

STUDENT LIFE IN 2020: UNCERTAINTY AND VULNERABILITY **FIRST RESULTS OF THE 2020 SURVEYS ON LIVING CONDITIONS**

FERES BELGHITH, Director, OVE ODILE FERRY, Research manager, OVE THÉO PATROS, Researcher, OVE ÉLISE TENRET, Advisor to OVE

or its ninth edition, the national study on students' living conditions took place in an unprecedented context, related to the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown. While students' responses provide information on major trends in their living conditions and on

certain newly introduced themes in the survey (such as gender-based and sexual violence in higher education, racism and discrimination, the use of digital tools in access to employment, the relationship to the environment or even the use of libraries), the additional survey carried out in July 2020 also provides information on how periods of lockdown can affect living conditions and studies.

BOX 1: THE 2020 STUDY : TWO SURVEYS LINKED TO THE HEALTH CRISIS

THE 2020 LIVING CONDITIONS SURVEY

More than 250,000 students were invited to participate in the OVE survey between March 12 and May 11, 2020. With nearly 100,000 students participating, the survey recorded an overall response rate of 39%. The results presented here are based on the 60,014 forms which were fully completed by students undergoing studies at the time of the survey. The responses relate to the living conditions during the 2019-2020 academic year, until the start of lockdown in March 2020: therefore they do not account for the specific context of the health crisis.

THE STUDENT LIFE DURING LOCKDOWN SURVEY

To measure the effects of the health crisis on student life, an additional survey was carried out in July 2020 among students having completed the 2020 Living Conditions survey, who agreed to be contacted by the OVE for a new survey. This represented 45,000 students enrolled for the 2019-2020 year, in universities, preparatory courses for *grandes écoles* (CPGE), engineering, business or cultural schools, or *grands établissements*. Of these, 6,300 students responded to the complementary survey, representing an overall participation rate of 14%. The analysis of these results is based on the 6,130 fully completed questionnaires.



THE DISRUPTION OF STUDENTS' ENVIRONMENTS BY THE HEALTH CRISIS

AN IMPROVEMENT IN GENERAL SATISFACTION UNDERMINED BY THE FIRST LOCKDOWN

In 2020, students reported being rather satisfied with their studies: 64% were satisfied or very satisfied, while only 10% reported dissatisfaction (figure 1). This proportion had clearly increased compared to 2016, when 60% of students reported satisfaction while 11% students reported dissatisfaction. Satisfaction with studies varies depending on courses, ranging from 78% for students in preparatory courses to *grandes écoles*, to 52% for students in public education courses.

However, this improvement seems to have been hindered by the health crisis. Indeed, in the Student life during lockdown survey, only 39% of students reported general satisfaction with courses provided during lockdown, and 25% found them unsatisfactory (see OVE Infos #421). This lower rate of satisfaction relates to relations with teachers in particular. In the Living Conditions survey, more than half of students reported satisfaction with the availability and pedagogy of teachers, while only 43% of students were satisfied with their exchanges with teachers during lockdown, through online classes.

Indeed, during the first lockdown, traditional teaching methods (onsite classes) were altered for a large majority of students: only 2% of students reported no changes in conditions in their institution (formally or informally).

FIGURE 1: GENERAL SATISFACTION WITH STUDIES



Sources : Living Conditions surveys (2016 and 2020) and Student life during lockdown (2020)

Lockdown led to a massive switch to digital tools in higher education to ensure pedagogical continuity. Digital tools enabled students to stay connected to their study environment, 77% of them communicated with their teachers directly, 87% of them exchanged with other students in their study programme, 73% received documents or course materials, and 69% participated in online courses or work sessions. The use of digital tools in higher education was therefore accelerated by lockdown measures. In 2016, only 29% of students reported spending more than 2 hours online for their studies, this proportion increased to 37% in the spring of 2020. Lockdown certainly played a role in this increase. as 69% of students reported following online courses.

However, digital tools did not overcome all obstacles associated with pursuing studies in a context of lockdown. Beyond technical issues, such as problems with internet connections (reported by 39% of students), or related to the use of new digital tools (17%), the survey finds the main difficulty related to the teaching context: 51% of students reported problems with organising their work or managing their time during lockdown.

