

Learning on the margins:

The evolving nature of educational vulnerability in the occupied Palestinian territory in the time of Covid-19

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Cover photo: Yousef Hammash/NRC

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Haitham, 12, reading on a hill in Jabal Al-Baba, a Bedouin community in Area C of the West Bank, on 15 September 2020. Photo: Ahmad Al-Bazz/NRC

Executive summary

Covid-19 has been a significant shock on the education system and Palestinian society more broadly. The severity and prevalence of Covid-19 in the West Bank and Gaza has varied since the coronavirus was first detected in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) in early March 2020, as has the nature of the response from Palestinian government and educational service providers.

The study explores the differential impacts Covid-19 has on various sub-groups of students, based on age, gender, location, and vulnerability status of the school and wider community, using existing data collected through NRC's flagship psychosocial support and social emotional learning programme (PSS/SEL), known as the Better Learning Programme (BLP). The study compares 2019 and 2020 data, collected as part of the BLP's implementation in Palestinian Ministry of Education schools in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and Gaza Strip. The analysis also compares results between the most vulnerable and less vulnerable schools in Gaza and the West Bank.

Key findings: Gaza Strip

There has been a steep decline in the well-being and academic engagement of students across the Gaza Strip.

In the Gaza Strip, the well-being outcomes of students declined between 2019 and 2020 (in the midst of Covid-19). Prior to Covid-19, 80.7 per cent of students in Gaza had a positive outlook on the future. By September 2020, in the midst of Covid-19, this dropped to 29.5 per cent of students. Likewise, learning from home proved to be a significant challenge for students in Gaza. Prior to Covid-19, 76.38 per cent felt they could easily concentrate on their schoolwork, likely because at that time, they were doing this in school. In September 2020, when all students in Gaza were completing their schoolwork at home, only 27.38 per cent felt this way.

Only 4.16 per cent of students in the more vulnerable schools felt safe at home “sometimes” or “always”, while 43.68 per cent in the less vulnerable schools felt this way. Likewise, 53.68 per cent of students in the less vulnerable schools reported their parents asking them about how they were doing sometimes or always. In the more vulnerable schools, only 3.33 per cent reported this to be the case. **It is important to note these differences in well-being were not prevalent in 2019—highlighting that for a range of factors, Covid-19 has led to a gap in well-being outcomes between the more and less vulnerable schools in Gaza.**

Regarding the e-learning programme adopted by the Ministry of Education, it was found that males are four times less likely to be engaged in e-learning than females. Student responses in 2020 suggest that males continue to report lower well-being outcomes than females across all statements, continuing a trend from 2019. It was also identified that females in more vulnerable schools have seen the most sizeable declines in their well-being between 2019 and 2020. Similarly, in 2019, the overwhelming majority, some 87.5 per cent, of these girls felt optimistic about the future, while in 2020, 1.5 per cent reported feeling this way.

Key findings: West Bank

There have been improvements in the well-being of students in the West Bank, in the context of Covid-19 due to supportive and protective home environments.

In West Bank, there were improvements in well-being for students between 2019 and 2020. In response to the statement, “I can easily concentrate on schoolwork”, in 2019, 77.99 per cent of students felt this way sometimes or always. In 2020, 88 per cent of students identified feeling this way sometimes or always. With regards to the statement, “I feel safe at home”, in 2019, 85 per cent of students felt this way sometimes or always, but in 2020, 92 per cent of students identified feeling this way. Likewise, students felt they were better able to speak to their parents about their worries in 2020, with 76.5 per cent reporting being able to do this sometimes or always, than they were in 2019, when 57.5 per cent reported sometimes or always being able to do so.

These responses appear to signal that despite the disruptions to schooling faced by children across the West Bank throughout 2020, their home environment and wider social systems are enabling children to engage remotely in learning and also contribute positively to their well-being. This appears to also be supporting their overall well-being through well-established connections to peers, families, and other adults outside the home. The survey of parents or caregivers conducted by NRC in September 2020 suggested that the vast majority, some 79 per cent, reported their children to be participating in e-learning.

The fact that the vulnerability status of schools in the West Bank became less of a determinate of well-being in 2020 highlights how eliminating the need to travel to and from school, along learning in unsafe environments, may serve to improve the well-being of these young people. It is well documented by the Ministry of Education and partners that attacks on education are a major cause of educational vulnerability and students’ psychosocial distress. Israeli armed forces are frequently present outside schools. Israeli soldiers and settlers regularly attack schools and school students, and destroy Palestinian homes and infrastructure, especially in Area C of the West Bank.

Eliminating the need to travel to school also has gendered and age specific implications. Adolescent boys are more vulnerable to violence and are more likely to be targeted by Israeli forces at checkpoints for stops and searches when travelling to school. This is also supported by stakeholder interviews, conducted in January 2020. Covid-19 restrictions, which forced boys to stay at home, may have actually reduced, if not prevented, their exposure to violence outside the home, which mitigates their risk of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, suicidal ideation and risk behaviour. This may also explain why for boys, there were particularly sizeable improvements in well-being in 2020.

Conclusion

As the findings from this study suggest, the impact of Covid-19 on learners in oPt are far from uniform. **The current period of learning from home has been advantageous for some learners, but not for others.** This suggests that universal responses within and across the educational landscape across oPt may not address the well-being and learning needs of all students. Additionally, while ensuring students have access to learning opportunities outside the classroom is important, it is critical to understand some of the barriers that preclude these students from engaging or succeeding in e-learning. As the study highlights, many factors in the home, which extend well beyond access to internet or Additionally, while ensuring students have access to learning opportunities outside the classroom is important, it is critical to understand some of the barriers that preclude these students and participation. Lastly, the research indicates that beyond just access to learning materials and teachers, many students need to have ongoing social connections to their peers. For some students, particularly female students in Gaza, these connections are a critical outlet to their overall well-being and outlook on life at a time of increased isolation at home.

Additionally, greater attention must be paid on focusing energies and efforts towards households where parents and caregivers do not have the necessary capacities or time to support their children's learning and well-being. This might include support to these parents and caregivers, or more extensive engagement by schools and other social services with children in these homes.



