



DIVISION 15 POLICY BRIEF

GENERATION COVID-19: RESPONDING TO THE PANDEMIC'S IMPACTS ON YOUTH

Authors: Gabriel Velez, PhD, College of Education, Marquette University
Camelia E. Hostinar, PhD, Department of Psychology, University of California, Davis

INTRODUCTION

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted millions of lives across the world, impacting health, affecting relationships within families and communities, and drastically altering social systems like education and economies. These cross-cutting effects were particularly strong for adolescents and young people because of the time in their lifespan that the pandemic impacted. Adolescence is a key time for social and cognitive development: forming social bonds, constructing identities and visions of one's future trajectory, cementing academic skills as a foundation for higher education, and more (Arnett, 2015; Dahl et al., 2018; Mills et al., 2014; Steinberg, 2005). It is also a period of heightened emotional and stress reactivity (Dahl & Gunnar, 2009), posing unique challenges for adolescents' mental health (Gruber et al., 2021). Lockdowns and stay-at-home orders disrupted schools, which are central contexts for adolescent development that provide space for socialization, skill-building, and psychosocial support (Eccles & Roeser, 2011).

Though the pandemic has faded from public discourse, the reverberations continue for young people as they move on to college and become adults. A plethora of

research and theory indicates that major socio-ecological perturbations have lasting impacts on young people's understandings of the world and themselves (Elder, 1974; Hammack, 2008; McAdams & McLean, 2013). With those who were adolescents during the most intense moments of the pandemic now in college, it is critical and urgent that policymakers, educators, and psychologists on college campuses are responsive to the unique needs and challenges of this COVID generation. The intersection of psychology and education is critical for effectively achieving this goal: through disrupted schooling the pandemic deeply impacted psychosocial development, and now as these young people enter college, their school institutions can offer important supports.

This brief presents a summary of research-based developmental impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people, with a particular focus on the needs and experiences of those currently in college. We draw on over 20 review articles from a special issue of *Current Opinion in Psychology* we co-edited and offer policy recommendations for universities, psychologists, and policymakers about how to promote the academic, personal, and psychosocial well-being of college students.

RESEARCH ON COVID-19'S IMPACTS ON YOUTH

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, accumulating research documents how the pandemic has affected young people. These studies are based in a range of disciplinary perspectives—e.g., neuroscience, clinical, developmental—and many can inform strategies for effectively supporting young people's psychosocial well-being in educational settings. Below, we survey social, academic, identity, and mental health impacts from this literature. These areas offer distinct ways the pandemic influenced young peoples' lives, but also demonstrated the core work of educational psychology as systems, individual experiences, schooling, and psychosocial well-being are interwoven (Wang et al., 2022).

Social Impacts

1. For many young people, feelings of loneliness and disconnection were widespread and elevated compared to pre-pandemic levels (Farrell et al., 2013).
2. Greater isolation and loneliness were linked to longer duration of remote schooling and with worse mental health (Breux et al., 2023; McMahon et al., 2023).
3. Impacts on parent-adolescent relationships were variable, with some families experiencing greater closeness and others an increase in harshness and maltreatment (Harms & Record, 2023).
4. LGBTQ+ youth and those from historically marginalized populations found important peer support through social media (Breux et al., 2023).

Academic Impacts

1. Remote schooling led to poor academic experiences in general. Although some students reported positive effects such as the ability to de-stress and focus on work, for many remote schooling came with lowered expectations, less motivation, and less learning (Velez et al., 2022; Velez, 2023).
2. Greater exposure to virtual schooling and poorer access to digital technologies were associated with worse academic outcomes (Golden et al., 2023).
3. Outcomes were worse for historically marginalized communities. School closures were more common and longer within K-12 public schools with higher proportions of racial/ethnic minority students, resulting in greater exposure to online/distance and hybrid learning (Coulter & Benner, 2023).



4. There were immediate changes in sleep with the onset of the pandemic, as young people went to sleep later and woke up later. Though originally sleep duration was not impacted, when schools returned to in-person learning, many young people struggled to return to prepandemic schedules, which may have also played into psychological and logistical obstacles to learning (e.g., loss of motivation; Rocha & Fuligni, 2023).

