

## About What Young People are Experiencing During the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in drastic changes to the environments in which children learn and play and has revealed vast disparities in access to virtual education, developmental resources and support. Minhas and Freeman (2021)

As reported by Martha Irvine (2021), the Associated Press recently re-interviewed a group of young people who first spoke with the AP just as the pandemic started to grip the world. Irvine summarized the interviews as follows:

They've missed their friends, desperately. They've struggled at times to stay motivated and to focus on school done in various ways from home, if access to their studies was even available. Most are still awaiting their chance to get vaccinated, but want to do so.

They are anxious and happy and frustrated and hopeful, seemingly all at once. But they say the pandemic also has given them newfound resilience and an appreciation for even little things. ...

The joy of rejoining the world – and especially reuniting with friends and extended family – has been a universal theme for the young participants who've been able to do so. "Being with them, hugging them," Elena Maria Moretti, a 12-year-old in Rome, said. Last year, she was dancing hip hop alone in her bedroom and spraying disinfectant on packages the family received. Italy was among the first to experience huge death counts because of COVID-19.

Now wearing masks, she and her friends have been able to walk to school together and to study and visit in one another's homes. Being separated from them – stuck in her family's apartment for so long – was "ugly," she said.

Not everyone is feeling so free. While cases and deaths are dropping in some parts of the world, the pandemic continues to rage in others, especially those with bigger populations and with less access to vaccines.

In New Delhi, India, young brothers Advait and Uddhav Sanweria have sheltered at home for months. This year alone, a second wave of COVID left more than 230,000 Indians dead in a four-month period.

"We thought that the entire human population will be finished," 10-year-old Advait said in a video interview recently filmed for the AP by the boys' parents. "And Earth will remain nothing but an empty sphere with dead bodies."

Uddhav, 9, still fears for their family, particularly his grandparents, who've managed to stay well so far. ...

In Brazil, where COVID cases are still surging, 16-year-old Manuela Salomão, expressed frustration with her country's president, Jair Bolsonaro, whose government repeatedly ignored opportunities to buy vaccines.

"The pandemic was not easy for a lot of people in Brazil. Many lost their jobs and could not socially distance because they needed to survive," said Manuela, who lives in Sao Paulo.

"To die of hunger or of COVID? That's still very hard."

The pandemic has caused her to grow up more quickly, she said – to become more empathetic, to think more critically and to study even harder.

In Melbourne, Australia, Niki Jolene Berghamre-Davis, who's 12, just finished two weeks in lockdown. She's relied on her family and their new dog, Bailey, to keep her company and learned to play the clarinet. She says online school helped her become more independent.

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\*The material in this document builds on work done by Salvador Robledo Escobedo as a participant with the national Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA in 2021.

The center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor and operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project, Dept. of Psychology, UCLA. Website: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>

Niki tries not to be annoyed by the shutdowns and Australia's restrictions on international travel. She's knows other countries have had it much worse – and is grateful that Australia has made it through the pandemic relatively unscathed.

"I would be really happy to spend time away," she said, wistfully. Sweden, where her family has relatives, would be her first destination. She misses them terribly.

... In Nunavut, a territory in far-north Canada, Owen Watson, another 13-year-old, had hoped the remoteness of his homeland would help keep everyone there safe.

... For months, partly due to the occasional lockdowns and strict travel bans, the small capital city where he lives, Iqaluit, had no documented cases of Covid. That changed this April.

"It got pretty scary," Owen said. Health officials there worried the virus would spread quickly, since Inuit communities can be more vulnerable.

Owen breathed easier when his parents got vaccinated. Then this month ... he got the first of two Pfizer shots, newly approved for his age group in some countries.

"I'm feeling a bit more calm now," he said. But there's always that underlying fear that it won't stay that way.

That, too, was a common sentiment among the young people who spoke with the AP.

It's not just the fear of another pandemic. For Freddie Golden, a 17-year-old in Chicago, the state of the world is overwhelming in many ways. As young Black man, for instance, he watched last year's news about the police killings of George Floyd and others with a heavy heart.

"I want to live life in a good way, not where bad things are continuously thrown at me," said Freddie, who'll begin his senior year at North Lawndale College Preparatory High School on Chicago's West side in a few weeks.

His mom, Wilonda Cannon, watched as her son struggled emotionally last year – but also as he grew into a man, with broad, muscular shoulders and deepened voice. It was a reminder, she said, that even when life came to a halt in many ways, time marched on.

My family, especially my mom, helped pull me through," said Freddie, who now feels more ready to take on the world.

His big goal is to become an engineer – "to change the world with technology" -- and to play basketball in college. He has his sights set on Howard University in Washington.

"I feel like for kids my age ... all across the world, it's been a tough, stressful situation," Freddie said. "But I feel like we all can push through. We all can do it. We just got to stay the course.

"I feel like we deserve happiness."

## **Recent Studies of Impact on Youth**

### **Mental Health**

Newlove-Delgado, et al., (2021) discuss the findings and implications of the follow-up of England's Mental Health of Children and Young People (MHCYP) survey.