School children in the Ras At-Tin community, east of the West Bank city of Ramallah, in October 2020. Photo: Fadi Arouri/NRC

Introduction

The study is the culmination of 18 months of collaboration between the University of Auckland (UoA) and the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) in occupied Palestinian territory (oPt), based on support from the EU Humanitarian Aid. This research-practice partnership set out to better understand whether and how current sector definitions of educational vulnerability—defined largely by access-related constraints to education—impact on student learning and well-being outcomes. When Covid-19 hit in early 2020, the research focus changed. It shifted to exploring how the pandemic has differentially impacted on students' engagement and participation in virtual or e-learning platforms, as well as their overall psychosocial well-being based on primary and secondary data collected, reviewed and analysed by UoA and NRC.

This paper is a precis of the full technical paper produced with all the academic background and justifications. The full report is available, Please contact NRC for the full report. It begins by providing a bit of context for the study and summarises the data collected. It then moves to present some of the key findings that arose from analysis of these data, for both Gaza and West Bank. At the end, some key implications from this study are provided. Readers interested to understand more on how key findings presented were reached, or analysis conducted are encouraged to read the full technical report.



Palestinian students leaving Asma bint Abi Baker primary school in Sheikh Radwan neighbourhood, Gaza city, on 29 March 2021. Photo: Yousef Hammash/NRC

Context for this study

Educational vulnerability in occupied Palestinian territory

Fifty-three years of occupation of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and thirteen years of a siege imposed on Gaza have led to ever-increasing humanitarian needs across oPt. In the education sector, the prioritisation and targeting of schools for education in emergencies and/or humanitarian-focused support in oPt has largely been directed towards learners and school communities facing the greatest conflict-related barriers to schooling. This is often related to restrictions in mobility, distance to schooling, exposure to violence to/from/in school, or the active denial or removal of educational services due to the ongoing occupation. In oPt, these issues are often locational in nature, and based on where communities are located, with them being most acute in Area C, Hebron H2, East Jerusalem, and at times of violent escalation, communities across the Gaza Strip. The result is that humanitarian support to the education sector has a long-standing precedent for targeting communities in these areas over others with a clear focus on ensuring protective access.¹ This is based on an assumption that locational-based factors are the most critical determinate for identifying the most vulnerable learners.

Yet, international research suggests that the interrelationship between risk, vulnerability and resilience is not linear, but rather multifaceted, in conflict-affected contexts.² On one hand, pre-existing inequalities in society are often exacerbated by acute or protracted crises situations, and can lead to longer-term barriers to children returning to and remaining in schooling.³ Educational vulnerabilities, and the ensuing marginalisation it produces, are often a combination of group-based, poverty-related, location-specific and individual factors, which manifest themselves in intersectional ways.⁴ In oPt specifically, this appears to be recognised in development-focused programming; but humanitarian responses still remain largely focused on assessing risks and vulnerabilities quite narrowly (as specified above), and potentially with too little coherence with coordination across the humanitarian-development nexus to addressing systemic inequalities, protection needs, and group and poverty-related patterns of marginalisation.⁵

Covid-19: a significant new risk factor for already vulnerable learners?

As in the rest of the world, Covid-19 has been a significant shock on the education system and Palestinian society more broadly. Yet, the severity and prevalence of Covid in the West Bank and Gaza has varied since the virus was first detected in the oPt in early March 2020, as has the nature of the response from government and educational service providers.

When a population-level shock like Covid-19 comes on top of these long-range stressors—which differentially impact various segments of the population based

on a range of factors including location, household socio-economic status (SES), disability status, gender, and age to name a few—there is significant concern that the vulnerability of certain groups of learners will have been exacerbated by Covid-19.

It is also expected that Covid-19 will have an impact on the psychosocial well-being of children and youth. Constrained access to socialisation, play, and physical contact with peers, the prevalence of new stressors in parents and caregivers, and the potential inability of some families to provide adequate information, support and care to their children can lead to increasing levels of anxiety and frustration—which if unaddressed can lead to negative coping mechanisms—ultimately impacting on learning outcomes.⁶ As a recent NRC report on the Middle East region office highlights, to date most school reopening and distance learning plans have given too little attention to the well-being and social-emotional needs of learners.⁷

While the Ministry of Education and UNRWA, as the main education service providers in oPt, have undertaken rapid assessments of the impact of Covid-19 on learners, including their psychosocial well-being, lacking from these assessments is a disaggregated analysis of the impacts of the pandemic on student well-being based on factors such as age, gender, location and vulnerability status of school, which can help to better understand the differential impact of the pandemic on populations with pre-existing levels of vulnerability.

The study set out to explore the differential impacts Covid-19 has on various sub-groups of students, based on age, gender, location, vulnerability status of the school and wider community, using existing data collected through NRC's flagship psychosocial support and social emotional learning programme (PSS/SEL), known as the Better Learning Programme (BLP). The BLP was designed to support the Ministry of Education and UNRWA in oPt provide PSS and SEL services at the school level, with the aim of ensuring they are eventually mainstreamed into the education system. The BLP focuses on improving pupils' learning capacity by empowering the school community, integrating coping techniques into daily teaching and learning, and encouraging pupils' natural recovery.



Zaina attends a 6th grade class in Asma bint Abi Baker primary school in Sheikh Radwan neighbourhood, Gaza city, on 29 March 2021. Photo: Yousef Hammash/NRC

Summary of data collected and analysed

As part of its regular cycle of programme monitoring with the BLP, NRC collects baseline data on students' self-perceived psychosocial wellbeing at the start of each academic year, and again at the end of its intervention (end of the academic year). Data is collected using the Student Learning in Emergencies Checklist (SLEC). SLEC is a self-report survey that is designed to measure students' sense of safety, self-regulation, self-efficacy, social support (connectedness), academic functioning, and feelings of hope. These five dimensions are seen as the core attributes of recovery for children exposed to disasters and mass violence and stand as the foundation for the design of the Better Learning Programme activities, according to Norwegian Refugee Council's Global Framework on Child Well-being and Learning (2020). Students respond to a number of statements on these five dimensions based on a four-point scale: 1=never, 2=rarely, 3=sometimes, 4=always.

Given that this research sought to understand whether and how students' psychosocial well-being has been impacted by Covid-19, it was decided to compare student responses collected from two time points: beginning of year (BoY) 2019-2020, pre-Covid-19; and BoY 2020-21, in the midst of Covid-19. Data from the same sample of schools, but different student populations were compared across these two time points. A total of 800 students in Gaza (680 males, 120 females in both years), and 459 (252 females, 207 males in 2019; 237 females, 222 males in 2020) students in West Bank's SLEC survey responses were compared. Importantly, because the SLEC was greatly reduced in terms of the number of items, and was administered differently, a small number of well-being statements (six in Gaza, five in the West Bank) were compared across the two time points.⁸

NRC also administered a separate survey to parents/caregivers of BLP beneficiaries in late 2020 to understand whether or not their children were participating in e-learning activities, the challenges to participating in these e-learning activities, and whether and how their child's behaviour had changed during the period of school closure. A total of 782 households in Gaza and 64 households in West Bank were included in the analysis presented below.⁹

Following completion of analysis, a workshop was held with educational stakeholders in January 2021 to discuss some of the preliminary findings and seek out potential explanations for trends and patterns observed.

