

Editor's Note: Cecilia Mou, a high school student, wanted to research the literature on mental health and the pandemic and to share what she found. This is an edited version of the report she submitted.

About Student Mental Health and the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic drastically altered the lifestyles of students worldwide, especially with the transition to online learning. The impact on both physical and mental health has been profound. This brief report highlights a few of the mental health and social relationship concerns that have implications for schools.

Mental Health Concerns

Online learning and quarantine from fellow peers has incited feelings of disconnectedness and isolation from relationships. Overall, connectedness in the United States was reported to be very low as compared with previous years, with only 47% of youth feeling somewhat or very connected to their teachers and 41% with classmates.¹

The loss of intimate relationships with both adults and peers can lead to greater risks of depressive behaviors, as social interaction and close relationships are one of the strongest protective factors for mental health.² Particularly for younger children, the lack of opportunity to interact with others in the classroom can also impact the development of their social and emotional intelligence.

Being at home for extended periods of time, especially under pandemic conditions, can increase domestic abuse and violence. And prolonged school closures correlate with higher rates of reported child abuse. Job losses and economic strain can rob a family of an established routine, exacerbating feelings of stress and hopelessness. Living with increased stress, fear, and media hype can affect a youngster's capabilities, motivation, and frustration tolerance.³

Children quarantined during the COVID-19 pandemic are reported to have developed acute stress disorder, adjustment disorder, and 30% met criteria for post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). As the pandemic ends, many children may be at increased risks for depression, anxiety, and PTSD. It is estimated that worrying about personal and family safety coupled with social isolation can produce a fourfold increase in cases of PTSD.⁴

Overall, reported mental health rates declined in the beginning of the pandemic, with almost 75% of surveyed high school students reporting a poor or decreased sense of mental health in the past 30 days, and more than half reported feeling more stress than usual.⁵ Another report indicated that high school students learning from home showed lower levels of social well-being (74.8 vs. 77.2), emotional well-being (55.7 vs. 57.4), and academic well-being (77.3 vs. 78.4) than students who learned in person at school, regardless of socioeconomic status or race.⁶

¹Flanagan, S.K., Margolius, M., Pileggi, M., Glaser, L., Burkander, K., Kincheloe, M., & Freeman, J. (2021). Where do we go next? Youth insights on the high school experience during a year of historic upheaval. Washington, DC: America's Promise Alliance. <https://www.americaspromise.org/sites/default/files/d8/gradnation-062321.pdf>

²Myklestad, I., Røysamb, E., & Tambs, K. (2012). Risk and protective factors for psychological distress among adolescents: A family study in the Nord-Trøndelag Health Study. *Social psychiatry and psychiatric epidemiology*, 47(5), 771–782. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00127-011-0380-x>

³Cluver L, Lachman JM, Sherr L, Wessels I, Krug E, Rakotomalala S, et al. (2020). Parenting in a time of COVID-19. *Lancet*, 395:e64. [https://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lancet/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)30736-4.pdf](https://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lancet/PIIS0140-6736(20)30736-4.pdf)

⁴Chamberlain, S., Grant, J., Trender, W., Hellyer, P., & Hampshire, A. (2021). Post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms in COVID-19 survivors: Online population survey. *BJPsych Open*, 7(2), E47. [doi:10.1192/bjo.2021.3](https://doi.org/10.1192/bjo.2021.3)

⁵Flanagan, *op. cit.*

⁶Duckworth, A. L., Kautz, T., Defnet, A., Satlof-Bedrick, E., Talamas, S., Lira, B., & Steinberg, L. (2021). Students attending school remotely suffer socially, emotionally, and academically. *Educational Researcher*. Prepublished July 14, 2021. doi.org/10.3102/0013189X211031551.

It is important to note that while mental health declined at the beginning of the pandemic, some subsequent findings suggest overall distress returned to normal levels during the summer and fall. Around the world, population's satisfaction levels remained the same, and suicide rates in many nations did not rise during this period.⁷ Such findings have been attributed to human resiliency.⁸

Concerns about Disproportionality

The virus and the pandemic have had a disproportionate impact on minority and low income communities. For example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report that Black, Latino, and Native Americans are infected with the coronavirus and hospitalized with COVID-19 at higher rates than white Americans. African American deaths have been nearly two times greater than projected for their population, and in eight states, Latinx made up a 4 times greater share of confirmed cases than their population.⁹

