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The Pandemic's Effect on Children Globally: A Brief Perspective

ABSTRACT. The COVID-19 pandemic is unique in that it exerts widespread and severe impacts on daily life without a predictable end date and presents a complex combination of stressors; yet, it has affected children around the world differently depending on the economic level of those children. In addition, girls may have been more affected than boys depending on the country they live in. Children in developed countries may have faced greater mental health challenges, but those from poverty-stricken nations not only felt the loss of their educational opportunities, but also extremely limited healthcare to aid those infected with COVID-19.

KEYWORDS: pandemic, global impact, stressors

Introduction

During the current pandemic, school-aged children around the world have faced unprecedented life stressors never experienced by recent generations. Schools, clubs, sports, and churches were suddenly closed across the nation and people of all ages had to adjust to a new way of living. Fear and uncertainty clouded the nation, and the trajectory of the future was unknown. Yet, children and adolescents in developing countries who already live with chronic hardships may have experienced the 2020–2021 pandemic differently than those in developed countries. For instance, children in Haiti have faced natural disasters and extreme poverty throughout their lives including a recent earthquake in August of 2021; thus, the recent pandemic was another opportunity to demonstrate their ability to manage life difficulties.

This paper introduces the difficulties that school-aged children dealt with globally in 2020–2021 including the effect on males versus females. The idea for this topic came about due to the authors' involvement in service work in orphanages in Haiti and the realization that the pandemic affected children there very differently. These new stressors related to COVID-19 continue to put challenges on the daily life of all children. Around the world, these include limited or few social outlets, limited or no opportunities to attend school face to face, increased economic concerns in families, childcare issues for some parents who were required to work without their children being in school, and overall anxiety about the future. Thus, children's mental health, access to education, and health concerns are addressed in light of the pandemic and in light of differing economic stations around the world.

Mental Health

Much has already been written on mental health and school-aged children during the height of the 2020 pandemic. Global lockdown in most countries around the world was instituted to drastically stop the spread of the virus and this has not been experienced in modern history. The last extensive lockdown was in 1918 with the Spanish Flu which lasted over two years infecting 500 million people (one-third of the world's population at the time). With severe job losses around the world affecting each member in a family, school closures, business as usual being shut down (restaurants, barbers, and the ability to conduct normal life), church closures, and the banning of sports, millions of people had to adjust to a new way of life. However, this was not the case in developing countries as the hardships already faced by the people there made this pandemic not as severe as other places around the world. For instance, in Haiti, due to the extreme poverty there, communities of people barely noticed the pandemic as their economic and health issues were already so extreme (Pierson, 2020).

In China, 1210 respondents from 194 cities were surveyed about the psychological impact and psychiatric symptoms of this pandemic (Wang et al., 2020). Females and students were significantly associated with a greater psychological impact of the outbreak and had higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. 75.2% were highly worried that a family member would get COVID. Anecdotes from children in Southern California

provide evidence of social and emotional difficulties in all grades and genders due to community lockdowns (Pierson, 2020).

Access to Education

Globally, roughly a third of the world's schoolchildren, or nearly 600 million, were affected by pandemic-related school closures, according to UNICEF, the United Nations agency responsible for aid to children. During the most difficult part of the pandemic in 2020, approximately 463 million schoolchildren worldwide (by UNICEF estimates) lacked Internet, television or radio and were left with almost no access to education (Chauvin & Faiola, 2020). This would be most obvious in developing countries where technology is not a consistent part of life. "We are seeing very real disparities between those children able to access remote learning, and poor children, children in rural areas, adolescent girls and disabled children who just don't have equal access," said Robert Jenkins, UNICEF's education chief (Chauvin & Faiola, 2020).

In response to COVID-19, 107 countries closed schools nationally by March 18, 2020 (Viner et al., 2020). This has been proven to be an overreaction as recent modelling studies showed that only 2–4% of deaths could possibly have been prevented by school closures alone without consideration of other measures such as social distancing. Other less disruptive social distancing interventions should be considered before school closures occur again.

Health Concerns

The obvious concern related to health and the spread of COVID-19 is the amount of illness and deaths that occurred which continue to impact society. Many children lost parents or caretaking relatives. As the pandemic wore on and new variants were introduced into society, children have become more and more affected by transmitting COVID-19 themselves with deaths in children increasing. COVID-19 spread to every country and infected millions and killed hundreds of thousands (Johns Hopkins University, 2020).

In addition, the imposed shutdown and confinement of people in developed countries led to drastically increased screen time, extensive use

of digital media, and an extreme rise in sedentary activity (Dutta et al., 2020; Pierson, 2020). Many families did not get the level of exercise they were used to since children's physical activities were stopped, and parents were not walking at work. For instance, at many school sites, children would need to walk upstairs to get to different classrooms, but with the requirement to stay home as much as possible, this extra exercise on top of after school activities and physical education classes did not exist (Pierson, 2020). Many of the typical activity patterns and sleep habits went through a noticeable transformation during this lockdown phase. It was observed that prolonged restriction on inherent practices brought about by this period of confinement may have deterred the health well-being of people (Wang et al., 2020).

Effects on different activity levels may not have been true in developing countries as their lives remained much the same; yet infection levels among children were similar as the variants increasingly infected younger and younger people around the world. Those in developing countries did not have access to healthcare and lifesaving treatment if infected with COVID-19.

Conclusion and Future Research

Children around the world were affected differently during the 2020–2021 pandemic. Those in developed countries who saw their lives shut down were unable to attend school face to face or participate in their after-school activities the same way as usual. This led to mental health issues such as increased depression due to social isolation. Yet, children in developing countries who had been attending school no longer had access at all due to no virtual learning opportunities. Thus, their education levels fell behind by one year and possibly even two. This put children in poorer parts of the world at an increasing disadvantage for upward mobility and also affected their mental health.

Female children and adolescents in developed countries were affected more severely than males. They tended to worry more, have higher rates of depression, and verbalize their concerns about losing important aspects of life to the pandemic shutdown.

Children in all countries have been affected by the new variants that have increasingly infected younger people. Disparities in healthcare make this especially a concern for those in poorer nations. The social-

emotional, educational, and health effects of COVID-19 on children will long reverberate throughout the world until the pandemic ends.

Upcoming research should focus on children's perspectives on how the pandemic has affected them in these different aspects of life.

Biographies of the Authors

Melinda R. Pierson, Ph.D. has been the Chair of the Department of Special Education at California State University, Fullerton for the past 15 years and a professor for a total of 22 years. She also directs the Center for International Partnerships in Education. She has written over 100 articles, book chapters, and grants in the areas of effective teacher training, affective characteristics (self-concept, loneliness, and social skills) for adolescents with mild/moderate disabilities, and literacy interventions. She has led numerous study abroad trips to Haiti and Germany where students have applied research-based teaching strategies in struggling schools. She has served as a Fulbright Scholar twice in Poland and Germany where she taught and conducted research with university faculty.

Brooke E. Pierson has served numerous times in schools and orphanages in Port au Prince, Haiti. She is interested in child welfare around the world and is looking forward to a future as a teacher. Her upcoming service will be with the children of the Appalachian region of the United States.

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