Findings presented below are not a full summary of all analysis completed. Rather what is presented are trends, which were noted to be statistically significant quantitatively. Where possible, potential reasons for these trends, based on research and analysis conducted by other partners, is referenced.



A Palestinian boy walks to school on the rocky hills of Al-Muntar, located on the periphery of East Jerusalem. The community is under a blanket demolition risk, including the school, which serves children in kindergarten up to the seventh grade. Photo by Ahmad Al-Bazz/NRC

Key findings: Gaza Strip

There has been a steep decline in the well-being and academic engagement of students across the Gaza Strip

In the Gaza Strip, the well-being outcomes of students declined between 2019 (pre-Covid-19) and 2020 (in the midst of Covid-19) as per Figure 1 below, which depicts average (mean) scores against each statement, based on the four-point scale described previously. All of these changes are statistically significant.

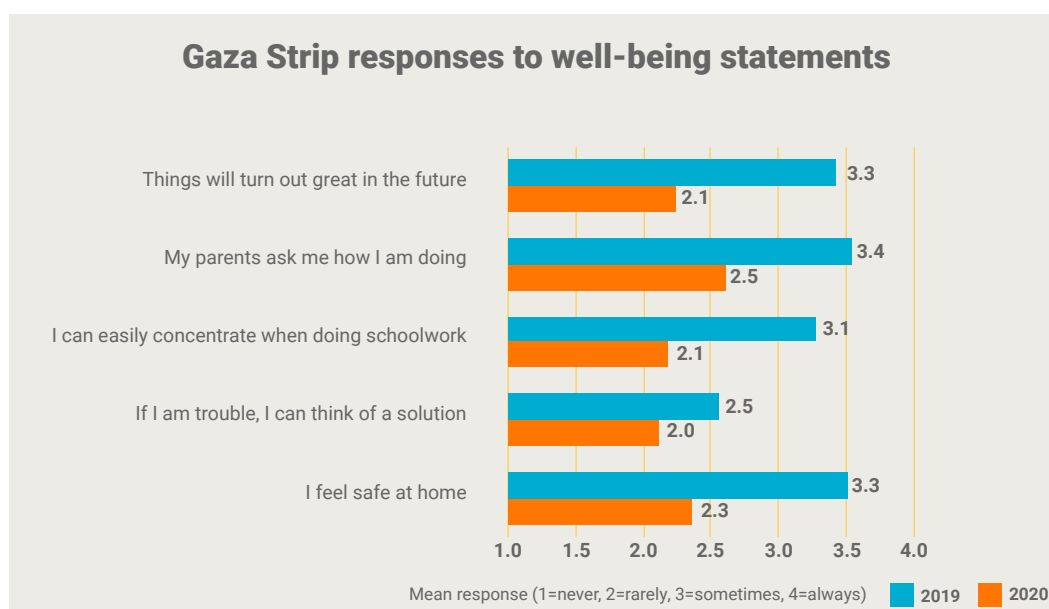


Figure 1: Responses to SLEC survey items, Gaza Strip 2019 and 2020

For example, prior to Covid-19, the vast majority of students in Gaza (80.7 per cent) had a positive outlook on the future. By September 2020, in the midst of Covid-19, this dropped to a small minority of students (29.5 per cent). Likewise, learning from home proved to be a significant challenge for students in Gaza. Prior to Covid-19, 76.38 per cent felt they could easily concentrate on doing their schoolwork, likely because at that time they were in school. In September 2020, when all students in Gaza were completing their schoolwork at home, only 27.38 per cent felt this way.

In Gaza, it was found that for many students, the home environment may not be a safe place for students to be, despite the messaging promoted by national authorities and civil society partners. The majority of respondents (62.5 per cent) in 2020, said that they did not feel safe at home, which is quite different to 2019 when, only a small minority (18.5 per cent) felt this way. This has direct consequences on educational access and well-being outcomes.

A combination of household overcrowding and a lack of access to basic services at home have made movement related restrictions, curfews and stay at home orders

difficult for young Gazans to bear. In the context of the hierarchical Palestinian family unit where young people are constantly reminded of their inferior status within the family through various rules of conduct, Gaza youth are likely to feel frustrated with home confinement.¹⁰ This is compounded by the fact that many households in Gaza are overcrowded and have multiple school-aged children, which increases strain on parent-child interactions.¹¹ Parents in overcrowded homes have also been found to show less responsive parenting, especially in terms of monitoring children's academic performance and helping with schoolwork.¹² At the same time, children living in crowded households have tended to exhibit more behavioural problems, which further contribute to parental stress and burnout.¹³ Studies on the impact of housing on children's well-being find that overcrowding can negatively impact their stress level, educational performance, and sleep quality through reduced privacy and peace, which lead to difficulty concentrating during the day and negatively affect children's mood and behaviour.¹⁴

From a well-being standpoint, these conditions in combination impact young people negatively and can lead to them being withdrawn, anxious, depressed or fearful, or in the case of boys, antisocial or violent towards their peers.¹⁵ **In September 2020, nearly half of parents felt that their children were more fearful, and a further quarter identified that as a result, they were exhibiting anti-social behaviours such as aggression, anger, violence, bullying and stubbornness at home.**

Household conditions also impact on children's ability to participate remotely in learning during the pandemic. From NRC's survey, analysed for this study, more than half of the parents/caregivers surveyed (57 per cent) indicated that their child was not participating in e-learning in September 2020. Some 50 per cent of the school aged population in Gaza lack access to computer equipment, a reliable power supply and the internet. Additionally, it is estimated that only 30 per cent of households in the Gaza Strip have internet, and these internet connections are often unreliable.¹⁶ The same NRC survey found that households lacking internet in Gaza are three times less likely to have a child participating in e-learning.