The disparities reflect continued barriers to well-being that require structural changes (e.g., better access to healthcare, greater economic opportunities). As Dr. Marcella Nunez-Smith at Yale's Equity Research and Innovation Center notes: "What's needed to ensure equity in the recovery is not limited to health and health care. We have to have conversations about housing stability and food security and educational equity, and pathways to economic opportunities and promise."¹⁰

Concerns about disproportionality were heightened by the protests over social injustice such as the Black Lives Matter initiative and increased youth involvement in a range of civic issues. For example, a study from America's Promise reports that 40% of students have attended political protests or rallies.¹¹

About Online Learning During The Pandemic

Using modules, pre-recorded videos, and screen sharing, districts adapted to a year of isolation by taking learning online. Zoom, Google Classroom, Canvas – online education platforms became the norm for students during the pandemic.

Research indicates a good deal of online instruction is not as effective as in-person classes. (However, as others have pointed out, online is clearly better than no classes.)¹² The ability to adapt to and benefit from online instruction is related to previous academic performance. Loss of face-to-face interaction poses challenges for attention span and engagement. Furthermore, some students, particularly younger ones, are inexperienced computers and applications and other technological aids. And, of course, there are significant and sometimes insurmountable financial costs for poor families and poorly funded schools.

⁷ Akin, L. Zaki, J., & Dunn, E. The pandemic did not affect mental health the way you think, *The Atlantic*, online. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/07/covid-19-did-not-affect-mental-health-way-you-think/619354/>

⁸ Verdolini, N., Amoretti, S., Montejo, L., Garcia-Rizo, C., Hogg, B., Mezquida, G., Rabelo-da-Ponte, F. D., Vallespir, C., Radua, J., Martinez-Aran, A., Pacchiarotti, I., Rosa, A. R., Bernardo, M., Vieta, E., Torrent, C., & Solé, B. (2021). Resilience and mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of affective disorders*, 283, 156–164. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2021.01.055>

⁹ Godoy, M., & Wood, D. (2020). What do coronavirus racial disparities look like state by state? *NPR*. www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/05/30/865413079/what-do-coronavirus-racial-disparities-look-like-state-by-state.

¹⁰ Dr. Marcella Nunez-Smith Takes Aim at Racial Gaps in Health Care. *The New York Times*, January 8, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/08/health/coronavirus-marcella-nunez-smith.html>

¹¹ Flanagan, *op. cit.*

¹² Loeb, S. (2020). How Effective Is Online Learning? What the Research Does and Doesn't Tell Us, *Education Week* online. <https://www.edweek.org/technology/opinion-how-effective-is-online-learning-what-the-research-does-and-doesnt-tell-us/2020/03>

A Note from the Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports

We are pleased that Cecilia wants to share her report. Student perspectives are essential as schools pursue the difficult year ahead.

In her pre-edited report, Cecilia noted a number of implications for schools. First and foremost, she expressed concern about improving communications with students and families about the challenges ahead stemming not only from the COVID pandemic, but also from structurally generated inequities and injustices. She cautioned that poor communication is related to feelings of hopelessness and external control. She also stressed the importance of enhancing supports for students having difficulty adjusting to classroom instruction and the interpersonal environment at school.

Cecilia's recommendations for schools mesh well with those the Center has been distributing. Below is a sample of Center resources. They are intended to help with immediate concerns, as well as encouraging system changes to enable schools, working with communities, to better address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage disconnected students.

- > *About students who are having problems adjusting to school*
- > *A few cautions about screening and identifying students at this time*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/sept2021.pdf>
- > *WELCOMING -- it seems more important than ever this school year*
- > *About Supports for Transitions*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/aug2021.pdf>
- > *What plans are in place to address "mask bullying"?*
[http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/practitioner\(8-25-2021\).pdf](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/practitioner(8-25-2021).pdf)
- > *2021-22: Addressing Learning, Behavior, and Emotional Problems Through Better Use of Student and Learning Support Staff*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/supports.pdf>
- > *About the Growing Demand for Mental Health in Schools*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/8-12-21.pdf>

For resources on *Racism and School*, see the Center's Quick Find at
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/racism.htm>

For resources on *Resilience*, see the Quick Find at
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/resilience.html>

For a big picture perspective and details related to mental health and student/learning supports, see:

- > *Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change*
- > *Improving School Improvement*
- > *Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide*

(All three accessible at
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html)

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