A CLOUDED VISION OF THE FUTURE

Lockdown had a detrimental effect on the plans of a large number of students: 45% of students believe the first lockdown will negatively impact the rest of their studies. 21% of students reported the lockdown changed their career plans. At the end of the first lockdown, only 67% of students intended to continue their studies as planned before the lockdown, 8% intended to change their discipline, and 4% said they wished to end their studies. Likewise, 9% of students reported wishing to extend their studies beyond what they had initially planned, probably due to a perception that integrating the job market had become more difficult.

The situation seems more critical concerning students' prospects for the

¹ More data from the Student life during lockdown survey are available in OVE Infos 42 (also in English).

start of their careers - improvements measured by the Living Conditions surveys between 2016 and 2020 seem to have stopped following the lockdown. Indeed, in 2016, 54% of students rated their chances of finding jobs in France as good or very good, compared with 14% who considered them poor or very poor (figure 2). By spring 2020, these proportions had increased to 68% for students optimistic about entering the job market in France, while only 8% of students were pessimist. Considering prospects for starting a career abroad, in 2016, 40% considered them good or very good while 21% considered them poor or very poor - in 2020, this represented 45% and 18% of students respectively. A reversal of this trend can be observed following the health crisis: after the first lockdown, only 41% of students were optimistic about entering the job market in France while only 28% of students were optimistic about starting their careers abroad.



FIGURE 2: ASSESSMENT OF CHANCES OF ENTERING THE JOB MARKET

Sources: Living Conditions surveys (2016 and 2020) and Student life during lockdown (2020)

THE IMPACT OF REDUCED INCOME From Paid Work On Students' Budgets

THE IMPORTANCE OF PAID WORK IN STUDENTS' INCOME

he Living Conditions survey identifies three main sources of income in students' budgets: family support, wages and benefits. As in 2016, income from these three sources constitute the bulk of students' budgets (90%). The structure of students' budgets remains substantially the same between 2016 and 2020. In 2020, family support was the main source of income for students (42% of students' income), followed by income from employment (25%), and benefits (23%) (figure 3). Quantitatively, employment provides the most income, as it amounts to 728 euros per month on average (for the students who receive it) — while income from family support and benefits represents 532 euros and 334 euros respectively. The health crisis disrupted the structure of students' budgets deeply, reducing income from paid work. Hence, during the first lockdown, 36% of students who had jobs stopped working and 21% reduced their working time. For those who stopped working, the loss of income stood at 274 euros on average per month, while those who reduced working time lost 86 euros on average per month. Among those who completely stopped working, foreign students and students aged 26 and over suffered the biggest losses, respectively 426 euros and 414 euros on average per month.

FIGURE 3: AVERAGE MONTHLY INCOME IN 2020



Source: Living Conditions survey 2020

THE INTERRUPTION OF PAID WORK DUE TO THE HEALTH CRISIS

In 2020, 40% of students reported working during the academic year (excluding internships). This proportion is roughly the same as in 2016 (38%). However, paid work covers a wide range of activities: a quarter of all students carry out work unrelated to studies with working time below 50% (time-to-time jobs), 8% carry out work related to their studies, 3% carry out work competing with studies (not related to studies, working half-time or more, for less than six months per year) and 5% have work that highly competes with studies (not related to studies, working half-time or more, for more than six months a year). The most frequent type of work carried out by students were babysitting and childcare (18%), sales or cashier jobs in retail or distribution (17%), tutoring or private lessons (13%), and waiting tables, cooking, or receptionist or concierge jobs (in restaurants, hotels or for individuals — 14%). Certain activities are mostly carried out by women, with proportions of female students over 70% (babysitting, receptionist), while other jobs such as courier, deliveries or driving are carried out by male students in nine cases out of ten.

