

Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds suffered increased mental distress as pandemic began

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New research from ESRC Centre for Society and Mental Health (CSMH) and the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience

(IoPPN) at King's College London has examined the impact of COVID-19 and related school closures in the first months of the pandemic on adolescent mental health, particularly among disadvantaged, marginalized, and vulnerable groups.

The paper, published in *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, used data from the London-based REACH (Resilience, Ethnicity and AdolesCent Mental Health) study and sought to explore whether there was any evidence of an overall increase in mental health problems during the [pandemic](#) compared to pre-pandemic levels.

Between May and August 2020, researchers invited 4000 young people from REACH to complete an online questionnaire about their experiences and their mental health during the first phase of school closures and social restrictions. This data was compared to responses collected on the same young people in the three years leading up to the pandemic.

The study established that the negative effects of the pandemic were felt most strongly by those respondents who reported financial hardship, poor housing, worse relationships and [isolation](#), and [disruption](#) to routines. Researchers found that these challenges were cumulative, with respondents facing greater negative effects the more they went through.

Keeping up with schooling and access to education was also a key source of worry among participants, with concerns about exams, falling behind with schoolwork, and making the next step to further education being commonly provided responses.

"The evidence from our study—and others—increasingly points to worrying trends in mental health, with young people in low-income households and in marginalized and vulnerable groups most affected. This is the key point. It is those who have been most directly affected by

the pandemic who have suffered the most. The current cost of living crisis will only compound these impacts on young people. In responding we need to change the narrative—to draw attention to the fact that it is those young people most directly affected by the pandemic who have suffered the most. We need to address the root causes, provide support—in non-stigmatizing ways—to those at most affected, and ensure access to appropriate services for those most in need," said Professor Craig Morgan, lead investigator and Professor of Social Epidemiology at King's IoPPN.

Following an analysis of the data, the researchers then ran a series of consultation activities at the Festival for Young People, hosted by the BigKid Foundation in Brixton (London). Working together with young people and a range of other key stakeholders, researchers co-developed a series of policy recommendations that could help support young people to thrive in the post-pandemic world. These included the need to improve financial security and support for low-income families, as well as ending the digital divide so that children in low-income households could continue to study, even when schooling is disrupted.

Dr. Gemma Knowles, the study's first author from King's IoPPN, said, "Responding to the impacts of the pandemic on the mental health of [young people](#) requires social and economic policy, public health strategies, and community-based and school-wide interventions."

More information: Gemma Knowles et al, Covid-19, social restrictions, and mental distress among young people: a UK longitudinal, population-based study, *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* (2022). [DOI: 10.1111/jcpp.13586](https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.13586)

Provided by King's College London

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