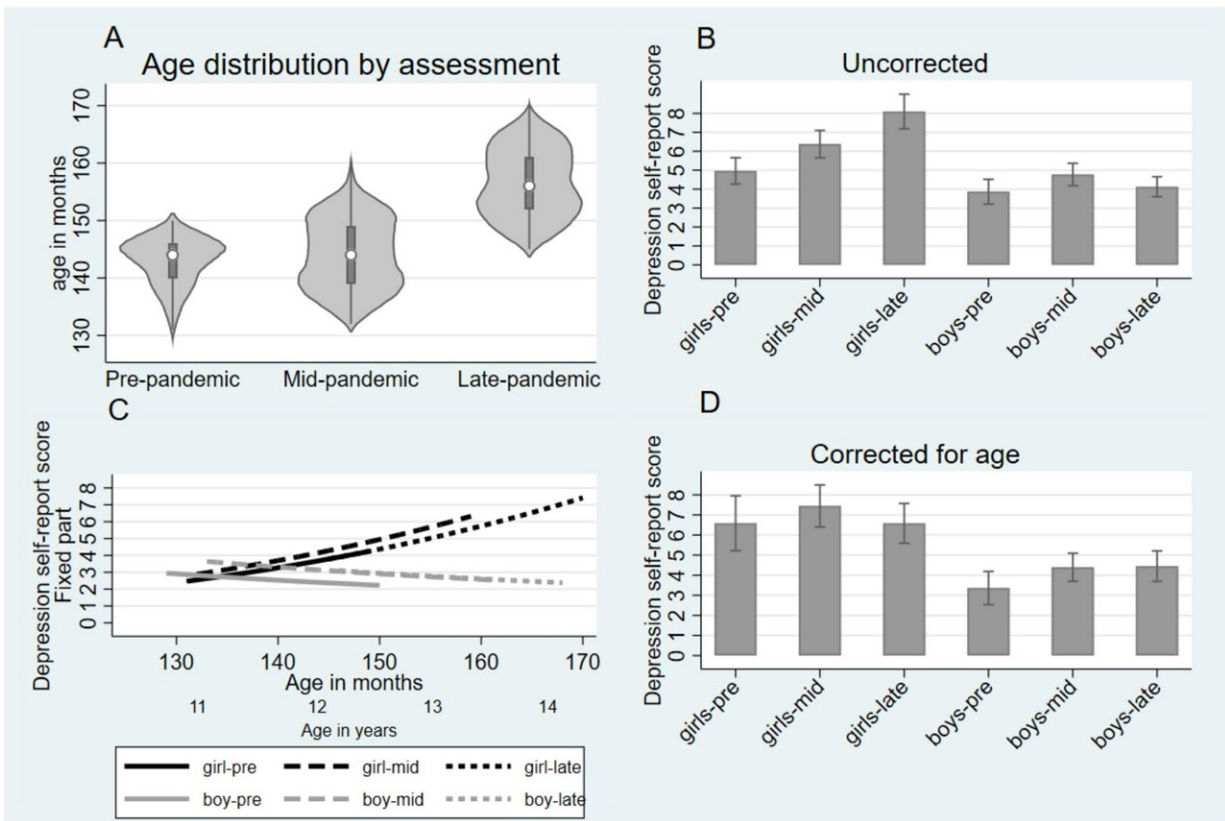


Study finds boys' mental health more impacted by COVID-19 pandemic than girls'

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Self-rated adolescent outcomes: Mood and Feelings Questionnaire depression. Panel A shows age overlap in months, Panel B and D shows marginal means with 95% confidence intervals, uncorrected and corrected for age. Panel C shows the age and pandemic effects. Credit: *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* (2024). DOI: 10.1007/s00787-023-02337-y

The COVID-19 pandemic had a greater impact on boys' mental health than girls, contrary to the findings of other studies, according to new research led by scientists at University of Liverpool, Manchester Metropolitan University, University of Reading, and King's College London.

These findings could have a significant impact on referral of adolescents to [mental health services](#) and on diagnoses, and greater awareness of age-related changes in mental health symptoms is needed by clinicians, educators and parents, say researchers.

Researchers used their unique dataset with repeated measurement pre and during the pandemic, and, crucially, took into account the developmental differences in symptoms between boys and girls aged 11–14 years.

According to the study, initial reports of a pandemic-related increase in depression in young adolescent girls could be explained by a natural rise in these symptoms as they get older. In contrast, pandemic-related increases in boys' depression and both boys' and girls' behavioral problems may have been masked by maturational changes over [early adolescence](#).

The [paper](#), "COVID-19 pandemic impact on adolescent mental health: a reassessment accounting for development," was published in the *European Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*.

The team were able to draw the conclusions using the unique longitudinal dataset: Wirral Child Health and Development Study (WCHADS). The study was also unique in capturing reports on depression in young adolescents' health from the parents and self-reports from the children themselves at this key stage. This indicated an over-reporting of a pandemic effect on girls' symptoms of depression by

parents, while under-reporting the pandemic effect on boys.

Professor Helen Sharp, Professor of Perinatal and Child and Adolescent Clinical Psychology, University of Liverpool said, "We have identified significant changes in the pattern of mental health needs of young people due to the pandemic.

"Our study revealed adverse effects of the pandemic, with increases in behavioral problems in both boys and girls and increased depression symptoms in [adolescent boys](#) in particular. Emotional difficulties may not be recognized easily by parents or schools. However, raised awareness should help ensure more young people are directed to sources of support and treatment."

Lead author Nicky Wright, a Lecturer in Psychology at Manchester Met, said, "Because of the general decrease in boys' depression with age, and the general messaging about the impact of the [pandemic](#) being greater on [girls](#), it is likely that boys' mental health needs are being missed, but also there may be more referrals for boys than will be anticipated."

"Overall, it is very important to take aging into account when considering diagnosis and prognosis in early adolescence, because these maturational shifts may mask or over-state actual change in symptoms. The differences between the parents' reporting and the adolescents self-report also potentially have important implications because it is typically parents who initiate referrals to child and adolescent mental health services for young people."

The WCHADS is led by Jonathan Hill, Professor of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at University of Reading and Helen Sharp, Professor of Child and Adolescent Clinical Psychology at the University of Liverpool. Statistical analysis is led by Andrew Pickles, Professor of Biostatistics at King's College London.

More information: N. Wright et al, COVID-19 pandemic impact on adolescent mental health: a reassessment accounting for development, *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* (2024). [DOI: 10.1007/s00787-023-02337-y](https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-023-02337-y)

Provided by University of Liverpool

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