

New survey reveals pandemic impact on Canadian youth

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The emotional toll of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic weighed heavily on everyone in Canada: young and old. Nevertheless, the sense of loss was perhaps most evident on the country's teens as their

world stopped spinning instantly and pivoted quickly to a virtual space.

While adept (more than most age groups) at navigating school and friendships via Zoom, FaceTime and other [social media platforms](#), this technological ability didn't mitigate teens experiencing psychological distress. It did, however, equip many of them with the skills, strategies and tools necessary to survive and even thrive during this unprecedented time in world history.

Faculty and students at Western University's Human Environments Analysis Laboratory (HEAL) connected with Canadians aged 13-19 years via a youth-informed, cross-sectional online survey to better understand the effects of the pandemic on teens. They found many adopted positive [coping strategies](#) during the first 12 months of the pandemic to de-stress, including [physical activity](#), safe peer interactions and hobbies.

The study, led by HEAL director Jason Gilliland and postdoctoral associate Kendra Nelson Ferguson, asked two simple, open-ended questions: "What feelings and emotions have you experienced around the pandemic?" and "What coping strategies have you used during the pandemic?"

The questions were designed to make the exercise more relatable for teens, which allowed them to answer effectively and honestly.

"In a lot of surveys, you get a question with multiple choice responses or true and false. You can't get a deep understanding based on whether someone chooses A, B or C. Teens will often race through multiple choice questions and skip complex open-ended questions, but if you keep them very open and more relatable, it allows them to think about the question and respond the way they want," said Gilliland, a professor holding joint appointments to geography and environment, pediatrics,

epidemiology & biostatistics and the School of Health Studies.

The response to the open-ended approach was excellent, as the researchers received 1,164 replies from Canadian teens. This allowed them to identify two main coping strategies used during the pandemic: connecting online and outdoors, and leisure and health-promoting activities.

"Everything was taken away from teens: their school, their sports, their means of connecting with friends, except for online," said Nelson Ferguson. "So much of their communication is done online through social media but everything else was completely disrupted. Their normal day-to-day experiences were stripped away, so the pandemic had a huge impact on their lives."

But it wasn't all negative, said Nelson Ferguson. A major, overarching theme mined from the data was that many teens felt, perhaps unexpectedly, more at ease during the first wave of the pandemic as there was less structure, less pressure and less stress.

"A lot of respondents [teens] actually mentioned due to school closures, they felt less stress and less pressure to keep up with their day-to-day demands," said Nelson Ferguson. "On one extreme, it was very hard for them to cope with the pandemic but on the other extreme, it made them feel less pressure to do things."

Gilliland said the results have significant implications for public health policy and practice during pandemic and non-pandemic times.

"These results emphasize the importance of accessible mental health resources for those experiencing psychological distress, especially teens," he said, noting his team will continue to monitor how Canadian teens are changing, coping and recovering during the pandemic and

beyond.

The research was published in *CMAJ Open*.

More information: Kendra Nelson Ferguson et al, The mental well-being and coping strategies of Canadian adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic: a qualitative, cross-sectional study, *CMAJ Open* (2021). [DOI: 10.9778/cmajo.20210042](https://doi.org/10.9778/cmajo.20210042)

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