Identity Impacts

1. The pandemic, along with the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 and greater attention to racism, brought questions of identity, race, and equity to the forefront of many young people's minds (Mathews, 2023).
2. Some young people described that having more down time and being removed from the everyday routines created space to reflect on themselves and their lives.
3. In facing many challenges—including in academics, socializing, and mental health—some young people reported feeling like they learned more about themselves and effective coping strategies (Velez et al., 2022; Velez et al., 2023).

Mental Health Impacts

1. The effects of the pandemic on mental health were variable, with worse outcomes for those with pre-existing conditions and fewer resources, and better outcomes for those with positive coping responses and behaviors (McMahon et al., 2023).
2. Young people spent more time online and on social media, which further exacerbated frustrations with learning, loss of motivation, and isolation for some, but was protective for others (Doom et al., 2023).
3. Psychosocial well-being was promoted by social support and connectedness to schools, as well as close relationships with adults (Doom et al., 2023).





POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

From this research base, we suggest recommendations for university administrators and staff, psychologists, and policymakers to promote and support young people's psychosocial health and well-being.

Universities

1. Institutions should provide additional mental health resources and supports (e.g., increased counseling resources; Velez, 2023).
2. Targeting specific groups with culturally sensitive supports is key for addressing the increased exposure to and salience of racism, along with the disproportionate impacts on communities of color, during the pandemic. Culture provides frameworks for young people to experience the world and also shapes relationships with peers, family, and communities. It is critical to provide training in cultural competence and cultural humility to existing mental health professionals and incorporate it into the training of future mental health professionals, akin to cultural humility training programs for medical professionals (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998). This will ensure that mental health support is responsive to cultural differences and avoids bias.
3. Campuses should organize events to create spaces that allow students to discuss and reflect on how the

pandemic impacted them (e.g., what were the ways they coped, what lessons have they learned).

4. Social support and connection were identified as promoters of resilience, demonstrating the need to emphasize in-person and group activities to build stronger social cohesion and a sense of belonging on campuses. This includes efforts to promote school connectedness, including through relational building (including restorative practices), inclusive practices, and positive youth development programs like mentorship, service learning, or community leadership opportunities ([see the CDC's guide to school connectedness](#))

Psychologists

1. Psychologists should work to increase options and opportunities for accessing mental health services, as many young people faced unique challenges to their well-being — particularly during the early stages of the pandemic and for youth with pre-existing risk factors (e.g., loneliness)—while access to treatment diminished.
2. To expand their work, psychologists can look to serve young clients via telehealth and digital interventions. These possibilities have shown efficacy and hold potential for expanding access

to mental health treatment to isolated populations (Golden et al., 2023; Shidhaye, 2023), especially greater access for students from key populations like communities of color, low income or rural communities, and students with special needs (Dvorsky et al., 2023; Eboigbe et al., 2023).

3. Within schools, an effective approach may be tapping into whole-school models. Therefore, instead of needing extra funding to hire more school social workers, efforts can be made to train all adults (including staff and parents) in mental health first aid, implementing restorative practices, and other practices that support psychosocial wellbeing. Specific examples include creating a problem solving team, mapping available resources in school and community, trauma-informed professional development. More specific examples can be found [here](#).
4. Psychologists can also advocate for increasing school counseling programs and strengthening pathways into these programs. There is a great need for mental health counselors in schools, with estimates of a shortage of 100,000 professionals (George, 2023). Psychologists can also push for making funding sustainable by demonstrating high need and also the importance of mental health for other aspects of educational contexts (e.g., academic learning, safe schools), as well as raising awareness about social emotional development broadly, beyond psychopathy or mental health disorders.

Policymakers

1. Learning loss was documented across a variety of demographics and school types, but there was also variability and significant catch-up upon return to in-person learning. Funding and programs should be catered to these needs while also engaging with promoting social skill development.
2. Because adolescents and young adults were more vulnerable to mental health problems during the pandemic, building on pre-pandemic trends, there is a need to increase the availability and financing of mental health services and support programs for these age groups. During the pandemic, many schools saw increased funding (as well as financial needs to provide for infrastructure development to

provide healthy environments or offering technology supports to students), but these Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSR) funds will be running out in 2024 and many schools will see gaps and deficits. It is essential that these supports be extended, as many schools continue to grapple with the ramifications of the pandemic.

