



Developmental Impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic Greatest Among Low-Income and Minority Youth

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Economic recession, societal disruption, and nearly seven million lost lives: the COVID-19 pandemic triggered a global public health crisis with significant consequences for the social, physical, and psychological development of young people. In a recent special issue,¹ we commissioned a collection of studies seeking to answer questions about these consequences. How did growing up during the COVID-19 pandemic differ compared to other times? Did the pandemic have long-term negative impacts on youth? What roles did racial and economic inequality play in those impacts? What are the major protective factors for youth development in times of major societal upheaval? Covering mental health, socio-emotional development, cognitive development and academics, identity development and future orientation, and physical development, the studies offered important insights into how policymakers, social service providers, educators and employers must understand the impact of COVID-19 on young people—especially those facing socioeconomic disadvantage—to better protect them against future public health threats and other global stressors.

Key Facts

The COVID-19 pandemic had significant consequences for the development of young people.

These consequences were often most substantial for young people facing socioeconomic disadvantage.

Addressing existing social, economic, and racial inequities would help protect young people from the worst effects of any future public health threats.

The COVID-19 pandemic unleashed pervasive disruption on the lives of young people. This included the loss of grandparents or parents, physical and social isolation due to quarantines, limited physical activity, and disconnection from school-related people, services, and routines. For example, a 2021-22 WHO study found that, across 22 countries, schools were closed on average 138 days, 30 percent of young people reported a negative impact on their mental health, and 16 percent reported low life satisfaction.² Previous research on the life course has demonstrated that generations who experience such momentous times as young people can expect to experience long-lasting reverberations.³ What reverberations has Generation COVID experienced so far, and what can we learn from them?

Mental health

Many adolescents experienced increased mental health problems during the pandemic, particularly if they had pre-existing vulnerabilities.^{4,5} Initial increases in symptoms from 2020 persisted into 2021. Life satisfaction improved for many in

2022, as social activities and in-person schooling resumed. Mental health problems were more pronounced among adolescents who were older, lower income, and girls.

The compounding effects of heightened risk of COVID-19 illness and legacies of colonization also worsened outcomes for Indigenous youth, who tended to show increases in substance use during the pandemic, though cultural activities and community connection were protective.⁶ Similarly, Black and Asian American youth experienced a “dual pandemic” through their exposure to both increased racial discrimination and COVID-19-related health disparities. Still, social support, a strong ethnic-racial identity, and ethnic-racial socialization buffered ethnic-racial youth against the impacts of COVID-related stressors on mental health.⁷ Girls, and adolescents identifying as Black, Asian, American Indian/Alaska Native, or Asian/Pacific Islander were also at increased risk of suicidal behavior and ideation compared with other demographics.⁸

The extent to which youth had access to individual, social, and intervention-based

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resilience-promoting factors also predicted mental health outcomes during the pandemic.⁹ Youth in low- and middle-income countries witnessed unique challenges due to the pandemic, including increases in food insecurity, violence, and reduced educational opportunities due to insufficient access to the internet and technology.¹⁰ Access to mental health services was severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, both in LMICs and across the globe.¹¹

To address the pandemic-related rise in mental health problems, policymakers and other key decision-makers should increase the availability and financing of mental health services and support programs for adolescents. Interventions delivered in school settings and using digital health technologies may improve access to mental health care for adolescents.

Socio-emotional development

The pandemic also disrupted typical developmental milestones and stages. Lockdowns forced adolescents to spend more time with their parents and siblings at home, to shift many of their peer interactions online, and to experience more social isolation—all at a time when they would normally be increasing their independence from their parents and reorienting towards relationships with peers. Families contending with low income or parental job loss experienced an increase in harsh parenting and maltreatment. However, rates of maltreatment decreased along with financial insecurity thanks to government income subsidies.¹²

Loneliness and social isolation led to mental health problems as adolescents' peer relationships were impacted by the pandemic and their interactions with social media and digital platforms increased. However, overall rates of bullying for all youth decreased during periods of online learning, suggesting that supportive peer relationships and increased teacher supervision may help reduce bullying opportunities at school.¹³

Cognitive and identity development

Remote and hybrid learning impacted different groups of young people differently. Students from minoritized racial/ethnic backgrounds, who lived

in low-resourced neighborhoods and schools, or with special educational needs had higher rates of absenteeism and greater learning loss, and were more likely to face family job loss and COVID-19 illness.^{14,15} These students were also more likely to have difficulty accessing the technology needed for remote learning, and to attend schools that stayed remote longer.¹⁶

The pandemic impacted adolescent identity development by creating uncertainty about the future, disrupting usual and normative educational experiences. Young people of color had to additionally navigate discussions and experiences around interpersonal and systemic racism, with some drawing heavily on peer support and using social media to facilitate activism and coping.^{17,18}

Critical insights for policymakers

Young people experienced deep, interconnected, and lasting impacts related to the pandemic. The early part (i.e., 2020) was an especially intense and disruptive experience for many, with changes in schooling, social isolation, and uncertainty affecting their mental and physical health, academics, social and personal development, and future-oriented thinking. These effects were disproportionately substantial for young people impacted by social and economic inequities that existed pre-pandemic.

Policymakers, social service providers, educators, employers, and more will all need to understand this developmental context. While popular discourse and the media have moved beyond a focus on COVID-19, the developmental impacts of the pandemic on the emotional, social, and future professional lives of Generation COVID—and especially on young people facing socioeconomic disadvantage—provide critical insights for promoting resilience to future health threats and other global stressors.

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