Among the students reporting working in 2020, different explanations are put forward: 78% of students consider working improves their standard of living; 73% consider it allows them to gain professional experience; 65% report it enables autonomy from their parents; while 51% report working is imperative for them. These reasons vary depending on the type of activity. Students exercising work that highly competes with studies (more than half-time and more than six months per year) are the most likely to report working is imperative for them (86%), and the most likely to report their job negatively impacts their studies (32%, while this is only the case of 18% of all students).



Source: Living Conditions survey, 2020

The health crisis deeply disrupted students' employment during the first lockdown, 58% of working students stopped, reduced or changed their jobs. Of these, 36% stopped working altogether - this was more prevalent among younger students (under 20) and women. Among the students who stopped working, 27% reported receiving partial-unemployment benefits. At the same time, students forced to stop working were also those who benefited the most from financial support, mainly from their family (41%, while this represented 26% of those who continued working, and 36% of all students).

For the students who could continue working during the health crisis, work was often altered. 5% of students who did not work before the first lockdown said they had started working during this period. Changes in the educational environment had longer-term consequences beyond the lockdown: among students who stopped working, 37% did not start working in the month following the first reopening, 9% changed jobs, and 13% resumed the same job but reduced their working hours.

FIGURE 5: PERCEPTION OF PAID WORK IN 2020



Source: Living Conditions survey, 2020

FINANCIAL SITUATIONS WERE IMPROVING BEFORE THE HEALTH CRISIS

The Living Conditions survey also enables an analysis of the economic and financial situation from the point of view of students. Overall, during the academic year, one-fifth of students reported experiencing significant or very significant financial difficulties. This proportion is slightly lower than figures for 2016 (23%). Another vulnerability indicator from the Living Conditions survey confirms this slight improvement: in 2020, 26% of students said they did not have enough money to cover their monthly needs compared to 29% in 2016. This drop affects the most vulnerable students in particular, for example students with lower-income backgrounds: in 2020, 24% reported financial difficulties and 32% felt they did not have enough money to cover their monthly needs, compared to 29% and 36% respectively in 2016.

This situation deteriorated with the health crisis: during the first lockdown, a third of students reported financial difficulties. Among them, one in two students (17% of all students) considered these difficulties greater than usual. Students who were more financially independent from their families (working students and foreign students) appear to have been the most affected.

Food expenses constituted the main issue for students, they were reported by 56% of students who encountered financial difficulties during the first lockdown. In addition, a quarter of students whose financial difficulties worsened during lockdown said they were not always able to properly feed themselves for financial reasons — this was the case for 6% of all students on average. In less





Sources: Living Conditions surveys (2016 and 2020) and Student life during lockdown (2020)

cases, financial difficulties also resulted in delays or inability to pay rent (38% of students who experienced financial difficulties).

Faced with these difficulties, students could benefit from family and public support. 36% of students reported receiving financial assistance (52% of students who reported financial difficulties) and 19% reported material support (24% of students who reported financial difficulties) during lockdown. In general, family or close ones were the main providers for students (22% of students received financial support from them, while 13% received material support), followed by support from the CROUS (French office of student services), with 11% of students reporting receiving this type of financial aid.

HOUSING: A RETURN TO THE FAMILY HOME DURING THE HEALTH CRISIS

STABILITY IN HOUSING WAS DISRUPTED BY THE HEALTH CRISIS

ata from the Living Conditions 2020 survey confirms students' housing changes little over time during a "classic" academic year: as in 2016, a third of students live with their parents and a third rent homes, alone or with their partner. Among other types of housing, rates of house-sharing and student housing also remain stable, each representing 12% of students.

During the first lockdown, however, 44% of the students surveyed reported having left their usual housing for the academic period. The family circle (parents and, to a lesser extent, siblings or partner) appears to have been a haven during the health crisis, as more than three quarters of the students who changed their housing, mostly living away before the crisis, were confined with at least one of their parents. 63% of students who changed their housing situation mentioned the wish to be closer to their family — slightly below the wish



FIGURE 7: TYPE OF HOUSING DURING THE ACADEMIC PERIOD

Source: Living Conditions survey, 2020

not to be alone (66%) and above the wish to live in a bigger space (62%). Whether triggered by lockdown or not, living together could also have been a source of conflict during this period: 34% of students report relationship difficulties with the people with whom they were living. Among students who did not change their housing, the most frequent reason reported was they did not wish to do so (53%) or this was not an option for them (35%).

