Children and COVID-19 Research Library Quarterly Digest

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Covid-19 & Children

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Quick Guide

Part 1. Guest editorial

Children and Youth Mental Health under COVID-19

Lonely. Isolated. Scared. Anxious. Depressed. Self-Harm. Suicidal. These words are repeatedly used when we read about the perceived negative impact of COVID-19 on the mental health and well-being of children and youth, particularly in the media and on social media but also in reports generated for development professionals and policymakers. Intuitively, it is easy to understand why: the restrictive nature of the anti-pandemic measures – e.g., lockdowns, social distancing, protective personal equipment – have kept children and young people away from family and friends. They have prevented other forms of social interaction, interrupted their education, cast doubt on their future prospects, and left many isolated and neglected. Too often, however, the evidence on which such articles are based is largely anecdotal, cherry-picked to justify a particular point of view or simply missing or lacking in rigour and factual basis.

©UNICEF/UN0353439/Wilander. Rahmad, 15, a child with an intellectual disability, waits to enter class at SLB AL Fithri special needs school while keeping his physical distance in Bandung, West Java province, Indonesia, on 15 October 2020.

Given the critical importance of children's and young people's mental well-being for the present and future realization of their rights and potential, it is imperative that actions to support them are guided by the best research rather than opinions, impressions and perceptions. UNICEF Innocenti's _Children and COVID -19 Research e-library_ – launched in 2020 to curate quality social science research on COVID-19 and children – seeks to do this, not just for mental health but for all of the major dimensions of child and youth well-being.

Our _Quarterly Thematic Digest_, launched today, brings you research highlights from our growing COVID-19 e-library. In this inaugural digest we spotlight 11 studies on mental health that were all generated in the first half of 2021. These research papers address a diverse array of subjects related to the impact of COVID-19 on child and youth mental that include disorders such as anxiety, depression, suicide ideation and compulsive internet gaming, as well as risk factors such as HIV or refugee status, and responses such as art therapy and parenting and caregiver programmes. These studies have been undertaken in a range of countries and regions and include several multi-country analyses.

From these studies we have learned that:

The impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of children and youth has been near ubiquitous, with multiple studies indicating significant negative effects from the pandemic on children and their caregivers, both those with pre-existing and non-pre-existing mental health conditions and/or deprivations of their social and economic well-being.

Resilience factors – including family support, parental and caregivers' mental health, availability of quality mental health services, peer relationships, connection to others during the crisis and knowledge about the pandemic – **are significant in enhancing and supporting mental health in the COVID-19 era.**

Literacy on health in general, the pandemic and mental health is an important contributor to

moderating anxieties and depression among children, young people and their caregivers.

Capacity development through training, access to information and alternative interventions such as online art therapy are showing considerable promise in supporting the social and emotional well-being of children and young people.

'Building back better' mental health systems in low-and middle-income countries will entail integrating mental health into universal and primary health care approaches, task sharing, innovative and ethical use of digital technologies, and greater focus on neglected populations, including children.

Our nascent collection of child-related COVID-19 research is growing rapidly. Curated studies on various topics currently exceed 2,000 with more than 800 added in the past quarter alone. Popular topics presently include general health, mental health and education. A keen focus of the e-library will remain on low- and middle-income countries, neglected and vulnerable populations, and the perspectives of children and young people, with research in these areas beginning to show signs of growth – albeit from a low base in many instances.

Finally, we are committed to making our e-library open, accessible and responsive. Comments on studies, articles, the digest and the e-library itself are welcome and will only enhance its utility.

I hope that you enjoy the Digest and look forward to hearing your thoughts on how we can make it even better in future.

Happy Reading!

About the Author

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Part 2. Research highlights

Introduction

Each quarter, this Digest highlights newly curated research papers selected based on criteria of relevance to children's rights; diverse research methodologies; and insights from low-and middle-income countries. This selection is not exhaustive, and we welcome suggestions from our readers on further criteria and papers for inclusion.

Publication 1

COVID-19 mental health impact and responses in low-income and middle-income countries: reimagining global mental health

Kola, Lola, et al., *The Lancet*, February 2021

The COVID-19 pandemic and the likelihood of future pandemics highlight the importance of resilient and responsive mental health systems. This review examines how to 'build back better' the mental health systems in LMICs with a focus on key strategies: notably, fully integrating mental health in plans for universal health coverage, enhancing access to psychosocial interventions through task sharing, leveraging digital technologies for various mental health tasks, eliminating coercion in mental health care, and addressing the needs of neglected populations, such as children and people with substance use disorders.