Beyond the material depravities prevalent across Gaza at present, there are emotional and psychological safety concerns for children stuck at home. Many children in Gaza are exposed to domestic violence, which affects them emotionally and behaviourally. Pre-pandemic, and based on recent Multi Indicators Cluster Survey (MICS) data, around 89 per cent of Palestinian children have been subjected to psychological aggression and 74 per cent to physical punishment in their homes.¹⁷ In the midst of Covid-19, 22 per cent of the Gazan households surveyed in a baseline household vulnerability assessment identified that domestic violence and neglect were a significant challenge in their household for their children.¹⁸ Some 31 per cent of children between the ages of 1 and 14 in Gaza experience violent child discipline¹⁹, with boys being more likely to experience violence from family members. Confinement and movement and access restrictions have heightened parental stress and burnout, and put them at risk of problematic parenting behaviours, such as corporal punishment.²⁰

The lack of safety in homes appears to have a direct bearing on learning and well-being outcomes. Regression analysis from the parent survey data indicates there being a statistically significant relationship between households where violence is prevalent and participation in e-learning. **Where violence in the home was a reported challenge, these learners were found to be four times less likely to be engaged in e-learning in Gaza.** It is likely that higher rates of violence within the home during the pandemic might be contributing to the challenges children in Gaza are noting on the SLEC in terms of their emotional regulation, their sense of helplessness as well as their increased sense of detachment from their parents.

Students from more vulnerable schools in Gaza have suffered the most in the pandemic

Further analysis also reveals that these issues are not universal with some students more impacted than others. **Specifically, students in the more vulnerable schools in Gaza have seen greater declines in their well-being and struggled more to engage in distance-learning than students in less vulnerable schools.** In the context of Gaza, these schools were identified as more vulnerable prior to Covid-19 by education sector stakeholders because their students face a greater range of access-related impediments in realising their right to a quality education. For the Gaza context, these barriers are a combination of factors directly attributable to the protracted conflict and wider socio-economic conditions of the communities in which these schools are located. These differences are reflected in Figure 2, which highlights the statistically significant differences in mean score responses between more vulnerable and less vulnerable school student responses in 2020.

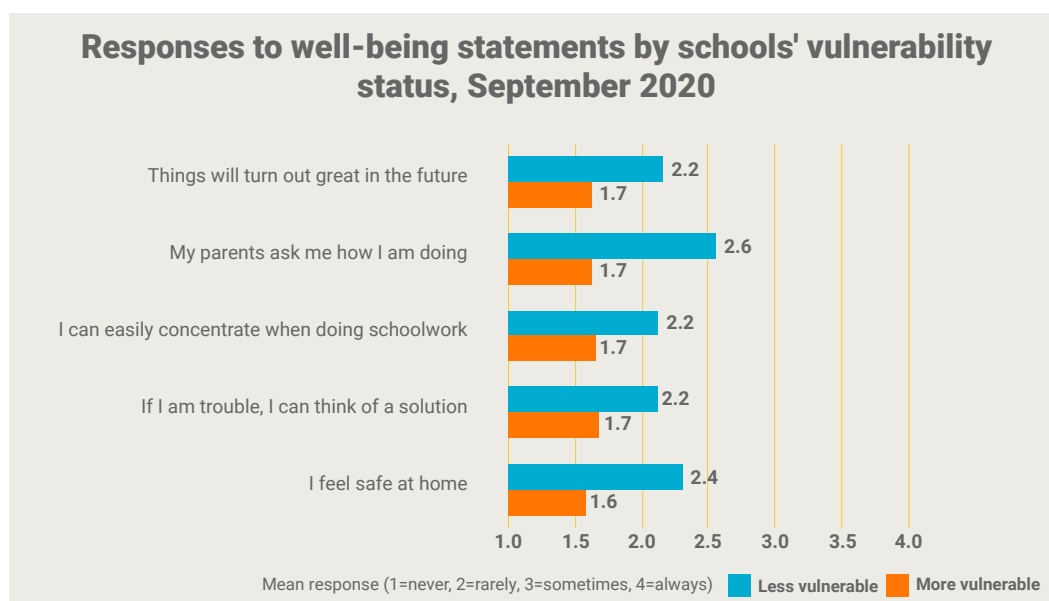


Figure 2: Students responses to SLEC survey by schools' vulnerability status, 2020

Across all of the five statements, a much lower proportion of students in the more vulnerable schools expressed a positive outlook on their well-being. For example, only 4.16 per cent of students in the more vulnerable schools felt safe at home sometimes or always, while 43.68 per cent in the less vulnerable schools felt this way. Likewise, 53.68 per cent of students in the less vulnerable schools reported their parents asking them about how they were doing sometimes or always. In the more vulnerable schools, only 3.33 per cent reported this to be the case. **It is important to note these differences in well-being were not prevalent in 2019 (pre-Covid-19)—highlighting that for a range of factors, Covid-19 has led to a gap in well-being outcomes between the more and less vulnerable schools in Gaza.**

From analysis of the separate parent survey administered by NRC, it was found that students in the more vulnerable schools are two times less likely to be engaged in e-learning than peers in other schools. As Figure 3 suggests, there were a number of barriers to engagement in e-learning that were much more prevalent for students attending the more vulnerable schools, many of them related to parents' capacity to support learning in the home, or the capacity of teachers to support e-learning for students in these schools. Other access-related issues, such as not having enough devices, unreliable electricity supply or a lack of internet in the home, were equally common challenges for families across the more and less vulnerable schools in Gaza.

