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#CovidUnder19. Hoe ervaren kinderen en jongeren in Nederland de coronacrisis en wat zouden zij adviseren aan beleidsmakers? Een onderzoek vanuit kinderrechtenperspectief

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Hoe ervaren kinderen en jongeren in Nederland de coronacrisis en wat zouden zij adviseren aan beleidsmakers?

Een onderzoek vanuit kinderrechtenperspectief.

#CovidUnder19 is een wereldwijd initiatief dat tot doel heeft de ervaringen van kinderen en jongeren te verzamelen over hun rechten tijdens de COVID-19 pandemie.

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SUMMARY

How do children and young people in the Netherland experience the Covid-19 crisis and what would they recommend to policy makers?

A study from the perspective of children's rights

#CovidUnder19 is a global initiative to understand children and young people's experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic

The Covid-19 virus has the world in its grip. On 16 March 2020, educational institutions in the Netherlands closed for 2 months. It was the government's response to the coronavirus pandemic with what was called an 'intelligent lockdown'. On 16 December 2020, the government announced a new lockdown period and schools once again had to close their doors. The daily lives of children and young people were profoundly limited during these lockdown periods. Teaching was done from a distance, online. Doing sports, shopping, going to cafés and restaurants, music events, school trips – all these kinds of activities were also limited for this age group. The aim of this research was to analyse how children and young people have been affected by the coronavirus pandemic, from the perspective of children's rights.

The research is part of the international project *#CovidUnder19*, a survey initiated by Queen's University in Belfast, the United Nations and various civil society organisations, on how young people aged 8 to 17 years have been affected by the coronavirus pandemic. Leiden University sent the survey to children and young people in the Netherlands (N = 287) and Aruba (N = 18). Since the response from Aruba was low, we are regrettably unable to make any reliable comments on how children and young people have been affected there. So the results are limited to participants in the survey from the Netherlands. Here, 102 boys and 175 girls took part in the survey. The ages of participants ranged from 8 to 17 years old (M = 14.72; SD = 2.18), with a higher contribution from older children: 84% of participants were older than 12 years. The survey comprised 33 closed-ended questions and 5 open-ended questions on topics related to various children's rights from the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. These included the right to education (Arts. 28 and 29), to equal treatment (Art. 2), to an adequate standard of living (Art. 27), to protection from violence while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or others responsible (Art. 19) and to play and recreation. (Art. 31). The survey was completed in

two stages. A small group (n = 30) completed the survey before summer (June – July 2020). The largest group of participants (n = 221) completed the survey at the beginning of the school year before the second school closure (September – early December 2020), and a small group (n = 31) took part after the announcement of the second school closure (second half of December). The analysis of the answers showed that the phase in which the survey was completed was relevant for the nature of the responses. It would seem that the longer the coronavirus pandemic lasts, the more worse children and young people are affected in their daily lives.

As could be expected in a prosperous country like the Netherlands, the vast majority ($\geq 75\%$) of participants experienced no changes in access to sufficient drinking water and food, a safe place to live and also did not experience violence. Areas in which a large group indicated that their situation had worsened, included the amount of contact with people other than their parents, contact with friends, education, and physical exercise. Although the majority of participants in many areas had not experienced any changes, there is still a significant minority that did notice a deterioration in their situation. This included, for instance, a deterioration in access to learning materials, a place to be alone, having free time, being outdoors, and the degree to which schools involved pupils in decisions. Unfortunately, this survey did not collect data on the socio-economic background of the participants. However, in view of results from past research, it is clear that vulnerable groups in particular are suffering more during the pandemic than groups who were experiencing few problems at home and at school before start of the crisis. This is certainly true the longer the pandemic lasts. All in all, the reflections of the participants on the positive and negative sides to the pandemic were mostly related to school, social contacts, and milestones in their development. The specific concerns of participants may at times seem trivial, but when read as a whole, a more complete picture emerges of a deep sense of missing out, also concerning things that cannot be done again later.

