel et al., 2012) are frequently coupled with the ongoing demands of the asylum-seeking process (Chase et al. 2019; Jakobson et al 2021).

These challenges are often compounded by experiences of destitution, anxieties about where and how to live with no access to public funding (Jolly 2022; Pfeiffer et al 2022), and the uncertainties about whether they will be able to remain in the destination country (Chase and Allsopp 2020).

Whilst recent research has considered how the pandemic has impacted on children and young people’s mental health and wellbeing more generally (Children’s Society 2020), the LOHST project is the first detailed study to expose how the pandemic has affected young unaccompanied asylum seekers’ mental health, from the perspectives of young people themselves [1]. The findings in this briefing bridge a crucial empirical gap highlighted by mental health experts working with children and young people seeking asylum [2].

[1] The 2021 ‘Wasted Childhoods’ report by GMIAU considers the impacts of delays in asylum decision-making since Covid-19 on the mental health of children and young people seeking asylum but from the perspectives of practitioners (GMIAU 2021).



It is important to note that, against the backdrop of the pandemic, other social care and immigration policy changes were taking place which were directly relevant to the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people seeking asylum. Emergency legal and policy changes were introduced to the children's social care sector which adversely impacted the support available to unaccompanied children and young people seeking asylum. These included limiting the number and frequency of statutory visits or contact with children in care by social care practitioners[3][4] and significantly reducing important checks and balances around safeguarding children within care placements[5][6]. Such changes prompted challenges by the third sector which contested the compatibility of the Covid-19 emergency measures with children's fundamental rights [7]. The reduction in social care support during the pandemic likely impacted the mental health and wellbeing of unaccompanied children and young people seeking asylum. More recent legal and policy developments to criminalise and expedite the removal of those who enter the UK through so-called 'unlawful' routes [8] and the possibility to refuse in the future all Albanians [9] the right to seek asylum [10] are likely to further compound the anxieties and vulnerabilities of young unaccompanied asylum seekers who fall within these groups.

[2] See Matthew Hodes who argues that "There has been very limited research into the effects of the pandemic on young asylum seekers and refugees' mental health and service use and this subject warrants further investigation", in "Mental health of young asylum seekers and refugees in the context of COVID-19", ACAMH, 20 March, 2022, available from <https://acamh.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/camh.12558>

[3] The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 ([legislation.gov.uk](https://legislation.gov.uk))

[4] The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) (No.2) Regulations 2020 ([legislation.gov.uk](https://legislation.gov.uk))[8] The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 ([legislation.gov.uk](https://legislation.gov.uk))

[5] The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 ([legislation.gov.uk](https://legislation.gov.uk))

[6] The Health and Social Care Act 2008 (Regulated Activities) (Amendment) (Coronavirus) Regulations 2021 ([legislation.gov.uk](https://legislation.gov.uk)).

[7] See for instance BASW policy brief on The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 | [www.basw.co.uk](http://www.basw.co.uk), and the Charity, Article 39's, successful judicial review of the measures: The Queen (Appellant) (on the application of Article 39) and Secretary of State for Education (Respondent), 24 November 2020, Case No: C1/2020/1279 [viewed 09.12.20]. Available from: <https://www.judiciary.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/R-Article-39-v-SSEjudgment.pdf>

[8]The Nationality and Borders Act 2022, sections 12-20 .

[9] According to the latest policy proposals, the UK Government will demand the Home Office that the claims of Albanian citizens to be processed in "weeks, instead of months", with many more being swiftly rejected (see <https://www.politico.eu/article/rishi-sunak-united-kingdom-albania-asylum-in-britain/>).

[9] The Nationality and Borders Act 2022, Section 29 and Schedule 4 which amend the 'safe country' provisions previously set out in Schedule 3 of the Asylum and Immigration (Treatment of Claimants, etc.) Act 2004. See also the Memorandum of Understanding between the government of United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the government of the Republic of Rwanda for the provision of an asylum partnership arrangement, 14 April 2022.



