



SAVING
LIVES
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LIVES

Rebuilding human capital amidst the pandemic

The impacts of COVID-19 on school-aged
children and youth in Iraq

October 2022

Contents

Highlights	5
Background	6
Methodology and sample description	8
Access to and quality of education	10
Livelihood activities and income.....	13
Food security and livelihood coping.....	15
Access to medical services	19
Main challenges faced.....	20
Safety concerns	24
Aspirations for the future.....	27
Concluding remarks.....	30
Photocredits	31

Table of Figures

Figures

Figure 1:	Sex of respondents unweighted and weighted	9
Figure 2:	Education of respondents.....	9
Figure 3:	Enrolment of children before COVID-19 and in the 2021 school year	10
Figure 4:	Main reasons children are not going to school during the 2021 school year.....	11
Figure 5:	Where do you currently (May/June) learn and/or study?	12
Figure 6:	Has your household's income level undergone any changes since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic?	13
Figure 7:	Primary sources of household income prior to the pandemic	13
Figure 8:	Has your ability to earn an income changed since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic?.....	14
Figure 9:	Main sectors where youth were working before COVID-19 and in May/June 2021.....	14
Figure 10:	How many meals (incl. breakfast) did your child(ren) eat yesterday?	15
Figure 11:	Which statement best reflects your child(ren)'s food situation over the past 30 days?	16
Figure 12:	Main livelihood coping strategies adopted by parent respondents (multiple response)	16
Figure 13:	How many meals (incl. breakfast) did you eat yesterday?	17
Figure 14:	Food consumption in the 24h preceding the survey over change of income	17
Figure 15:	Which statement best reflects your food situation over the past 30 days	18
Figure 16:	Main livelihood coping strategies employed by youth and their household (multiple response)	18
Figure 17:	Concern over food and access to medical services for children.....	19
Figure 18:	Main challenges currently faced by children by gender (multiple response)	20
Figure 19:	Primary challenges facing Iraqi youth, by gender.....	22
Figure 20:	Primary challenges facing Iraqi youth, by age.....	23
Figure 21:	Types of tensions perceived by Iraqi parents of school-aged children.....	24
Figure 22:	How have increased violence/tensions affected your child(ren)?	24
Figure 23:	Tensions/violence perceived and concerns over food	25
Figure 24:	Food security and perceptions of safety among Iraqi youth.....	25
Figure 25:	Factors influencing youth perceptions of safety.....	26
Figure 26:	Most important needs to be successful in the future.....	28

Tables

Table 1:	Overview of sample and distribution per country.....	8
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Maps

Map 1:	Sample distribution by governorate.....	8
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Highlights

- › In Iraq, a total of 894 youth aged 15–24 years and 548 parents of schoolchildren aged 6–14 years were randomly surveyed using web surveys between May and June 2021. Parents of schoolchildren reported on behalf of 775 young boys and girls. Survey participants were located throughout all 18 Iraqi governorates.
- › Survey responses indicate that COVID-19 has negatively impacted **access to education** in Iraq. Reported enrolment among children aged 6–14 fell by 4 percent, with an even larger decline among young girls. This finding is confirmed by government sources, which that the percentage of children that were tested before enrolment into schools (a requirement for first-time school enrolment in Iraq) dropped from 98 percentage to 70 due to the pandemic.¹ This could be used as a proxy indicator for decreased school enrolment of young children, especially first-graders.
- › Additionally, 19 percent of Iraqi youth aged 15–24 reported they **dropped out of school** during the pandemic. Responses show that access to education in Iraq was restricted not only by school closures but also by the pandemic's economic impact, which left many respondents unable to afford to attend school.
- › COVID-19 also affected **education quality**, according to 77 percent of surveyed youth and 83 percent of schoolchildren. Reduced interaction with teachers and peers was identified by both youth and parents as a key factor in reducing education quality. Worryingly, 23 percent of youth and 19 percent of school children reported that there was no ongoing teaching at their school due to the pandemic.
- › The **livelihoods** of Iraqi parents with school-aged children and Iraqi youth have been impacted by the pandemic. Over half of parents reported their income had reduced since the start of the pandemic, and one in three youth reported they had lost their job. Because of these challenges, the use of livelihood-based coping strategies was found to be widespread in households with schoolchildren and youth, reported by over 65 percent of parents and by over half of the youth.
- › Over half the parents and a third of the youth reported being worried about not having enough to eat in the month before taking the survey. Almost one in five children and one in four youth reported eating at one meal in the day before the survey. Both groups reported being forced to use food-based coping strategies, including skipping meals or eating less than usual in the month before the survey.
- › Fifty-seven percent of parents surveyed reported **challenges accessing medical services** for their children. For those who reported challenges, the primary cause was a lack of money.
- › The pandemic also impacted **safety and security** concerns in Iraq, with over half of parents with school-aged children perceiving an increase in tensions, and almost one in three youth reporting they did not feel fully safe in their environment.
- › When asked about the main challenges to their children's wellbeing, parents identified access to education, social isolation, and lack of work/unemployment.
- › When young people in Iraq were asked what they needed in order to **achieve success** in the future, youth said the most important factors were access to higher education and job opportunities, safety and security, and access to capital, credit and financing.

¹ Iraq Ministry of Health, 2022.

Background

Iraq is an upper-middle income country in which the economy and livelihoods have been impacted by conflict, political uncertainty, and environmental change. Over the past several decades, Iraq's population has grown rapidly, by 65 percent from 23.5 million in 2000 to 39 million in 2019.² At the same time, water tables have become increasingly salinized in central and southern Iraq, and less water has been accessible from the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, which has had substantial consequences for arable land.³ In addition, conflict has forced many farmers to abandon their farms and agricultural equipment.⁴ As a result of these compounding challenges, food supply has struggled to keep up with population growth. According to WFP's Hunger Monitoring System (in partnership with the World Bank), around 2 million people in Iraq had insufficient food consumption by the end of 2021.⁵ Out of 6 million conflict-affected people, about 731,000 were found to be acutely food insecure and in need of urgent food assistance in 2021.⁶ Currently, Iraq is home to 1.18 million internally displaced people⁷ and over 240,000 refugees from neighbouring Syria. Over 2 million people require humanitarian assistance.⁸

In 2020, Iraq ranked 123 out of 189 countries in the Human Development Index—a composite measure of a country's health, income and education—based on data available prior to the pandemic. That same year, 24.8 percent of people in Iraq were found to be under the national poverty line.⁹ Instability in the region has

further complicated the situation. The impact of additional shocks such as COVID-19 has started to stabilize, and the country's economy is gradually recovering. However, many structural challenges remain.¹⁰

Before COVID-19, Iraq's education system was marred by conflict and underfunding. According to UNICEF, almost half of all displaced children were out of school, and more than 90 percent of school-aged children in some high-conflict areas did not attend school.¹¹ School infrastructure had also been damaged by conflict, with half of all schools in the country in need of rehabilitation.¹² Despite these needs, Iraq ranks last in education investment across all Middle East countries, with only six percent of the national budget devoted to education.¹³ As Iraq was one of the first countries to experience the effects of COVID-19, it was also one of the first to close schools. Starting in February 2020, schools closed for 62 weeks, the longest total duration of school closure of any country during the pandemic.¹⁴ These closures impacted an estimated 11 million children, more than one quarter of the country's population.¹⁵

Human capital is defined by the World Bank as “the knowledge, skills, and health that people invest in and accumulate throughout their lives, enabling them to realize their potential as productive members of society”.¹⁶ Prior to the pandemic, Iraq's Human Capital Index (HCI) score was 0.41, indicating that children born in Iraq in 2020 would only achieve 41 percent of their

2 Fathallah, H. 2020. [Iraq's Governance Crisis and Food Insecurity](#). Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

3 [Ibid](#)

4 FAO. 2021. [Iraq](#)

5 WFP. 2021. [Iraq Annual Country Report](#)

6 Humanitarian Programme Cycle. 2021. [Humanitarian Needs Overview – Iraq](#).

7 IOM DTM. 2022. [Iraq Master List Report 125 \(January – March 2022\)](#).

8 Humanitarian Programme Cycle. 2022. [Humanitarian Needs Overview – Iraq](#).

9 WFP. 2022. [Iraq Country Brief](#).

10 Humanitarian Programme Cycle. 2022. [Humanitarian Needs Overview – Iraq](#).

11 UNICEF. 2021. [Iraq](#)

12 [Ibid](#)

13 [Ibid](#)

14 Barzani, H. 2021. [An 'illiterate generation' – one of Iraq's untold pandemic stories](#). Atlantic Council.

15 World Bank. 2021. [Iraq: An Urgent Call for Education Reforms to Ensure Learning for All Children and Boost Human Capital](#).

16 World Bank. 2022. [The Human Capital Project: Frequently Asked Questions](#)

potential productivity by adulthood as they would if they had perfect access to education and full health.¹⁷ Impacts of the pandemic are likely to have worsened these measures.

Iraq is one of seven countries part of a global study conducted by WFP's Research, Assessment and Monitoring (RAM) Division and the School-based Programmes (SBP) Division, which aimed to better understand the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on children aged 6–14 years and youth aged 15–24 years to help increase their resilience, build back their education and livelihoods, and avoid long-term impacts on human capital.

Other countries covered included **Cambodia, Colombia, Ghana, Haiti, Kenya and Zimbabwe.**

These countries were selected to represent each of WFP's regions as well as all three school-based programmes country contexts.¹⁸ An additional selection criterion was the relatively good internet coverage in each of these countries, which ensured representation of the target groups covered.¹⁹ A global report and seven separate case studies were produced in the context of this initiative. This case study provides an overview of context-specific findings of the survey among school-aged children and youth in Iraq.

17 World Bank. 2021. [Human Capital Index \(HCI\) \(scale 0-1\) - Iraq](#).

18 School-based programme contexts include Context 1: Providing operational support (Haiti); Context 2: Transitioning to national programmes (Cambodia, Iraq, and Kenya); Context 3: Consolidating and strengthening national programmes (Colombia, Ghana and Zimbabwe).

19 A minimum threshold of 30% of internet users within the total population was used as a criteria for this study. Data on internet users for 2020 was retrieved from: <https://datareportal.com/>

Methodology and sample description

This study used innovative web surveys to collect information from random and anonymous respondents in near-real time. In practical terms, these surveys appear when internet users click on a broken link or make a mistake when entering a URL – instead of receiving a broken link notification, they are redirected to the survey form.²⁰ Two custom but thematically similar surveys were designed for parents of schoolchildren aged 6–14 years and youth aged 15–24 years. Respondents were identified using specific filter questions and channelled to the appropriate survey. The analysis builds upon data from these two groups. The survey in Iraq was translated and administered in Arabic. As a Kurdish version of the survey was not available, this may have impacted the study's ability to capture experiences of Iraqis living in the Iraqi Kurdistan region.

The overall target sample size for the country was 960 completed surveys with the following disaggregation (Table 1) to ensure school-aged children and youth from different age groups were represented. The sample was distributed proportionally to population size by governorate level.

Data collection was conducted in Iraq between 25 May and 19 June 2021. Overall, **1,442 surveys** were completed, more than double the national target (all disaggregated targets were also met) in which a total of **894 youth** and **548 parents of school-aged children** completed the survey. The parent survey included a child roster where respondents were invited to provide information for each of their children (up to five children). Parents reported on behalf of **775 children** aged 6–14 years, which allowed for sex- and age-disaggregated analysis on questions related to this group.

Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected through the surveys. Questions mainly covered access to and quality of education, livelihoods and income sources, food security situation and livelihood coping, access to healthcare (children), primary challenges faced, safety concerns as well as aspirations for the future (youth). The primary limitation of the web survey technology is that its reach is limited to literate populations connected to the internet. To respond to this limitation, a three-variable weighting system was introduced during the analysis phase to ensure that both sexes, rural and urban populations, and people with different education backgrounds are represented according to the prevailing national statistics. Moreover, when and where possible, data was triangulated with secondary sources to complement key findings.

MAP 1: SAMPLE DISTRIBUTION BY GOVERNORATE

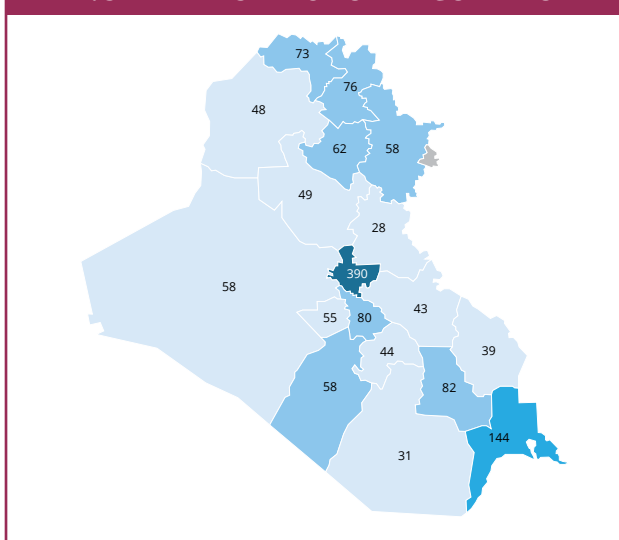


TABLE 1: OVERVIEW OF SAMPLE AND DISTRIBUTION PER COUNTRY²¹

480 x Parents of school-aged children (6–14 years)	240 x school-aged children (6–9 years)
	240 x school-aged children (10–14 years)
480 x youth (15–24 years)	240 x youth (15–19 years)
	240 x youth (20–24 years)

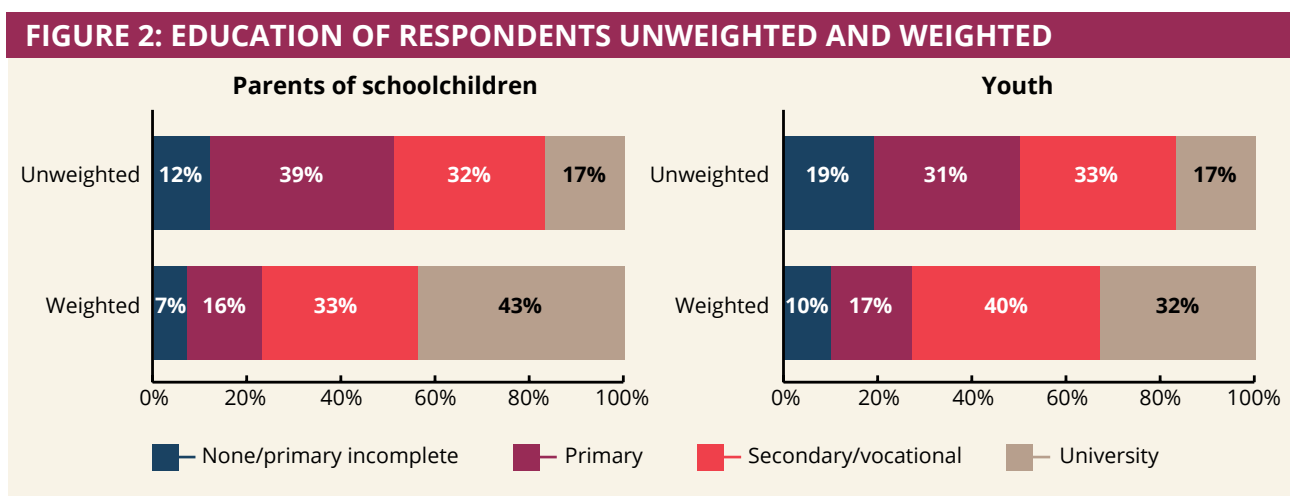
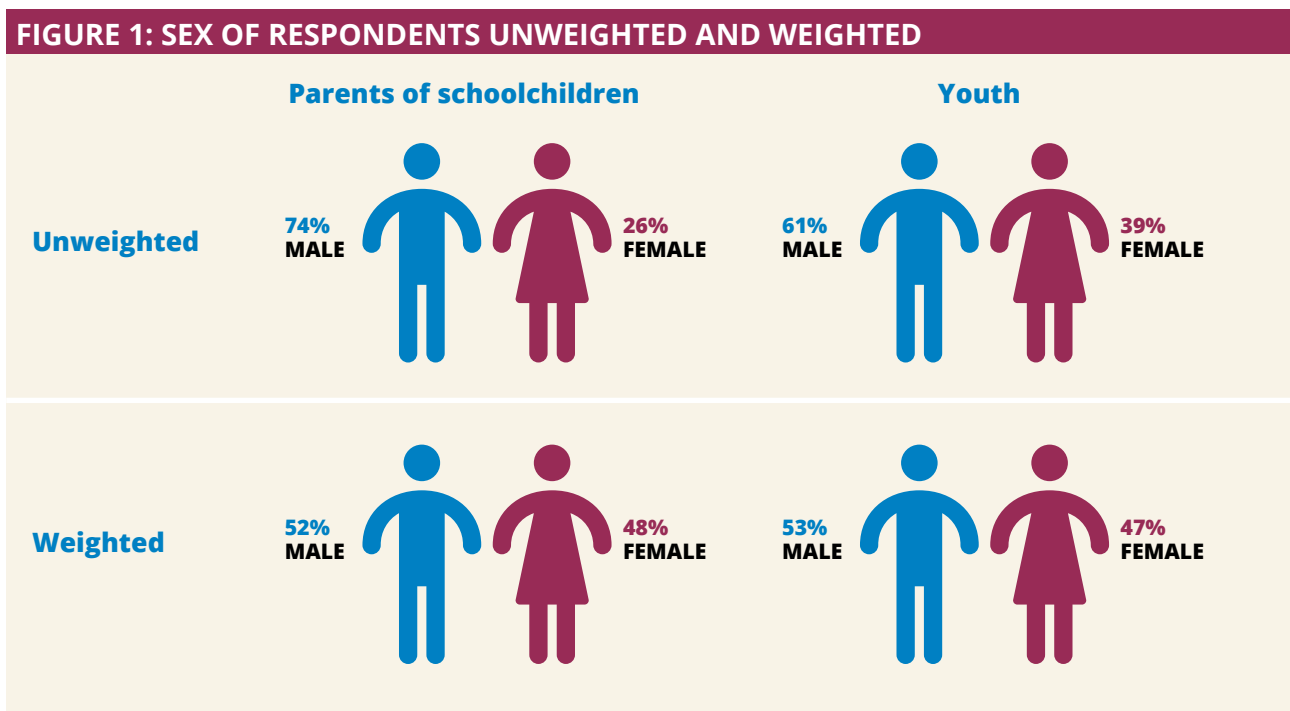
²⁰ WFP contracted RIWI Corporation to implement web-based surveys using its patented Random Domain Intercept Technology (RDIT™). Detailed information regarding RDIT can be found on the service provider's website: <https://riwi.com/>.

²¹ The overall sample of 480 completed surveys per target group is based on a confidence level of 95 percent and a margin of error of 5 percent.

PROFILE OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS

Surveys across all seven countries targeted parents who had children aged 6–14 years as well as youth aged 15–24 years. For the sample of parents of schoolchildren in Iraq, more men responded to the survey than women. This was also true for youth respondents. For both youth and parents, responses were weighted by sex to address this imbalance. Figure 1 illustrates the sex of respondents before and after weighting.

The sample for youth and parents of school children both had higher levels of education compared to the overall population, with the majority having finished secondary school or obtained university degrees. The weighting system helped correct this bias by recalibrating the sample based on education statistics for Iraq. Greater weight was given to responses from those with lower education levels, which is often used as a proxy measure of lower socioeconomic status. These responses in particular shed light on the specific challenges and needs faced by this population.



Access to and quality of education

Broad access to quality education is a key factor determining a country's level of human capital. When children and youth can attend school, they are able to learn skills that can improve their livelihoods and earning potential. Unfortunately, school closures and economic hardship experienced during COVID-19 have impacted youth and schoolchildren's ability to attend school and receive a quality education in Iraq. This study examined the impact of the pandemic on children aged 6–14, as reported by their parents, and youth aged 15–24.

SCHOOLCHILDREN

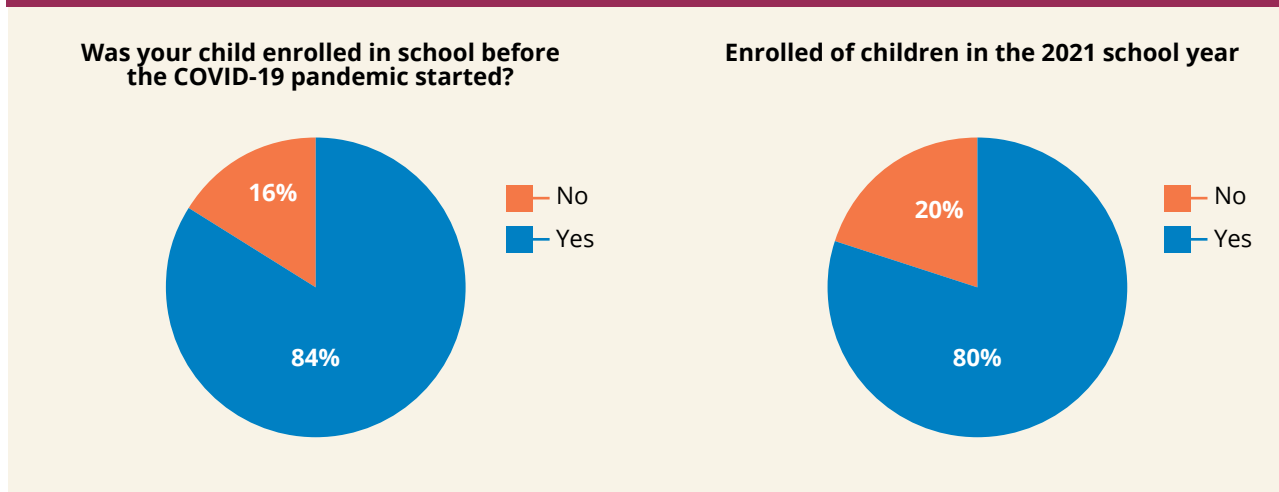
Before the start of the pandemic, school enrolment among children of respondents was low. Only 84 percent of parents reported their child was enrolled, with an even lower percentage of female children enrolled (82 percent). Enrolment was also lower among younger children aged 6–9 (74 percent) compared with older children aged 10–14 (95 percent). This may reflect a preference for sending older children and boys to school when families cannot afford to educate all of their children. In fact, only 71 percent of young girls aged 6–9 were enrolled prior to the pandemic. Interestingly, enrolment (as reported by parents) was lower for children

in urban areas (83 percent) than those living in rural areas (88 percent). The primary reasons parents reported for not sending their children to school before the pandemic were that the child was required to work to contribute to household income (21 percent), the family was unable to pay for school fees/costs (14 percent), and the child needed to take care of family members or complete household chores (12 percent). These responses reflect the impact of economic hardship on children's education in Iraq even before the pandemic.

