



Young People's Mental Health during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Emily Widnall^{1,2} Lizzy Winstone^{1,2} Becky Mars¹ Claire Haworth^{1,3} & Judi Kidger^{1,2}

¹ Population Health Sciences, Bristol Medical School, University of Bristol

² The National Institute for Health Research School for Public Health Research (NIHR SPHR)

³ School of Psychological Science, University of Bristol

About the research

In March 2020, the UK was placed in lockdown in an effort to help slow the spread of Coronavirus (COVID-19). The lockdown has disrupted the lives and daily routines of everyone; however, the impact is likely to have had a particular impact on young people with the closure of schools and disruption to social relationships.

This project wanted to know: what was the impact of lockdown on adolescent mental health and wellbeing, social connections, and social media activity? Who are the vulnerable groups that will need additional support post-lockdown? What will schools need to consider when students return?

Participants in this project were Year 9 students (aged 13-14 years). They were all participants of an ongoing NIHR School for Public Health Research longitudinal survey study exploring social media use and adolescent mental health and wellbeing over time. Participants had already completed a baseline survey pre-pandemic in October 2019. For this project, they were contacted by their schools in April 2020 during lockdown and invited to complete a similar survey online.

A total of 1,047 students in 17 schools in the South West of England completed the lockdown survey. Where we have made comparisons between timepoints, we have used all matched data available for the outcomes of interest for students that completed both the pre-pandemic survey and the survey during lockdown (ranging from 721-770 participants).



Policy implications

- As schools fully re-open, it is important to consider ways to prevent a rise in anxiety back to pre-pandemic levels. Students' mental health and wellbeing may have to be prioritised before catch up on academic work can be achieved.
- It will be particularly important to focus on support for students who already felt less connected to school, and those who had high anxiety prior to lockdown.
- Vulnerable groups including those identifying as LGBTQ+ and those with a disability or health condition are likely to require support when they return.
- Schools should consider whether they can continue practices developed during lockdown that may explain the increased in sense of connectedness for students.
- Policy makers, education providers, mental health services and other stakeholders would benefit from research to explore the impact of the school environment on student mental health and wellbeing.
- More research is needed to understand the impact of lockdown on other year groups, for example students of primary school age, or those whose exams or transitions were disrupted.

About the School

The NIHR School for Public Health Research is a partnership between the Universities of Sheffield; Bristol; Cambridge; Imperial; and University College London; The London School for Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM); LiLaC – a collaboration between the Universities of Liverpool and Lancaster; and Fuse - The Centre for Translational Research in Public Health a collaboration between Newcastle, Durham, Northumbria, Sunderland and Teesside Universities.

This project is funded by/ supported by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) School for Public Health Research (Grant Reference Number PD-SPH-2015-10025). The views expressed are those of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the NIHR or the Department of Health and Social Care.



Key findings

- Overall we found reductions in anxiety and rises in wellbeing but no large changes in depression in the majority of students.
- We saw larger improvements in mental health and wellbeing for students who had poor mental health and wellbeing before lockdown
- Students with low school, peer and family connectedness pre-pandemic, saw the biggest improvements in mental health and wellbeing during lockdown.
- Improvements in mental health and wellbeing may be due to the removal of stressors within the school environment, such as pressure of academic work, and challenging peer relationships.
- LGBTQ+ students and those with a health problem or disability had higher anxiety and depression, and lower levels of wellbeing pre-pandemic. Although anxiety reduced and wellbeing increased for the whole sample during lockdown, there was not much change for these more vulnerable groups
- Students' school connectedness increased overall for both girls and boys, indicating that some of the measures put in place by schools during lockdown were successful at nurturing connectedness.
- We did not see any overall changes in peer or family connectedness between pre-pandemic and during lockdown.

Further information

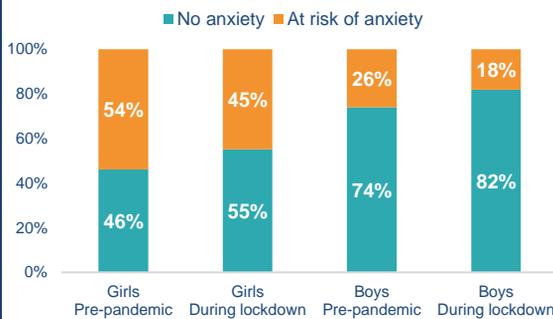
Further details can be found in the full report available at: <https://sphr.nihr.ac.uk/research/young-peoples-mental-health-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

Contact the researchers

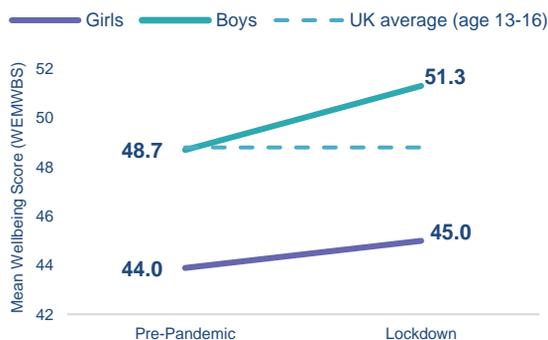
For further information about this study please contact emily.widnall@bristol.ac.uk

NIHR School for Public Health Research
 Website: sphr.nihr.ac.uk
 Twitter: @NIHRSPHR
 Email: sphr@ncl.ac.uk
 Telephone: +44 (0)191 208 3829

Change in Percentage of Students at Risk of Anxiety



Change in Students' Wellbeing Scores



Change in Percentage of Students at Risk of Depression