## Summary of Key Findings

- The Covid-19 pandemic continues to have distinct impacts on the mental health of unaccompanied young people seeking asylum. These are directly attributable to anxieties and insecurities related to their asylum status and the asylum process, including ongoing delays in the resolution of asylum applications.
- Covid-19 lockdown measures exacerbated many of the mental health difficulties that young people were experiencing because of their pre- and peri-migration histories.
- Young people's struggles to access statutory services throughout the pandemic, including education (see related education brief), social care support, financial aid and accommodation, have had significant implications for their mental health and wellbeing.
- Young people described experiencing significant difficulties in accessing support for often acute mental health difficulties prior to and during the pandemic.
- With often no additional government resources, the third sector provided critical and culturally sensitive services and support to young people seeking asylum which were unavailable to them through statutory services.
- The findings suggest that a major review of these shortfalls in provision is urgently required.



# FINDINGS

Research findings are presented thematically according to what young people identified as the most salient aspects of their mental health and which have clear implications for policy and practice. These include accounts of deteriorating mental health during the pandemic; difficulties in accessing appropriate support and services in person and online; cultural barriers to understanding and accessing relevant mental health services and the benefits of culturally-informed and responsive support services; stresses of pandemic-related delays; and how the legacies of the pandemic continue to impact young people's lives and mental health. The briefing concludes with some key recommendations for policy and practice.



## 1. Escalation of mental health difficulties during the pandemic

Young people in the study described how the pandemic exacerbated mental health difficulties which pre-dated the pandemic. These often stemmed from anxieties associated with their asylum situations, the traumatic experiences during their migration journeys, and protracted uncertainty in their lives. For example, many young people in our study spoke about how lockdown measures brought with them painful memories of what had previously happened to them. 18-year-old Erion, who had arrived from Albania just before the pandemic, described how lockdown confinements psychologically took him back to the situation he endured in Albania where he spent extensive periods of time in hiding and isolation from family and friends as a result of a blood feud. Erion explained,

**Like when I first arrived here, I was still traumatized.... when the pandemic hit, all the support you know was gone. I attended the college one month before the pandemic hit, but then after I really struggled, because every day I had to stay inside the house and, you know, staying inside four walls really reminded me of the same situation that I had experienced in Albania. And it really, really made me just think of all those memories and those flashbacks. I was feeling depressed most of the time. It was a really, really hard experience for me just being isolated from everything.**

Similarly, Mustafa, aged 18 from Sudan, commented on how the experience of Covid-19 took him back to his confinement in Libya,

**And everything looks horrible and sometimes [it] reminded me that I sat in Libya for three months. It was like prison, so it's very, very boring and very hard and I missed a lot of things and hobbies as well.**

Nelith from Sri Lanka had just turned 26 during the pandemic and although slightly older than the other young people in our study cohort, had previously arrived in the UK as an unaccompanied child. He described the effects of the lockdowns on his own wellbeing:





**During pandemic it was crazy because I could not access different forms of support, I couldn't communicate with people face to face and this had an impact on my mental health. Being in a lock down wasn't easy for me and my mental health. I suffer from PTSD ...I spent a lot of time in isolation which was not good for my mental health. I suffered nightmares, flashbacks, you know, intrusive thoughts, weird dreams and all that stuff.**

Many young people noted that they either began taking medication to alleviate symptoms of anxiety and distress or required an increase in their prescription during the pandemic. For example, Anara, aged 24 from Afghanistan, commented how, on top of everything else, she found she needed medication to help her cope with the lockdown situation:

**Everything came at once and combined with lockdown I started taking tablets.**

## **2. The stresses of pandemic-related delays in asylum processes**

Many young people spoke about their frustrations, feelings of powerlessness and stress throughout the pandemic because of not being able to find out any information from the Home Office or solicitors about what was happening with their asylum applications. Some young people we spoke with had waited over a year-and-a-half to have their substantive interview. For others, their worsening mental health during this time meant that their application was delayed even further. For example, Roman, aged 21 from Albania, was supposed to have had his substantive interview with the Home Office in March 2020, just as lockdowns began. When we spoke to him in June 2021, his interview had still not taken place mainly because, by that time, even though the lockdown rules had been eased, the effects on his mental health had become so crippling that he was too unwell to attend the interview. Roman's experience illustrates the difficulties in disentangling the inefficiencies of the asylum system from delayed progress due to the young person's mental health difficulties, arguably making it easy for the system to attribute any delays in applications to the 'frailties' of the young person.