When asked if their children were attending school in the 2021 school year, the percentage of enrolled children dropped by 4 percent compared to before the pandemic. The reduction was greatest among young girls, whose enrolment fell by 6 percent to 76 percent. There was also a large enrolment drop for children aged 10–14, whose enrolment fell from 95 percent to 84 percent. Enrolment fell by 7 percent among respondents in urban areas but remained unchanged among children in rural areas.

At the time of the survey, the most common reasons for children not attending school (according to parents) were school closures (28 percent), inability to pay for school fees/costs (12 percent), and that their child was required to work to contribute to household income (12 percent).

FIGURE 3: ENROLMENT OF CHILDREN BEFORE COVID-19 AND IN THE 2021 SCHOOL YEAR



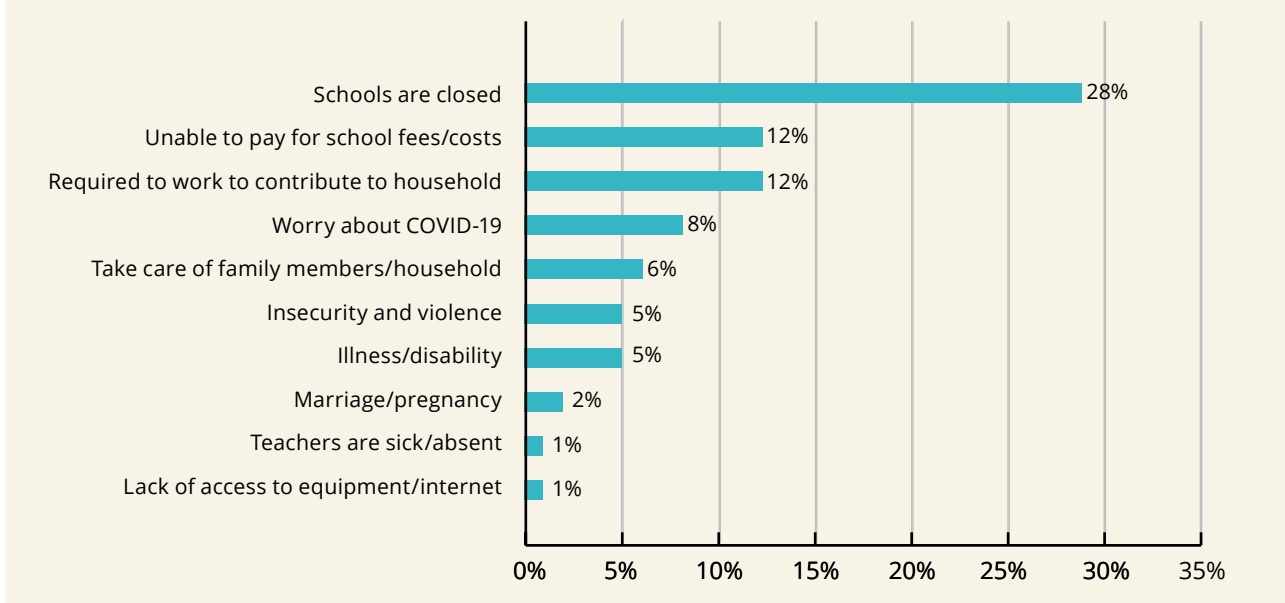


These responses suggest that economic issues were the primary factor impacting enrolment both before and after the onset of the pandemic.

Parents were also asked about the perceived quality of their children's education. Some 83 percent believed that COVID-19 negatively impacted the quality of their child's learning. When asked why they believed education quality was impacted, 18 percent identified less interaction with teachers and peers as the main reason or the need for their child to work to earn income (18 percent), followed by health reasons

(11 percent). This suggests that both the economic impact of the pandemic and the changing learning modalities may have impacted the quality of education for children in Iraq. Many Iraqi children appeared to be learning using a hybrid model or learning entirely from home. Twenty-two percent of parents reported their child attended school only on some days, 22 percent reported their child had at home instruction only, and 19 percent reported no ongoing instruction was occurring due to COVID-19.

FIGURE 4: MAIN REASONS CHILDREN ARE NOT GOING TO SCHOOL DURING THE 2021 SCHOOL YEAR



YOUTH

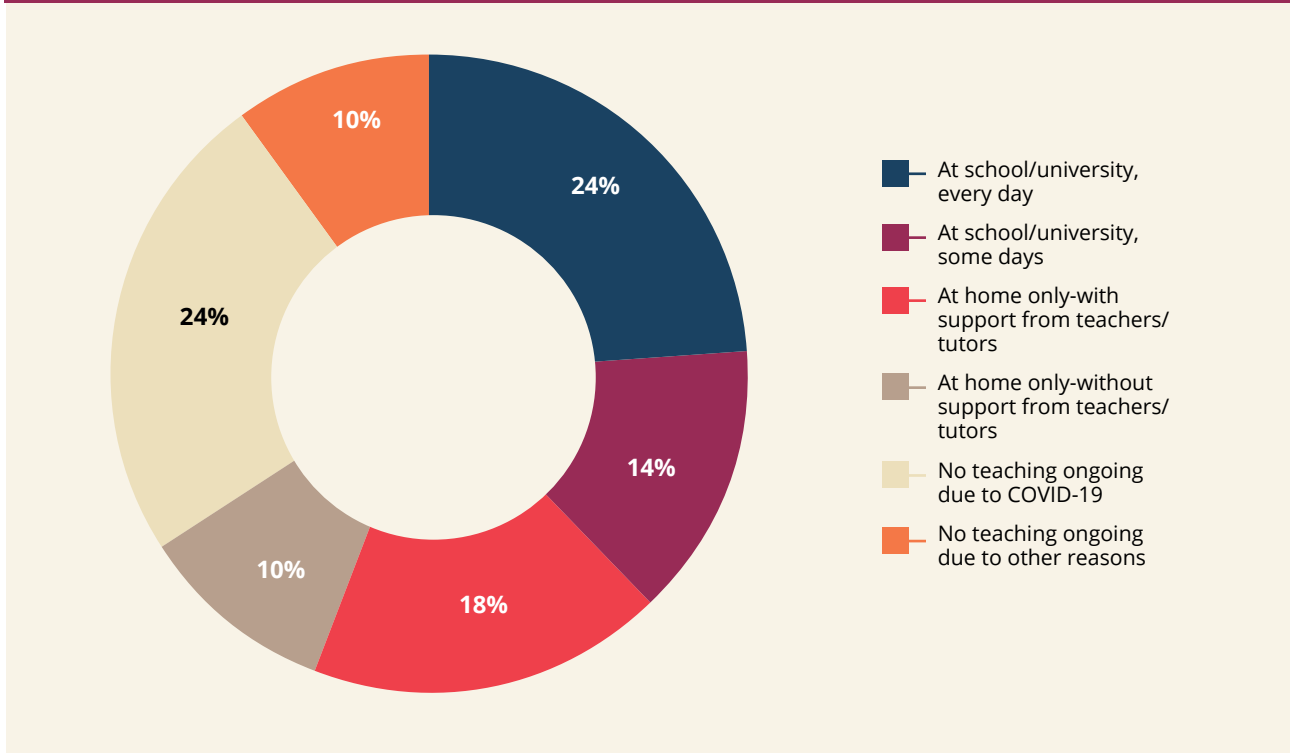
Around 80 percent of youth aged 15–19 years old and 72 percent of 20–24 year-olds reported they were enrolled in an educational institution (school or university) before the COVID-19 pandemic. The difference between the two groups is unsurprising, as many older youths join the workforce instead of pursuing higher education. Youth in urban areas were more likely to be enrolled in school (79 percent) than those in rural areas (69 percent) but less likely to report they had finished school than those in rural areas (6 percent vs. 11 percent). Young women were slightly more likely to report they were enrolled in school prior to the pandemic (77 percent) than young men (75 percent).

Around 19 percent of youth reported they had left school during COVID-19. Reported dropouts were highest among young men and youth aged 20–24. One in four older youth aged 20–24 and 22 percent of young men reported they had left school during the pandemic. This high dropout rate likely reflects the increased pressures placed

on youth in this age group, and on young men in particular, to support their families financially during the COVID economic crisis. The primary reasons youth identified for no longer attending school were school closures (27 percent), worry about COVID-19 (17 percent), and that they were required to work to earn an income (8 percent).

Over three quarters of respondents noted changes to the modality of their education during COVID-19. Although 24 percent were attending in-person classes, 14 percent reported they learned in school or university only on some days, and 28 percent reported their instruction was entirely virtual. Almost one in four (23 percent) reported there was no ongoing teaching due to COVID-19 (see Figure 5). Unsurprisingly given these findings, **77 percent of youth respondents felt that COVID-19 had affected the quality of their education.** When asked why they felt the quality of their education was affected, 19 percent cited distraction and loss of focus, less interaction with teachers and peers (19 percent), health reasons (13 percent), and that they were required to work to earn income (13 percent).

FIGURE 5: MAIN PLACES WHERE YOUTH ENROLLED IN SCHOOL/UNIVERSITY IN 2021 LEARNED AND/OR STUDIED



Livelihood activities and income

The impact of COVID-19 closures worsened an already difficult economic situation in Iraq. Before COVID-19, the Iraqi government faced a USD 40 billion budget deficit caused by falling oil prices that decimated revenue.²² In 2020, domestic GDP contracted by 10.4 percent, primarily due to further reductions in oil prices, weakened domestic demand, and reductions in religious tourism caused by the pandemic.²³ These economic shocks have

broader implications for youth, who already face difficulties entering the labour market as they transition from school and lack proper protection against job insecurity. In the survey, youth and parents of school-aged children were asked about the impact of the pandemic on their income and livelihood activities.

SCHOOLCHILDREN

Around 17 percent of the parents of school-aged children who responded to the survey earned their living through salaried work with a regular income. This finding is expected given that the primary source of employment in Iraq is the public sector.²⁴ Another 17 percent reported daily/casual labour as their primary source of income and 11 percent reported they were living off debt. This picture of precarious financial circumstances appeared to worsen after the arrival of COVID-19. At the time of the survey, 58 percent of parents reported their income had reduced since the start of pandemic. Parents in rural areas were slightly more likely to report a reduction in income than those in urban areas.

FIGURE 6: HAS YOUR HOUSEHOLD'S INCOME LEVEL UNDERGONE ANY CHANGES SINCE THE START OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC?