Half of the older children (13-18 years) reported that they do not feel the government is listening to them about the measures that affect young people. One or more suggestions were given to the government by 116 participants as recommendations to ensure that children's rights are protected during the pandemic. Most participants believe that the government must take more responsibility and set a good example, or must take more effective measures to get the virus under control. Children and young people also say that schools should not be closed again and that attention should be given to prioritising the mental and physical wellbeing of children. This

includes setting up programmes and activities during lockdown periods, supporting vulnerable children such as those in an unsafe home environment or with poor health, and listening to children and allowing them to share their feelings and ideas. Other recommendations concern using schools or social workers to keep an eye on children and to act as a point of contact, better monitoring and enforcement of measures to combat the pandemic in public areas, and the provision of services to children and families, financial support or food and shelter.

Interestingly, most children and young people indicate that since the pandemic they are not suddenly more inclined to help other people; nor are they concerned with politics, although a reasonable minority (22%) does indicate an interest in politics. So there does seem to be some motivation among the participants to get involved in society or politics, but this is by no means the dominant picture. We believe it would be good to consider in what way children and young people, with an interest, could play a role in supporting their peers or other groups in society, such as the elderly or migrants, or in calling attention to requests for help or unsafe situations of other children or young people.

The Covid-19 pandemic and the measures to prevent the spread of the virus have had a huge effect on the lives and rights of Dutch children and young people. As a state party to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Netherlands is obliged to safeguard the rights of children, also during a pandemic. The interests of the child should always be a primary consideration in all decisions and measures that concern children (Art. 3(1) CRC), so that includes measures to combat the coronavirus. The pandemic and the coronavirus measures affect, among other things, the right to education (Arts. 28 and 29 CRC), the right to be safe and protected (Arts. 19, 34, 39 CRC), the right to play, recreation and leisure (Art. 31 CRC), and the right to be heard (Art. 12 CRC). This latter right entails, among other things, that the government involves children and young people when making policies. For participation of children and young people to be effective, it is not only necessary to invite them to take part and to listen to them (if they want this themselves), but also to actually allow them to make a meaningful contribution and exert influence, and to give them feedback on the outcome. This research has shown that half of all participants above the age of 13 say they do not feel the government is listening to young people, which indicates their sense of powerlessness in a situation where decisions are mostly taken for them and not in consultation with them.

It is very important to monitor areas in which Dutch children and young people have experienced a deterioration in their situation during the Covid-19 pandemic, even if this involves a minority of youngsters. It is this minority in particular that needs attention from policymakers to prevent structural inequality arising during this pandemic that can lead to widening the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged groups. This would, after all, be at odds with Article 2 UN CRC which obliges the Netherlands to protect the rights and interests of every child. Attention for the minority starts with attention for the interests and rights of *all* children and young people as part of national and local policy to combat the pandemic. In addition, the interests of specific groups of children must be acknowledged when implementing coronavirus measures, since it can be assumed that the impact of the coronavirus pandemic – even with the highest waves of infections behind us – will have a long-term effect. For instance, besides the economic impact of the pandemic, the consequences for the physical and mental health of children and young people must also be considered. In addition, it is important to involve children and young people in policy about the coronavirus which represents all groups in society. Children and young people who are less visible and who are vulnerable or disadvantaged, are also entitled to be involved and have their interests acknowledged. Despite initiatives to invite children and young people to be part of the deliberation process and to make a contribution, it is doubtful whether this has actually led to inclusive and effective participation in which the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children and young people have also been reached. The fact that the respondents in this research have said that they do not feel heard, or only to a small extent, is a sign that the Dutch government can put far more effort into involving children and young people in its policy on the coronavirus.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is clear. The interests of children and young people should be a primary consideration in policy that affects them. Nevertheless, in the Dutch policy to combat the pandemic too often it is not clear to what extent the interests of children and young people are considered, what their importance is compared to other interests, and how children and young people are involved. This is contrary to the guiding principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the essence of which is the recognition of children and young people as a group of citizens in society that have the right to be taken seriously; certainly, when their rights and interests are directly affected by measures to combat Covid-19 which have major consequences in both the short term and the long term.

The full [report](#) has been published in Dutch, in April 2021.