

CLIMATE CHANGE AND MENTAL HEALTH

– a co-
produced
study in
Blackpool



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"I've always cared about the environment, and I believe that as a team we can combat climate change" (Alice, 12)

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Authorship statement:

This research project has been a collaboration of different parties. Therefore, the authorship includes community partner organisations as well as named individuals and their main affiliations.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Most of all, we want to highlight the contributions from all young people in Blackpool who contributed to this research, whether through offering advice or taking part in interviews, and the long-time commitment from the climate co-researchers Alice, Annie and Maya. This research could not have taken place without the support of many individuals and organisations. We want to thank the South Coast Doctoral Training Partnership for funding this project and the University of Brighton for being supportive of the co-produced nature of this work. The co-production part also could not have happened without mentoring from Viktoria's supervisory team, Prof Angie Hart, Prof Julie Doyle and Dr Barbara Mezes, and support from the community partners Boingboing CiC and the Resilience Revolution Blackpool. As well as witnessing and learning from the range of impactful co-production research taking place at the Centre of Resilience for Social Justice.



*"I feel like littering is a good metaphor for climate change, everyone else is just throwing their things away and the people who actually want to make a difference have to pick it all up."
(Jay, 17)*

INTRODUCTION

More than ever, young people are fighting for our planet, with more youth taking part in climate actions, such as climate strikes, climate groups and individual climate actions. However, research shows that thinking about **a big issue like climate change can cause distress, worry, and hopelessness, impacting the mental health of young people** (Ojala 2012).

Very little was known about what can help young people when they feel overwhelmed by climate change, especially from a youth perspective. **This research looked at how young people were indirectly affected by climate change and what they thought would help them overcome negative feelings.**

This was done through **one-to-one interviews and co-research workshops**, which included a group of 3 young people working together over the course of 9-months to do their own research together with Viktoria Erlacher-Downing, the PhD researcher and Henry Pollock, the BoingBoing co-production worker.

From past research, we do know that **there is a link between climate change and mental health** (Hickman et al. 2022, Hayes et al. 2018; Galway et al. 2019; Ojala 2016; Bryant 2019). Unfortunately, there is still little research about youth mental health in relation to climate change. There is even less research about youth in the UK who are facing additional adversities, and there is less research still that young people can directly engage with and influence the research direction. This study set out to change this and aimed to answer two key questions:

1. How might climate change affect the mental health of young people in a disadvantaged* area of the UK?
2. How can young people co-develop resources that aim to increase resilience during climate change?

These research questions were answered by working with **young people in Blackpool, aged 10-19**. Blackpool was not a location chosen at random – the study involved **young people facing multiple systemic disadvantages**. The city of Blackpool was ranked the most deprived area in England in 2019 (Indices of Multiple Deprivation) ('Blackpool Unitary - Lancashire County Council' 2019). HeadStart Blackpool's Resilience Revolution takes a whole-town approach to support individuals in resilience and tackle structural inequalities. Focusing on Blackpool, especially with the support of the Resilience Revolution, allowed this research to explore **how socio and environmental resilience are connected**.

* the term 'disadvantaged' is common in research but generally not used in this project, in BoingBoing or the Resilience Revolution as it does not highlight the fact that the root causes of these disadvantages are not the fault of the people experiencing them. Young People in Blackpool have co-developed a different term, 'Young People facing Multiple Systemic Disadvantages' (YPfMSD)

RESILIENCE.

You may already have a working definition of resilience in your own life. It could look like persisting in the face of a personal challenge or succeeding despite difficult circumstances. In the context of this research, 'resilience' is in line with what BoingBoing, the community partner of this research defines as:

"Overcoming adversity, whilst also potentially changing, or even dramatically transforming, (aspects of) that adversity" (Hart et al., 2016, p. 3)

Another way of putting it is:



**'Beating the odds whilst also changing the odds'
(Hart et al., 2016)**

Why does all of this matter?

The **climate crisis is here** and young people are increasingly concerned about what the world will look like when they are adults. Scientists and young people agree that to improve our planet's uncertain future, **we must act now**. Importantly, today's slow and limited political climate actions are not enough to prevent climate catastrophe. With young people inheriting the planet and both **taking part in and pioneering climate action**, it's important to understand how their well-being might already be affected by climate change and how they can be supported.