More than a quarter of children (aged 5–16 years) and young people (aged 17–22) reported disrupted sleep and one in ten (5.4% of children and 13.8% of young people) often or always felt lonely. Both problems were more common in those with probable mental health problems, of whom 18.0% felt fearful of leaving the house because of COVID-19. Children with a parent in psychological distress were more likely to have a probable mental health problem. This is particularly concerning because parents, compared with working age adults without young children, have experienced larger than average increases in mental distress during the pandemic, which suggests that support for parents at this time matters for child mental health.

The results highlight how social protection systems must respond to the socioeconomic challenges facing families. Children with probable mental health problems were more than twice as likely to live in households newly falling behind with their bills, rent, or mortgage payments compared with those whose families were able to pay their bills. One in ten children and younger people reported that during the pandemic their family did not have enough to eat or had increased reliance on foodbanks compared with before the pandemic. These stark conditions matter more when schools close, highlighting the unequal effect of lockdown on learning. 12.0% of children had no reliable internet access at home, 19.1% no quiet space to work, and 26.9% did not have a desk at which they could study. Such socioeconomic information provides crucial context for schools planning pupils' home-based learning, and emphasises the need, where possible, to prioritise schools remaining open.

Our findings reveal disrupted access to health care: 44.6% of 17–22 year olds with probable mental health problems reported not seeking help because of the pandemic. Clinicians have raised similar concerns about timely access to services, and a sharp decrease in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services referrals has been observed.<sup>5</sup> Children and young people have been physically distanced from adults outside their family who might monitor their well-being and intervene: 21.6% of children and 29.0% of young people with probable mental health problems reported having no adult at school or work to whom they could turn during lockdown. Even after schools reopened, 16.1% children who could have attended stayed at home during the 2020 summer term. Academic practitioners anticipate that the cumulative effects of not intervening will result in widening health and education inequalities.

## **Anxiety**

Xu, et al., (2021) surveyed 373216 junior and senior high school students in China and reported on the prevalence and risk factors for anxiety symptoms during the COVID-19 outbreak.

Students were found to have anxiety symptoms, producing an overall prevalence of 9.89%. The prevalence was lower in female than in male (9.66% vs. 10.11%) and the prevalence was higher for junior high school students than senior high school students (13.89% vs. 12.93%). The prevalence of anxiety symptoms was highest among rural students and lowest among urban students (11.33% vs. 8.77%). The cognitive level was negatively associated with the prevalence of anxiety symptoms. After adjusting for potential confounders, age, gender, residential location, worried level, fear level and behavior status were found to be associated with anxiety symptoms.

## **School Absenteeism**

In a 2021 EdSource article, Carolyn Jones reports on the surge in absenteeism since California schools reopened. For example, she notes that, according to Stockton Unified, Oakland Unified, and Elk Grove Unified their rates have risen exponentially from two years ago rising, respectively, to 39%, 33%, and 26% of their students being chronically absent. Long Beach Unified also reported that their efforts to counter chronic absenteeism were reversed during COVID-19.

In the Jones article. Hedy Chang , executive director for Attendance Works, states:

Students in quarantine make up the bulk of absences but not all. Some students are missing school because of lingering mental health or behavior challenges, while others are afraid of contracting Covid. Some have gotten out of the habit of daily school attendance or simply don't want to be there because they feel overwhelmed.

Jones also notes that

“Students who are enrolled in long-term independent study still must log on every day and complete their work or the district may mark them absent. Likewise, students who are home for a few days while they’re sick or in quarantine must also complete their schoolwork, or they’ll be marked absent.”

### Concluding Comments

It is too early to know the full impact of the pandemic on children and youth. It is evident that impact on schooling has been extensive. Instruction has been disrupted and so have the student/learning supports from the school. Domestic violence, child maltreatment, and family member mental health problems have been exacerbated exacerbating youngsters problems and cutting off supports at some homes.

Concerns about “learning loss” are widespread. Undoubtedly, schools currently are encountering many more students experiencing learning, behavior, and emotional problems. And there is extensive concern about those who have diagnosed disabilities.

Unfortunately, the numbers prior to the pandemic already were large and the response insufficient. This has been especially so related to students from low wealth families.

At this point, our center at UCLA stresses that major breakthroughs in countering students’ learning, behavior, and emotional problems can be achieved only when school improvement policy, planning, implementation, and accountability comprehensively address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage disconnected students. One major facet of this involves redesigning and transforming a wide range of regular classroom strategies to enable learning. Specifically, we expand RtI in the classroom and delineate it as a sequential and hierarchical approach for all students. At the same time, we emphasize that classroom efforts to enhance equity of opportunity must be embedded within a comprehensive schoolwide system of student and learning supports. See

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

free access to all 3 is at

[http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving\\_school\\_improvement.html](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html)

We also caution against premature referral of students for special education. See

- >*Countering LD and ADHD False Positive Diagnoses: Another Pandemic Challenge*

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/winter2022.pdf>

Finally, see the 2022 focus for the *National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports* to see our suggestions of some first steps that can be taken to improve student/learning supports and for resources to assist in moving forward.

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html>

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