

One in three young people say they felt happier during lockdown

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Boy with football. Credit: Lukas Rychvalsky/Public Domain

One in three young people say their mental health and wellbeing improved during COVID-19 lockdown measures, with potential contributing factors including feeling less lonely, avoiding bullying and getting more sleep and exercise, according to researchers at the universities of Cambridge and Oxford.

As the COVID-19 pandemic swept the world, many countries imposed

strict lockdown measures, with workplaces and businesses closing and people forced to remain at home. Measures also included [school closures](#), with exceptions for young people whose parents were classified as essential workers and those considered "vulnerable," for example children under the care of social services and those in families or social situations deemed by schools to be of concern.

Several studies have reported that the lockdown had a negative impact on the [mental health](#) and [wellbeing](#) of young people, but this effect has not been uniformly reported, with a number of studies suggesting that some young people may have benefited from lockdown.

Emma Soneson, a Ph.D. [student](#) and Gates Scholar at the Department of Psychiatry, University of Cambridge, said: "The common narrative that the pandemic has had overwhelmingly negative effects on the lives of children and young people might not tell the full story. In fact, it seems as though a sizeable number of children and young people may have experienced what they felt was improved wellbeing during the first national lockdown of 2020.

"After hearing from patients in our clinical practice and informally from several parents and young people that they thought the lockdown was beneficial for their or their child's mental health, we decided to look at this trend."

Ms Soneson and colleagues explored this issue using the OxWell Student Survey, a large, school-based survey of students aged eight to 18 years living in England. More than 17,000 students took part in the June/July 2020 survey, during the tail end of the first national lockdown, answering questions about their experiences of the pandemic, school, home life, and relationships, among others. The results of their research have been published in *European Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*.

The team found that one in three students thought their mental wellbeing had improved during the first lockdown. In fact, an almost identical number of students fell into each of the three categories: their mental wellbeing had improved; there had been no change; or they had experienced a deterioration to their wellbeing.

The highest proportions of students who reported improved mental wellbeing were among those who were in school every day (39%) and most days (35%), while the highest proportion of students who reported worse wellbeing were those who attended just once or twice (39%).

Students who felt they had had better wellbeing during lockdown were more likely than their peers to report positive lockdown experiences of school, home, relationships, and lifestyle. For example, compared with their peers, a greater percentage of students reporting better wellbeing also reported decreases in bullying, improved relationships with friends and family, less loneliness, better management of schoolwork, more sleep, and more exercise during lockdown compared with before.

Professor Peter Jones, also from Department of Psychiatry at the University of Cambridge, said: "What we've seen is a complex mix of factors that affect whether a child's mental health and wellbeing was affected by the lockdown. These range from their mental health before the pandemic through to their relationships with their families and peers, and their attitudes towards school."

While previous studies have reported young people worrying about the impact of lockdown on friendships, nearly half of those who reported improved mental wellbeing in this new study reported feeling less left out and lonely and having better relationships with friends and family. In part, this may be because access to digital forms of social interaction can mitigate the negative effects of reduced face-to-face contact. With many parents and carers at home, there was also potential for improved family

relationships.

One specific aspect of peer relationships that changed during the pandemic was bullying. The researchers found that most young people who had been bullied in the past year reported that the bullying had reduced. The proportion that reported that they were bullied less than before lockdown was higher for those who reported improved wellbeing (92%) than for those who reported no change (83%) or deterioration in their wellbeing (81%).

For approximately half of the young people who reported improved mental wellbeing, lockdown was associated with improvements in sleep and exercise—for example, 49% of those who reported improved mental wellbeing reported sleeping more, compared with 30% of those who reported no change and 19% of those who reported deterioration.

Family relationships also clearly played a part: the proportion of students who reported that they were getting along with household members better than before lockdown was higher for the group who reported improved mental wellbeing (53%) than for the groups who reported no change (26%) or deterioration (21%), with a similar pattern for getting along with friends (41%, 26%, and 27% respectively).

Professor Mina Fazel from the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Oxford said: "While the pandemic has undoubtedly had negative consequences for many, it is important to keep in mind that this is not the case for all children and [young people](#). We are interested in how we can learn from this group and determine if some of the changes can be sustained in order to promote better mental health and wellbeing moving forward."

Some of the school-related factors that may have influenced how a young person responded to the [lockdown](#) include: the increased

opportunities for flexible and tailored teaching that encouraged different styles of learning; [smaller class sizes](#) and more focused attention from teachers for those attending school; and later waking times and more freedom during the school day.

More information: Emma Soneson et al, Happier during lockdown: a descriptive analysis of self-reported wellbeing in 17,000 UK school students during Covid-19 lockdown, *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* (2022). [DOI: 10.1007/s00787-021-01934-z](https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-021-01934-z)

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