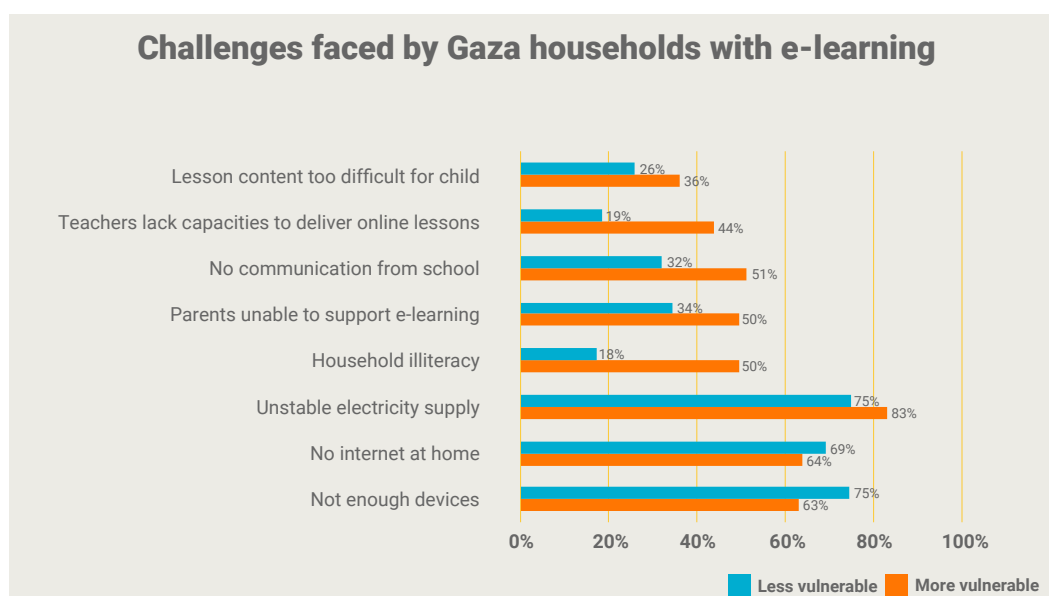


Figure 3: Reasons for children not participating in distance learning in Gaza, by the vulnerability status of the school the child attends

For students attending schools in communities and locales that were already more educationally vulnerable prior to Covid-19, there is a real risk that educational inequalities will worsen in the pandemic's aftermath, particularly as learners in the more vulnerable communities miss out on learning, or experience sub-optimal e-learning experiences, compared to other students. Prior analysis has found that in communities and households where poverty is endemic and parental educational and literacy levels are lower, students are less likely to attain basic literacy and numeracy skills and more likely to drop out.²¹ Additionally, given that poverty rates, unemployment, and food insecurity have all markedly increased in the past months—particularly in the more vulnerable communities of Gaza—there is a real risk that these new patterns of inequality may become a more permanent feature of the educational landscape in Gaza.

While males have become much less engaged in learning, females have suffered the most in terms of well-being outcomes during Covid-19

Finally, while differences between males and females in both well-being and learning outcomes (retention, achievement, attendance) is a well-documented trend in the education system—with males typically doing worse than females—the current pandemic both reinforces these inequalities in some ways, but also alters the narrative in others. It was found, for example, that males are four times less likely to be engaged in e-learning than females. Student responses to the SLEC in 2020 suggests that males continue to report lower well-being outcomes than females across all statements, continuing a trend from 2019. **But, when analysed further, it was also identified that females in more vulnerable schools have seen the most sizeable declines in their well-being between 2019 and 2020.** For example, in 2019, 82.5 per cent of this group felt safe at home, "sometimes" or "always", but in 2020 none reported feeling this way. Instead, 68.8 per cent of girls in the more vulnerable schools reported this was never the case, and 31.3 per cent rarely the case. Similarly, in 2019, 87.5 per cent of these girls felt optimistic about the future, while in 2020, only 1.5 per cent reported feeling this way.

This dramatic shift could be a product of the fact that during lockdown, this group have been trapped at home, and living in households that are overcrowded, suffering economically and lacking access to basic services.²² For many young Palestinian women, schools provide a space for them to establish social contacts and to practise their choice and agency, as well as a legitimate reason to leave home without the questioning and supervision of male adults.²³ A study that explored the impact of Covid-19 on young people in the Gaza Strip found that older girls viewed education as key to their self-esteem, autonomy and future career development, and were especially affected by school closures.²⁴ Although young people's mobility in Gaza has always been restricted due to the siege, the social isolation of young women worsened under lockdown because they could not leave the house easily, leading to a marked increase in reported suicide attempts.²⁵ Overall, there is growing evidence to suggest that Covid-19 related movement restrictions have negatively affected young Gazan girls' relations with their parents and their sense of security at home.²⁶



Students wear masks to prevent the spread of Covid-19 during a lesson at Al-Muntar elementary school in early October 2020. Photo: Ahmad Al-Bazz/NRC



Students in 4th grade at the primary school in Jubbet Adh-Dhib on the Bethlehem periphery. Photo: Roald Høvring/NRC

Key findings: West Bank

There have been improvements in the well-being of students in the context of Covid-19 due to supportive and protective home environments

In West Bank, there were improvements in well-being for students between 2019 and 2020, as per Figure 4 below, depicting average (mean) scores against each statement, based on the four-point scale described previously. Most of these improvements in mean scores were statistically significant, despite the scale of change not seeming large. And, for the statement “Things will turn out great in the future”, where there was a slight decline in 2020 compared to 2019, it was not statistically significant.

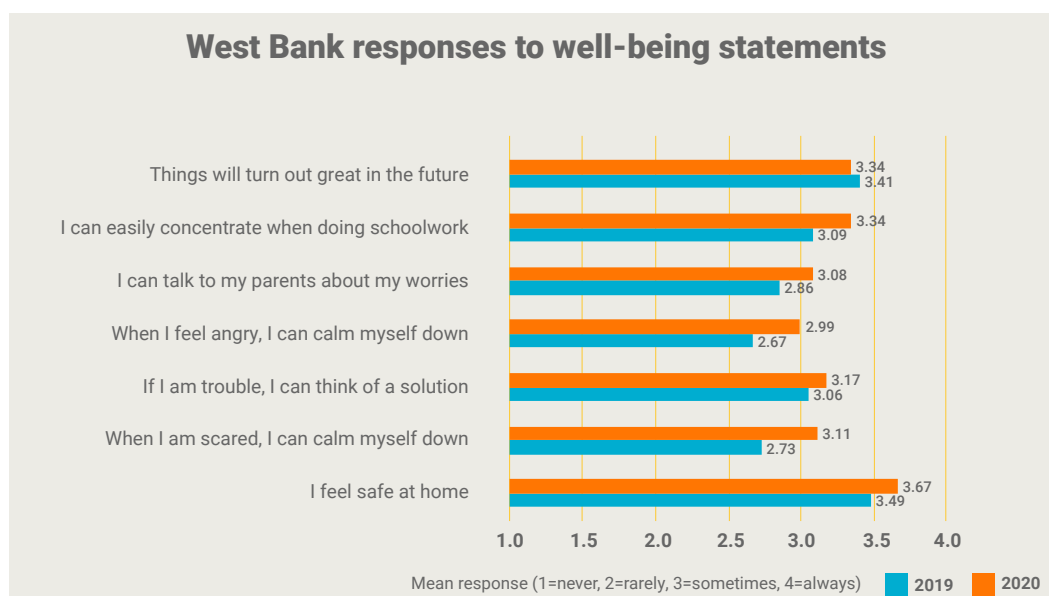


Figure 4: Comparison of student responses to SLEC statements between 2019 and 2020, West Bank

For example, on the statement, “I can easily concentrate on schoolwork”, in 2019, 77.99 per cent of respondents felt this way sometimes or always. In 2020, 88 per cent of respondents identified feeling this way sometimes or always. And on the statement, “I feel safe at home”, in 2019, 85 per cent of students felt this way sometimes or always, but in 2020, 92 per cent of students identified feeling this way. Likewise, students felt they were better able to speak to their parents about their worries in 2020 (76.5 per cent reporting being able to do this sometimes or always), than they were in 2019 (57.5 per cent reporting sometimes or always).

