

## **Learners' Perceptions of Socio-Ecological Risks Experienced During the Covid-19 Pandemic Lockdown in Selected Secondary Schools in Kenya**

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### **Abstract**

Socio-ecological risks against young people are major public health problems with devastating long-term health consequences. There are gaps in research on learner perceptions concerning socio-ecological risks faced during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. This study's main aim was to use participatory visual methodology to gain increased knowledge on learners' perceptions of socio-ecological risks faced during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in selected secondary schools in Kenya while discussing the potential of reaching social change. The study was guided by Freire's empowerment education theory which specializes in encouraging individuals to become vocal about their needs and those of the community. This study took a qualitative approach, a phenomenological critical paradigm, and a participatory visual approach. Data was generated through cellphilms and focus group discussions. Twenty Form 1 and 2 learners were selected purposively in selected secondary schools in Kenya. The data was triangulated and thematically analyzed. The findings reveal that learners perceived socio-ecological risks experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown as: psychologically torturing as they caused fear and led to emotional instability; life destructive for causing learners to drop out of school, losing hope as a result of contracting diseases and becoming pregnant and also leading to family conflicts, and; lowering learners' integrity by causing shame and guilt and leading to victimization of the affected learners. The findings suggest that challenges faced by young people are unprecedented and exclusively hard to navigate leading to devastating challenges. The study recommends that the Ministry of Education and Department of Basic Education should prioritize equitable access to technology and resources that enhance support for mental health and well-being, strengthen social support networks, and foster interdisciplinary research collaborations to address the multifaceted challenges faced by learners in times of crises thereby creating a more inclusive and sustainable educational system.

**Keywords:** *Learners' Perceptions, Socio-Ecological Risks, COVID-19 Pandemic, Lockdown, Voices*

### **1.0 Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic hit hard and interrupted many scopes of our lives, basically education. The interruption of education highlights issues that arise as a result of a pandemic in that the world

underwent an unprecedented alteration. Consequently, schools closed, and millions of learners transitioned to remote learning modalities, basically changing the dynamics of education. However, beyond the immediate challenges posed to academic continuity, a deeper exploration revealed the complex socio-ecological risks faced by learners during the pandemic lockdown period.

When pandemics break out, matters surrounding human well-being in their socio-ecological setup are not side-lined; consequently, human-sensitive responses can go a long way in determining how such occurrences are addressed (Lewis et al., 2021; Baird et al., 2020). Understanding how learners perceived socio-ecological risks during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown is crucial for developing effective strategies to alleviate adverse effects and foster resilience. This exploration probes into the complex relationship between learners and their settings, shedding light on the nuanced dynamics that influence risk perception and response.

In Kenya, the disconnect in Life Skills education has reflective consequences for youth growth and development. There are gaps in research exploring learners' experiences of the school-based approaches to matters connected to socio-ecological risks (Butler et al., 2022, Ogutu, 2021; Oginga et al., 2014). The use of a socio-ecological approach allows for the inquiry of learners within their social contexts and assists with understanding shared relationships between individuals and their social settings. Therefore, this study embarked on unraveling the multifaceted trap of socio-ecological risks as perceived by learners amidst the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. By exploring the interconnectedness between societal constructions, environmental issues, and individual experiences, the study aimed to expound the complex mechanisms that shape risk perceptions and inform adaptive behaviors.

### **1.1 Research Question**

How do learners perceive the socio-ecological risks experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown?

### **1.2 Research Objective**

To explore how learners perceive the socio-ecological risks experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown.

## **2.0 Literature Review**

Learners have different experiences and perceptions of socio-ecological risks they experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. This section focuses on existing literature on perceptions of learners of varied risks they encountered in the socio ecological settings during the pandemic lockdown.

Young people often face significant struggles in getting their voices heard and appreciated (Young et al., 2023; Haynes & Tanner, 2015). Frequently, their voices are absent from discussions about them. Voice and agency, which include one's ability to describe and act upon goals, are key components of youthful empowerment (Mazwi, 2020). As such, learners are the authorities on their own practices, and we cannot fully understand their experiences without taking a young people-centred approach. The COVID-19 crisis highlighted the importance of seeking to enact

learner voice practices. By elevating learner experiences in culturally responsive and sustaining ways, it creates space for learners to think deeply about their communities and bring various locally based, social issues to light. The presence of various risk factors contribute to the mental health of youth and efforts could be taken to promote positive mental health and avoid or lessen mental health problems. Young people with mental health conditions may face challenges in their homes, school, community, and social relationships (Lunneblad et al., 2023).

