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The Impact of Coronavirus Lockdowns on Adolescents

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the social, medical, and futuristic impacts of coronavirus lockdowns on adolescents. The effects of social isolation and school closures are the focus. The literature reveals that adolescents' mental health declined due to social isolation during COVID, and that their social development was stunted. The brain development of adolescents could also have been negatively affected due to a lack of engagement in social decision making processes. The article examines the inequality exacerbated by the pandemic, namely the increased inequality by race and income in adolescents' access to sports and the economic inequality in learning losses. Not only were learning losses during remote learning more prevalent among low-income adolescents, but these students are likely to experience a decrease in expected income over the course of their lifetimes. Based on existing research, an effective remedy to the negative impacts of COVID lockdowns on adolescents would be to increase funding to schools in order to decrease COVID cases among adolescents, provide individualized instruction to students who fell behind during remote learning, and to improve in-school counseling services.

Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic, also known as COVID-19, affected the mental health, social development, and future opportunities of adolescents. The highly contagious nature of the virus led schools across the globe to close and switch to remote learning. In 2020, school closures affected 50.8 million United States (U.S.) public school students (Education Week). Despite the benefits of preventing contagion, school closings have negatively affected adolescents. In the context of the pandemic, the results of a study conducted by Kathy Do, Ethan McCormick, and Eva Telzer (2020) of the University of North Carolina become especially relevant. They found that early adolescents are more likely to conform to the positive, rather than negative, ideas of their peers in social situations. During lockdowns, adolescents interacted with peers less, were not exposed to these social decision making processes, and thus did not experience the positive influence of their peers. This lack of essential connection begs the question: How can the harmful effects of COVID-19 lockdowns on American adolescents be remedied?

The effect of school closures and isolation on adolescents can be observed through the social lens, the medical lens relating to adolescent development, and the futuristic lens in terms of mental education loss, and economic impact. The harm caused by the pandemic can be mitigated by a U.S. federal government program that provides funds to schools to implement preventative disease-control measures. This will allow schools to remain open and will reduce the number of students who need to self-isolate, allowing for increased beneficial social interaction. Educational support programs and more counseling should also be implemented in schools for students who experienced learning loss or mental health issues because of school closures.

Social Impacts

The pandemic has socially and mentally impacted adolescents, according to a study conducted by Wendy Ellis, Tara Dumas, and Lindsey Forbes (2020) in which 1,054 Canadian adolescents were surveyed. Although the focus is not on American adolescents, these psychological results are consistent among adolescents in similar pandemic circumstances. They found that stress during COVID led to increased loneliness and depression, and that adolescents were especially concerned about "schooling and peer relationships." Clearly, a lack of in person social connection has led to widespread negative mental health effects in the adolescent population, as confirmed by Amy Orben, Livia Tomova, and Sarah-Jayne Blakemore (2020). Their research also finds, however, that some negative effects of social isolation may be mitigated by connecting with peers online and through social media.

Another social aspect of mental health for many adolescents that was severely lacking during the pandemic was participation in team sports. According to Emily Pluhar et al (2017), in comparison to those who play individual sports or no sports, adolescents who participate in team sports experience lower rates of anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation. To fully examine the benefits of team sports and why the near full shutdown of sports during COVID was so harmful, it is essential to consider research conducted by Michele Gelfand et al (2020) regarding the trade-offs of ritualistic synchrony. The report found that performing synchronous movement within a group leads to increased collaboration, cooperation, and prosocial behavior. Further, the research proves that participating in synchrony improves overall social bonding, even across different groups. Therefore, the benefits to adolescents' social health from participating in sports extend to other aspects of their social lives.

Most team sports include some type of ritualistic synchrony. Whether it be synchronized warm-up routines, organized team cheers, or movements part of the sport itself, team members experience ritualistic synchrony and thus benefit from it. This research on ritualistic synchrony, then, comprehensively explains why team sports are so essential to the social health of adolescents. The report also discusses the negative effects of ritualistic synchrony, such as a decrease in creative dissent within a group. This, however, is not a pressing concern in sports because group discussions are not as common as the situations in which team members benefit, especially socially, from ritualistic synchrony.

Having established the importance of team sports for the mental and social health of many adolescents, it is clear that the widespread shutdown of most youth sports during COVID left adolescents bereft of the social benefits they would otherwise have received. Further, inequalities by race and income have been exacerbated in sports. The Aspen Institute (2020) found that sports have become "less accessible to lower-income youth" and that the gap in time spent playing sports between lower and higher income youth increased because of COVID shutdowns. The implication here is clear: The negative effects on mental and social health resulting from missing out on sports are most severe for already disadvantaged youth.

Counterargument

According to Vicki Harrison of Stanford University, as quoted by Benjamin Williams (2020) in Psychiatry Advisor, some adolescents may have experienced better mental health during the pandemic because they "escape[d] negative experiences at school." These include bullying, social anxiety, or conflicts with peers. However, this does not negate the negative mental health effects experienced by most adolescents. Additionally, some problems such as interpersonal conflict faced in person would not disappear during online school. According to Williams (2020), the increase in social media use during lockdown means bullying can continue to pose a threat to the mental health of students in the form of cyberbullying.

