

Malaysia's Youth in Peril

The impacts of the pandemic on the youth and its implications for Malaysian economy, society and politics

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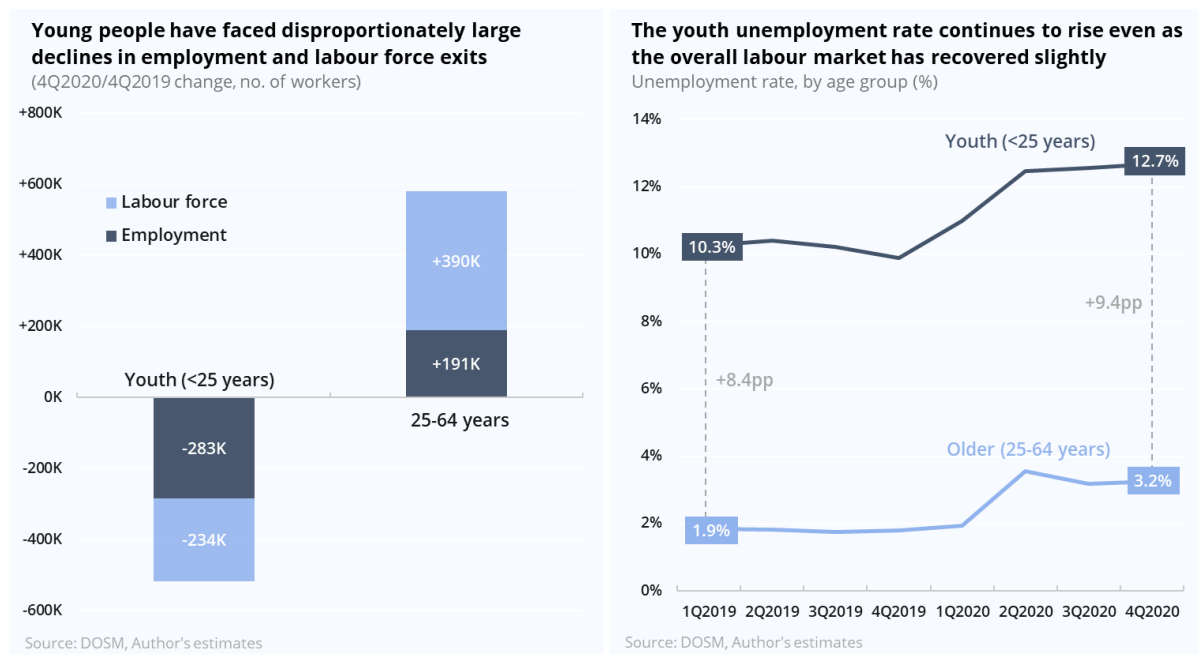
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Young Malaysians are under siege from multiple fronts. COVID-19 has created a perfect storm of economic, social, and political pressures that will have long-term implications for an entire generation of young Malaysians, and for the future of the nation's economy, society, and politics.

Malaysia's youth sustained heavy economic losses

It is well-known that young Malaysians have been disproportionately [affected](#) by COVID-19. Overall, young workers have suffered far [higher rates](#) of job losses than older workers while also being pushed outside of the labour market in record numbers. The youth unemployment rate (for jobseekers below 25 years of age) is now at about 12.7 percent—far higher than the unemployment rate for older workers, which is sitting at about 3.2 percent.

Compared to a year ago, there are about 283,000 less young Malaysians who have a job, while about 234,000 more have exited the labour market entirely. Those who have managed to hold on to their jobs are overwhelmingly [more likely](#) to have their work hours and/or wages cut and are also likely to face increased job precarity. New Malaysians graduates entering the workforce only add to an ever-growing stock of unemployed youths, as bad labour market conditions and an uneven economic recovery continue to deepen the youth unemployment crisis.



Even when Malaysia's economic growth returns to pre-pandemic levels, these economic pressures youth are facing will be stubbornly long-lasting. A large body of [research](#) warns that being unemployed while young for extended periods of time has sweeping long-term [consequences](#) for young workers, creating significant effects on future income, employment prospects, and mental wellbeing for decades down the road. For too many young Malaysians, the inability to earn money now will affect the ability of young people to have financial security over the long term, including the ability to purchase a home and comfortably take care of their families. Additionally, there is also evidence to suggest that elevated levels of youth unemployment can have important socio-political implications as well, leading to [social unrest](#) and higher crime rates.

More importantly, while youth unemployment may have been [magnified](#) by the pandemic—its roots run far deeper. There are a whole host of underlying structural inequities that younger workers face that have contributed to the pandemic's disproportionate economic [effects](#) on Malaysia's youth. For instance, young workers in general are far more likely to be in precarious jobs in demand-sensitive industries particularly vulnerable to the pandemic—along with persistently contending with higher rates of unemployment and underemployment. More generally, [many youths](#) are first-time labour market entrants, and have yet to build the requisite information, social networks, and human capital to compete with the average experienced, older, worker.