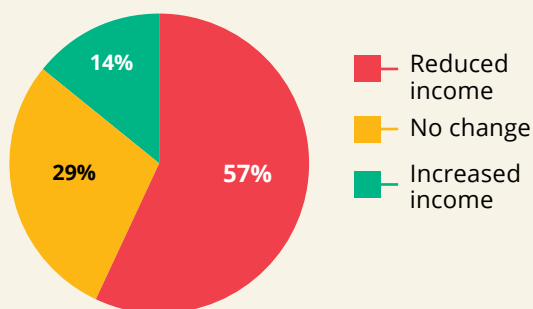
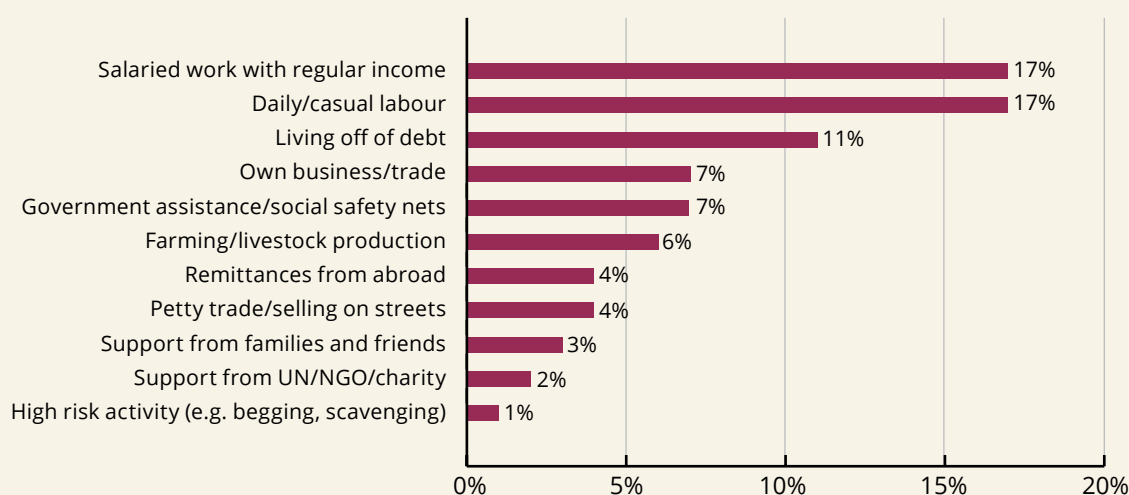


FIGURE 7: PRIMARY SOURCES OF HOUSEHOLD INCOME PRIOR TO THE PANDEMIC



22 Fathallah, H. 2020. [Iraq's Governance Crisis and Food Insecurity](#). Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

23 World Bank. 2021. [Iraq's Economic Update – April 2021](#)

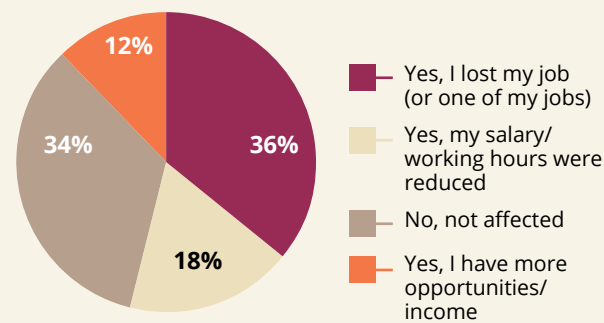
24 World Atlas. 2021. [Natural Resources of Iraq](#).

YOUTH

Around 36 percent of all youth and 42 percent of those aged 20–24 reported working prior to COVID-19. Almost half (49 percent) of young men reported working compared with only 22 percent of young women. The most common sectors of employment before the pandemic were construction (15 percent), restaurants or other food services (10 percent), and health (8 percent).

At the time of the survey, more than one in three youth reported that they had lost their jobs, with an additional 18 percent reporting their wages or working hours were reduced. Only 26 percent of youth reported being employed at the time of the survey, a drop of 10 percentage points from before the pandemic.

FIGURE 8: HAS YOUR ABILITY TO EARN AN INCOME CHANGED SINCE THE START OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC?

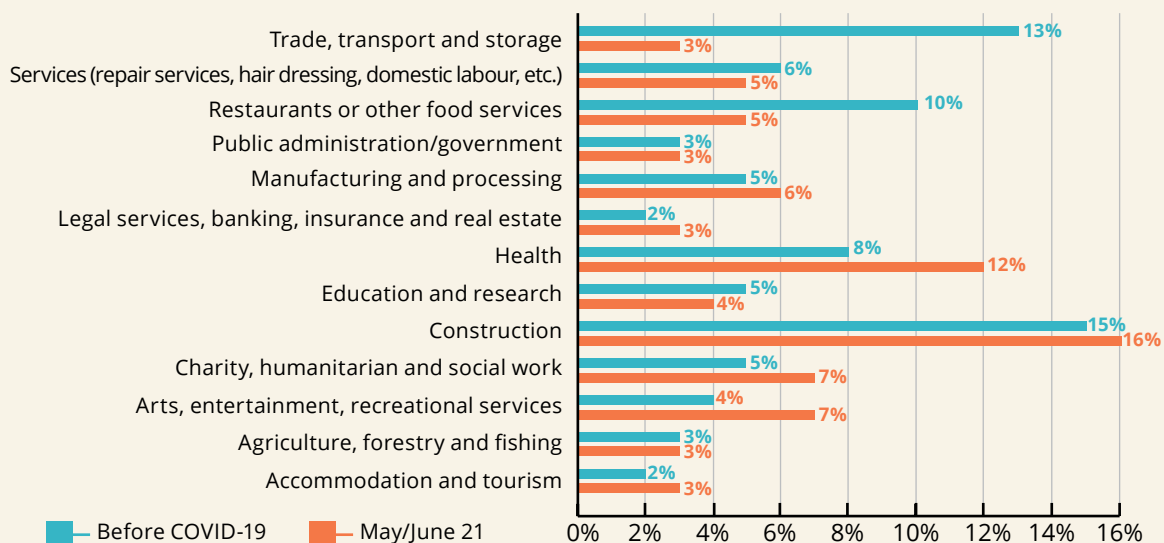


Young men saw a larger decline than young women, with employment falling from almost half of male youth respondents to only 36 percent. Youth aged 20–24 also saw a large decline in employment, falling from 42 percent employed to 30 percent. Youth in urban areas experienced a similarly large drop in employment, falling by 11 percent.

The sectors in which youth worked also changed after the pandemic. Health became the second most common sector for employment, whereas restaurants and other food services went from employing 1 in 10 working youth to only employing 1 in 20. This finding is unsurprising given the impact of lockdowns on restaurants and the service industry. The economic impacts of the pandemic were not equally spread among all youth. Males, older youth, and those living in rural areas were more likely to report they had lost their job, or one of their jobs.

The impacts of the pandemic on youth employment also had consequences for youth mobility. Over the past year, 16 percent of youth had been living away from home for work but had returned. Of those who returned home, one in three did so because they had lost their job.

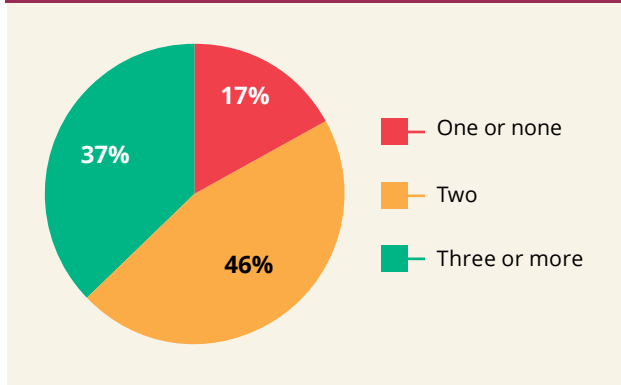
FIGURE 9: MAIN SECTORS WHERE YOUTH WERE WORKING BEFORE COVID-19 AND IN MAY/JUNE 2021



Food security and livelihood coping

Food insecurity impacts the current and future health and development of children. Children who are food insecure struggle more to learn and acquire job skills as adolescents and adults than children whose development was uninterrupted.²⁵ In this web survey, three proxy indicators were used to better understand the food security situation of schoolchildren and youth, including consumption of meals, concerns over food and the use of food-based coping strategies. Youth and parents were also asked about the use of livelihood coping strategies to further understand current levels of vulnerability among these groups.

FIGURE 10: HOW MANY MEALS (INCL. BREAKFAST) DID YOUR CHILD(REN) EAT YESTERDAY?



SCHOOLCHILDREN

Overall, more than half of the parents (59 percent) reported they felt worried about their household not having enough to eat over the past 30 days. Those in rural areas were even more likely to worry about having enough food to eat (66 percent). When asked about their children’s meal consumption in the day prior to the interview, 17

percent reported that their children had eaten one or no meals.

The situation was more concerning for children living in rural areas, with almost one in four (23 percent) reporting their child eating fewer than two meals the day before the survey.



25 Children’s Healthwatch. [Feeding Our Human Capital: Food Insecurity and Tomorrow’s.](#)

Figure 12 illustrates that 66 percent of interviewed parents reported that the applied food-based coping strategies involved their children. This includes skipping meals or eating less than usual or going a whole day without eating. When disaggregating by gender, it was found that parents of young girls were more likely (71 percent) to report food-based coping strategies than parents of young boys (62 percent). In particular, skipping meals was found to be quite common in young girls (23 percent), which is of serious concern.

The use of livelihood-based coping strategies was found to be widespread in households with

schoolchildren. Around 65 percent of parents reported using at least one coping strategy to meet their most essential needs, including food, health, education, rent in the month prior to the survey. In addition, one in ten parents reported having no capacity to cope. Figure 13 illustrates the main strategies used, which include asking friends and family for help, followed by spending less on health. Around one in ten parents also reported spending less on food or education to make ends meet. These responses emphasize how the economic impacts of the pandemic have influenced the health and overall human capital of Iraqis.

FIGURE 11: WHICH STATEMENT BEST REFLECTS YOUR CHILD(REN)'S FOOD SITUATION OVER THE PAST 30 DAYS?