During the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, young people felt that their homes were no longer safe havens for them and desired they were in school over home (Peterman et al., 2020). The pandemic challenges presented unpredictability and chaos in homes (Daks et al., 2020) and most of the young people faced social seclusion and loneliness during the pandemic lockdown leading to further trauma to some of those with more vulnerability (Thayer et al., 2021; Morgan et al., 2020; Divala et al., 2020; Senghore et al., 2020). The seclusion faced by the young people led to emotional instabilities prompting devastating effects to them and their families (Bundervoet et al., 2022; Brooks et al., 2020; Holmes et al., 2020; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). The risks faced by the young people pushed the disadvantaged learners to the brink of deserting school prematurely (Zuleika et al., 2022; Miller, 2020). For instance, the feelings of shame and guilt significantly contribute to girls dropping out of school due to teenage pregnancy (Ruzibiza, 2021; Laski, 2015) which may have long-term consequences linked to a wide range of emotional responses for those affected (Potard, 2020; Else-Quest, 2014; Aruda et al., 2010). In risky situations, victimization plays a major impediment in managing to get out of risk. Studies have investigated risk factors for young people victimization resulting from family conflicts, sexual violence, alcoholism, and drug and substance abuse, poor parental guidance and monitoring among other issues (Kisaakye et al., 2023; Assink et al., 2019; Galabo & Gempes, 2017). These challenges have triggered mental health challenges among the affected young people (Brook-Sanzana et al., 2023; Bradbury-Jones, 2020; Andreou, 2020). Therefore, it is imperative to find ways that prevent young people from risks as well as solutions to problems caused by risks.

Hlad et al. (2022) contend that the contemporary context has exposed young people to varied risky ventures predisposed by availability of internet. This has exposed them to sexual content including pornographic materials which subsequently shape their developing sexuality (Crabbe & Flood, 2021). Negotiating between their new and old morality often results in confusion of what is acceptable and what is not. Thus, the gap between the youth and adults discussing young people must be addressed with urgency by adapting the modern education programme to cater for the young people's needs.

Cubero-Pérez et al. (2023) argue that, learners need to be considered as intermediaries of their own lives by giving them the chance for their voices to be heard and acted upon. Besides providing learners with avenues to communicate their thoughts and feelings, learner voice is also about learners having the power to bring about changes which improve their experiences at school and in the community (Unterhalter et al., 2023; Cubero-Pérez et al., 2023). The increase in young people's risks in the communities during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown period points to weaknesses in the community young people protection system that would need to be addressed. This study thus, sought to assign responsibilities for young people protection and defense on the

young people themselves, by finding ways and solutions that make them capable to manage their own lives more especially in times of crises.

### 3.0 Materials and Methods

This study employed a qualitative approach located within a critical paradigm and a phenomenological research design. Purposive and convenient sampling designs were used to select participants from selected secondary schools in Kenya. The participants were in Form 1 and 2 as these classes consist of learners taking Life Skills curriculum in their classes. Three schools were selected (Private and Public schools, two of single sex and one mixed sex) purposively. Five learners were included per school, and consideration of equal gender representation in the mixed sex school was made to avoid research bias. So, in total, data was generated from twenty participants. Cellphilms were used to generate the data on learners' perceptions of socio-ecological risks experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. Cellphilming is a participatory visual method which focusses on cellphone video production with research participants as a participatory visual research method (MacEntee et al., 2016). There was a total of 6 Cellphilms from participant learners in the selected secondary schools. This method democratized the research process and gave participants liberty to share information with ease. In groups, participants created a storyboard template on which to plan and execute a story and facilitate the process. The researcher encouraged them to have a maximum of six scenes for their philms. The storyboards created by participants were collected and later used as part of the analysis in this study. After the participants had created the storyboards, the researcher then handed them a cellphone to set off to produce the philms. The participants philmed a variety of clips from which they were shared using the researcher-owned cellphone camera.

Focus group discussion was also used with learners to generate the data on their perceptions of socio-ecological risks experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. The focus group discussion was useful in eliciting more information from learners' cellphilms (Creswell & Poth, 2022). Meanings and answers arising during focus group interviews are socially constructed rather than individually created (Creswell, 2014). Twenty learners from the three selected secondary schools participated in the focus group discussion. The researcher took the role of a moderator to guide and direct the discussion.

The generated data was organized and analysed thematically. The researcher utilised the six steps of thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2022) and Creswell (2014) to analyse the data, this involved immersion in the data by viewing and reading through transcripts several times, generating codes, searching for categories and themes, reviewing, defining and naming themes and presenting themes.

### 4.0 Findings and Discussion

This study sought to explore how learners perceived socio-ecological risks experienced during COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. The findings are discussed in this section.

#### **4.1 Learners Perception of Socio-Ecological Risks Experienced During COVID-19 Pandemic Lockdown**

Learners from the selected secondary schools gave their views on their perception of socio-ecological risks experienced during COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. The findings are discussed under three themes generated from the data; these include;

- 1) Psychologically torturing,
- 2) Life destructive, and
- 3) Lowering integrity.

##### **4.1.1 Theme 1 Psychologically torturing**

This refers to the infliction of physical or mental suffering on a person. The risks that learners faced during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown inflicted so much pain on them both physically and mentally. The data generated from the participants indicate that the learners have varied perceptions of the socio-ecological risks experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. These include:

- (i) Fear, and
- (ii) Emotional instability (see table 1)

**Table 1: Theme 1 and its categories**

Theme 1	Categories
Psychologically torturing	Fear
	Emotional instability/distress