Agnes, aged 24 from Albania, articulated how the extended uncertainty about her asylum case and all the difficulties of the past were causing her significant stress,



**I haven't been able to contact my lawyer. The only way I can contact him is through emails. I haven't had the chance to meet him face-to-face yet, so these kind of things have really affected my mental health, especially when I can't get in touch with my lawyer, or for example, when I don't know what is happening with my case. I haven't heard back about anything, about the interview, or anything. They took months to reply to me so I wasn't sure what was going on and what I should do. It was such a stressful situation.**

Similarly, 17-year-old Adriel from Albania spoke of her sense of powerlessness within the asylum system which had ground to a halt,

**How difficult the things are....you have to deal with a lot by yourself and you want to say, "why haven't [you] come to see me?", but then you're so small. Even towards them you're so small; you're like a drop, you're nothing, you feel so like you cannot do anything about the way you're feeling. And when you think about it, it is just so hard everything that you deal with. And you wonder if it will ever end. I wake up every day with this thing in my head. It's hard. You're like frozen in everything, and you cannot do anything.**

Delays were particularly stressful for young people approaching the age of 18 years (an age at which when young people's access to social care, education and other support can be affected), or those who were on the threshold of eligibility for leaving-care support which typically ends at the age of 25 years. Besnik, from Albania and about to turn 24, had, spent several years living precariously without papers in the UK before an NGO helped him access the services he needed. He reflected on how the further delays to asylum applications meant that the clock was against him in terms of being able to sustain any support within the social care system. This added to the stresses he was feeling,

**I have to move out and God knows what I have to do after I turn 25. So, I will have no more support from social services. Having to send this fresh claim and being in this anxiety loop of waiting - it hasn't been good. I'm starting therapy because my GP referred me because medicines weren't working. But it hasn't been good because things are getting tighter and nothing's happening for the better; it's just struggles and more problems along the way. There are days I don't want to get up. There are days all I want to do is get outside. There are days I forget to eat or drink.**



Bako, aged 21 from Guinea, who was dealing with the uncertainty of his asylum application alongside an application for being recognised as a victim of trafficking, described how his mental health significantly worsened during Covid-19,

**Covid-19 affected my mental [health] because before the first lockdown, I was not very well. I had some mental sick[ness], and then after the first lockdown came, I was inside the house, and then I had much stress. I was thinking more, I didn't sleep, I didn't do anything, I didn't eat well. Yeah so it's very, very hard.**

### **3. Difficulties in accessing mental health services in person and online**

While Covid-19 is known to have seriously impacted many young people's mental health and wellbeing and generated significant challenges for the provision of appropriate and timely services more broadly (Power et al. 2020; Cowie and Myers 2021), our study highlighted additional challenges for young people seeking asylum.

For example, Dori was responsible for her two younger siblings who both struggled with mental health difficulties. She described how hard it was to get them the support they needed during the pandemic, particularly for her brother (also seeking asylum) who was really struggling during this time,

**Then his therapy was just about to happen, and then it didn't because of Covid-19 so we would chase it as much as we could, for it to be done online. And the response that we got was that, well, now we are just maintaining the sessions and the therapies that have already been. For him to begin, he would have to wait to be put back on the waiting list. So yeah, Covid-19 left him without mental health support [at all] for more than a year, and he still hasn't had any support and his health just kept worsening at the time.**

Dori shared how she couldn't access the intense mental health support she required for past trauma since her psychologist had emphasized the importance of being in a more secure place before they could begin to unravel and work through her previous trauma that led to her claim asylum in the first instance. She reflected on this frustrating situation and the dependency between her asylum status and the bespoke mental health support she so desperately needed,