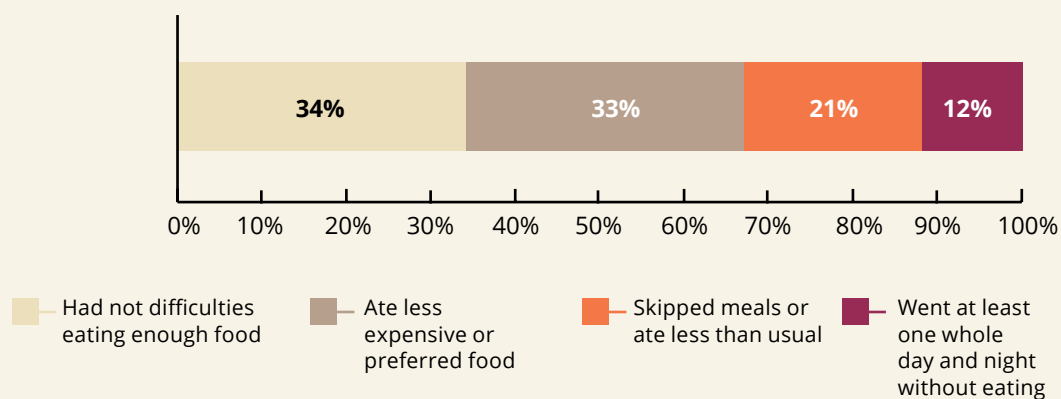
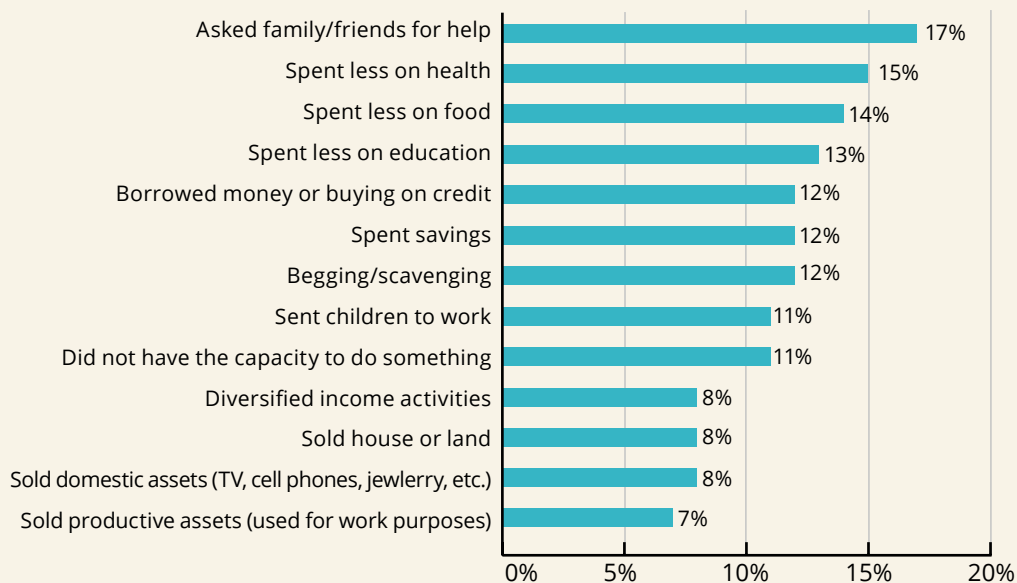


FIGURE 12: MAIN LIVELIHOOD COPING STRATEGIES ADOPTED BY PARENT RESPONDENTS (MULTIPLE RESPONSE)



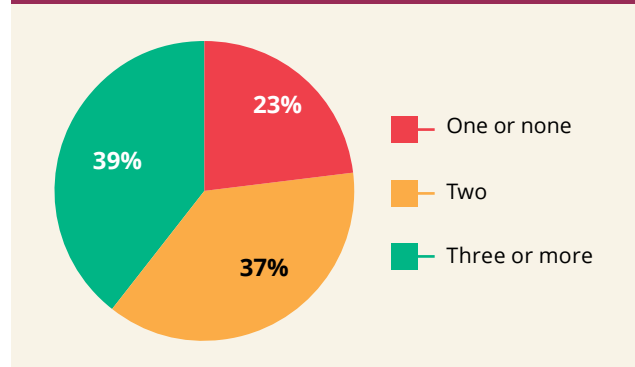
YOUTH

Almost one in four youth reported eating fewer than two meals in the day prior to the survey. Young men were found to be compromising their food consumption to a greater extent than young women (28 percent and 18 percent respectively). When disaggregating by areas, youth living in rural areas were more likely (30 percent) to report compromising their food consumption than urban youth (21 percent).

There was a clear link between youth who reported they had lost their job or had their salary reduced and those who reported compromising their food consumption. Around 45 percent of those who reported losing their job and a third of those who reported seeing their income reduced also reported eating fewer than two meals in the day before the survey (see Figure 14).

Over a third of youth felt worried about not having enough to eat in the month preceding the survey. Young men (42 percent) and youth aged 20–24 (38 percent) were more likely than young women and 15–19 year-olds to report worrying about having enough food to eat. This finding is unsurprising considering these same groups saw the largest decline in employment. Youth living in rural areas were more likely than those in urban to report worrying about not having enough food to eat (41 percent), but they did not report a similar drop in employment. This may suggest that such challenges for youth in rural areas existed prior to the economic impacts of the pandemic. Mobility also played a role in food security concerns for youth respondents. More than half (51 percent) of youth who were stranded in their current location

FIGURE 13: HOW MANY MEALS (INCL. BREAKFAST) DID YOU EAT YESTERDAY?



away from home reported they were also worried about having enough food to eat, compared with only 29 percent of youth who could move freely.

Over half of surveyed Iraqi youth reported applying food-based coping strategies due to lack of food, including around one in ten who reported going to bed hungry in the month before the survey. Young men and rural youth were slightly more likely (16 percent) to report being forced not to eat for one day and one night in the month prior to the survey.

Half of the youth respondents also reported that either themselves or someone in their household adopted livelihood-based coping strategies in the month preceding the survey to make ends meet. One in ten youth reported not having had the capacity to cope. Reducing spending on health was found to be the main coping strategy employed by youth and their households, closely followed by spending less on food. These responses highlight the multiple strains placed on youth by the deteriorating economic situation.

FIGURE 14: FOOD CONSUMPTION IN THE 24H PRECEDING THE SURVEY OVER CHANGE OF INCOME

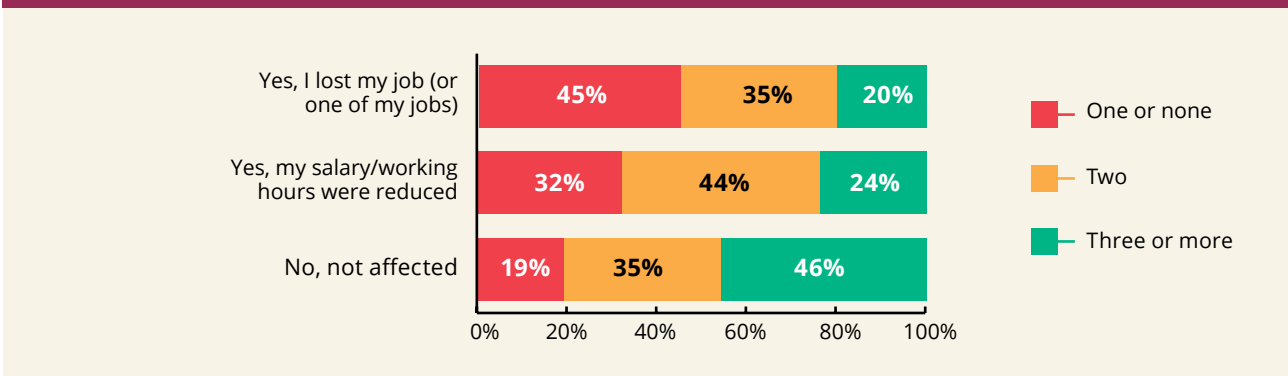


FIGURE 15: WHICH STATEMENT BEST REFLECTS YOUR FOOD SITUATION OVER THE PAST 30 DAYS

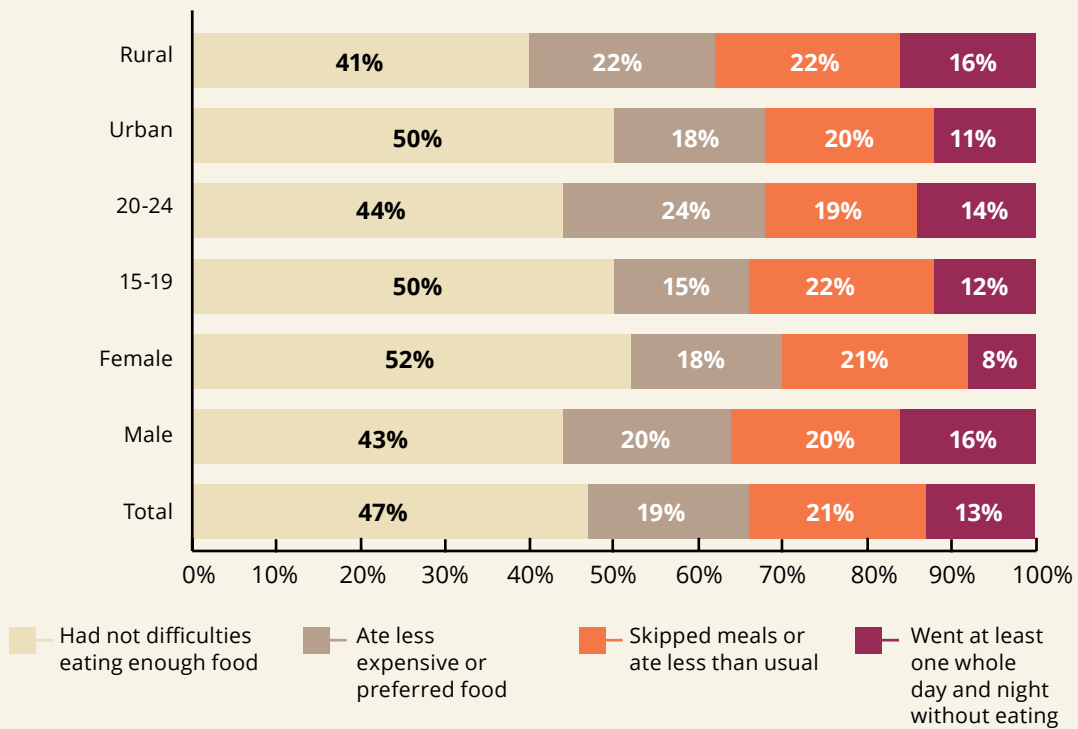
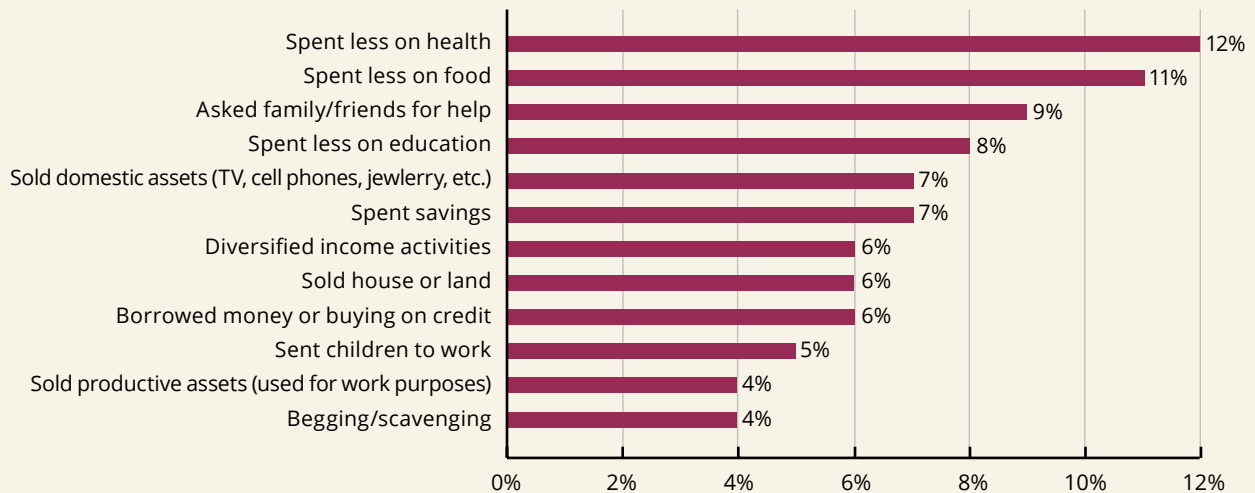