The lockdown resulted in a slight improvement in satisfaction with housing conditions on the part of the students: whether or not they changed accommodation, 84% of students surveyed reported being satisfied or very satisfied with their housing conditions during the first lockdown, while this figure stood at 78% during the "normal" period preceding the lockdown. However, half of students reported experiencing feelings of isolation or loneliness during the lockdown. Unsurprisingly, those who suffered the most were students living alone during lockdown (76% of them, as opposed to 41% for students who spent lockdown with their parents and 38% for those who spent it with friends). Foreign students were also more likely to report feeling lonely or isolated during this period (61% as opposed to 50% overall).

STUDENTS IN THE PARIS REGION LEFT THE FAMILY HOME LATER

Excluding the period of the health crisis, students' housing changes with their age: at the age of 18, 49% of students still live with their parents while this is only the case for 29% of them at the age of 21. Leaving the family home is generally followed by a drop in general satisfaction with housing (52% of students living in their parents' home are very satisfied compared to only 33% of those having left the family home) - however satisfaction with proximity to the place of study increases (23% of students living with parents report being very satisfied, as opposed to 44% for those having left the family home).

The process of leaving the family home clearly varies with geography. In the Ile-de-France region excluding Paris (particularly in the suburbs) and in municipalities with fewer than 100,000 inhabitants, students are more prone to live with their parents (56% in the outer suburbs of the Paris region, 51% in the inner suburbs, and 46% in municipalities with less than 100,000 inhabitants). By contrast, in bigger cities, a large majority of students have left the family home (only 15% live with their parents in other cities with more than 300,000 inhabitants, and this is the case for 10% of them in municipalities of 200,000 to 300,000 inhabitants). Once more, Paris stands out with 29% of students living with their parents. The appeal of educational opportunities in large cities as well as difficulties to find accommodation and

transport in the Paris region explain these differences.

HOUSING: THE HIGHEST EXPENSE FOR STUDENTS

Housing remains the highest expense for students, with an average of 484 euros in accommodation costs (388 euros in rent and 96 euros in costs related to housing). The cost of rent (paid by the student, with or without support from their parents, excluding any public financial support) varies depending on the size of the city of residence (with an average amount of 636 euros in Paris). Unsurprisingly, students living in Paris report the highest dissatisfaction with the cost of housing (27% compared to 18% overall). At the same time, difficulties in finding a deposit or a guarantee for housing have not increased since the 2016 survey, and even seem to have slightly decreased: in 2016, 17% of students living in rented or shared accommodation reported difficulties in securing a deposit for their housing, while this figure stood at 16% in 2020.

Public support can cover a portion of rent costs: 59% of students having left the family home reported having benefited from public support for their housing. The average amount received was 169 euros. This figure is slightly higher in the Paris region on average (up to 191 euros on average in Paris).

VULNERABILITY IN HEALTH Persisted during the lockdown

SIGNIFICANT VULNERABILITIES IN MENTAL HEALTH

n the spring of 2020, students reported a generally positive state of health: just over two-thirds of them considered themselves to be in good or very good health. This varies depending on characteristics such as gender, nationality or the profession of parents: female students, foreign students and students with lower-income backgrounds were slightly less likely to report good or very good health. Likewise, older students and students moving towards autonomy in housing were also less likely to report a good state of health.

However, a share of students faces mental health issues: nearly a third of students (30%) reported signs of psychological distress in the four weeks preceding their completion of the survey (the survey took place in the spring of 2020, hence students' responses partially related to their situation at the time of the first lockdown). This prevalence varies depending on different factors. 37% of female students showed signs of psychological distress, compared to 22% of male students. This was the case for 25% and 13% of female and male students respectively in 2016 (Student Health survey), and 20% of students overall. Foreign students are also more affected: 35% as opposed to 29% of French students. Finally, students with scholarships based on social criteria also appear more vulnerable, 34% of them showed signs of psychological distress, while this was only the case of 28% of students without scholarships.