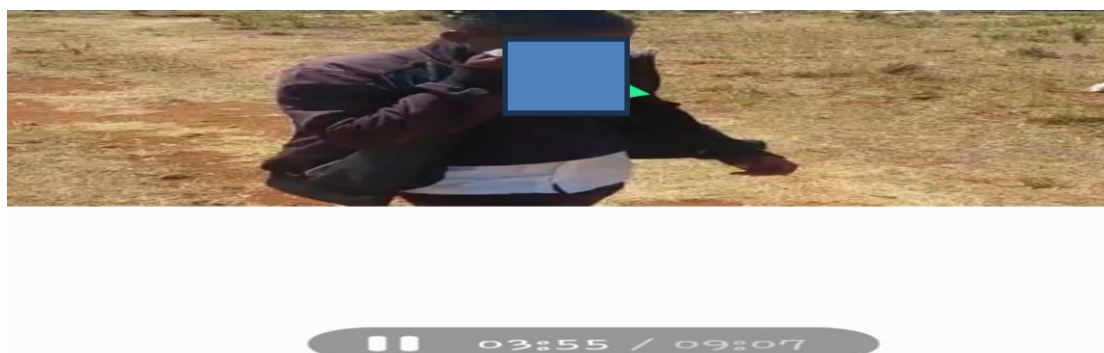
##### **4.1.1.1 Fear**

Fear is a result of psychological distress resulting from actions. It violates someone's moral and ethical conduct. Researchers have found that most risk issues affecting the young people occur while they are away from school (Litz, 2009). While governments focused on containment of the pandemic, they failed to put into consideration the risks that the young people were possibly going through because of the lockdown. Participants perceived that the risks experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic created a sense of fear in them. The risk in this category includes sexual violence and suicide.

The victims of sexual violence were mostly deceived, enticed or forced by the offenders into the sexual abuse. Such victims developed fear of staying around people that could possibly exert the same physical harm on them. This means that such victims need support network and strategize to cope with the trauma associated with sexual violence to avoid a reoccurrence (Papalia et al., 2021; Addae, 2021). Some participants complained of long-lasting psychological harm because of sexual violence. In the focus group discussion, a participant mentioned that:

*My cousin developed fear after being consistently molested by strange men. She decided to commit suicide. That was a very low moment for us.*





**Figure 1: Cellphilm presentation of a girl after being sexually molested by three men.**

The picture presented, is part of the cellphilm created by the participants, the girl in the picture is frowning and fearful after being attacked and raped by three men at ago. She shuns away from facing her fears and hides the truth from her parents who later own discover it as she became pregnant.



**Figure 2: A Cellphilm presentation of a victim of sexual molestation finally facing her mother**

Young people who became victims of family fights developed fear associated with their family environment. They perceived fear as having led them loose trust in their family. Participants felt that their homes were no longer safe havens for them and preferred school over home (Peterman et al., 2020).

In conclusion, since learners regard schools as safe havens, the school counselling units should always strive to offer learners that went through such fears during the pandemic lockdown to fit with the rest of the learners in their institutions.

#### **4.1.1.2 Emotional instability/distress**

Emotional instability refers to a form of behavior characterized by prevailing, erratic, and sometimes rapid changes in emotions, thoughts, moods, and feelings of a person.

It was hard for the learners to cope with the school closures and loss of learning loss. Most learners faced social seclusion and solitude during the pandemic and some of them with more vulnerability experienced further trauma and disruption. These disruptions stretched from loss of

members of the family, loss of parents and guardians' jobs loss, heightened poverty levels leading to food and accommodation insecurity and turning caregivers for their siblings (Winston, 2022).

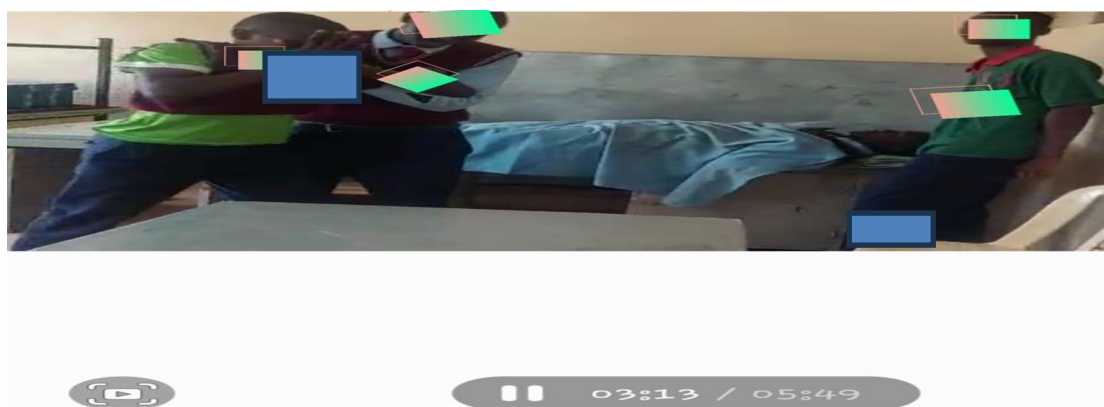


**Figure 3: A cellphilm of learners coping with abrupt school closures and exposure to risks.**

The cellphilms presented are presentation shared by teams of the participants sharing that the pandemic lockdown period was emotionally difficult for them and their families. They had suffered domestic and sexual abuse, and they carried these traumatic experiences back to schools as they reopened. The young people's social lives were greatly impacted by the pandemic since they lost their experience of connecting with peers and adults in the academic setup. This led to increased loneliness and social isolation therefore causing their emotional instabilities (Holmes et al., 2020; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020).