This already underrepresented research goes even further and **actively engaged with young people in an area of the UK usually left out of research**. It is also transparent about their demographics, which highlighted some of the existing adversities some of them already face in addition to concerns about climate change (see p.4 'who was involved'). This is important because 'young people' do not all fit into the same box or have access to the same resources. This is important to highlight because historically **environmental activism has often required a certain amount of privilege to take part in**. This added lens allowed us to discover what resources could be used and improved to allow youth a resilient response to climate change. Even more, this study ensured that there were ways that young people could be part of the academic research process. Training in research methods was offered to them and lowered the barriers that make research like this usually inaccessible to youth.

WHY THIS REPORT?

Research only matters if we know about it and can learn from it. Unfortunately, much research is only geared toward a select group of people who have been specifically trained to engage with it. This report seeks to translate the content of the overall research project for a larger audience so that anyone who is interested can access this knowledge. Of course, we recognise that other barriers exist such as literacy, access to internet and time, and even contextual academic work. However, we hope that this report ultimately makes this kind of research more accessible.

"It's really encouraging to have like-minded people within a space where it's really positive and we're trying to make changes because in day-to-day life some people don't take it seriously" - Maya, 17.

MEET THE RESEARCH TEAM

'Climate change and mental health; A co-produced study with young people in Blackpool' was Viktoria's doctoral research project (PhD) at the University of Brighton, funded by the South Coast Doctoral Training Partnership. However, it was not just a one-person research project but resulted in outputs beyond a traditional PhD. It was made possible through close community partnerships with BoingBoing CiC and the Resilience Revolution Blackpool.



VIKTORIA ERLACHER-DOWNING

University-based researcher - University of Brighton / CRSJ

Viktoria Erlacher is a young PhD student at the University of Brighton's Centre of Resilience for Social Justice and a BoingBoing volunteer. In line with the BoingBoing approach to resilience she wants to make sure to hold systems accountable rather than blaming the individual for their struggles.



HENRY POLLOCK

Community co-researcher - University of Brighton / CRSJ

Henry is an assistant co-production worker at BoingBoing. Before this he did a PhD on the metaphysics of time. He has also done a bit of policy work around sustainability, and is really interested in how issues about climate change interact with issues about social justice. So, obviously he was very excited to be a part of the climate co-research group!



SAM RICHARDSON

Project partner - Resilience Revolution Blackpool

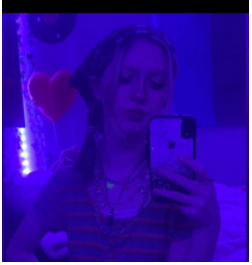
Sam Richardson is a Youth Engagement Worker for the HeadStart Blackpool programme and a proud co-leader of the Blackpool Resilience Revolution! He was born and educated in Blackpool and is passionate about tackling inequality in all its forms.



ALICE TARPEY

Co-researcher - aged 12

Alice is 12 and has always cared about the environment and believes that as a team we can combat climate change.



ANNIE RHODES

Co-researcher - aged 14

Annie is home educated, a vegan and loves theatre and film. When climate change issues were in the news it made Annie want to be a part of making the world a better place.



MAYA LINDLEY

Co-researcher - aged 18

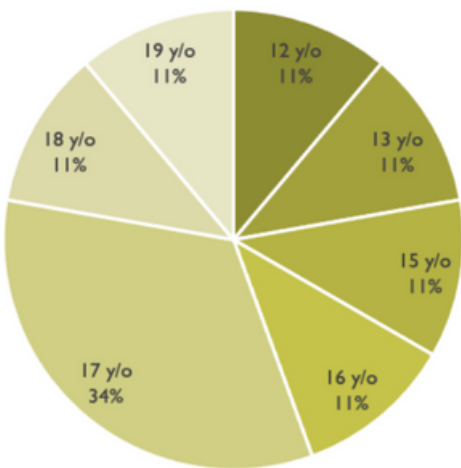
Maya loves being involved in different youth environmental groups to implement positive change and from this autumn is studying Global Sustainable Development at the University of Warwick.

Blackpool Youth Climate group also advised and supported this research. They bring young people from various community groups together to take positive action for climate justice. They are also a collaboration of the Youth Voice Network, Junior Park Rangers and the Resilience Revolution. Blackpool Youth Climate group also works with Blackpool Council and ran the 1st Youth Climate Summit 2021.