These responses appear to signal that despite the disruptions to schooling faced by children across the West Bank throughout 2020, their home environment and wider systems/structures are enabling children to engage remotely in learning. This appears to also be supporting their overall well-being through well-established connections to peers, families and other adults outside the home. According to the survey of parents/caregivers conducted by NRC in September

2020, 79 per cent reported their children to be participating in e-learning. An online survey conducted by the Centre for Lebanese Studies found school closures left many children with no access to schooling despite the National Response Plans.²⁷ However, the lack of access to the internet or devices to follow online classes is a less significant problem in the West Bank than it is in the Gaza Strip.²⁸ The 2018 Social and Economic Conditions Survey showed that 88 per cent of West Bank households own at least one smartphone, 41 per cent own a computer (desktop, laptop or tablet) and 72 per cent had internet access.²⁹ West Bank households also have more reliable access to electricity, barring certain remote areas of Area C and Bedouin communities in particular. This reliable access to electricity is important to West Bank children's access to distance learning during the pandemic and their ability to study and complete homework.

Additionally, the fact that students appear to be better able to concentrate on their learning and have stronger connections with their parents might be explained by family cohesion. Research suggests that family resilience can mediate the extent to which the severe shock brought by the Covid-19 pandemic affects families.³⁰ **Supportive relationships and positive interactions with family members are critical protective factors that can alleviate depressive and post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms.**³¹ A single supportive relationship, even against a backdrop of heightened risk, may be sufficient to offset the effects of stress on children's functioning.³² Many Palestinians in the West Bank respond to occupation-related restrictions, such as the building of settlements and checkpoints, with an increasing focus on family solidarity.³³ For example, a study found that Palestinian adults in the West Bank who experienced chronic and consistent exposure to political violence such as verbal abuse and humiliation reported higher levels of marital quality and community belonging, even as they experienced higher insecurity and depression.³⁴ Many families in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, see themselves as contending with the challenge of promoting family cohesion in the face of political obstacles that divide families and draw on the close connection to one's family and kin group as a form of resistance against the occupation.³⁵ An exploratory study of psychological resilience among Palestinian school students in the West Bank found a high level of resilience, with family support being the most important contributing factor.³⁶ Therefore, **Covid-19 restrictions, which kept families at home, might have strengthened family cohesion within West Bank households, which in turn facilitated the development of the emotional regulation and cognitive skills young people need to cope with shocks like the pandemic.**³⁷

Improvements in well-being are most notable for younger children in the West Bank

This appears to be particularly true for children under 14 years old, who showed the greater improvement in terms of their capacities to speak with their parents about their worries, and their emotional regulation.



Figure 5: Comparison of responses by age groups, 2019 and 2020 West Bank

For example, in 2019, 62.6 per cent of respondents 11 years old or younger, and 61.3 per cent of respondents between 12 and 13 years old felt they could talk to their parents about their worries (Q5 above) sometimes or always. In 2020, this was true sometimes or always for 76.3 per cent per cent of respondents 11 years old or younger,

and 83.8 per cent of respondents 12 and 13 years old. For respondents 14 and older, there was no magnitude of improvement to this same item (69.1 per cent in 2019 and 69 per cent in 2020).

Improvements in well-being were most pronounced in the most vulnerable schools of the West Bank during Covid-19

These schools, located in East Jerusalem, Hebron H2 and Area C, are ones with the highest reported incidences of attacks against staff, personnel and school infrastructure, as well as a high likelihood of students and staff facing threats on their way to and from school due to soldier and settler harassment or violence, the need to pass through military checkpoints or the separation barrier, and/or due to a long journey from home to school.

The below graph summarises the mean responses of students to each of the well-being statements from the most vulnerable schools between 2019 and 2020.

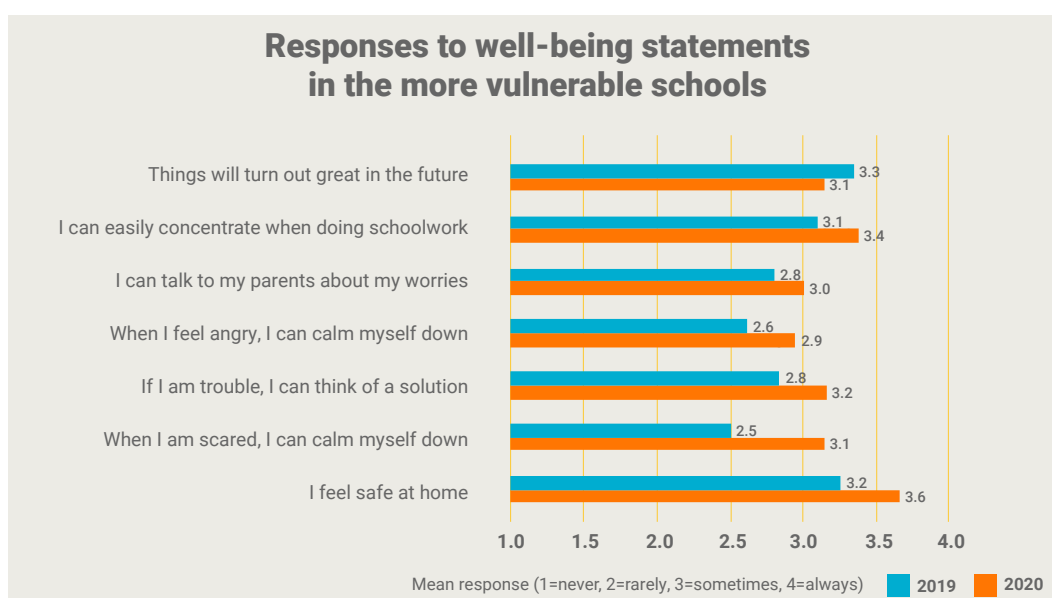


Figure 6: Responses to SLEC survey items in the most vulnerable schools in West Bank, 2019 and 2020

Where there were Sizeable improvements were found in relation to students' perceived capacities for self-regulation. For example, on the statement, "When I am scared, I can calm myself down", in 2019, 52.9 per cent of students in the more vulnerable schools felt this way sometimes or always. By 2020 this had jumped to 76.9 per cent of students feeling this way. Similarly, for the statement, "When I feel angry, I can calm myself down", in 2019, 51.6 per cent of students in the more vulnerable schools felt this way sometimes or always. By 2020 this increased to 72.1 per cent. Students also reported that they were better able to think of solutions when facing problems in 2020 (83 per cent noting they could do this sometimes or always), in the midst of Covid-19, than in 2019 (63.4 per cent reporting they could do this sometimes or always).