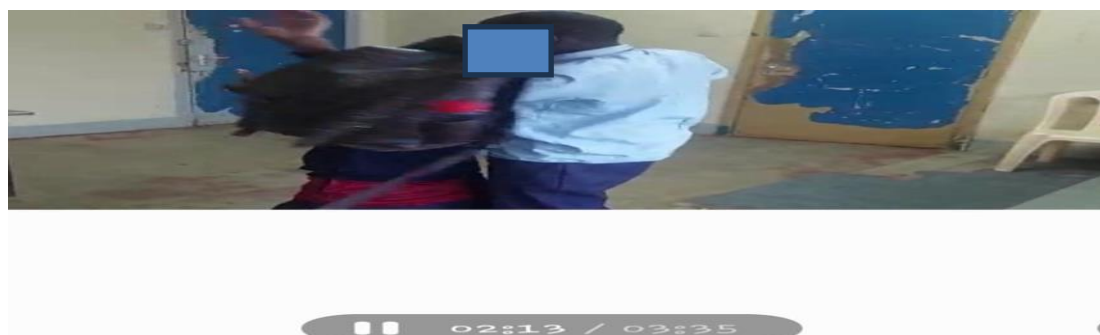
Learners hailing from economically straining families are more likely to face emotional and mental health problems, this could negatively affect their effectiveness and quality of life (Bundervoet et al., 2022; Brooks et al., 2020). In the focus group discussion, a participant mentioned that her parents were unable to feed her with her young child and she went through a lot looking for casual jobs to get money for food. She admitted going through emotional torture because of the heavy responsibility at home.

Similarly, in a cellphilm shared by one of the teams, Thored shares his experience of going through an emotional trauma because of losing his father. His father was a doctor at a hospital in town and his mother is a housewife. In June 2020, he lost his father due to COVID-19 related complications. This caused stress on him as well as their family who were worried about how they were going to survive without money. This stress led Thored into drug and substance abuse to relieve himself from the tension. The stress affected him a lot that he had to be taken to a rehabilitation center for containment as a rescue strategy.



**Figure 4: A cellphilm of a distressed child (Thored) who lost their family breadwinner**

Another traumatic experience shared by the participants involved one of them (Lez) going through an emotional phase after his father lost his job during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. Being the eldest son, he had to be a caregiver and provide for his family that was already worried on how they would get food and pay rent. He resorted to stealing to money to buy food. His father later own discovered and was stopped from doing so. Later own when schools opened, and his father was still jobless, he did not want to engage with his classmates, he disengaged for a couple of months and fell off in class. He was later taken through counselling sessions. This simply implies that the lack of basic needs are indeed a harmful source of anger, anxiety, and frustration (Brooks et al., 2020).



**Figure 5: A cellphilm of a young person (Lez) stealing to get money for their family subsistence**

Indeed, COVID-19 related risks and hopelessness led the young people to emotional instabilities during and after the pandemic lockdown. Despite the downsides, the pandemic gave the young people an opportunity to cross check their lives and make decisions that improve their lives now and in the future.

#### **4.1.2 Theme 2: Life destructive**

COVID-19 pandemic is one of the biggest life destructive pandemics that the world has ever faced. It destroyed individuals in all aspects of their lives. COVID-19 had a significant effect on the academic lives of the young people. This is because people all over the world were forced to adjust to a life other than the norm, staying home safely and avoiding further spread of the disease.



From the participants responses, they perceived the pandemic lockdown as life destructive in that it led to:

- (i) Dropping out of school,
- (ii) Family conflicts, and
- (iii) Loosing hope because of contracting diseases and becoming pregnant (see table 2).

**Table 2: Theme 2 and its categories**

Theme 2	Categories
Life destructive	i. Dropping out of school ii. Family conflicts iii. Losing hope after contracting diseases and getting pregnant

#### **4.1.2.1 Dropping out of school**

Education is an essential human right and basically empowers human beings to be free from all kinds of seclusion and domination. It contributes to the fullest development of human beings and a deprivation of education destroys the future wellbeing of an individual. The more educated individuals are, the more it contributes to the nation's developmental options (Tenbusch, 2016; Basher, 2010). A learner's drop out of school is characterized by many parameters ranging from individual, family and social one. For instance, sexual and reproductive health harms (i.e., pregnancy), poverty and gender inequality (Zuleika et al., 2022; Duke, 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, many academic institutions shifted from face-to-face to virtual teaching. Most learners were affected worldwide especially those that could not manage to adapt to remote learning because of the mentioned varied challenges (Moscoviz et al., 2022; UNESCO, 2020).

