

# High depressive symptoms in adolescents increased by 6% due to pandemic

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Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, depressive symptoms increased and life satisfaction decreased among secondary school children in England, particularly among girls, reports a new study led by UCL researchers.

The researchers say the increase will have led to approximately 60,000 more [secondary school students](#) whose depressive symptoms would surpass a clinical threshold, adding further strain to [young people's mental health services](#).

The study, published in *Royal Society Open Science*, compared two groups of adolescents over two separate 1.5-year periods just before, and during, the [pandemic](#).

Corresponding author Dr. Praveetha Patalay (UCL Center for Longitudinal Studies and MRC Unit for Lifelong Health and Aging at UCL) said: "Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, there had been widespread concern about rising [mental health difficulties](#) among adolescents.

"Here, we have found the pandemic contributed to a small additional rise in [mental health](#) difficulties among adolescents in England. As the pandemic is ongoing and many of its [negative impacts](#) may be long lasting, there is a need to prioritize young people and resource sufficient support for their mental health and well-being."

The researchers, based at UCL, University of Manchester, University of Dundee, and the Evidence Based Practice Unit (at UCL and the Anna Freud National Center for Children and Families), compared adolescents taking part in the Education for Well-being program, which has been tracking a total of 11,450 secondary school pupils in two phases, providing what the authors call a natural experiment to compare two similar groups of children over different time periods.

The phase two cohort was tracked from September-October 2019 to February-April 2021, providing insight into the impacts of the pandemic, while pupils in the first phase were assessed from late 2018 to early 2020, so their data was used as a comparison group. The pupils

were in years 7, 8, and 9 at the start of the study periods.

In line with previously reported evidence of rising mental health difficulties among young people, the researchers found that the pupils in phase two experienced slightly more depressive symptoms at baseline (the start of the study period) than the pupils in phase one. In both groups, depressive symptoms increased across the study period (as is expected during adolescence), but there was a greater increase for the adolescents in phase two who were exposed to the pandemic.

The researchers estimate that had the pandemic not occurred, there would be 6% fewer adolescents in England with high levels of depressive symptoms such as low mood, loss of pleasure and poor concentration, compared to what would have been expected based on existing trends (27.1% experienced high depressive symptoms, while 25.5% would have been expected, which equates to a 1.6 percentage point difference in prevalence, or 6% increase in the number of adolescents with high depressive symptoms).

The pandemic appeared to impact girls' mental health more than boys', as girls experienced greater [depressive symptoms](#) and lower well-being. The authors also examined behavioral difficulties and found no overall impact of the pandemic.

Joint first author Dr. Rosie Mansfield (UCL Center for Longitudinal Studies) commented: "Young people in England are already facing long waiting lists to access mental health support, and it is clear that the challenging circumstances of the pandemic have further worsened many people's mental health and well-being and widened inequalities. Prioritizing young people's mental health requires more than just talk, as we need a properly resourced, public health approach that builds capacity within and between sectors."

**More information:** The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on adolescent mental health: a natural experiment, *Royal Society Open Science* (2022). [DOI: 10.1098/rsos.211114](https://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.211114).  
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