FIGURE 8: SELF-ASSESSMENT OF HEALTH



1 Including dual citizenship.

2 Employees and factory workers.

3 Intermediary professions.

4 Managers and intellectual professions.

Source: Living Conditions survey, 2020

Regarding their state of health during the first lockdown more specifically (over a longer period than the Living Conditions survey, i.e. eight weeks instead of 4 weeks, which limits the comparison), similar proportions emerge, with nearly one in three students (31%) showing signs of psychological distress, and even higher proportions among foreign students (42%), female students (35%) and students with scholarships based on social criteria (34%).

		NEVER	RARELY	SOMETIMES	OFTEN	CONSTANTLY
Very nervous	Beginning of 2020*	10	19	32	30	9
	During the first lockdown	13	18	34	28	6
Downhearted and blue	Beginning of 2020	15	26	34	21	4
	During the first lockdown	16	21	35	23	5
Calm and peaceful	Beginning of 2020		18	33	41	6
	During the first lockdown	2	16	30	46	7
Worn out	Beginning of 2020		14	34	35	12
	During the first lockdown	12	24	28	24	11
Нарру	Beginning of 2020	2		29	52	8
	During the first lockdown	4	16	35	39	6
So down in the dumps that nothing could cheer you up	Beginning of 2020	31	24	25	17	4
	During the first lockdown	43	22	19	12	4

TABLE 1: PSYCHOLOGICAL FRAGILITY BEFORE AND DURING THE FIRST LOCKDOWN (%)

*Please note the comparison is limited by the difference in length of periods between both surveys (8 weeks in the *Student life during lockdown* survey and 4 weeks in the *Living Conditions* survey.

Sources: Living Conditions surveys (2016 and 2020) and Student life during lockdown (2020)

Among various signs of distress, anxiety and exhaustion were the most common: 34% of students were often or constantly "very anxious" and 35% often or constantly "exhausted". Students also reported feeling "sad and downcast" and "discouraged" more often during lockdown. In addition to these signs of distress, certain specific issues were related to lockdown: 50% of students reported suffering from loneliness or isolation during lockdown, 34% experienced relationship difficulties with the people with whom they lived, and 7% said they experienced the loss of a loved one.

ACCESS TO HEALTH DEPENDS ON FINANCIAL RESOURCES AND THE HEALTH CONTEXT

84% of students consulted a general practitioner at least once over the previous twelve months. However, a third of students said they abstained from medical examinations or treatment at least once over the previous twelve months for financial reasons. Indeed, 17% of students did not see a specialist, 16% did not see a general practitioner or a dentist, and 11% of students did not see a gynecologist. Regardless of the type of care, female students forgo it more often than male students. Financial reasons are not the only reasons reported by students who forego medical care or examinations. Among other reasons, lack of time or waiting for health issues to pass came first (before financial reasons), as reported by 42% of students. 39% of students also reported abstaining from care because the waiting period was too long.

During lockdown, students were less prone to seek care, and more prone to forgo care as 29% of students declared needing medical care during this period. Yet, a third of these abstained from seeing a doctor. The two main reasons reported were waiting for health issues to pass (44%) and fear of exposing oneself and contracting COVID-19 (42%). Financial issues is the fourth reason reported by students (23%), representing only 2% of all students. Students in psychological distress are three times more likely not to have seen a doctor when they felt they needed it (18%, as opposed to 6% of students not showing signs of psychological distress).

FIGURE 9: ABSTAINING FROM MEDICAL CARE FOR FINANCIAL REASONS



Source: Living Conditions survey, 2020

¹ Only women were invited to answer this question (n=37 936).

FOCUS ON...

GENDER-BASED AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

For the first time, the Living Conditions 2020 survey measures the prevalence of gender-based and sexual violence among a representative sample of French students. The students were questioned on facts, perpetrators and consequences of this violence, as well as its impact on their studies.