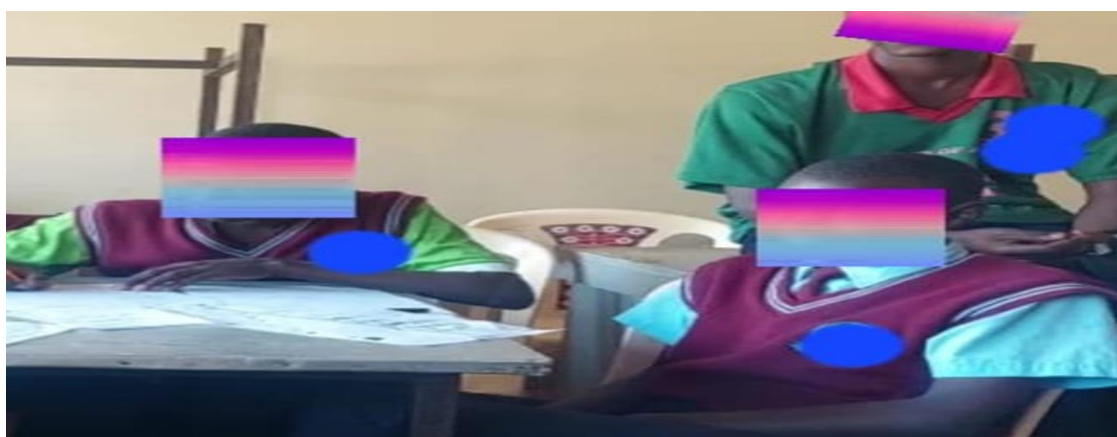


**Figure 6: A cellphilm presentation of learners idling and engaging in life destructive activities (smoking)**



**Figure 7: A cellfilm of three young people after sexually molesting a girl**

This literature is supported by data from this study in that the cellfilms presented, demonstrate that young people were left out in online learning as their schools did not have such learning arrangements. This then led them to engage in peer activities that were life destructive (i.e., sexual activities leading to pregnancies and abortion that had long term health effects as well as drug addiction). Consequently, some of their peers dropped out of school after the pandemic lockdown. Having schools shut down, most learners from low socio-economic status experienced increased school dropout rates globally after the lockdown was lifted. In rural parts of Kenya, researchers observed a triplicated risk of school dropout amongst secondary school learners more especially the girls from 3.2% in pre-pandemic years to 9.4% during the pandemic period (Zulaika et al., 2022). COVID-19 pandemic lockdown threatened the unhampered school attendance by many learners globally, broadening the educational and social discrepancy among them. Thus, rendering the disadvantaged learners more at risk of deserting school prematurely (Zuleika et al., 2022; Miller, 2020). This study highlighted the harmful and possibly long-term effects COVID-19 pandemic on the learners with dropout rates varying intensely across settings, concentrated more among learners from low-income families. The findings in this study are in line with other studies that have shown heightened life destructive repercussions as caused by COVID-19 related containments.



**Figure 8: A cellphilm of three boys brainstorming**

In the attached cellphilm, the three boys were sharing ideas on how to make money for their social needs. The long stay away from school gave them opportunities to engage in manual work which had negative effects as they confessed that some of their friends quit school after the lockdown because they had subsequently turned breadwinners in their families. One of them had dropped along the way but had been convinced to return by his guardian. The participants views align with some studies that show that once engaged in economic activities, the young people had to maintain those engagements even after schools reopened to aid sustain their families (Burzynska et al., 2020; Baron et al., 2020; Zuleika et al., 2022).

Zuleika et al. (2022) mention that some factors that lead to school dropout are pregnancy cases as experienced by some participants as given in the cellphilms and focus group discussions. Two girl participants were forced to be away from school after resumption because of pregnancy. They were later taken back to school by well-wishers and parents that opted to take care of their babies for them to get a chance of going back to school. It is worth noting that not most of their peers were lucky to be part of the return to school team and are struggling to make ends meet at home.

**Figure 9: A cellphilm presentation of a young nursing mother who had to drop out of school after becoming a young mother**

In conclusion, COVID-19 pandemic lockdown and related school closures had substantial life destructive effects on schooling. Therefore, appropriate measures that support in buffering the consequences of such emergencies on vulnerable young people are warranted.

#### **4.1.2.2 Family conflicts**

The COVID-19 pandemic lockdown degenerated the living conditions of young people, placing them at an increased risk of diverse forms of abuse. Reports indicate that there were increased cases of family conflicts during this period (Usher et al., 2020). This was heightened by pandemic-related tension and income loss. Because of the diminishing household incomes, being idle, feeling less safe at home and persistent quarrels by household members, the young people were pushed to engage in life destructive activities. This included peer influenced activities such as sexual indulgence which exposed them to risks of STIs and HIV and AIDS, drug and substance abuse, abortions among other risks (Muzungu, 2020; Baron et al., 2020). Family related stress can be a drive to mental health problems for young people across the lifespan. This is associated with a lack of a positive and supportive home and learning environments.



The literature given is similar to participants cellphilm production as given:

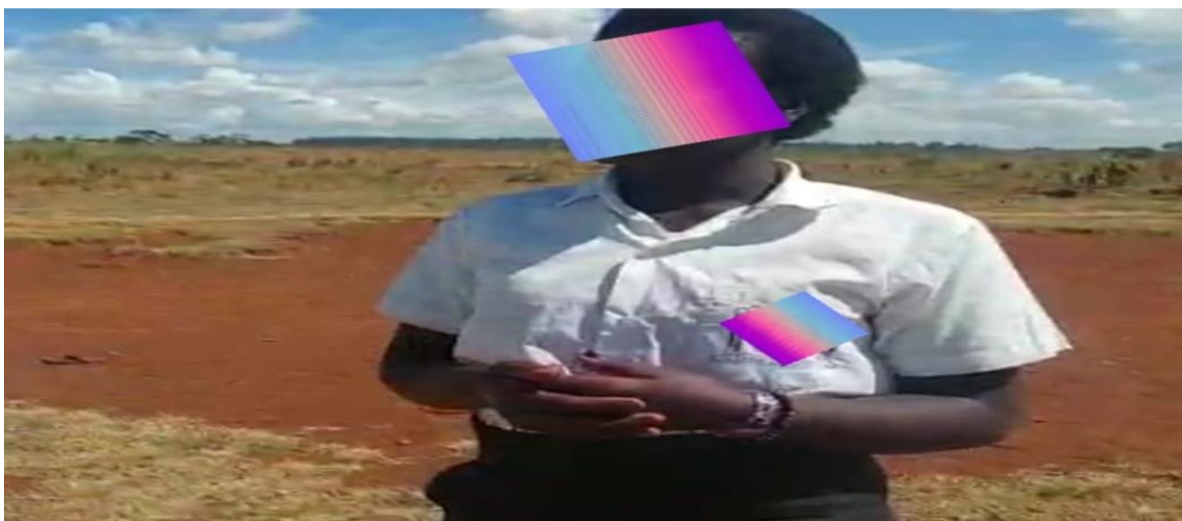


**Figure 10: A cellphilm of young people who have resorted to drug abuse because of family related conflicts**

Because of the containment directive by the government, there was a lot of much stress in the homes and the young people filmed, would meet up to pass time, they influenced each other into drug and substance abuse. This did not go well with them as they became addicts. On one occasion, they raped a girl that was walking alone in the forested area they would meet up. All these are life destructive as they risked contacting sexually transmitted diseases and health related complications as a result of drug addiction.

In the focus group discussion, a participant said:

*I come from a large family. Because of family conflicts, I decided to look for a job so that I could buy food, because that was the cause of our problems. I was cheated by a man that pretended he could give me money if I slept with him. I got pregnant and he gave me money for abortion and disappeared. I used the money to buy food for my family. I am currently raising my child as I go to school.*



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<https://journals.mu.ac.ke/index.php/edj/>

**Figure 11: A cellphilm of a girl in a family conflict for getting pregnant after a mass rape**

From these data, it is suggested that pandemic challenges may introduce volatility and chaos into the household (Daks et al., 2020). As parents struggle meeting their demands, they may permit their children greater independence or dependency on children to sustain the family. Thus, exposing them to risky behaviours outside their homes (Sanzana et al., 2023). These family struggles can be a push factor to teenage pregnancy and early marriage, which persist to be significant difficulties for Kenya's adolescent girls, limiting their ability to complete school and exploit their potential (MoH, 2021; WHO, 2020).

Domestic conflicts, poverty, hunger and food insecurity area life destructive as they push people within a household to indulge in risky activities (Divala et al., 2020; Senghore et al., 2020). These critical challenges among households aggravate cases of exposure to increased rape, drug and substance abuse, exposure to pornographic materials, drug and substance abuse and suicidal ideation (MOE, 2020; UNESCO, 2020).

During the pandemic lockdown, there were also cases of conflicts among the children within the home. The sudden changes and divergent responsibilities contributed to their emotional distress during the pandemic lockdown (Daks et al., 2020; Tang et al., 2021). This paved way into engaging in greater household chaos that were life destructive to the well-being of the young people (Marsh et al., 2020).

It is recommended that parents, guardians and teachers generate constructive and helpful home and learning settings that may help lower levels of adopting distress in young people especially during pandemic lockdowns.

**4.1.2.3 Losing hope after contracting diseases and getting pregnant**

Hope is proactive eagerness attached with risk and progressive waiting (Bruininks, 2016; Roitman, 2014). Schools have always been considered crucial in supporting the health and wellbeing of learners as they provide whole round opportunities that can aid in protecting against negative outcomes (Humphrey et al., 2013). COVID-19 pandemic lockdown exposed learners to various risks in their socio-ecological settings that could have been partly preventable had they been in school. There were increased cases of STIs including HIV and AIDS, unplanned pregnancies, sexual violence, untreated physical injuries and suicide (UN Women & Snyder, 2020; Shipeolu et al., 2020). Failure to support young people that became victims of these issues risked losing hope in life (Shipeolu et al., 2020) since such risks possibly led to early end of education or mental health problems amongst the young people therefore reducing their chances of securing rewarding employment as adults.

In Kenya, media reports stated spiked adolescent pregnancies due to COVID-19 associated restraint measures, this raised concerns about schooling outcomes to the vulnerable youth (Nyothach, 2021; Mersie, 2020). Girls who were pregnant had a high chance of marrying, despite their young age whereas some dropped out of school. Withdrawal from school is directly linked to lose of hope for a brighter future by the victims heightened by depression levels, social stigma, emotional support, isolation and lack of proper access to good healthcare (Thayer et al., 2021; Morgan et al., 2020).