Additionally, in 2019, it was found that when controlling for other variables, students attending a more vulnerable school predicted differences in responses to statements relating to students' capacities for calming/self-regulation. Specifically, student responses to the statement (Q2), "When I am scared, I can calm myself down", and the statement (Q3), "If I am trouble, I can think of a solution", could

be predicted by whether or not the students attended a school deemed as more or less vulnerable. On these statements, students in the more vulnerable schools had mean response scores significantly lower than students in less vulnerable schools. In 2020, however, the vulnerability status of a school was not found to be a predictor for these statements, mainly because the differences in means between students in more and less vulnerable schools ceased to exist.

The fact that vulnerability status of schools in the West Bank became less of a determinate of well-being in 2020 highlights how eliminating the need to travel to and from school, and learn in unsafe environments, may serve to improve well-being of these young people. It is well-documented that attacks on education are a major cause of educational vulnerability and students' psychosocial distress.³⁸ Israeli armed forces are frequently present outside schools. Israeli soldiers and settlers fire teargas or live ammunition at schools and school students, and demolish Palestinian homes and infrastructure, especially in Area C of the West Bank. Analysing attacks on education in the West Bank across a 30-month period (January 2018 to June 2020), NRC found that 37 per cent of the attacks involved harassment, intimidation and threats or the actual use of force against students and educational staff.³⁹ Often, Israeli forces raid schools while they are in session or harass children as they travel to and from school.

Beyond the immediate threat to children's safety is also the affects this has on children's learning. Prior research highlights how children, after needing to cross through military roadblocks and encounter harassment or humiliation at the hands of soldiers or others, face difficulties in concentrating at school.⁴⁰ Likewise, for children needing to travel long distances to school, a combination of poor weather, unreliable public transportation, and threats from soldiers or settlers, meant that children sometimes arrived at school wet and dirty, and felt a sense of stigma as a result.⁴¹ Again, this impacts on children's sense of belonging within the school context, and undermines their self-efficacy to achieve.

Distance learning has meant that one of the biggest triggers of trauma and daily stress for these learners—the journey to and from school—has been eliminated. **Children and adults from vulnerable communities in the West Bank report that they felt safest within their own communities**, an option that Covid-19 restrictions and remote learning made possible.⁴² The survey results reaffirm this finding with 91.5 per cent of the respondents noting that they felt safe at home sometimes or always in 2020. This was actually a marked improvement from 2019 when 75.8 per cent of the respondents in the more vulnerable schools noted feeling this way.

Lastly, education-related attacks have declined during the pandemic. Although demolitions continued in the West Bank, the number of education related incidents between August and October 2020 dropped significantly compared to the same period in 2019, in part due to blended learning, the delayed academic year and the limited physical presence of students in schools.⁴³ Between January and June 2019, 84 incidents of attacks on school were recorded. However, between January and June 2020, the number of incidents recorded was 36, less than half of what was recorded in the same period in the previous year.⁴⁴ Neither OCHA or the Ministry of Education recorded any attacks on education from April to June 2020.⁴⁵ Although access restrictions imposed in response to Covid-19 were made worse by worsening Israeli restrictions, such as roadblocks, harassment by Israeli armed forces, checkpoint closures and permit restrictions⁴⁶, school closures meant that children in the West Bank were able to avoid these coercive measures.

Removal of the need to travel to and from school during the pandemic has improved well-being for boys, more so than girls

The need to not travel to school also has gendered and age specific implications. Adolescent boys are more vulnerable to violence and are more likely to be targeted by Israeli forces at checkpoints for stops and searches when travelling to school.⁴⁷ As a result, boys, ages 12 to 17, are more likely than girls to be exposed to occupation or settler-related violence.⁴⁸ This is also supported by stakeholder interviews which were conducted under the first phase of the 'Learning on the margins' research. The final report from that stage of the study identified that adolescent boys are well-known to be more at risk of harassment and detention by Israeli soldiers or settlers. In addition, schools are one of the key places where children were exposed to psychological and physical violence, with boys having a higher likelihood than girls to be exposed to violence perpetrated by their teachers or peers.⁴⁹ Covid-19 restrictions, which forced boys to stay at home, may have actually reduced, if not prevented, their exposure to violence outside the home, which mitigates their risk of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, suicidal ideation and risk behaviour. This may also explain why for boys, there were particularly sizeable improvements in well-being in 2020.

For example, boys showed marked improvements in their self-regulation capacities, and ability to speak with parents about worries and concerns. In 2019, 49.2 per cent of boys reported that “when I feel angry, I can calm myself down” sometimes or always. In 2020, this increased to 69.6 per cent of male respondents. In 2019, 54.3 per cent of male survey respondents felt they could “talk to my parents about my worries” sometimes or always. In 2020, this increased to 71.6 per cent of males surveyed. While females also showed improvements against these same statements, the size of the improvements was often much smaller.



Children learning English at the primary school in the Ras At-Tin herding community in the central West Bank in October 2020. Photo: Fadi Aroui/NRC

Conclusion

As the findings from this study suggest, the impacts of Covid-19 on learners in the occupied Palestinian territory are far from uniform. While it was initially hypothesised that declines in well-being outcomes would be universal, the results indicate this is not the case. Rather, the current period of learning from home has been advantageous for some learners, but not for others. This suggests that universal responses within and across the educational landscape across the occupied Palestinian territory may not address the well-being and learning needs of all students. Additionally, this study identifies that while ensuring learners have access to learning opportunities outside the classroom is important, it is critical to understand some of the barriers that preclude these learners from engaging or succeeding in e-learning. As the study highlights, many factors in the home, which extend well beyond access to internet or ICT impacts on learning engagement and participation. Lastly, the research indicates that beyond just access to learning materials and teachers, many students have a need for ongoing social connections to their peers. For some students, particularly female students in Gaza, these connections are a critical outlet to their overall well-being and outlook on life at a time of increased isolation at home.

