



Key Facts

Students of color and lower socioeconomic status (SES) were disproportionately impacted by the educational challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic deepened pre-existing educational inequities caused by systemic barriers.

Structural inequities should be addressed to promote positive educational trajectories for all students regardless of race, ethnicity, or SES.

Educational Inequities Related to Race and Socioeconomic Status Deepened by the COVID-19 Pandemic

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The COVID-19 pandemic caused reverberations throughout the educational system that disproportionately impacted students of color and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. We examined the latest research documenting the disparate educational impacts of the pandemic across racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic status groups—impacts that deepened existing educational inequities in the U.S. Underlying these disparities were numerous systemic barriers, including disproportionate access to in-person learning and technology alongside the intensification of racial discrimination. We also found emerging evidence revealing some similarities in the educational impacts of the pandemic, as well as evidence of some students of color leveraging supplemental educational supports and their academic confidence to confront the educational challenges it posed. We concluded that dismantling structural inequities to promote positive educational trajectories for each group will be essential in the post-pandemic educational recovery landscape.

In a recent review of multiple relevant studies,¹ we found compelling evidence that the COVID-19 pandemic laid bare and deepened longstanding and systemic educational inequities related to race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (SES).² Exacerbating these disparities were underlying structural gaps in educational access to in-person instruction and access to technology, alongside mental health challenges.³ Because of these inequities, the pandemic disproportionately impacted the reading and math achievement of students who are classified as Black, Hispanic, American Indian or Alaskan Native (AI/AN), as well as those from high-poverty schools.⁴

Educational Inequities Related to Race

Among Black and Hispanic fourth to eighth graders, gains in math and reading during the 2020-21 school year were lower, on average, relative to White and Asian students. Also, disparities in math between Black and White students—as well as between Hispanic and White students—

widened from before (2019–20) to one year after the onset of the pandemic (2020–21). Schools serving higher proportions of Black and Hispanic students also experienced slower gains in math and reading.⁵ The largest declines in reading over time (fall of 2019, 2020, and 2021) were among children who were identified in the data as Hispanic, AI/AN, or Black.⁶ Research suggests that this racial gap increased due to the differential pandemic-related shocks (i.e., the pivot to remote instruction) that more negatively impacted schools serving Black and Hispanic students.⁷ Other studies report that absenteeism increased at higher rates for Black and Hispanic students relative to White students, and that Black and Hispanic students were also two times more likely to experience increases in grade retention.⁸

Educational Inequities Related to SES

Prior to the pandemic, gaps in math and reading among third to eighth graders already existed between low-poverty and high-poverty

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schools. Between fall of 2019 and 2021, these gaps widened further, and particularly among children in elementary grades (third through fifth grades).⁹ These SES disparities can be attributed in part to limited access among lower-income families to: (1) technology to support online learning, (2) high-quality remote instruction, and (3) supplemental supports, such as individualized tutoring.¹⁰ School bonding decreased less for adolescents from households with higher incomes and parental education levels, underscoring how family resources acted as a protective factor during the pandemic. Relatedly, school engagement rates among six- to 17-year-olds were higher for those from higher SES families versus lower SES families.¹¹

Existing Structural Inequities Deepened by the Pandemic

Systemic inequities related to race and SES were already embedded in the education system well before COVID-19. These inequities were reflected and deepened by the pandemic's disparate educational impacts, such as limiting access to in-person instruction and internet access in the wake of widespread school closures that were more typical in underserved communities.¹² Students of color received fewer opportunities to access in-person learning relative to White students.¹³ Higher-SES families and White households were more likely to have access to a computer relative to lower-SES families and those with heads of household who self-identified as Black or Hispanic.¹⁴

During the pandemic, Asian American and Black youth experienced heightened racial discrimination, which can impact academic engagement and achievement.¹⁵ Experiences of COVID-19-related racism among racially and ethnically minoritized adolescents have also been linked to higher levels of depression, which can in turn affect educational attainment.¹⁶ Relative to all other racial groups, Asian American adolescents reported the highest rates of perceived racism in their lifetimes during the pandemic. This has been linked to poorer mental health and feeling

disconnected from others in school.¹⁷ Many Asian American adolescents also had to confront COVID-19 racial discrimination, both online and in-person,¹⁸ which is associated with higher levels of post-traumatic stress disorder.¹⁹

Promote Positive Educational Trajectories for all Students

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified longstanding educational inequities between groups based on race, ethnicity, and SES. There is emerging evidence of more nuanced and multifaceted educational impacts and responses, especially among students of color, with the achievement trajectories of students whose education was disrupted catching up with—and in some cases exceeding—the typical pre-pandemic achievement trajectories. However, there is still a long way to go for the recovery of students who experienced disproportionate impacts, and students in higher-poverty schools still have much more ground to make up. Moving forward, working to dismantle structural inequities and promote positive educational trajectories for all students will be essential in the post-pandemic educational recovery landscape.

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