Medical Impacts

COVID lockdowns have impacted adolescents medically as well, specifically in terms of development. A lack of interaction with peers means important social decision making processes do not occur, according to Emile Aarts, Hein Fleuren, Margriet Sitskoorn, and Ton Wilthagen (2021) of Tilburg University. They report that adolescents mature by completing "developmental tasks", which include managing social situations and conflicts that arise. Contradictory peer influence, as discussed by Do et al (2020), is a prime example of the social conflict faced by adolescents. Do et al (2020) found that when faced with contradictory peer or parent opinions, adolescents are likely to either maintain their beliefs or conform to positive influences rather than conform to negative influences. Their findings explain why social deprivation is such a relevant issue, especially within the context of adolescent development during COVID. Social isolation removes the opportunity for adolescents to meet critical developmental benchmarks like standing by their beliefs and responding to conflicting peer opinions. Learning to manage social situations such as the ones described by Do et al is a critical aspect of adolescent development, one that is sorely lacking during COVID lockdowns, according to Aarts et al (2021). Orben et al (2020) confirm that "peer influence in adolescence" is critical to development and that the lack thereof poses a threat to full brain development in adolescents, emphasizing the harm of social isolation to adolescents.

The increased stress experienced by adolescents because of the pandemic, proven by Ellis et al (2020), also has effects on the adolescent brain. Russel Romeo (2017) of Columbia University finds that some parts of the brain that continue to form during adolescence, including the amygdala, hippocampus, and prefrontal cortex, are "highly sensitive to the effects of chronic stress exposure." Because the pandemic affected virtually every community in the U.S, and pandemic related circumstances are associated with more stress in adolescents, it can be concluded that most American adolescents experienced at least some degree of increased stress. Therefore, pandemic lockdowns negatively impacted the brain development of a large portion of adolescents in the U.S.

Futuristic Impacts

Adolescents faced mental health issues and education loss during COVID, which will affect them, and society, in the future. As previously established, the pandemic has negatively impacted adolescent mental health. Unaddressed mental health can lead to long term problems, according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Association (SAMHSA, 2019). These include "poor academic performance, behavior problems, school violence, dropping out, substance abuse, special education referral, suicide, and criminal activity."

Education loss during online schooling is equally pressing. Francesco Agostinelli of the University of Pennsylvania, Matthias Doepke of Northwestern University, Giuseppe Sorrenti of the University of Amsterdam, and Fabrizio Zilibotti of Yale University (2022) add to this. Their study found that in the U.S., students from low income communities faced a much more drastic learning loss than wealthier students. The authors explain that this is partially caused by students' at-home support systems, or lack thereof. Low income parents are less likely to work from home, meaning they could not help their children with online classes or technical issues. Additionally, low income students have access to fewer resources necessary to learn from home. Students who have no computer or need to share one with family members will clearly have a lower quality educational experience than students with their own computers.

From a wider economic perspective, education loss will impact both individual income and the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the U.S., according to a 2020 report by Eric A. Hanushek of Stanford University and Ludger Woessmann of Ludwig Maximilian University. They predict that students in grades 1-12 during pandemic school closures will experience a near 3% decrease in income over their lifetimes. The inequality in learning loss means that low income students will be at even more of an economic disadvantage in the future as compared to their wealthier peers. Further, the "lower long-term growth" associated with education loss during COVID could lead to a 1.5% decrease in the U.S.' annual GDP for the rest of the century. (Hanushek

and Woessman). Economically, this could be because of the decline in human capital associated with a decrease in workers' education levels, which makes labor less productive.

Solutions

The pandemic's consequences may affect adolescents for the rest of their lives. However, increasing funding to U.S. public schools is a viable solution that will mitigate the effects of issues faced by adolescents. Providing a plan for how schools should allocate these funds will ensure maximum benefits to students. This funding would let schools provide optional masks to students, which will be effective in preventing the spread of the coronavirus, as confirmed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2022). Preventing COVID cases among adolescents will allow schools and sports to remain open, which is essential to the social wellbeing, cognitive development, and educational opportunities of adolescents.

Ensuring schools receive funds will allow them to implement individualized educational programs for students who fell behind during remote learning. Hanushek and Woessmann (2020) confirm that providing individual instruction to students who need it will repair the damage done by pandemic learning loss and mitigate potential future economic harm. Additional funding will let schools hire more teachers, which will allow individual instruction for some students at no detriment to others. Since the pandemic also psychologically impacted adolescents, it will be beneficial to provide schools with the funds to either hire more in-school counselors or increase the training of existing counselors to deal with mental health issues that became more prevalent during the pandemic, especially stress. This will prevent future negative impacts on brain development. This is supported by a study conducted by Mandy Savitz-Romer, Tara Nicola, and Emily Alexander of Harvard Graduate School of Education, along with Heather Rowan-Kenyon and Stephanie Carroll of Boston College (2021). They confirm that school counselors are essential post-COVID because they bolster both students' mental health and potential future opportunities.

Limitations

This solution would be effective but expensive. Providing enough funds to public schools across the country to fulfill all of these goals would require bipartisan political support in order to pass on the federal level. There would likely be political opposition to spending such a large amount of money. Another limitation is the fact that some people are vehemently opposed to the wearing of masks in school. This solution does not require students to wear masks, however, but provides them to students who would like to wear them. While existing CDC data only reports on the willingness of adults to wear masks, a survey conducted by Morning Consult in December 2021 finds that 48% of parents of students age 12 and older support mandatory masking in schools and 32% support encouraged masking in schools, while only 20% do not support either. Therefore, the majority of parents would likely support this solution. Since Do et al (2020) find that adolescents are likely to conform to the positive influences of their parents, this means that the majority of adolescents might support this solution as well.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted adolescents socially, mentally, and developmentally. These effects, combined with the education loss that disproportionately impacted disadvantaged students, will impact the future economic opportunities of many adolescents. Mitigating these harmful effects will require schools to implement individualized instruction programs for students who fell behind and increase in-school counseling,

along with providing masks to prevent contagion. The most effective way to make these changes is the implementation of a federal program that provides funds to schools. In this way, society's road to recovery from the pandemic can include adolescents and help those most impacted.

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