

Multitude of stressful events in 2020 may have harmed social development of young adults

September 19 2022



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

2020 was a uniquely stressful year—with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the murder of George Floyd, and a contentious presidential election in the United States. New research shows that these crises may have harmed the social development of young adults at a critical time in

life.

Previous research has examined the effect of stressors on social development throughout life, but this work reinforces the importance of young adulthood and how it can be shaped by external events.

"If everything goes well, young adults select into social networks, initiate friendships and [romantic relationships](#), and find their occupational niche," says lead author Dr. Bühler of Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz. "Our findings, however, show that external stressors and [environmental variations](#) may set young adults on a less fortunate path."

Researchers compared the [social development](#) of 415 young adults in 2020 with that of 465 young adults in 2019. Over the course of eight months, participants, ranging from 18-35 years old, shared updates on several factors affecting their development.

The participants in 2020 reported decreased levels of intimacy and relationship satisfaction over time, while the group surveyed in 2019 reported slightly higher levels of social support and inclusion over time. While the changes were not drastic, Dr. Bühler notes that small effects can have lasting consequences.

"Environmental conditions and contexts are critical for development, because they provide the opportunities that people need to grow in a healthy way," says Dr. Bühler. "In the case of 2020, the average young person may have had fewer of these opportunities, causing fear and anxiety while potentially hindering their development."

It's also important to remember that these disruptive events are not limited to national or global crises. The study's participants were based in northern California, where they grappled with wildfires throughout the region.

Researchers noticed a great deal of variation in the effect of these stressors on individual participants and Dr. Bühler highlights this as an important area of future study. Examining the coping mechanisms of those less affected, she says, could lead to more effective resources and support for young adults.

When asked if researchers were surprised by any of the findings, Dr. Bühler cites one aspect of social functioning which did not appear to be affected by the stressors of 2020: loneliness.

"Irrespective of whether [young adults](#) were exposed to collective stressors or not," she says, "the degree and development of their loneliness was similar."

The research was published in *Social Psychological and Personality Science*.

More information: Collective Stressors Affect the Psychosocial Development of Young Adults, *Social Psychological and Personality Science* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/19485506221119018](https://doi.org/10.1177/19485506221119018)

Provided by Society for Personality and Social Psychology

Citation: Multitude of stressful events in 2020 may have harmed social development of young adults (2022, September 19) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-09-multitude-stressful-events-social-young.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--