FIGURE 16: MAIN LIVELIHOOD COPING STRATEGIES EMPLOYED BY YOUTH AND THEIR HOUSEHOLD (MULTIPLE RESPONSE)



Access to medical services for children

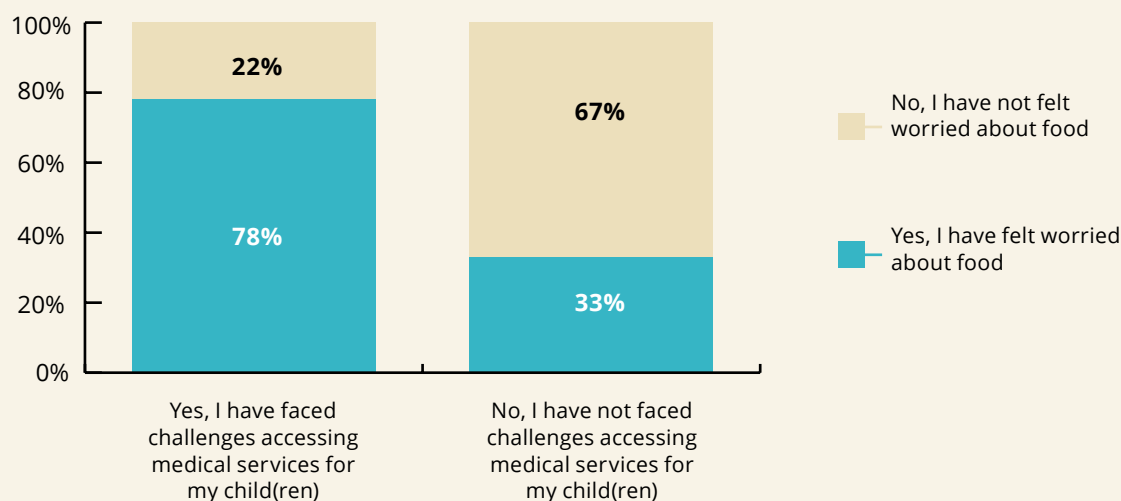
Children cannot meet their full potential if they are not healthy. That's why adequate access to medical services for children is an important factor to strengthen Iraq's human capital.

Overall, 57 percent of parents experienced challenges in accessing medical services for their children in Iraq. Households living in rural areas were slightly more likely to report this issue (59 percent) than non-rural households. For almost one parent out of two, unaffordability was the main challenge to accessing health care.

Challenges in accessing medical services and concern over having enough food to eat were found to be closely intertwined. Some 78 percent of those who reported challenges accessing medical services also reported they felt worried about having enough food to eat over the past month. This finding highlights that most children who are at risk of food insecurity are also at risk of lacking access to medical services. Lack or loss of income is likely to be the central driver of these needs.



FIGURE 17: CONCERN OVER FOOD AND ACCESS TO MEDICAL SERVICES FOR CHILDREN



Main challenges faced

SCHOOLCHILDREN

Parents of school-aged children were asked about the primary challenges facing their child since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The most common challenges parents identified were access to education and learning materials (31 percent), lack of nutritious food (22 percent),

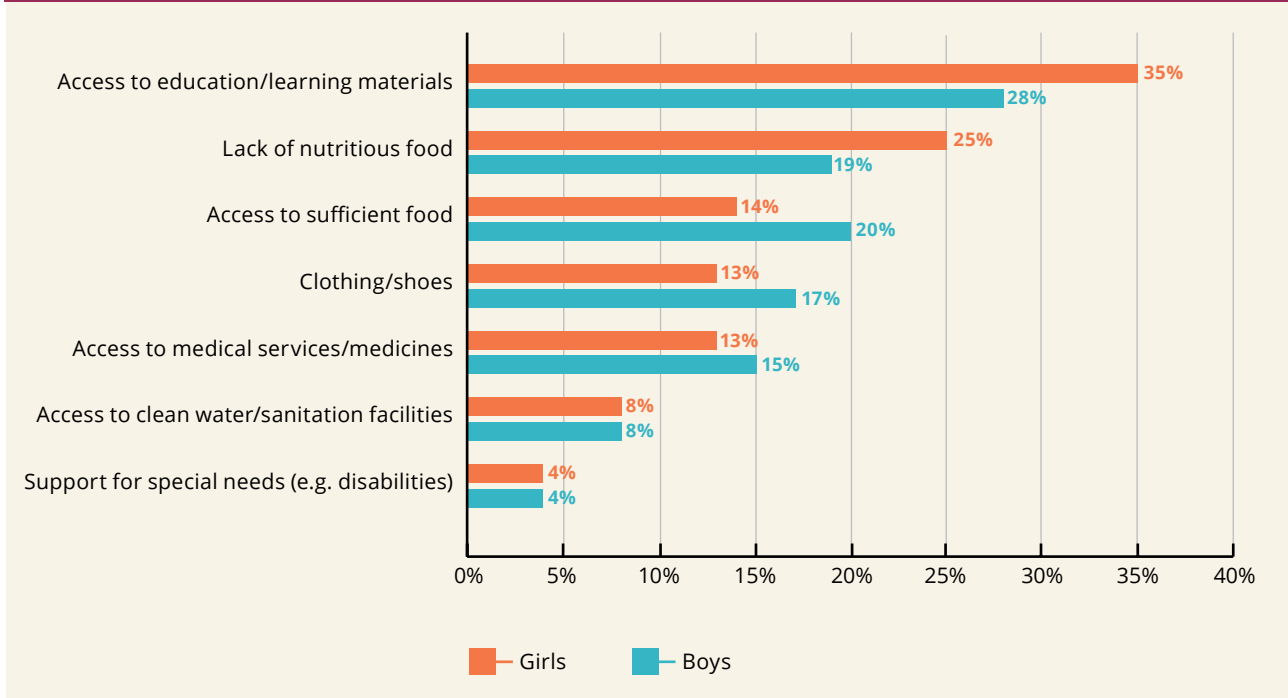


and lack of access to sufficient food (17 percent). Figure 18 illustrates the differences in challenges faced by gender of children.

It appears that young boys and young girls faced different challenges, according to their parents. Access to education and access to nutritious food were found to be greater challenges for young girls than boys. Access to sufficient food and clothing was a more commonly reported challenge for male children.

While 33 percent of parents of children in urban areas reported access to education and learning materials as their primary concern, 26 percent of parents of children in rural areas did so. In rural areas, parents were much more likely to identify lack of nutritious food and lack of access to clean water and sanitation facilities as challenges than parents of children in urban areas. These discrepancies in responses suggest that inequalities in infrastructure and food access between rural and urban areas that existed prior to the pandemic may have been exacerbated.

FIGURE 18: MAIN CHALLENGES CURRENTLY FACED BY CHILDREN BY GENDER (MULTIPLE RESPONSE)



AS A PARENT, WHAT ARE YOU MOST WORRIED ABOUT WHEN IT COMES TO RAISING YOUR CHILDREN?

Iraqi parents were asked about their greatest worries when it came to their children. The most common concerns highlighted were access to education, healthcare, and food.

As one 34 year-old father from Najaf put it:

“I worry about my children having a decent life: there is not enough food, no proper education, not enough income to provide a good quality of life to children.”

Other parents were worried about safety and security as well as their own ability to provide for their families.

In the words of one Iraqi father in the 35-44 age group,

“The future is very uncertain in all its aspects: health, education, access to services, food security, livelihoods and politics.”



YOUTH

Youth surveyed faced numerous challenges after the COVID-19 pandemic. When asked to identify the main challenge they faced, 24 percent selected access to education, followed by social isolation (23 percent) and lack of work or unemployment (20 percent).

Challenges differed across gender, age and urban/rural geography. Young men were almost twice as likely to consider high living costs (17 percent) and lack of work/unemployment (28 percent) their main challenge compared to young women (9 percent and 11 percent, respectively). This may stem from larger societal pressure placed on young men to provide financially for themselves and their families. Conversely, young women were more likely to be concerned with access to education (30 percent) and social isolation (32 percent) than young men (19 percent

and 15 percent, respectively). Figure 19 shows the main challenges faced by youth by gender.

Older youth ages 20–24 were also more concerned with economic challenges such as high living costs and lack of work than younger youth aged 15–19, who were more likely to list access to education as their main challenge. These findings correspond with changing expectations and responsibilities for younger and older youth. Challenges identified by each age group are found in Figure 20.

High living costs (14 percent), lack of work (21 percent), and social isolation (24 percent) were also much more likely to be identified by urban respondents than rural respondents (11 percent, 17 percent, and 19 percent, respectively), highlighting the differing impact of COVID-19 on income generation between cities and rural areas.

FIGURE 19: PRIMARY CHALLENGES FACING IRAQI YOUTH, BY GENDER

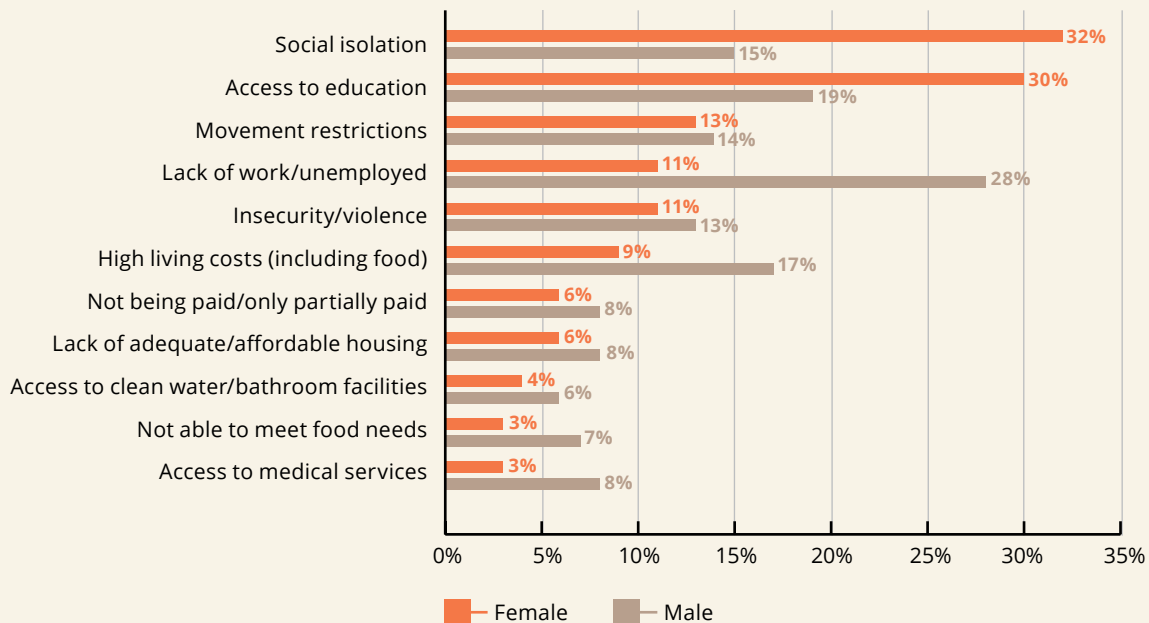
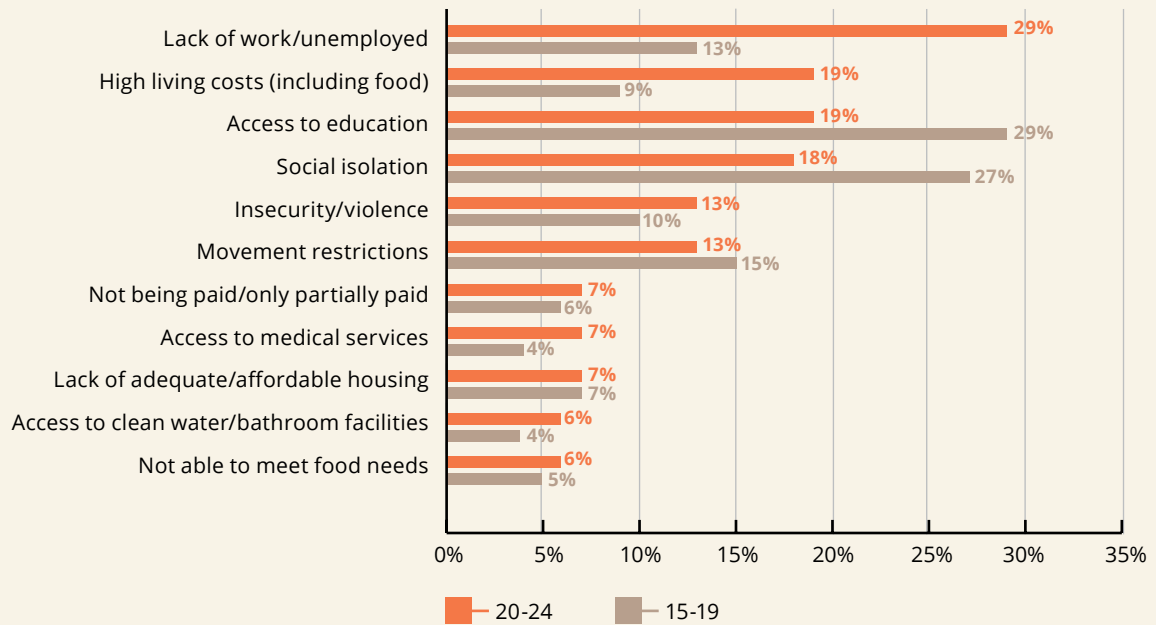




