News



People in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, watch a movie at a drive-in theater during the coronavirus pandemic March 28. (CNS/Reuters/Marco Bello)



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Near the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the general thought was that young people were less susceptible to the virus. That perception changed as cases and data mounted, indicating young adults have made up sizable percentages of U.S. coronavirus hospitalizations.

Beyond contraction, other impacts of the virus on the country's youngest generations have come clearer into view, from coping with feelings of loneliness and restlessness while social distancing, to economic effects that will play out long after the pandemic has passed.

More than half of young adults ages 18-25 feel scared or uncertain, according to a survey conducted in late March by the Springtide Research Institute, an offshoot of the St. Mary's Press team that conducted the 2018 "Going, Going Gone" study on young Catholics who left the church.

The March survey explored questions related to loneliness and isolation in a time of social distancing. It found one in three respondents were sheltering in place alone, and of them 60% reported feeling very isolated. Even for those sheltering with others, half said they still felt alone.

Feelings of isolation did not appear to have a negative impact on faith, however, with 35% of young people saying their faith increased, while 47% said it's stayed the same.

The researchers said the findings suggest an opening for faith leaders to connect with young people, as 63% of the survey respondents reported feeling less alone when someone reached out to them, particularly a trusted adult — the vast majority being friends and family, with faith leaders under 1%.



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"We believe there is an urgency for those working with young people to understand the need to be connected during this time of social distancing," Josh Packard, Springtide executive director, said in a statement. "This is an important moment for spiritual leaders to do what is at the heart of their faith."

A number of Catholic groups have worked to make virtual connections with young adults since the pandemic began and stay-at-home orders closed up parishes. They have offered spaces to talk and strategies to cope.

The Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life at Georgetown University held a webinar April 27 geared toward young adults, aptly titled "Moving Beyond a Life on Hold."

In the panel discussion, four young Christians talked about their own ups and downs during the pandemic. Tara Isabella Burton, a columnist for Religion News Service, described eloping in Central Park before restrictions were put in place. Kimberly Mazyck, senior manager for engagement and educational outreach for Catholic Charities USA, spoke of the loss of her brother who recently died.

Ashley McKinless, an associate editor at America magazine, spoke about how the podcast "Jesuitical," which she co-hosts, has worked to build a virtual community, inviting listeners to send photos of home altars they've created as well as suggestions for their favorite livestreamed Masses. Others said that meeting with friends of parish communities online provided them with much-needed human interaction. It also reinforced what they wanted to preserve, including a return to in-person worship.

With most large gatherings still barred, the panelists suggested a number of ways to channel feelings of restlessness from being at home. Reach out to someone just to talk. Run errands for the homebound. Be intentional in recognizing the real people behind the packages and groceries that arrive at doorsteps, to keep a human face on the daily pandemic statistics. Help older neighbors or relatives with technology issues, whether a grandparent trying to video call or a parish running its social media.

"The elderly may not find it as easy to jump on a Zoom call, but an old-fashioned phone call can go a long way," said Darius Villalobos, director of diversity and inclusion at the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry.



Workers at St. Margaret's Center in Lennox, California, carry boxes of food to people's cars April 15. The Catholic Charities center has been open on Wednesdays for food pickups by appointment. (CNS/The Angelus News/Courtesy of Pablo Kay)

Opportunities to lend a hand outside the home remain, too.

Mazyck said local Catholic Charities, as well as other volunteer organizations and blood banks, continue to need help themselves. In the case of Catholic Charities,

they screen people beforehand for potential coronavirus vulnerabilities, and most limit volunteering to 14-day blocks.

While charitable organizations are stepping up more and more, the pandemic is highlighting the inequalities in the country, added Mazyck, a member of the Catholic Charities social policy team. She encouraged her peers to use this time to closely monitor legislation coming out of Congress and state legislatures, especially related to protective equipment for frontline workers, financial support for small businesses, fair wages for migrant farmworkers, and access to food for those most in need — for instance, allowing SNAP food stamps to be used to purchase groceries online.

"You can be an advocate. This is the perfect time to get on the phone, call your senators, call your representatives. Let them know how you feel about these things," Mazyck said.

Social Service Sr. Simone Campbell delivered a similar message last week as part of the Solidarity on Tap Wednesdays series hosted by the Ignatian Solidarity Network and other Jesuit institutions. The typically in-person series moved to virtual screens in April due to lockdowns.

At the April 29 event, Campbell, executive director of Network, urged young people to become more engaged in politics to bring about systemic changes to address exploitation of people and the planet.

"How do we carry out the Gospel in our social setting? It's through the political realm. We have to care for those who are at the margins and to change the systems that create the margins," Campbell said.

John Gehring, Catholic program director for Faith in Public Life, held a similar online conversation about faith and the 2020 election on April 24 with students at Cabrini University in Radnor, Pennsylvania.

From a financial standpoint, a post-coronavirus recession would be the second major economic collapse in the lifetimes of millennials — all of whom are in their 20s and 30s and last month became America's largest generation. A recession would also place much of Generation Z, born after 1996, in similar circumstances that millennials faced in 2008: graduating college and pursuing their first jobs as high unemployment pits them against a large pool of more experienced workers.

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A Wall Street Journal-NBC News poll conducted in mid-April found that voters aged 18-34 were more likely to have lost their job than any other age group. They were also the most likely age cohort to lose their health insurance or have their pay cut, and least satisfied with the federal government's handling of the pandemic.

A large swath of Generation Z who are in college were left out of the stimulus packages passed by Congress, unable to receive stimulus checks if above age 16 and claimed as a dependent by their parents. And while the government froze federal student loan payments, school-related debt continues to grow.

The situation of economic hardship facing millennials and Generation Z is reminiscent to what their great-grandparents faced in the 1920s and '30s during the Great Depression, when unemployment for young people ballooned by 251%, The Washington Post recently reported.

While President Franklin Roosevelt included programs such as the Civilian Conservation Corps and National Youth Administration in his New Deal to aid the country's young, economists and historians who spoke to the Post expressed skepticism that a similar large-scale government program would be utilized today — even as some are calling for just that.

The pandemic has only increased calls among youth-led organizations, like the Sunrise Movement, and others for an FDR-esque Green New Deal or a "green" stimulus. The Green New Deal calls for addressing climate change and economic inequality simultaneously by increased investments in clean energy and infrastructure while ensuring equal access to the jobs it creates.

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Nearly 1,000 organizations, including the Sunrise Movement, have joined in calling for a "people's bailout" that would provide not only short-term financial relief for workers but lay the groundwork for a just and equitable economic recovery. Among the five principles outlined in the people's bailout is a call for policymakers to develop a stimulus plan to create millions of good-paying jobs through investments in infrastructure, renewable energy, clean and affordable public transit, and climate

resilience measures.

In the process, supporters of a people's bailout said such an economic recovery must abide by high labor standards, include communities and not increase greenhouse gas emissions. "The response to one existential crisis must not fuel another," they said.

During the Georgetown webinar, the panelists spoke about how the post-coronavirus world, both inside and outside the church, will look different to the one before it. That presents a real opportunity, they said, especially for young people to help shape the new reality rather than simply return to a status quo.

"The normal wasn't working," Mazyck said. "So when that new normal comes about, how do we make sure that it's more beneficial to more people, to a larger community, to all of our brothers and sisters?"

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