3. The Earned Income Tax Credit and Child tax credits significantly mitigated financial insecurity among families (Wheaton et al., 2021) and also resulted in decreased rates of child maltreatment (Kovski et al., 2022). Reinstating these policies would have beneficial effects on families and children, not only providing greater financial security, but also more stability and thus fostering psychosocial well-being.

Resources

As universities, psychologists, policymakers, and educators consider what programs and interventions to employ, the following suggestions for resources can provide a starting place for evidence-based pathways:

- School-wide Program:
 - ◇ Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools
 - » CBT as part of school-based mental health programs has shown to be effective, particularly for anxiety (Zhang et al., 2023).
 - » For more information, see the [Trauma Aware Schools CBIT website](#).
 - » For an evidence summary, see [this resource](#).
- Wrap-around services for schools
 - ◇ These models include providing financial, nutritional, health and other resources for students and their families by linking with community partners. These strategies have been shown to be effective in bolstering academics and psychosocial well-being. Examples include the Seattle Public Schools “Whole Child, Whole Day” (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2021).
- Integrating SEL into curriculum
 - ◇ Social and emotional skills are vital for overall well-being and an array of research demonstrates their value. They are most effective when integrated across areas of curriculum (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2021).

- Best Practices for Addressing Sleep Concerns Directly
 - ◊ Lack of sleep and sleep issues have been identified as one prominent area of concern and is linked to various domains of young people's lives. Interventions have shown promise, including ones using motivational interviewing, reconsidering start times to be later, and teaching mindfulness (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2021).
- To find other programs
 - ◊ [The California Clearinghouse website](#)
 - » A searchable database of programs that are evidence-based, including school-based social-emotional learning (SEL) programs.



REFERENCES

- Arnett, J. J. (2015). Identity development from adolescence to emerging adulthood: What we know and (especially) don't know. In *The Oxford handbook of identity development* (pp. 53–64). Oxford University Press.
- Breaux, R., Cash, A. R., Lewis, J., Garcia, K., Dvorsky, M. R., & Becker, S. P. (2023). Impacts of COVID-19 Quarantine and Isolation on Adolescent Social Functioning. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 101613.
- Coulter, K. M., & Benner, A. D. (2023). The Racialized Landscape of COVID-19: Reverberations for Minority Adolescents and Families in the US. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 101614.
- Dahl, R. E., Allen, N. B., Wilbrecht, L., & Suleiman, A. B. (2018). Importance of investing in adolescence from a developmental science perspective. *Nature*, 554(7693), 441.
- Dahl, R. E., & Gunnar, M. R. (2009). Heightened stress responsiveness and emotional reactivity during pubertal maturation: Implications for psychopathology. *Development and Psychopathology*, 21(1), 1–6.
- Doom, J. R., Deer, L. K., Dieujeste, N., Han, D., Rivera, K. M., & Scott, S. R. (2023). Youth Psychosocial Resilience during the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 101656.
- Eccles, J. S., & Roeser, R. W. (2011). Schools as Developmental Contexts During Adolescence. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 21(1), 225–241.
- Elder, G. H. (1974). *Children of the great depression*. University of Chicago Press.
- Farrell, A. G., Vitoroulis, I., Eriksson, M., & Vaillancourt, T. (2023). Loneliness and well-being in children and adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Children*, 10(2), 279.
- George, D. S. (2023, September 5). In a crisis, schools are 100,000 mental health staff short. Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2023/08/31/mental-health-crisis-students-have-third-therapists-they-need/>
- Golden, A. R., Srisarajivakul, E. N., Hasselle, A. J., Pfund, R. A., & Knox, J. (2023). What was a gap is now a chasm: Remote schooling, the digital divide, and educational inequities resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 101632.
- Gruber, J., Prinstein, M. J., Clark, L. A., Rottenberg, J., Abramowitz, J. S., Albano, A. M., Aldao, A., Borelli, J. L., Chung, T., & Davila, J. (2021). Mental health and clinical psychological science in the time of COVID-19: Challenges, opportunities, and a call to action. *American Psychologist*, 76(3), 409.
- Hammack, P. L. (2008). Narrative and the cultural psychology of identity. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*.
- Harms, M. B., & Record, J. (2023). Maltreatment, Harsh Parenting, and Parent-Adolescent Relationships during Covid. *Current Opinion in Psychology*.
- Kovski, N. L., Hill, H. D., Mooney, S. J., Rivara, F. P., Morgan, E. R., & Rowhani-Rahbar, A. (2022). Association of state-level earned income tax credits with rates of reported child maltreatment, 2004–2017. *Child Maltreatment*, 27(3), 325–333.