FIGURE 20: PRIMARY CHALLENGES FACING IRAQI YOUTH, BY AGE



Safety concerns

The COVID-19 pandemic created economic challenges for Iraqis, which complicated pre-existing fragility and worsened the country's security situation. The years 2020 and 2021 saw protests and unrest^{26 27} and there have been instances of violence against medical personnel caused by mistrust. A 2021 study of doctors at 11 Baghdad hospitals found that 87 percent had experienced hospital violence in the previous six months, primarily at the hands of patients.²⁸ These instances are yet another example of the impacts on safety and security as Iraqis faced concerns for their health and economic survival during COVID-19. This section contains findings from respondents regarding their perceptions of safety and security.

SCHOOLCHILDREN

Over half of parents of school-aged children felt an increase in tensions, with parents in urban areas 9 percent more likely to perceive increased tensions than those in rural. Perceived tensions included increased levels of domestic violence (20 percent), increased levels of violence (17 percent), and increased crime rates (15 percent). These responses

raise concerns about security issues and increased gender-based violence that have arisen as a result of lockdowns. In fact, the Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation also found an increase in all forms of gender-based violence in Iraq since the start of the pandemic.²⁹

Of those who reported increased tensions, 44 percent believed these tensions affected their children very much and 33 percent believed their children were affected to some extent. Only 23 percent believed their children were not affected.

It is interesting to note that out of parents who felt unsafe, over 62 percent were also concerned about not having enough to eat for themselves and their children.

FIGURE 22: HOW HAVE INCREASED VIOLENCE/TENSIONS AFFECTED YOUR CHILD(REN)?

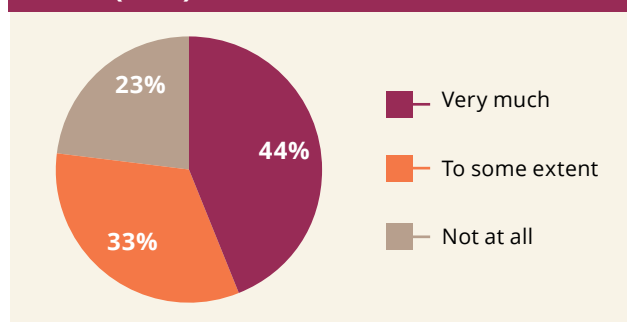
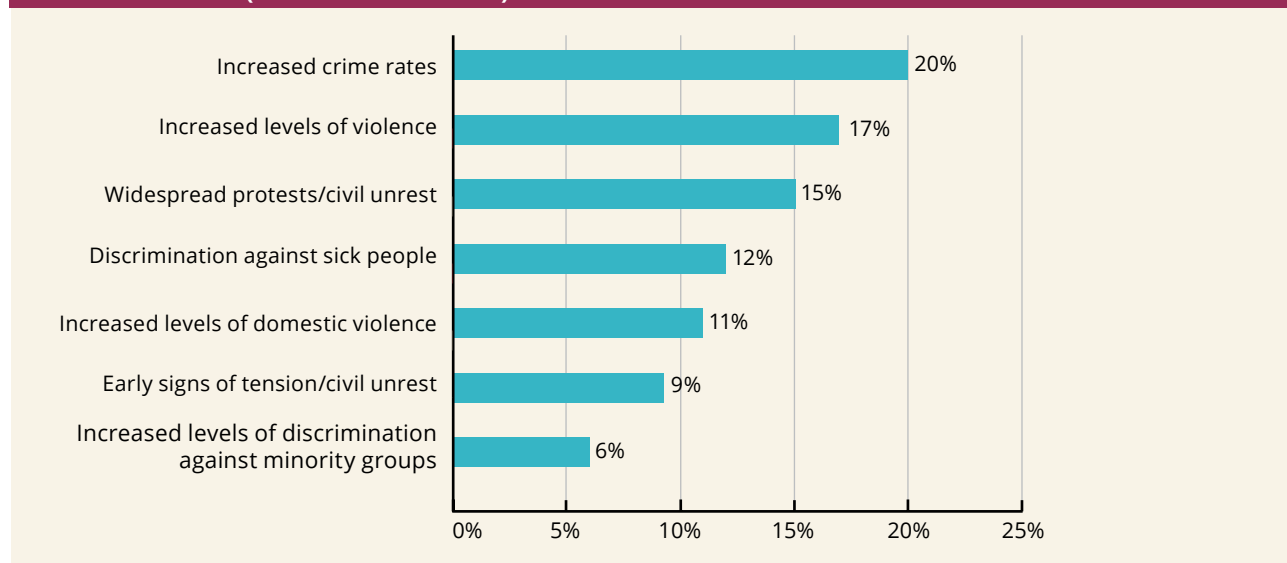


FIGURE 21: MAIN TYPES OF TENSIONS AND VIOLENCE PERCEIVED BY PARENTS IN THEIR COMMUNITIES (MULTIPLE RESPONSE)



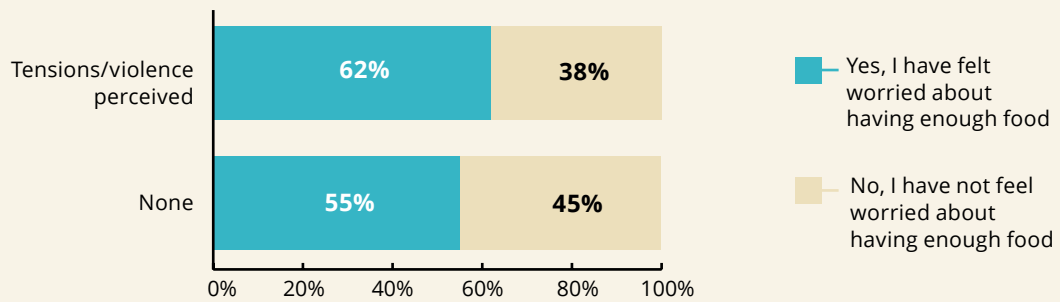
26 Alshamary, M. (2021, January 15). [How Iraq's economic crisis affects its traditional and non-traditional security sector](#). Brookings.

27 Tawfeeq, M. (2020, December 9). [Seven dead in protests over unpaid salaries in northern Iraq](#). CNN.

28 Lafta, R., Qusay, N., Mary, M., & Burnham, G. (n.d.). [Violence against doctors in Iraq during the time of covid-19](#). PLOS ONE.

29 Calabrese, John. December 2020. ["Iraq's Fragile State in the Time of Covid-19."](#) Middle East Institute.

FIGURE 23: TENSIONS/VIOLENCE PERCEIVED AND CONCERNS OVER FOOD

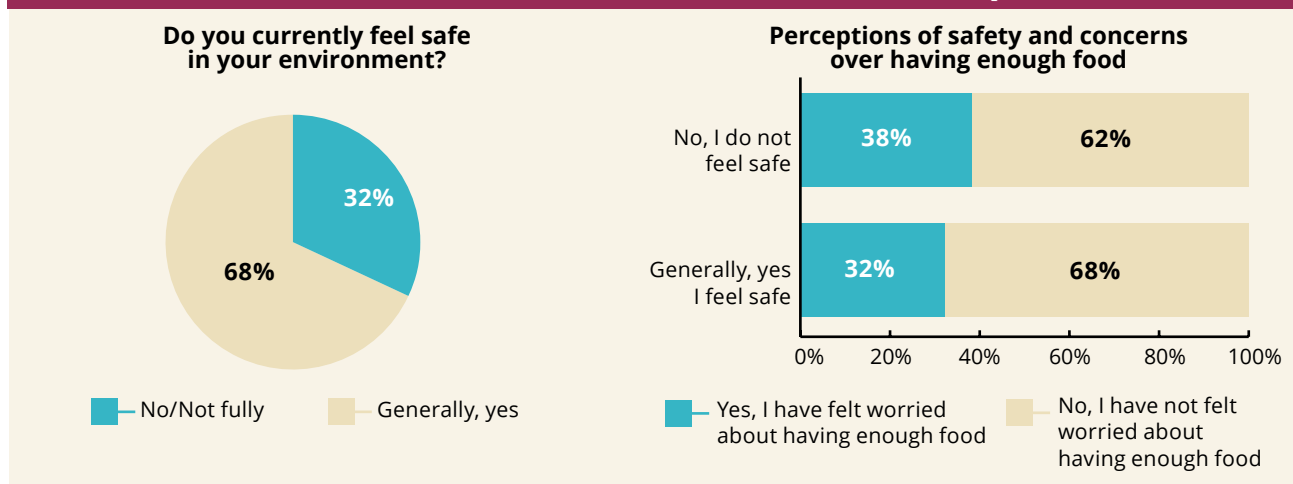


YOUTH

Youth were also asked about their perceptions of safety. Around 37 percent of young men and 26 percent of young women reported that they did not feel fully safe in their current environment. The discrepancies were even larger among older age groups, with 41 percent of 20–24 year-olds reporting they felt unsafe in their environment compared with only 25 percent of 15–19 year-olds. Similar to parents of schoolchildren, youth who reported not feeling safe were more likely to report concerns about not having enough food to eat over the past 30 days (28 percent who felt safe had concerns about food vs. 32 percent of did not feel safe). This finding could demonstrate that Iraqis struggling to feed their families are also often facing safety and security concerns.