Ensuring that distance learning approaches focus not just on cognitive skills, but also on learner well-being is of critical importance. This is because for many learners in the occupied Palestinian territory, but particularly those where the home environment is not supportive towards learning engagement and well-being, education can act as an important protective factor against maladaptive behaviours. This study, along with other research which has come out since the start of the pandemic, highlights the heightened risks facing young people in Gaza as they remain at home for long periods of time. Overriding concern for reducing student losses of cognitive skills during an extended period away from school may quickly drown out the importance of education supporting all aspects of a child's safety and development in a time of crisis. For example, the notable declines in the well-being of students, particularly in the Gaza Strip, signal the need for more holistic responses, which includes targeted psychosocial support for those most vulnerable at present. This will necessitate support and training to educators and counsellors, who need to be better attuned to identifying, addressing or referring to others key protection-related risks, which arise as they engage with learners in their home. **Additionally, greater attention must be paid to focusing energies and efforts towards households where parents and caregivers do not have the necessary capacities or time to support their children's learning and well-being. This might include support to these parents and caregivers, or more extensive engagement by schools and other social services with children in these homes.**

Finally, the fact that in the West Bank, learning from home has led to notable improvements in well-being for students attending schools prone to attack and violence may not be surprising, but is also alarming. What does it mean when homes are safer places than schools for learning, and where the absence of needing to go to school helps to improve student well-being? It illustrates the continued importance of the education sector prioritising safe access to schools, and safe learning environments within schools in the West Bank, to ensure that schools remain a place where students want to learn once the pandemic becomes less of an acute concern.

Beyond the immediate context of Covid-19 though, this study also provides insights into the nature of educational vulnerability in the occupied Palestinian territory at present, and the fact that it is in fact a multi-dimensional, intersectional and changing phenomenon. As this study illustrates, risk factors that existed pre-Covid-19 may be exacerbated for some, and in others diminish. For example, for older boys in the West Bank in communities prone to violence from settlers and soldiers, the risks associated with travelling to school might be quite high, in the most vulnerable schools. This risk has in fact been greatly reduced in the context of school closures. We see as a result that the well-being of this group has improved notably, and that this is coupled with high levels of engagement and participation in e-learning. Meanwhile, for children living in the most vulnerable communities in Gaza, which suffered from a lack of basic services, high rates of unemployment and poverty, and endemic violence prior to Covid-19, these risk factors have in fact increased tremendously in the past few months. These conditions have a direct impact on children's well-being as well as their access and engagement to e-learning.

It is likely that in the coming months and years, the wider socio-economic and political context in both Gaza and the West Bank will continue to change, both as a result of the longer-term impacts of Covid-19 and as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and internal Palestinian divide between political factions continues to evolve. Understanding and assessing educational vulnerability, both in terms of risks and outcomes, cannot be done at a singular point in time and attributed to one factor. Rather, the study highlights how vulnerability is both temporal (time-dependent) and spatial (place-dependent) in nature. It is likely that there are students who are more vulnerable in the West Bank, for example, but just that the current definitions of vulnerable schools do not help us in identifying who they are. Likewise, the notion that all children in Gaza suffer trauma and lack appropriate capacities for self-regulation, hope for the future and resilience may not be completely true. Rather, there are some groups where pre-existing conditions, caused more by endemic poverty and the long-term siege, are causing significant ruptures in their educational experiences and overall psychosocial well-being. For others, particularly wealthier and more educated households in Gaza, this may be less true. Given that this study covers only two points in time—prior to and during Covid-19—it will be critical to continue to track student well-being outcomes beyond the immediate period. Moreover, additional measures that help us to link this to academic outcomes will likely prove important—and require capturing affective measures such as academic self-efficacy and confidence, as well as data on cognitive learning outcomes themselves.

The 'Learning on the margins' research set out to better understand educational vulnerability in the context of The occupied Palestinian territory. In the midst of this research, Covid-19 hit. While it necessitated a significant pivot in the overall study design, what is now evident is that it also helps to illuminate the complexity of the concept, and the challenges of measuring this. Nonetheless, careful analysis of patterns of change, with disaggregation of specific demographics of the student populations (gender, age, household socio-economic level, parental educational level, degree of violence in both school and home to name a few), starts to give us attention to specific patterns of vulnerability at discrete points in time. The study findings highlight important considerations for education sector stakeholders, both in terms of their responses to the immediate consequences of Covid-19 on learners, and the ongoing identification of schools and households most vulnerable to negative educational outcomes now and into the future.



A Palestinian student leaving Asma bint Abi Baker primary school in the Sheikh Radwan neighbourhood of Gaza city on 29 March 2021. Photo: Yousef Hammash/NRC

Endnotes

- 1 This is despite the 2018 HIP (p. 5) from ECHO acknowledging that there are a range of factors influencing vulnerability of the Palestinian population including: risk of or having faced forced displacement because of the conflict, households living under the poverty line, proximity to borders/military zones, and those with little or reduced opportunities for livelihoods.
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- 4 UNESCO (2010). Global Monitoring Report: Reaching the Marginalized.
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- 6 This is a point stressed in the OCHA OPT Covid-19 Response Plan, which notes (p. 14), there is “further deterioration in MHPSS well-being of the protected population, as the pandemic creates many additional stress factors including social isolation, health-related fears, and stigma and discrimination.” This point is also noted in Mohsen, R. (2020). Repercussions of the Corona Pandemic on the Youth of Gaza Strip. Written for PNGO Net as well as a recent briefing put out on the Impact of Covid-19 on Global Mental Health, where it is noted that school closures combined with restrictions on movement are taking a toll on children’s mental health, affecting brain health and development and increasing likelihood of prolonged exposure to toxic stress (p. 5-6).
- 7 See <https://www.nrc.no/shorthand/stories/stressed/index.html>
- 8 Please see the full technical report for an extensive description of how the research team ensured that the responses that were compared between 2019 and 2020 could in fact be done reliably and with confidence in the statistical differences noted. Additionally, the technical report specifies a number of key limitations with the findings, and highlights ways in which this could be better addressed in the future.
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