- Mathews, C. J. (2023). New Directions in Ethnic-Racial Identity and Critical Consciousness Development: Contextual Considerations in the Aftermath of COVID-19. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 101649.
- McAdams, D. P., & McLean, K. C. (2013). Narrative Identity. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 22(3), 233–238. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721413475622>
- McMahon, T. P., Villaume, S. C., & Adam, E. K. (2023). Daily Experiences and Adolescent Affective Wellbeing During the COVID-19 Pandemic: The CHESS Model. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 101654.
- Mills, K. L., Lalonde, F., Clasen, L. S., Giedd, J. N., & Blakemore, S.-J. (2014). Developmental changes in the structure of the social brain in late childhood and adolescence. *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, 9(1), 123–131.
- National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2021. School-Based Strategies for Addressing the Mental Health and Well-Being of Youth in the Wake of COVID-19. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/26262>.
- Rocha, S., & Fuligni, A. (2023). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on adolescent sleep behavior. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 101648.
- Shidhaye, R. (2023). Global Priorities for Improving Access to Mental Health Services for Adolescents in the Post-Pandemic World. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 101661.
- Steinberg, L. (2005). Cognitive and affective development in adolescence. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 9(2), 69–74.
- Tervalon, M., & Murray-Garcia, J. (1998). Cultural humility versus cultural competence: A critical distinction in defining physician training outcomes in multicultural education. *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved*, 9(2), 117–125
- Velez, G. (2023). College and COVID-19: The Pandemic's Reverberations on Adolescents and Emerging Adults on Campus. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 101592.
- Velez, G., Hahn, M., & Troyer, B. (2022). Making Meaning of COVID-19: US Adolescent Experiences and Development Amid the Pandemic. *Translational Issues in Psychological Science*, 8(2), 269–281.
- Velez, G. M., Hoekstra, E., Nemanich, S., Jessup-Anger, J. E., & Herteen, M. (2023). Bringing Covid to College: Incoming First-Year College Students Meaning Making of the Pandemic. *Emerging Adulthood*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/216769682311639>
- Wang, M.T., Henry, D. A., Scanlon, C. L., Del Toro, J., & Voltin, S. E. (2022). Adolescent psychosocial adjustment during COVID-19: An intensive longitudinal study. *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology*, 1–16.
- Wheaton, L., Minton, S., Giannarelli, L., & Dwyer, K. (2021). 2021 poverty projections: Assessing four American rescue plan policies. *Washington, DC: Urban Institute*, 500.
- Zhang, Q., Wang, J., & Neitzel, A. (2023). School-based mental health interventions targeting depression or anxiety: a meta-analysis of rigorous randomized controlled trials for school-aged children and adolescents. *Journal of youth and adolescence*, 52(1), 195–217.

TARGET AUDIENCE

- Administrators in higher education
- Counselors and others working with young people in higher education
- Politicians considering funding and other supports for public institutions of higher education

The focus on this brief is the intersection of young people, education, and the pandemic's effects on their psychosocial wellbeing. Given that this cohort was in high school and just starting college when the pandemic began, many of them are now navigating higher education. Therefore, this review of research and the connected policy implications matter to administrators and counselors in colleges and universities, as well as politicians making decisions about resource allocation for these institutions. Policy recommendations are organized to target these specific groups.

