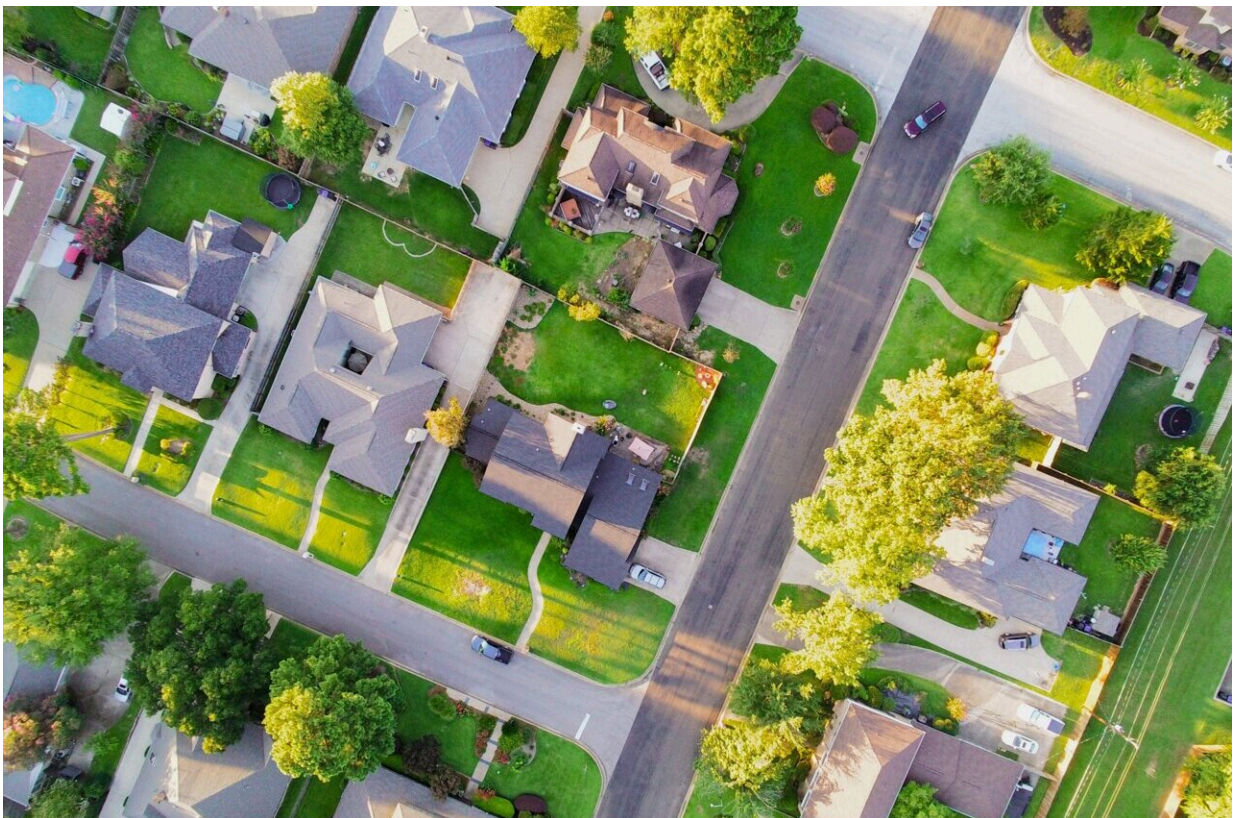


# Researchers: Neighborhood amenities may have helped youth mental health and stress early in the pandemic

January 8 2024, by Alexander Wray, Gina Martin, Jamie Seabrook, Jason Gilliland, Kendra Nelson Ferguson and Stephanie Coen

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, youth as a population group [reported](#)

[some of the largest declines in their mental health](#) compared to other age groups in Canada.

