

Adolescent Life Disruption Due to COVID-19

Minjee Kim, *Undergraduate Student*, Drew Rothenberg PhD

BACKGROUND

This brief outlines the findings from “How adolescents’ lives were disrupted over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic: A longitudinal investigation in 12 cultural groups in 9 nations from March 2020 to July 2022” in the journal, *Development and Psychopathology*.¹ The authors investigate the extent to which adolescents’ lives were disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the factors that caused these disruptions.

The authors recruited participants from the Parenting Across Cultures longitudinal study. From 2020 to 2022, adolescents were surveyed multiple times about COVID-19 life disruptions and about 10 risk factors related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Findings from the study show that adolescents worldwide experienced high levels of disruption in their lives during the COVID-19 pandemic due to a sweeping range of individual and societal risk factors.

THIS STUDY

While there have been numerous studies of the impact of COVID-19 on adolescents, almost all focus on a limited set of outcomes and were conducted with youth from the same cultural or ethnic group. In contrast, this study looks at a variety of outcomes across a wide range of geographic areas and cultures to examine how COVID-19 disrupted the lives of adolescents around the world. Researchers surveyed 1,080 adolescents across nine countries over five time points from 2020 to 2022.

Figure 1. Participants’ Home Countries



Throughout the pandemic, adolescents were asked how much COVID-19 had disrupted their lives and about 10 risk factors (See Figure 2 for the complete list of risk factors), to see how each predicted adolescent life disruption during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study aims to examine trajectories of adolescent life disruption reported over time during the COVID-19 pandemic, and find the most important predictors of these disruptions and what can be learned for the future.

¹ Rothenberg, W. A., Skinner, A. T., Lansford, J. E., Bacchini, D., Bornstein, M. H., Chang, L., Deater-Deckard, K., Di Giunta, L., Dodge, K. A., Gurdal, S., Junla, D., Liu, Q., Long, Q., Oburu, P., Pastorelli, C., Sorbring, E., Steinberg, L., Tirado, L. M. U., Yotanyamaneewong, S., ... Al-Hassan, S. M. (2024). How adolescents’ lives were disrupted over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic: A longitudinal investigation in 12 cultural groups in 9 nations from March 2020 to July 2022. *Development and Psychopathology*, 1–17.

FINDINGS

Adolescents across all nine countries reported feeling that their lives had been disrupted by COVID-19. They did not see the pandemic as less disruptive even after their governments lifted more stringent mitigation strategies like lockdowns. These trajectories of life disruption aligned with changes in COVID-19 case and death rates worldwide. Youth trajectories of life disruption differed from country to country, which could be explained by the cross-cultural variation in the prevalence of COVID-19 and in government responses to COVID-19.

Figure 2: Predictors of adolescent life disruption due to COVID-19

PREDICTOR	RISK FACTOR
SOCIETAL-LEVEL COVID-19 EFFECTS	
✓	HIGH COVID-19 DEATH RATE IN COUNTRY
✓	LESS STRINGENT COVID-19 MITIGATION STRATEGIES
ADOLESCENT'S COVID-19 BELIEFS & EXPERIENCES	
✓	LESS CONFIDENT IN GOV RESPONSE TO COVID-19
✓	MORE COMPLIANT W/ COVID-19 CONTROL MEASURES
✓	DEATH OF SOMEONE THEY KNEW TO COVID-19
✗	HOPE OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ENDING
ADOLESCENT'S BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS	
✓	INTERNALIZING PROBLEMS
✓	EXTERNALIZING PROBLEMS
✓	SMOKING
✗	ALCOHOL USE

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average disruption score reported by adolescents due to COVID-19

The average disruption score for all participants, however, stayed mostly stable from March 2022 to July 2022 (at 6 on scale from 1 to 10). These findings demonstrate that while the pandemic did take a toll on adolescents' perceived wellbeing, adolescents also developed resilience against the cumulative effects of the pandemic. All except two of the risk factors included in the study predicted adolescents' life disruption. Five of these risk factors had particularly persistent negative effects on adolescents' lives. Adolescents who lived in a country with less stringent COVID-19 mitigation strategies, had less confidence in their government's COVID-19 response, experienced the death of a loved one due to COVID-19, and experienced more internalizing and externalizing problems were more likely to report disruption for the entirety of the study period.

DEFINITIONS

Internalizing problems:

negative behavior directed inwards (ex. anxiety, depression, or sadness).

Externalizing problems:

negative behavior directed outwards (ex. anger, getting into arguments).

COVID-19 mitigation strategies:

rules and suggestions of the government and healthcare system to try to contain the virus (ex. school closures; workplace closures; restrictions on public gatherings; closures of public transport; stay-at-home requirements; public information campaigns).



TAKEAWAYS

- 1 Government response throughout the pandemic mattered for adolescent well-being, and was especially important in the first 6 months.** The implementation of national COVID-19 mitigation strategies and higher confidence in government response to the COVID-19 pandemic minimized adolescent life disruption throughout the pandemic. This effect was especially powerful in the early stages.

IMPACT OF NATIONAL TRENDS AND GOVERNMENT RESPONSES TO COVID-19 ON ADOLESCENTS

During the first six months of COVID

- Lower national death rates
 - Stricter nation-wide COVID-19 mitigation measures
 - More confident in the government's response to the pandemic
- } Less disruption

- 2 Death rates impacted adolescent well-being throughout the pandemic.** Deaths of those close to adolescents had disruptive effects on their lives during the entirety of the pandemic. National death rates, on the other hand, disrupted adolescents' lives primarily when the death rates rapidly rose or fell.
- 3 Adolescent behavior problems increased during the pandemic.** Adolescent behavior problems increased substantially during the COVID-19 pandemic, and those who experienced more behavior problems reported greater life disruption during the pandemic. Negative behaviors (internalized and externalized) were highly predictive of life disruption. While not surprising, this is particularly concerning because behavior patterns established or increased during the pandemic may have strong and lasting impacts, as opposed to the COVID-19 specific risk factors that abated with the end of the pandemic.



CONCLUSION

This study highlights the widespread disruptive effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on adolescents' lives across cultures. Adolescents' experiences during the pandemic were shaped by multiple layers of their environment, indicating the broad scope of policy interventions that may be necessary to remedy the pandemic's negative consequences. Governments, for instance, may wish to provide additional support and counseling for adolescents who lost their parents to COVID-19, while also implementing screening and referral for adolescents' internalizing and externalizing behavior problems. Moreover, interventions addressing the four risk factors that predicted life disruption for the entirety of the study period should be prioritized to counteract their sustained effects on adolescents' lives. These findings can be used by governments and policymakers planning for future natural disasters and pandemics.