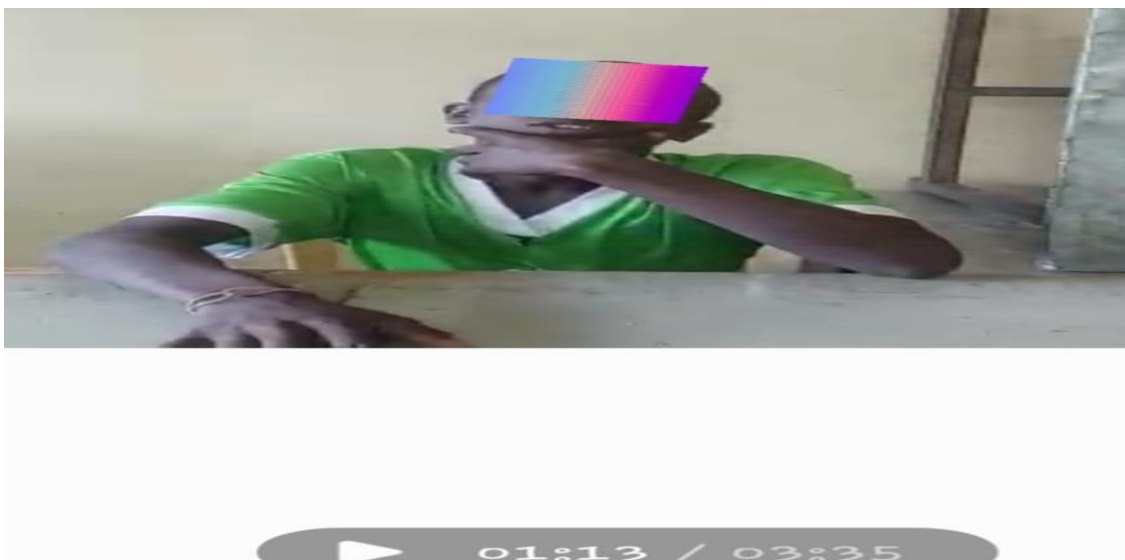
The participants shared the following views suggesting how devastated they were as a result of the pandemic lockdown. In the focus group discussion, a participant said:

*... hopefully my baby will get a good education. My academic life has been affected because of the baby; I feel like giving up in life but I hope everything will work out.*

Another participant said:

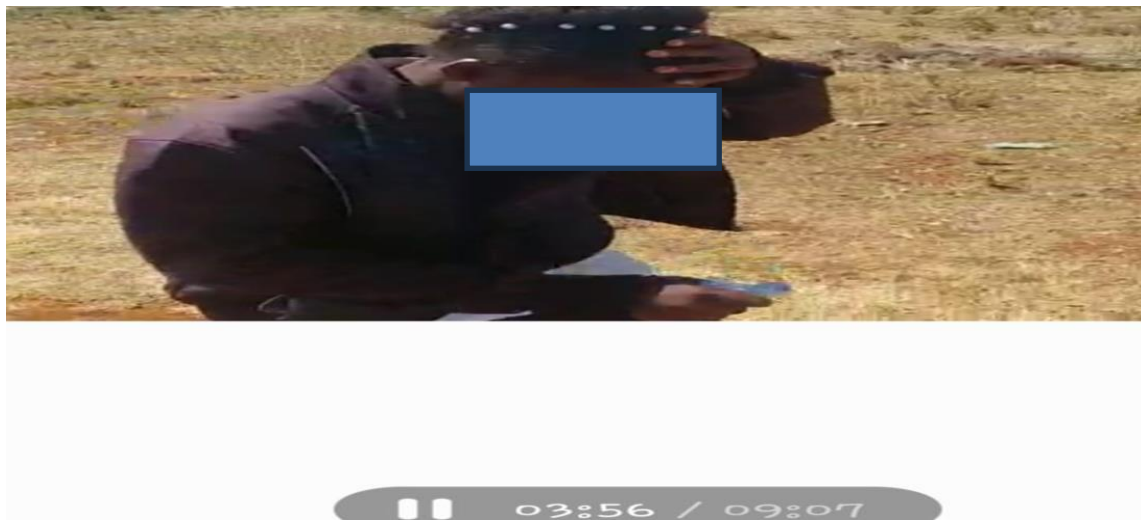
*I could not believe I was HIV positive; it was like my life had come to an end... I am currently trying to pick up and accept and move on as I take drugs.*

In a cellphilm, a participant is seen contemplating quitting school as a result of depression.



**Figure 12: A cellphilm of a depressed boy contemplating suicide**

In another cellphilm, the participants demonstrate a pictured destructive effect of risks whereby a female participant contemplates committing suicide because got raped and contacted STIs.



**Figure 13: A presentation of a girl with suicidal thoughts**

In conclusion, young people need a proper support from guardians, parents and teachers whenever they are going through stressful periods, a failure to which they may engage in life destructive activities that will see them not having fulfilling lives as adults.

#### **4.1.3 Theme 3: Lowering integrity**

Integrity refers to the quality of honesty and upholding strong moral values. Shameful deeds can allow one's principles, standards and morals to be lowered. In the study, participants perceived the risks they encountered in their socio-ecological settings as a lowering their integrity because of:

- (i) Shame and guilt they experienced afterwards, and
- (ii) It led to victimization.

This is discussed in detail in these categories herein (see table 3).

**Table 3: Theme 3 and its categories**

Theme 3	Categories	
Lowering integrity	i.	Shame and guilt
	ii.	Victimization

##### **4.1.3.1 Shame and guilt**

When young people face risky situations in their socio-ecological environments, they tend to be engulfed with feelings of shame and guilt as a result. Young people who have experienced social harms, such as early pregnancies, female genital mutilation, sexual and gender-based violence, early marriage, risky and unsafe abortions, domestic violence and a lack of emotional support withdraw from associating with the rest and might opt to leave their societies altogether (Nyothach, 2021).