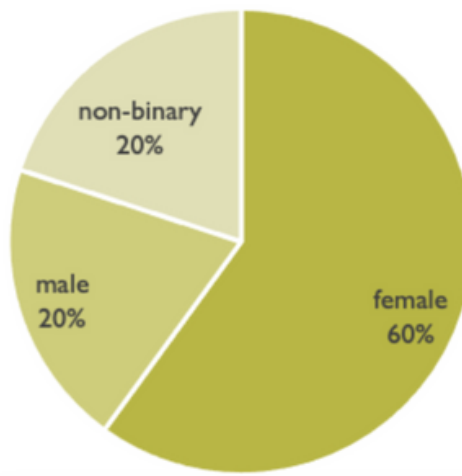
DEMOGRAPHICS

A total of 10 young people took part in this research. Here are their demographics:

Age of Young People



Gender of Young People



School-Type

College (75%) Academy (12.5%) Home-educated (12.5%)



Free School Meals

37.5%



Looked After Child

25%



Lived experience with environmental actions

75%



Lived experience with mental health condition

100% total: personal, (55.6%), family (44.4%)



Lived experience with a disability and/or special educational needs

(87.5% total): family (50%), personal (37.5%), none (12.5%)

We set out to engage a diverse range of Blackpool young people in this project as can be seen here. However, we need to acknowledge that it has limited ethnic diversity as all young people came from white Caucasian backgrounds.

THE PROCESS

Viktoria started this research by analysing existing literature so she knew what research was already out there and what was missing from it regarding youth facing multiple systemic disadvantages, climate-change, mental health, and resilience. She then visited the Blackpool Young People Executive Group (YPEG) to introduce the project and get feedback on it to make sure that this was something that young people in Blackpool would be interested in. Viktoria then did research interviews with a broad range of young people in Blackpool about what they thought and felt about climate change. Some of them decided to join the research as co-researchers.

Three youth co-researchers (Annie, Alice, Maya), an adult community partner (Henry) from Blackpool and Viktoria then worked together for over 9-months and produced their own co-research report which is made up of interviews with adults in positions of power and surveys of young people in Blackpool. You can read more about what they found out in the groups' report [here](#). Viktoria took notes throughout the workshops and the co-researchers made journaling entries after each session, this is the data that she then used in her doctoral research thesis (a long document that shows that this has been a piece of original research).

Timeline of key research stages/actions:

October 2019	start of the PhD
March 2020	Viktoria visits YPEG in Blackpool
[delays due to the start of the Covid-19 pandemic]	
January 2021	Online Blackpool Youth Climate Summit
February 2021	founding of Blackpool Youth Climate group which supported this research. Viktoria starts research interviews with young people in Blackpool
April 2021	start of co-research group
October 2021	Co-research group interviews adults and surveys young people
March 2022	Co-research group publishes their co-research report and presents it at the International Resilience Revolution conference in Blackpool.
April 2022	Representative of co-research group attend Blackpool Youth Summit to introduce the report and ask local MP questions about climate change
May 2022	Co-research group approached by Blackpool Climate Action Partnership to join future meetings

KEY FINDINGS

This is a summary of the 8 main themes from the interviews and co-production workshops that Viktoria found during the analysis stage for her PhD thesis. To see what we discovered during our research as a co-research group please have a look at [this report](#).

Themes	Key Findings
<p>Theme 1 "Access to nature as a benefit but not a condition for climate concerns"</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engagement in climate actions and concern were not linked to access to nature. Despite YPfMSD* having little access to nature and negative experiences with the town's pollution they still showed interest and engaged with local actions to create change.
<p>Theme 2 "The COVID-19 impact on climate reflection and action"</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> YPfMSD believed there was less public interest in climate change during Covid-19. However, they were able to use the lockdowns to get engaged and create online action, such as joining youth eco groups.
<p>Theme 3 "Perceived loss of future due to climate change"</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Climate change indirectly impacted YPfMSD's mental health through feelings of loss. They felt that their climate concerns were uncommon and that recognising the systemic** impact raised this concern.
<p>Theme 4 "[Loss of] trust in adults in addressing climate change"</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> YPfMSD believed that while some adults were listening, they were not taking sufficient action, increasing their distrust in adults. YPfMSD identified steps for adult support: recognition of youth activism from adults in power, platforms for youth voices and actions, and family participation in climate actions.
<p>Theme 5 "Individual versus societal responsibilities"</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> YPfMSD felt hope from their individual actions, such as diet changes, but felt long-term concern of being powerless against such systemic issues** and frustrated with the lack of adult support and action. Collective action was an opportunity for YPfMSD to gain social capital***, which opposes findings in other studies which found that direct experience led to a lack of social capital.
<p>Theme 6 "Sources of hope, envisioning a regenerative future"</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Systemic inaction led to feelings of hopelessness, but seeing people taking action and being able to envision a positive future created hope. 'Proactive', 'transformational' resilience was seen during the co-research (feelings of positive change and action).
<p>Theme 7 "Finding community through adversity"</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> YPfMSD concerned about climate change require safe spaces to self-organise with the support of adults. 'Belonging' is key. This adaptive coping skill benefits individuals while boosting community resilience.
<p>Theme 8 "Opportunities for transformation"</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The co-research group focused on systemic change**, deciding to use their voice to present their research findings to adults in power. They emphasised 'shared responsibility', asking adults to support young people with necessary resources and encouraging them to collaborate with young people.