**The unawareness around a long decision-making process, which is the most important one of your life, is what gives me anxiety, depression and provokes all my past trauma to surface. My therapist said “We cannot start to work on your trauma until you are stable”. While I wait for stability, everything else that is happening, or is NOT happening, makes holding off treatment to my mental wounds unbearable.**

19-year-old Fiona from Albania experienced multiple accommodation moves, which meant that it became increasingly difficult for her to make the most of counselling services available. Just as she got used to talking to one person, she explained, she would have to move and start all over again,

**The other problem that I've been having with the counselling is that because I have changed a lot ... from another area to another area and I don't really feel comfortable to speak with everybody. Once I have one counselling with one person and I'm feeling okay to speak with them, then I would do it. But then when I'm changing all these, I don't feel comfortable with everyone, so this is the reason why, even though I'm having counselling I won't be saying and speaking because I don't feel comfortable to do that.**

While some young people had the opportunity to access services and support online, many identified it as an additional challenge to being able to talk openly about their mental health needs. For example, Besnik's asylum claim depended on a mental health assessment. He described the difficulties of doing this online with someone he had never previously met,

**I had to do my mental, psychiatric support. During zoom that's a three-hour intensive meeting with a psychiatrist...It was hard to open up to someone that you would just see online and meet for the first time online and try and express things that really happened to you online.... In the end of the day, you need to understand how somebody feels when you have them in front of you.... And when it comes to sharing things from your life that are important, and it will make the difference in court or in your case or anything, these are important things the solicitor needs to pick up from me because these things are going to make the difference...people get surprised when they probably find out that I have depression medicines at home...**



**...I have sleep issues and have all these things going on, so they only understand when they're told or when they find out, but only in person. You would not understand someone's rage and when they're talking about something remotely.**

Erion, too, described the difficulty he had in telling his story online when making a case for asylum and highlighted that this online format also meant that there was no support easily available,

**It is difficult to tell the story to somebody who you don't know somehow, I had some trust issues. The zoom is such a hard experience. I couldn't have meetings with my lawyer because of the restrictions, so I had to continue to work virtually. I found it so difficult... I didn't have any mental health support.**

#### **4. Culturally-informed and responsive support services**

Several young people in the study spoke about how their cultural backgrounds influenced whether or not they acknowledged their own mental health struggles and sought or accepted related help and support. Some reflected that it was like 'learning a new language' to speak about their mental health and several admitted feelings of shame. Critically, many emphasized how NGOs provided vital access to support with mental health difficulties, including introducing them to services such as counselling and talking therapies, of which they had no previous knowledge or experience. For many, talking openly about mental distress was considered to be 'taboo' in their home countries. Bardhi from Albania, for example, explained,

**The first time I refused it [counselling] because, I didn't expect it is going to be that way, and I was thinking something else, because in our country, basically we don't have counselling. And we think in a different way. Like if you have a problem with mental health, people they're going to say you're crazy...like ... you can't explain it to someone else 'cos you're going to be ashamed... So I was feeling ashamed as well. I was thinking that way. So she [counsellor] said to me "just give it a go try, maybe it's going to be helpful"..., and she was right. When I started counselling and I really did continue to do it it really helped me out because I was in contact. She was asking how am I doing all this kind of questions and (saying),"we will help you out".**



Where services were tailored and sensitive to young people's needs and cultural background, they proved invaluable in helping them access timely and effective support. Such culturally sensitive provision was almost invariably provided by charities and not-for-profit organisations, however, rather than statutory services. Erion, for example, described what he valued about the support provided by a local charity supporting him and other young Albanians,

**I had these mental health sessions every Thursday. Yeah they had a regular Thursday mental health session call where we just talk with each other. And you had somebody - like a counsellor - to just speak to us and you know we got really, really, friendly and that. I couldn't wait actually all the day to just come to the sessions and just participate in this talk to each other. It was really, really healthy and at the same time, there was some entertainment for example, to play games online to just know it wasn't only for pain.**