The feelings of shame and guilt significantly contribute to girls dropping out of school due to teenage pregnancy (Ruzibiza, 2021; Laski, 2015). In some countries like Burundi, pregnancy

makes the end of education for teenage girls whereas in Kenya, there is usually a return to school policy that has not been clearly outlined therefore letting affected girls less confident to face their peers (Ruzibiza, 2021; Ndizeye, 2016). Pregnant youth dealing with feelings of shame, guilt, anger, disowning may end up depressed and having low self-esteem. Such victims shy off from seeking help from the people around them which lead to further seclusion from society (Potard, 2020).

It is worth noting that shameful behaviours such as sexual indulgence, crime and substance abuse among the young people are a drive to depression, isolation and low self-esteem as a result of guilt and shame; which may have long term consequences linked to a wide range of emotional responses for those affected (Potard, 2020; Else-Quest, 2014; Aruda et al., 2010). These feelings of shame and guilt could lead to signs of depression and suicidal ideation as a way of disorienting the shame and guilt.

Data from the field indicate that participants experienced cases of shame and guilt because of the risky experiences they faced in their socio-ecological settings as given:

In a focus group discussion, a participant said:

*I do not have support from anyone. My peers are laughing at me for becoming pregnant and getting a baby. Girls in my estate talk badly about me. I feel very bad.*

Another participant shared that:

*I have lived with the shame of contracting HIV and AIDS. Girls who know about my situation do not come near me. I am lonely and sometimes feel like killing myself.*

A similar experience is shared by yet another participant in a cellphilm:

*After being raped and childbirth, my mother took care of the child and I went back to school, but it was not easy for me in class. I have always tried to concentrate in vain. I am ashamed of what occurred to me, I end up crying.*



**Figure 14: Presentation of a girl crying whenever she thinks of the risks she faced**

In conclusion, young people should be guided to explore their roles as self-agents in relation to conceivable risks and protective qualities that seek constructive well-being among the young people.

#### **4.1.3.2 Victimization**

Victimization is an act of unjust treatment. Studies have investigated risk factors for adolescent victimization which result from family conflicts, sexual violence, poor parental guides, and monitoring among other issues (Assink et al., 2019; Galabo & Gempes, 2017). Recent studies established that the number of youth victimization cases increased during COVID-19 pandemic promoted by the lockdown measures in countries around the world. This has triggered mental

health challenges among the affected young people (Bravo-Sanzana et al., 2023; Bradbury-Jones, 2020; Andreou, 2020). Some young people who have faced sexual violence in the communities possess symptoms of depression and face victimization. Other studies have investigated that youth face social seclusion, humiliation and discrimination as a result of teenage pregnancies (Galabo & Gempe; 2017; Cherry & Dillon, 2014). Such victims become subjects of gossip and neighbourhood talk and make them feel out of place in the company of their peers, classmates and friends who take them as a letdown (Cherry & Dillon, 2014).

One participant commented that:

*I was judged by neighbours who mocked and gossiped about me. Some referred to me as a prostitute not knowing what I was going through.*

In other situations, parents of the girl may discourage them from going back to school because they are trying to protect their reputation and limit the victim's exposure to victimization from community and peers (Right to Education Initiative & Hakijamii, 2020). This was shared by a participant who said:

*My father did not really want to see me go back to school after my rape incident and getting the baby. I had been rejected by my friends and my father felt that it was not the right time for me to go back to school. My mother talked to him as she was willing to take care of the baby so that I could come back to school.*

This suggests the importance of creating awareness about the preventive strategies for creating safe spaces that reduce disparities among the young people should there be other pandemics in the future. Some studies suggested that alcohol and substance abuse played a crucial role in heightening victimization risks among the youth. This happen when the peers disassociate with those who have turned addicts of alcoholism and substance abuse because of fears of being influenced (Kisaakye et al., 2023). This is shared in the data of one of the groups. In a cellphilm, participants filmed a boy that was into deep thought as a result of taking drugs and being left out by the friends. The friends had been warned by their parents from associating with him.



**Figure 15: A cellphilm presentation of a boy who is being victimized by peers and society**

In conclusion, findings from this study have shed more light on the unmet necessities of vulnerable young people who navigate risky exploits on their own while lacking support from peers, family and friends. It is suggested that policies concerning the same issues be looked into so as to avert future problems.

### 5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown presented unprecedented challenges that required innovative coping strategies to support learners' academic, emotional, and social well-being. Young people were not well prepared to face the challenges associated with the pandemic lockdown. They perceived the risks as having caused them individual and societal harm since they were not well equipped with strengths-based approaches to intervene in their own problems.

It is recommended that the education policy makers including Kenya Institute of Curriculum developers and Ministry of Education, Department of Basic Education, should ensure that the Life Skills education curriculum is examinable in schools. This would ensure effective delivery of the programme to prepare young people to face rising challenges in their socio-ecological settings. Therefore, averting individual and societal harm. As well, County governments' education departments in collaboration with child protection units should provide community resources centres that offer effective guidance and counselling sessions for young people. They should also be made functional to help young people that face life threatening risks in the society. Moreover, teachers and parents should take young people through school based and community workshops that equip them with strengths-based knowledge approaches to intervene when faced with problems during crises.

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### Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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