It is easy to think that these pressures created by COVID-19 will be temporary. But unless adequately ameliorated and addressed with resolute policy action—all signs point to the reality that COVID-19 will indelibly shape the lives of Malaysia's young for decades to come.

The underappreciated psycho-social toll of the pandemic

Beyond the burden of a pandemic-stricken economy, COVID-19 lockdowns have also generated underappreciated social ramifications for Malaysia's youth. For younger Malaysians still in school, the shift to a full year of online schooling has been tumultuous. For one, online schooling has laid bare the wide disparities between access to internet and digital amenities between the households and between regions. It is well-known that many underdeveloped [or remote areas](#) in Malaysia lack access to stable, high-speed internet—but [access](#) to sufficient internet-enabled devices per household have been impediments to learning too. A family with two school-going children will require at least as many spare laptops/phones for each child to use for an entire day of online schooling—a luxury that many households cannot afford.

Besides, online school has proven to be an inadequate substitute for many students. [Recent research](#) suggests that the prolonged disruption of normal schooling can cause disproportionate learning losses for already-underperforming students and may increase the risk of students [dropping out](#) entirely. Additionally, the second-order social impacts are even greater, especially for those without access to resources and adequate supportive social networks. In short, inequalities in access to quality education is widening, with adequate educational attention denied to the very students who may need it the most.

There is [evidence](#) that [shows](#) that the wellbeing of young people has also deteriorated since the onset of the pandemic. Many younger people, particularly [adolescents](#), are [increasingly](#)

susceptible to mental health issues like [anxiety](#) and depression as lockdowns have led to increased stress, uncertainty and social isolation—which are all especially disruptive for young people in their formative social years. Worryingly, there are also a rise in [suicide](#) attempts among youth that reinforce the need to decriminalize suicide and to broaden access to counselling and support for children. Safety for children in schools and outside of schools urgently needs more attention.

Youth are politically disenfranchised—but not silent

At the same time, already reeling from the economic and psychosocial impacts from the pandemic, young Malaysians are also increasingly denied political representation. The government has delayed implementing the Constitutional amendment to lower the voting age to 18 and confer voting rights to over 1.5 million young Malaysians; while youth-centric parties like the former Youth Minister's Malaysia United Democratic Alliance (MUDA) have been denied [registration](#) as a political party.

Statements from senior politicians over the past few months downplaying the struggles young workers are facing have only made matters worse. In response to rising youth unemployment and dwindling wages, several cabinet ministers have repeated paternalistic narratives about the youth being 'picky', instead advising graduates to be 'grateful' even if they [barely make](#) minimum wage. The time for treating young adults as children, without respect for their views and contributions, is long over. Indeed, Malaysia's youth have long been politically [side-lined](#). There is a need to change mindsets and a recognize how outdated paternalism contributes to these inequities—ingrained in a social system that inherently marginalises the young in favour of age, experience, and patronage.

Despite these economic, social, and political setbacks, Malaysia's youth are a formidable force. In the next election voters under 30 will be the majority (even with the delay in enfranchising voters between 18-21). One of the most important political developments of COVID-19 has been the growing political activism of youth in the region. Youth mobilization in Thailand, Indonesia and Myanmar have captured the headlines, and inspired youth people in their bravery—and in Malaysia, there is a sense that the same forces from frustration and discontent are growing.

Galvanised by the success of the youth-led [Undi18](#) initiative and the important role that the youth played in the election of the Pakatan Harapan government, youth dissatisfaction with political elites across parties is fundamentally changing national politics. From youth-centric [Parlimen Digital](#) initiative to the recent [Buka Puasa, Buka Parliament](#) demonstration, youth political engagement has dominated national headlines and been one of the most decisive forms of political mobilisation nationwide. Malaysians like [Veveonah Mosibin](#) and [Ain Husniza Saiful Nizam](#) who have drawn attention to important socio-economic issues of infrastructure inequality and rape culture in schools are emerging as voices to make a better Malaysia, often overshadowing those of the political elites.

Denied a voice in Parliament, new voices are emerging and becoming increasingly prominent. Younger Malaysians are redirecting the narrative towards the challenges Malaysia is facing and stimulating productive discussions of policy solutions. The economic, social, and political hardships that youth are facing cannot be ignored—and the continued marginalization of youth

puts Malaysia as a whole in peril. Yet, while COVID-19 is undoubtedly a pivotal moment in Malaysian history, its impacts on youth and its implications for the future of the nation may prove to be even more momentous.

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