*Young People facing Multiple Systemic Disadvantages

**issues like climate change are bigger than the individual and need systemic change, 'systems' include bigger institutions like schools or local or national government.

***social capital is the network of our relationships. The more social capital we have, the more influence and support we have.

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

Youth climate activism in Blackpool might be less visible from the outside in comparison to other areas in England. This is because financial, personal, and geographic barriers prevented them from taking part in nation-wide and international protests such as the Fridays for Future movement which were reported on in mass media. Despite these barriers, young people were still concerned about climate change and found ways to participate in climate activism, both through joining local youth climate groups and individual actions.

- A key factor that contributed to youth resilience was connecting with local peers about climate change and collaborating on climate actions.
 - Young people also advocated by reaching out to adults in power with their climate related concerns and findings, and demanded systemic change.
 - The Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns enabled young people to take part in a range of climate change actions, as they suddenly had more time to follow their interests outside of school and work.
-



RECOMMENDATION 1

Power and support in numbers...Youth peer groups

What stood out at the end of the research was the importance of belonging for young people concerned about climate change. This suggested that feelings of climate-related hopelessness and anxiety can be eased when youth have a place to unite, advocate together and are supported by adults in their surroundings. Not only does this look like a space to discuss serious issues related to climate change, but this study suggests that better mental health outcomes come from the strong social connections nurtured in these groups and the focus on local actions.

Do you want to do something similar or make your youth climate group more resilient? A recommendation for such supportive groups involves setting healthy boundaries and structure in the organisation, such as consistent agreed-upon meeting times and allowing individuals confirm what amount of energy and time they can bring to the table. On reflection, what makes such groups resilient, also comes from two parts of self-care. Firstly, group members must agree to put themselves first even if their cause is important and overwhelming. And respect that sometimes we need to take breaks from our commitments. Secondly, in climate activism a lot of time and energy can go into actions without seeing immediate effects. We need to remember that "success" is a skewed metric and does not involve physical achievements or speed of progress.

An additional recommendation is to recruit adult supporters/mentors to your group who can back your actions and goals.

RECOMMENDATIONS CONT.



02 - Adults in power allowing youth voice into their meeting rooms

A main finding in the research was that much of the negative feelings about climate change by young people were connected and amplified by the inactions of adults in their environment, rather than just the direct effects of climate change. A key recommendation to local and national policymakers is to not just acknowledge this but to actively work towards making their structures more accessible to young people. This could be done by inviting youth representatives to frequent meetings and keeping in touch with what local youth climate groups are working on and offering them support.



03 — Research for all

This recommendation is more directed towards academia or policy research, but communities also need to realise the power they should have. What made this PhD research project different to what usually happens in academia, was that it set out to work with community partners and included young people in active research positions. The outputs created by the co-researchers have already been getting attention by local adults in positions of power and will hopefully influence local climate policies, adding more youth voice to those important decisions about the future. This is why a key recommendation is for research to not just gather new knowledge, but to co-create knowledge and use it to make positive changes in the communities that they are working in. Communities have a right to demand research to commit to working with them along the way, not just extracting knowledge from them.

These were the findings to date from the overall PhD research, be sure to also take a look at our co-research report containing their own recommendations and findings!

STAY IN TOUCH

Thank you for reading about this research project, part of what allows research like this to make an impact is your engagement. If you are interested in reading a copy of the final thesis, our blog posts or if you have any questions or anything you would like us to know, we would love to hear from you. You can reach out to us at:

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Henry Pollock henry@boingboing.org.uk (Co-production worker)

*“Just being able to go and talk to people about that and being able to just say the little things that they can change its definitely my way of helping in bigger ways that I can't be involved in like the protests.”
(Bethany, 16)*

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