

Pandemic adolescent mental health study reveals turnaround finding

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Young people with poor mental health took a turn for the better during the pandemic but those with good mental health saw a considerable decline, new research reveals.

The first nationally representative evidence regarding the diverse impact of the COVID-19 [pandemic](#) on [adolescent mental health](#) in the UK was led by researchers at Lancaster University working with the University of British Columbia in Canada.

Adolescents (aged 10 to 16) with better than average mental health before the pandemic experienced an increase in their emotional and [conduct problems](#), hyperactivity, and problems interacting with their peers and friends, but a decrease in their prosocial tendencies such as being caring and willing to share and help others during the pandemic.

In contrast, adolescents with lower than average mental health pre-pandemic experienced opposite changes, possibly, says the research, because more time at home under parental supervision prevented behavior such as fighting or bullying.

Published today in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*, the official journal of the Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine, the study also flags considerable disparities in the impact across social, demographic, and economic groups.

Young people from vulnerable one-parent, one-child, and less well-off families experienced a much greater mental health decline during COVID than before.

And those living in one-parent households experienced a sharper decline in social wellbeing which was reflected in a greater increase in problems interacting with peers and friends as well as feeling lonely.

The presence of other children in the household helped protect the teenagers from the pandemic's adverse impact on their emotional and social wellbeing.

The pandemic's impact on adolescent mental health also varied with parents' socioeconomic positions. Young people with high-earning parents experienced a bigger reduction in conduct problems and a smaller increase in hyperactivity and problems interacting with their peers and friends, compared with those in low-income families.

The research also found, while adolescents are unlikely to contract COVID-19 or become severely ill as a result of catching the coronavirus, family members' COVID-19 symptoms and illness took their toll on adolescents' [social wellbeing](#).

The study suggests the linked self-isolation, social distancing and stigmas might make them susceptible to being bullied and socially marginalized.

The findings, says the study, underline the need to go beyond a one-size-fits-all approach and adopt tailored mental health support for adolescents and targeted measures to mitigate inequalities in the mental health impact of the pandemic.

The research 'COVID-19 and Adolescent Mental Health in the UK' was carried out by Sociologists Dr. Yang Hu, of Lancaster University, and Dr. Yue Qian at the University of British Columbia in Canada.

They analysed data from the Economic and Social Research Council-funded Understanding Society COVID-19 Survey—a sample comprising 886 adolescents aged 10 to 16, who were surveyed both before and during the pandemic.

The research fills a gap in research examining adolescents' mental health compared with growing research on the impact of adults' mental health.

"Adolescents are at a critical stage of their lives and the detrimental impact of the pandemic on their mental health can undermine their

immediate wellbeing and harm their long-term development," said Dr. Hu.

"It is clear from our findings that efforts should be made to mitigate the mental health impact of the pandemic on children and adolescents—an issue that has not yet been featured in key public health and policy conversations."

Dr. Qian said: "Our findings urge policymakers to mitigate disparities in the pandemic's impact on [adolescent](#) mental [health](#), interrogate how these disparities are rooted in pre-pandemic socioeconomic inequalities, and intervene in future inequalities that may arise."

More information: *Journal of Adolescent Health* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jadohealth.2021.04.005](#)

Provided by Lancaster University

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