The survey reveals that 4% of students (5% of women and 3% of men) declared having experienced gender-based and sexual violence during the academic year. 4% of female students and 2% of male students reported having been the target of sexual comments, attitudes or proposals, while 2%

of female students and 1% of male students reported forced sexual intercourse. Following these events, more than one in five victims did not speak to anyone, more than one in two victims spoke to close ones, and slightly less than one in four victims reported the event to a group within the institution (student union, administrative staff, prevention unit). This gender-based and sexual violence, which becomes more frequent as the academic year advances, has an impact on students' studies and their academic experience in particular: 14% of victims of sexual comments, attitudes or proposals and 15% of victims of touching or forced sexual intercourse said they considered changing disciplines, 6% and 11% respectively were absent for more than two weeks, 37% and 42% of them said they had difficulty concentrating on their studies after the event.

The perpetrators of this violence are overwhelmingly other students (68% of verbal abuse and 71% of touching or forced sexual intercourse). Teaching or administrative staff are also reported as perpetrators of this violence (comments or proposals in 20% of cases and forced touching or sexual intercourse in 6% of cases).

THE PERCEPTION OF CLIMATE CHANGE

Reflecting trends among young people in general, students seem particularly preoccupied with the issue of climate change and ecology: 86% of students surveyed said they were worried or very worried about climate change. These proportions are particularly high among female students (89%) and students with higher education levels (85% of students who completed one year of studies, as opposed to 89% of students who completed five years of studies).

Concerns about the environmental crisis lead to changes in lifestyle for a large number of students: more than one in two students reported changing their diet or their transport habits for ecological reasons. Nearly half of students who reported not having changed their lifestyle said they wished to begin doing so. These attitudes - in particular the change of diet - are more frequent among students of higher-income backgrounds (57% changed their diet as opposed to 45% of students of lower-income backgrounds) and female students. Changes in lifestyle are also more frequent as studies progress, as more than 60% of students having completed five or more years of higher education report changing their diet, which could also be linked to greater financial autonomy.

However, participation in climate events or demonstrations is less frequent: 26% of students reported having attended courses, conferences or meetings related to the environment and 17% participated in a march, demonstration or mobilisation on ecological issues. This engagement is more frequent among students having completed a year of studies, students in activist groups (associations or union members or representatives) and female students.

CONCLUSION

n many respects, students' living conditions had improved compared to 2016 before the first lockdown: students reported higher satisfaction with their study situation, were more optimistic about their career opportunities and showed less signs of financial vulnerability. The health crisis disrupted living conditions and academic studies. On top of educational issues, financial and material difficulties and psychological distress disrupted students' environments. Although the effects of a very partial reopening and a second lockdown since the start of the 2020 academic year have not yet been measured, trends identified in the complementary survey highlight significant educational, economic and psychological vulnerabilities affecting students — which could have deepened with the progression of the health crisis.

FIND OUT MORE

PREVIOUS PUBLICATION



REPÈRES 2020

This booklet presents the key results of the national survey on students' living conditions conducted by the *Observatoire national de la vie étudiante* in the spring of 2020. Presented by theme, findings include figures on the student population, ethnic origins, the choice of disciplines, the pace of studies, student life on campuses, discrimination, future prospects, employment, housing, budget and health. A final section presents results of the additional survey on living and study conditions during the spring 2020 lockdown.



OVE INFOS 42 STUDENT LIFE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC How did the health crisis and the lockdown it triggered impact studies, housing conditions or students' financial situations? How did students experience this period? To answer these questions, the *Observatoire national de la vie étudiante* interviewed 6,130 students enrolled for the 2019-2020 academic year in universities, preparatory classes for grandes écoles (CPGE), engineering schools, engineering, business or cultural schools, or grands établissement in spring 2020, as an extension of the 2020 Living Conditions survey.



OBSERVATOIRE NATIONAL DE LA VIE ÉTUDIANTE

60 boulevard du lycée - CS 30010 92171 Vanves CEDEX Telephone +33171229800 Email communication.ove@cnous.fr Website www.ove-national.education.fr

Twitter @ove_national Facebook www.facebook.com/ovenational

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