Similarly, Fiona explained,

**Somebody from X (NGO), somebody was calling me every day. I was waiting for her call because I didn't have no one you know, as I say, stay in whole day waking up I don't want to wake up in the morning, I was just saying is better, you know to sleep all day and all night because I'm going to get up and what am I going to do, I didn't have TV, I didn't have Internet, what am I going to do.**

19-year-old Rilind from Albania similarly spoke about how the local charity supporting him was a lifeline during the pandemic,

**It was very, very difficult because you can imagine living on £6 a day to buy food first or to buy something for the washing machine or to clean the house... I was speaking to someone who was calling me every day asking if I was good and had enough food, if I didn't have enough money to get through the week or something like that..**

Bahdi went on to describe a combination of comprehensive non-governmental support services that had made life bearable during the pandemic: a refugee support agency had found him a new solicitor with specialist insight into the Albanian context to try to overturn his case; he received counselling support from another charity; and a third Albanian charity was providing a range of other culturally-sensitive support services which kept him going,



I was referred to the counselling from [the charity]. I was going there before lockdown (face-to-face) and I was in touch with them over the phone even in lockdown as well – one hour every two weeks.....I was depressed, as I said. .... I mean it worked well, you know like when you don't know how the experience is and how things work, they give you more hope. Especially when you express your things that happens.....I knew somebody would call me, it was looking like someone is interested, especially, as I said the solicitor from [names second charity]. I had like even X (names third charity) used to call me how am I doing how things going on, I really have people around me the whole time. It made things easier.

## 5. Legacies of Covid-19 and their impacts

After the Covid-19 lockdowns had ended, we spoke to some participants again about whether they thought things had improved since the restrictions had ended. Many reported little difference to their circumstances, which was difficult for them to comprehend. For example, 18-year-old Yussef from Somalia commented,

**During the lockdown we were just at home. The impact on my case, I feel it impacted in a massive way – things were moving over a very slow pace. There were lots of promises made over the course of the lockdown that things would get better, that when things opened up, progress with my case would be much faster – but things have remained the same and it was just wishful thinking.**

Like many other young people, Fiona felt that Covid-19 was used as an excuse not to move forward with asylum applications even after pandemic-related restrictions had ended. She described the knock-on effects for everything else in her life,

**Covid-19 is the excuse that they make but I don't think it is the right thing that they are doing. Because, leaving a person like five years, two years with that stress that they have...thinking every single day “what is going to happen with me?; when am I going to be granted (asylum)?; or am I going to go back to Albania?”. You don't have the rights to do anything like you are not equal with other people. Even at college and everywhere, they don't treat you the same. They treat you differently. They said that you are an immigrant.**





# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Based on the findings from this research, the following recommendations for policy and practice emerge:

- There is a need for greater awareness amongst practitioners and policy makers of the combination of factors undermining the mental health and wellbeing of young people seeking asylum. The stresses and delays of the UK asylum system were found to create significant mental health challenges for young people and exacerbate pre-existing mental health difficulties.
- Efforts need to be made to develop culturally-informed mental health services which are sensitive to the specific needs and challenges experienced by young people subject to immigration controls in the UK.
- Given the mental health benefits of accessing education and training opportunities, widening access for young people seeking asylum should be prioritised by local authorities and education/training providers.
- Local and national governments should increase resources to third sector organisations which have provided critical mental health care and support to young people seeking asylum throughout the pandemic.

For further details of the LOHST project findings and other resources, see <https://livesonhold.org/>.







# ABOUT THE LOHST PROJECT

The ESRC-funded LOSHT project is a peer research study investigating the effects of Covid-19 on children and young people seeking asylum in England. It explores how asylum seekers aged 16-25, as well as lawyers, social workers and charities and support organisations, are responding to the delays and disruption in front line services. The findings will suggest legal, policy and practice proposals to better promote the rights and wellbeing of young people seeking asylum in the UK



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## Researchers:

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Professor Elaine Chase, University College London  
Dr Ingi Iusmen, University of Southampton  
Dr Jana Kreppner, University of Southampton  
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