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Emerging Evidence: Coronavirus and children and young people's mental health

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The impacts of the coronavirus pandemic continue to be felt around the world. We have been conducting rapid reviews of the emerging evidence surrounding the mental health impacts of the pandemic on children and young people in detail (Issues 1-4 of this series). This issue, and future issues, will briefly highlight key new findings from our rapid reviews in a condensed format^a to enable us to share learning in a timely manner.

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^a. This bulletin outlines results of a rapid review of research identified in literature searches between 13th July and 30th August. Search terms included words associated with COVID-19, children and young people, and mental health. We limited searches to reports available in the existing literature on the topic, and only articles published in English. A quality assessment of papers was not carried out. In total, 46 studies were identified that met the inclusion criteria (including seven grey literature articles), 32 of which were included.



1. What is the mental health impact on the general population?

The evidence that the coronavirus pandemic is having a negative impact on the mental health of children and young people continues to build.

- Large studies found increases in the prevalence of anxiety and depression among young people during the pandemic.¹⁻³
- Findings regarding the relationship between the pandemic and suicide are mixed. Over a quarter of 18-24 year olds had seriously contemplated suicide between May-June 2020, which is a higher proportion than older age groups (U.S.). Non-Hispanic Black and Hispanic young people seemed to be particularly impacted.⁴ However, another study did not find an association between suicide rates and school closures (Japan).⁵
- Studies have discussed the harmful effect of the pandemic on psychological wellbeing⁶⁻⁹ and related factors such as worry, happiness, stress, and life satisfaction.¹⁰⁻¹²

2. What is the impact on children with pre-existing mental health concerns?

Young people with pre-existing mental health conditions are particularly impacted by the pandemic and many are experiencing an increase in symptoms.

- Young people with eating disorders, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) have reported a worsening of symptoms.^{13,19,20}
- In one study, the majority of adolescents with eating disorders and their families identified the onset of government-mandated confinement as a precipitating factor in their hospitalisation (Spain).¹³
- Mental health has deteriorated for young people receiving treatment at a Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (Canada). However, many also reported that the coronavirus pandemic had actually had “a few” or “some” positive impacts on their lives.¹⁶



3. What is the impact on children with pre-existing physical health conditions and disabilities?

During the pandemic, many young people with physical health conditions and disabilities have been affected by social isolation and have experienced negative effects on their wellbeing. However, young people with pre-existing conditions are not affected uniformly, with some experiencing lower levels of mental health difficulties than peers.

- Young people with disabilities had higher anxiety and depression scores than their peers before the pandemic. For many, this did not improve during the lockdown,²¹ while for others it notably deteriorated. For example, children and young people with cerebral palsy and neuromuscular diseases experienced social isolation and negative effects on morale and wellbeing.^{18,22}
- Very low incidence of mild and moderate-severe depression has been found during the pandemic in adolescents living with HIV, the symptoms and severity of which increase with age (Kenya).¹⁵ There is some indication that children with cystic fibrosis have lower state anxiety scores than their peers who do not have cystic fibrosis (Turkey).¹⁴ These findings suggest that there is not always a clear link between mental health during the pandemic and pre-existing conditions.

4. Are any other groups of children and young people disproportionately affected?

LGBTQ+ children and young people

There is some evidence that LGBTQ+ children and young people are experiencing greater mental health impacts during the pandemic.

- Lesbian, gay and bisexual children and young people appear more likely to have experienced financial strain, disruption in their daily routine, and to show significantly higher levels of depressive and anxiety symptoms than older lesbian, gay and bisexual people during the pandemic (Hong Kong).²³

- In a study of secondary school pupils, LGBTQ+ pupils had higher anxiety and depression scores and lower levels of wellbeing than their peers before the pandemic. Wellbeing did not increase nor did anxiety decrease for LGBTQ+ pupils during lockdown as it did for the broader pupil sample in this study.²¹

Children and young people of colour

Although previous issues of this series have identified that children and young people of colour are disproportionately affected by the pandemic, little research emerged during the period covered in this issue regarding how these young people in particular are being impacted. It is important that research continues to examine the disproportionate impacts of the pandemic, particularly on children and young people of colour.

Adverse childhood experiences and experience of social care

Children and young people with adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), experience of the care system or other forms of disadvantage have reported higher than usual levels of anxiety and stress. There also appears to have been an increase in child sexual abuse during the coronavirus pandemic.

- Increased adverse childhood experiences are associated with a higher probability of posttraumatic stress symptoms (PTSS and PTSD), anxiety, and depressive symptoms during the pandemic (China).^{24,25}
- Among adolescents who have experience of the care system or other forms of disadvantage, many reported feeling low, more anxious and stressed since lockdown, while some reported experiencing significantly disrupted sleep.²⁶
- There has been a threefold increase in the number of counselling sessions about child sexual abuse within the family for some services. Some of those attending reported more frequent sexual abuses or abuse that had happened recently (UK).²⁷



Living conditions

Young people's living conditions are linked with a range of mental health impacts during the coronavirus pandemic. Living in urban areas, living in poor quality housing, living alone, and experiencing homelessness are all associated with negative mental health outcomes.

- Significantly more children living in urban areas have mental health difficulties (depression, anxiety, and sleeping disorders) than those living in rural areas (Bangladesh).²⁸
- Young people with poor-quality indoor living space had twice the odds of experiencing moderate-severe and severe depressive symptoms than those in better quality accommodation (Italy).²⁹
- Hopelessness, anxiety, loneliness, sleep problems and depression are common among young people aged 18-25 experiencing homelessness during the pandemic.³⁰
- University students living alone during the coronavirus pandemic appear more likely to experience an increase in depressive symptoms (Switzerland).³¹
- University students who did not return home during the lockdown were significantly more likely to live alone and to report general stress at moderate or severe levels, compared to those who had relocated (France).³²

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