

Back In School: Addressing Student Well-Being in the Wake of COVID-19

Fact Sheet

The COVID-19 pandemic has had widespread, negative effects on California children and families since it began in early 2020, ranging from increases in suicide, suicidal behaviors, and psychiatric emergencies, symptoms of depression and anxiety, increases in adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), to difficulties in school. Experts warn that these negative effects may be long-lasting.

Increases in Youth Suicides and Psychiatric Emergencies

According to a recent California Department of Public Health webinar¹, youth suicide rates increased 20% from January through September of 2020 compared to the same period the previous year, with the increase most pronounced among African American youth (up 28%). Emergency department visits also increased substantially for youth ages 10–18 during the second half of 2020 compared to the same period in 2019.

Early Survey Findings Show Worsening Mental Health

Surveys conducted since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic consistently have shown substantial increases in self-reported behavioral health symptoms for adults and children. For example, more than a quarter of parents surveyed in June 2020, near the first peak of the pandemic, reported worsening mental health for themselves, and 14% reported worsening behavioral health for their children. The proportion of families with moderate or severe food insecurity increased from 6% before March 2020 to 8% after, employer-sponsored insurance coverage of children decreased from 63% to 60%, and 24% of parents reported a loss of regular child care. Worsening mental health for parents occurred alongside worsening behavioral health for children in nearly one in 10 families, among whom 48% reported loss of regular child care, 16% reported change in insurance status, and 11% reported worsening food security.²

What We Heard

“The increase in mental health challenges we saw in the first year of the pandemic will not go away as the threat from the virus is eradicated. We can expect to grapple with these wide-scale challenges for the next several years.”

– Dr. Deryk Van Brunt, University of California-Berkeley, MHSOAC Hearing, February 25, 2021

“From the LGBTQ perspective, half of participants state that one of biggest barriers was not that they couldn’t recognize they needed services, but lack of [ability to access] services. Shelter in place during covid is a challenge because they’re stuck at home with families who aren’t supportive, and they can’t access the support they need.”

– MHSOAC Listening Session participant

“The students are suffering. [...] The first people other than family to recognize when students have problems are the teachers. I ask that, please, if the State can allow school districts to apply directly for any help, that would be really wonderful.”

– MHSOAC Listening Session participant

Another study found that in late June 2020, 40% of U.S. adults reported struggling with mental health or substance use. Symptoms of depression and anxiety increased sharply during the second quarter of 2020 as compared to the second quarter of 2019. A quarter of respondents ages 18-24 reported having seriously considered suicide in the 30 days prior to the survey.³

Disproportionate Impacts on Children and Families of Color

Existing health inequities and the social determinants of health have resulted in increased vulnerability for children of color, particularly Black and Hispanic children, to the physical and psychological effects of the pandemic.⁴ As a result, disparities in behavioral health symptoms and outcomes have in many cases increased during the pandemic. Approximately 40,000 children (estimated range, 37,000 to 43,000) nationwide have lost a parent to COVID-19. A disproportional number of these parents were Black (20% of deaths versus 14% of U.S. population).⁵ In a sample of 169 Southern California mother-child pairs (46% Latinx), young children's depressive symptoms were approximately three times higher than pre-COVID-19 U.S. averages, with more than one-third of the children in the sample meeting criteria to be referred for clinical depression. About two-thirds of mothers in the sample indicated an increase in at least one type of conduct problem since the beginning of the pandemic as well.⁶ Another national study, sponsored by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), found in April-May 2020 that Hispanic adults were 59% more likely than non-Hispanic whites to report current symptoms of depression and four times as likely to report suicidal thoughts or suicidal ideation.⁷

End Notes

¹ California Department of Public Health (2021, July 28). Suicide in California—Data Trends in 2020, COVID Impact, and Prevention Strategies [Webinar].

² Patrick, S. W., Henkhaus, L. E., Zickafoose, J. S., Lovell, K., Halvorson, A., Loch, S., et al. (2020). Well-being of parents and children during the COVID-19 pandemic: a national survey. *Pediatrics*, 146(4).

³ Czeisler, Mark E., Lane, Rashon I., Petrosky, Emiko, et al. 2020. Mental Health, Substance Use, and Suicidal Ideation During the COVID-19 Pandemic—United States, June 24-30, 2020. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, August 14, 2020, 69(32): 1049-1057.

⁴ Rothe, E. M., Fortuna, L. R., Tobon, A. L., Postlethwaite, A., Sanchez-Lacay, J. A., and Anglero, Y. L. (2021). Structural Inequities and the Impact of COVID-19 on Latinx Children: Implications for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Practice. *J Am Acad Child Adolesc Psychiatry*, 669-671.

⁵ Kidman R, Margolis R, Smith-Greenaway E, Verdery AM. Estimates and Projections of COVID-19 and Parental Death in the US. (2021) *JAMA Pediatr*. 175(7):745–746. doi:10.1001/jamapediatrics.2021.0161.

⁶ Glynn, L. M., Davis, E. P., Luby, J. L., Baram, T. Z., & Sandman, C. A. (2021). A predictable home environment may protect child mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Neurobiology of Stress*, 14, 100291.

⁷ McKnight-Eily, Lela R., Okoro, Catherine A., Strine, Tara W., et al. (2021). Racial and Ethnic Disparities in the Prevalence of Stress and Worry, Mental Health Conditions, and Increased Substance Use Among Adults During the COVID-19 Pandemic—United States, April and May 2020. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, February 5, 2021, 70(5): 162-166.