Among those youth who reported feeling unsafe, the most common reasons were armed conflict (19 percent), violence and tensions within the area/community/neighbourhood (17 percent), high crime rates (13 percent), and violence within the family (13 percent). Young women were more likely to list violence within the family as the reason they felt unsafe (18 percent) than young men (10 percent), highlighting the role of gender-based violence in young women’s perceptions of security. Young men were more than five times more likely to report armed conflict (28 percent) as the reason for feeling unsafe than young women (5 percent). This emphasizes the outsized impact of armed conflict, particularly on young men.

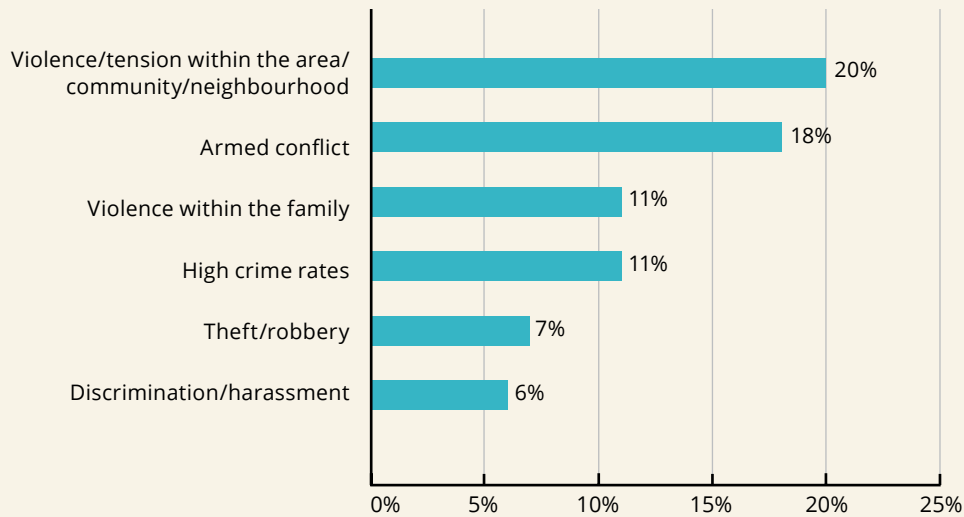
FIGURE 24: FOOD SECURITY AND PERCEPTIONS OF SAFETY AMONG IRAQI YOUTH



Youth surveyed also reported their mobility was impacted by the pandemic. Around 12 percent reported they were stranded in their current location away from home and 31 percent were at home but were unable to leave their home area. Some 75 percent of those whose mobility was not

impacted felt safe in their current environment, compared with 61 percent of those unable to leave their home area and 53 percent of those stranded in a location away from home. These findings suggest that safety and mobility are closely intertwined for Iraqi youth.

FIGURE 25: FACTORS INFLUENCING YOUTH PERCEPTIONS OF SAFETY





Aspirations for the future

When Iraqi youth were asked about what they would need to be successful in the future, access to higher education (24 percent) was the top factor for their success, followed by access to job opportunities (18 percent).

Access to higher education (29 percent) and safety and security (16 percent) were more likely to be considered the most important factor for future success by young women than young men (19 percent and 11 percent, respectively). Young men considered access to job opportunities to be the most important factor more frequently (22 percent) than young women (13 percent). This finding may reflect entrenched gender social expectations that place greater emphasis on young men to find employment over young women.

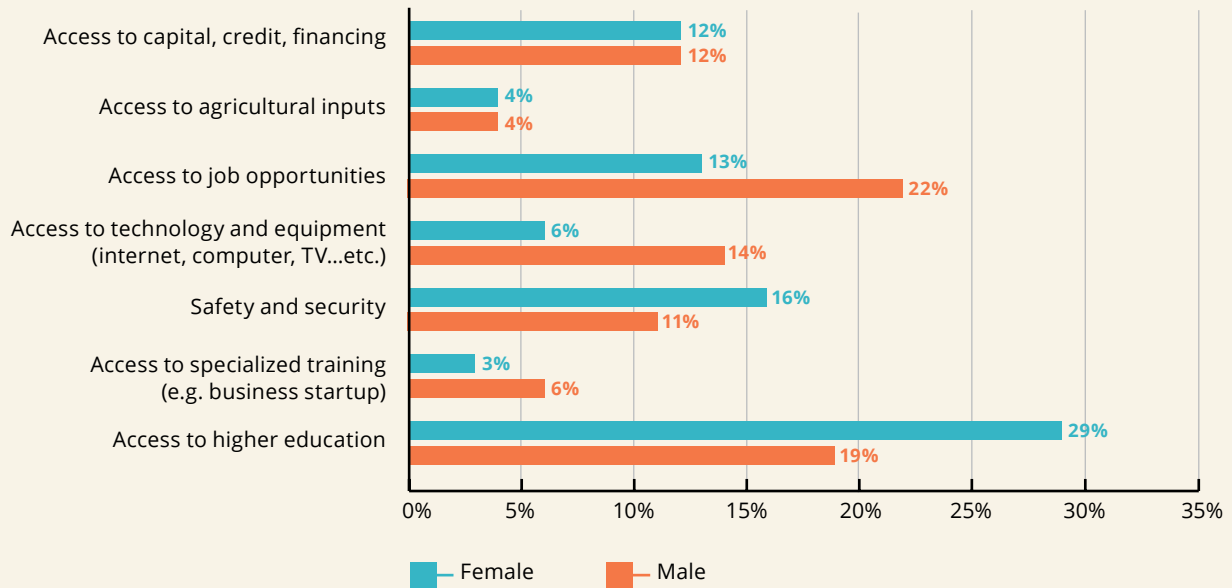
Among youth aged 15–19, access to higher education was considered the most important factor influencing future success (26 percent). Younger youth were also almost twice as likely to identify access to technology and equipment

such as internet, as the most important factor for their future success than older youth aged 20–24 (13 percent vs. 7 percent). Older youth considered access to job opportunities (22 percent) and access to capital, credit and financing (15 percent) to be the most important factors for their future success much more often than younger youth (14 percent and 9 percent, respectively). This suggests younger and older youth face different challenges for future success. Rural youth were more likely to list safety and security (19 percent) and access to technology and equipment (14 percent) as most important compared with urban youth (11 percent and 9 percent, respectively), highlighting gaps in internet access and safety concerns impacting rural areas.

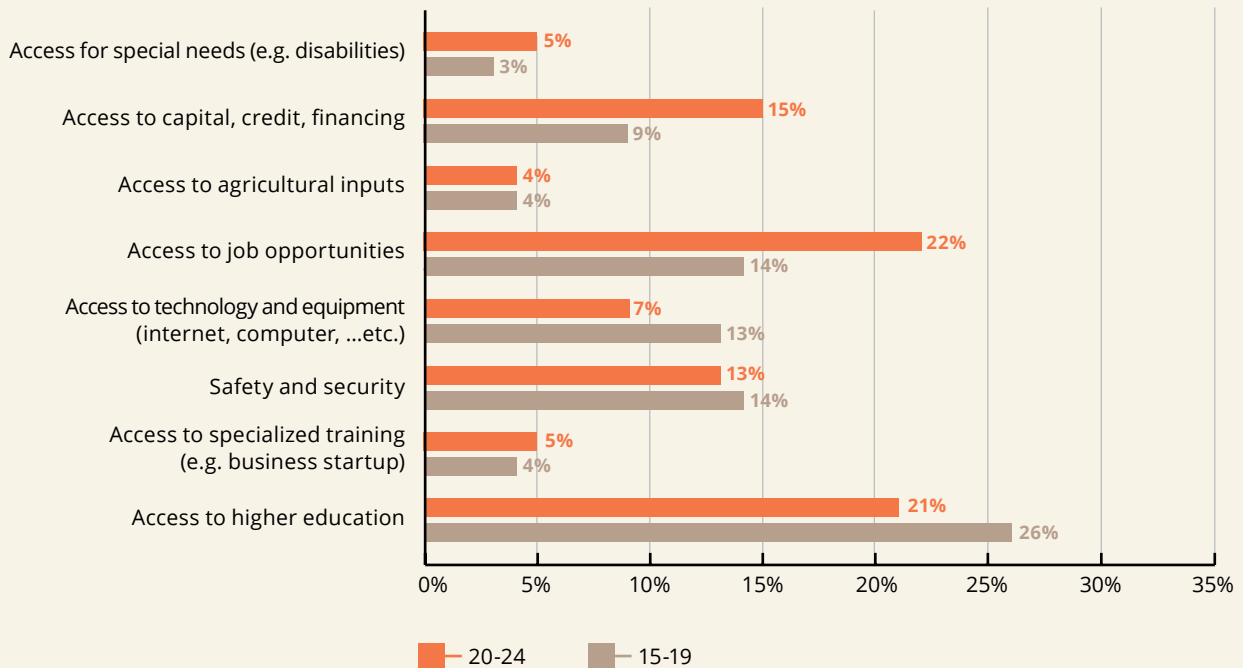
Youth living in urban areas were more likely to identify access to credit, capital and financing (14 percent), and access to job opportunities (19 percent) as challenges than youth living in rural areas (7 percent and 14 percent, respectively).

FIGURE 26: MOST IMPORTANT NEEDS TO BE SUCCESSFUL IN THE FUTURE

Most important factor to be successful by gender



Most important factor to be successful by age group



WHAT WOULD IT TAKE TO HELP YOUTH THROUGH THIS CRISIS?

Iraqi youth who responded to the survey felt that access to education, job opportunities, money, safety and security, and technology such as computers and internet access would help them make it through the COVID-19 crisis.

The following are quotes from respondents.

“For me, the State should provide support and access to technology to young people so they can safely attend school remotely,”

wrote a young Iraqi man in the 20–24 age group.

“It would help to have job opportunities in the private and public sectors. This would help utilize youth talent and energies to build a better and more developed society,”

shared a young woman in the 20–24 age group.

WHAT WOULD IT TAKE TO HELP SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN AND THEIR PARENTS THROUGH THIS CRISIS?

When asked what it would take to help parents and their school-aged children through the COVID-19 crisis, parents mentioned education, healthcare access, money and food access as key factors.

One Iraqi mother in the 35-44 age group responded:

“Having a proper education with a comprehensive curriculum as well as ensuring safety for students when they are in school”



Concluding remarks

Iraqis represented in this report faced a variety of challenges after the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated existing challenges stemming from insecurity. School closures, restrictions on movement, and economic impacts reduced youth and children's access to education and reduced the quality of education.

Economic impacts also had wide-reaching effects on income, livelihood coping mechanisms, food security, and access to medical services. The reduction in resources, education and healthcare may have broad implications for human capital in Iraq long after COVID-19 restrictions are lifted. When asked about these challenges, Iraqis shared their belief in the importance of their children's education and the need for educational challenges to be addressed. Further study is needed to understand the nuances of this impact, particularly for populations that do not have access to the internet as they were not represented in this survey.

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World Food Programme,
Via Cesare Giulio Viola, 68/70
Parco dei Medici
00148 Rome