Research on [youth mental health](#) during the [pandemic](#) has focused on [poor academic engagement](#), [loss of peer networks](#), [missed milestone events](#) and [challenging summer employment experiences](#). Yet little is known about how the places where [young people](#) lived played a role in changes to their mental health during the pandemic.

From walking in a park to ordering takeout food, there was not much to do out in public during the early months of the pandemic. Youth were attending school remotely and no longer participating in organized sports and indoor recreation.

For many, that meant their [daily activities](#) outside the home often consisted of what could be reached within walking distance of where they lived. Parks and food-related retail became the main places for physically distanced social interactions. They became a break in the routines of remote school, activities and virtual social networks available at home.

## Neighborhood amenities

[Our study](#) included Canadian youth between the ages of 13 and 19 in London, Ont. We investigated how the availability of neighborhood amenities may have contributed to positive or negative changes in mental health—interpreted as their own perception of their mood and outlook on life—and [stress levels](#) during the first six months of the pandemic.

Amenities included parks, [food outlets](#) and convenience stores in close proximity to home.

We investigated whether these amenities could have protected against

declines in mental health and increases in [stress](#) levels, and also if youth living in suburban neighborhoods had different perceptions of mental health and stress levels than those living in urban ones.

## **The missing role of parks**

Surprisingly, the availability of parks near the home had no significant impact on mental health and stress levels of youth. This finding runs counter to [evidence that suggests these places were crucial to supporting well-being](#) during the pandemic.

Given the pre-pandemic challenges of [engaging young people in using their local parks](#), these places may have not played as substantial a role in supporting better mental health and lowering stress levels for youth compared to other neighborhood amenities.

## **Youth experiences in urban neighborhoods**

For youth in urban neighborhoods, having more [fast-food](#) outlets available near young people's homes resulted in lower levels of stress, but worse declines in mental health. When coupled with the [observed decline in eating habits](#), urban youth were almost seven times more likely to report worse mental health.

While the places near young people's homes can make a difference to their mental health, we found that the impact is greater on their stress levels.

It may be that food-based amenities in urban neighborhoods provided places for young people to relieve their stress and try to cope with declines in their mental health by eating fast-food and convenience-store snacks and socializing.

## Youth experiences in suburban neighborhoods

Youth in suburban neighborhoods were more likely to report changes (both improvements and declines) to their mental health and stress levels. They also had a greater availability of food outlets near them compared to urban youth. In particular, having more [convenience stores](#) near the home was associated with more drastic changes to mental health and higher stress levels.

In addition, youth residing in suburban neighborhoods who reported a decline in their physical activity levels were also at nearly three times the risk of having worsened mental health than their peers who reported their physical activity levels had not changed since the pandemic.

Overall, boys were substantially less likely than girls to have improved mental health during the study period, and this was especially true for those residing in suburban areas.

One possible reason for this trend could be that boys are [more likely to play organized sports](#) than girls, which are often delivered by schools as extracurricular activities. In addition, boys tend to have less [extensive social networks](#) on digital platforms outside of their school than girls.

The loss of opportunities for physical activity and transition away from in-person social networks at schools may have created feelings of isolation and loneliness for boys.

## The role of neighborhood amenities

The first six months of the pandemic revealed the importance of neighborhood amenities in protecting against declines in mental health and reducing stress levels.

Parks may have been a helpful feature for other population groups, but we found their role was limited for youth in terms of mental health and stress. Planners and [landscape architects](#) can reflect on how these places could be changed to be more attractive to youth, thereby ensuring they receive the same benefits from them as younger and older groups.

In addition, it is important to consider that the experiences of youth living in suburban and urban neighborhoods may differ. This highlights the need to include youth perspectives in the planning of public spaces that contribute to healthy and thriving communities.

The pandemic exposed long-standing issues in how youth can access amenities in their community, and how to best meet their needs in Canadian communities.

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Researchers: Neighborhood amenities may have helped youth mental health and stress early in the pandemic (2024, January 8) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-01-neighborhood-amenities-youth-mental-health.html>

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