Publication 2

Refugee children and families during the COVID-19 crisis: a resilience framework for mental health

Browne, Dillon T, et al., *Journal of Refugee Studies*, February 2021

This report analyses resilience-challenging and resilience-promoting factors for refugee children and families during the COVID-19 crisis and proposes a developmental resilience framework building upon the inherent strengths of refugee children and families. In addition to considering multiple levels of analysis, from individual to societal, and from preventative to responsive interventions, refugee-serving programmes and policies are recommended to maintain considerations of trauma, family systems, and cultural and linguistic sensitivity. Furthermore, interventions and policies should promote access to resources, thereby further fostering the child and family resilience process.

Publication 3

Perceived stress as mediator for longitudinal effects of the COVID-19 lockdown on well-being of parents and children

Achterberg, Michelle, et al., *Scientific Reports*, February 2021

Children in families with a history of parental over-reactivity are at risk of developing negative coping strategies and higher perceived stress as a consequence of the COVID-19 lockdown. Moreover, parents and children with relatively lower mental well-being prior to the COVID-19 situation experienced lower mental well-being during lockdown. These results provide useful insights for parental support programmes and for determining, which families might need additional support during the pandemic and thereafter, stressing the importance of controlling externally represented stress levels in families and promoting positive coping strategies and resilience.

Publication 4

Interventions to Ameliorate the Psychosocial Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Children — A Systematic Review

Boldt, Katharina, et al., *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, February 2021

There is likely to be a high demand for pragmatic mental health management interventions during and in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic among the young. This systematic review identifies interventions targeting children and their caregivers to reduce psychosocial problems in the course of the COVID-19 pandemic and comparable outbreaks. The study recommends that intervention programmes that increase exercise, education, and socialization include psychosocial outcomes as secondary objectives. At the same time, early financial support programmes should integrate mental health prevention as part of the pandemic response. Furthermore, the effectiveness of these interventions should be evaluated carefully, to allow for evidence-based decisions in future pandemics on how to mitigate the impact of these crises on the mental health status of children.

Publication 5

Alleviating psychological distress and promoting mental well-being among adolescents living with HIV in sub-Saharan Africa, during and after COVID-19

Okumu, Moses, et al., *Global Public Health*, March 2021

COVID-19 social control measures (e.g., physical distancing and lockdowns) can have both immediate (social isolation, loneliness, anxiety, stress) and long-term effects (depression, post-traumatic stress disorder) on individuals' mental health. This may be particularly true of adolescents living with HIV

(ALHIV) and their caregivers – populations already overburdened by intersecting stressors. Addressing the adverse mental health sequelae of COVID-19 among ALHIV requires a multi- dimensional approach that at once (a) economically empowers ALHIV and their households and (b) trains, mentors and supervises community members as lay mental health services providers. Mental health literacy programming can also be implemented to increase mental health knowledge, reduce stigma and improve service use among ALHIV. Schools and HIV care clinics offer ideal environments for increasing mental health literacy and improving access to mental health services.

Publication 6

Stressful events and adolescents' suicidal ideation during the COVID-19 epidemic: A moderated mediation model of depression and parental educational involvement

Cheng, Gang, et. al., *Children and Youth Services Review*, May 2021

Stressful events related to the COVID-19 epidemic are found to be significantly positively associated with adolescents' suicidal ideation, and this association is mediated by depression. Results suggest that interventions to reduce depression during the COVID-19 epidemic can help reduce suicidal ideation in adolescents. Most importantly, parental educational involvement could act as an effective direct buffer against depression and suicidal ideation among adolescents. Programmes supporting parents to provide their children with higher quality parental education support and understanding can help alleviate the adverse effects of the COVID-19 epidemic on adolescents' depression and suicidal ideation.

Publication 7

[Mental health impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on parents in high-risk, low-income communities](#)

Alonzo, Dana, et al., *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, January 2021

This study examines the mental health impact of the pandemic on parents in high-risk, low-income communities drawing on evidence from Guatemala. In high-risk communities, parental stress is a pressing problem that, if unaddressed, has the potential to result in even greater psychological distress and child maltreatment. Training community healthcare providers to assess and address parental stress can lead to increased community capacity and the development of a community- based network to serve as a first line of support for parents and their children. Furthermore, interventions focused on increasing access of parents to informal and formal support networks and providing accurate information on existing services could contribute to better assessment and response to mental health issues, while preventing escalation during times of complex emergencies.

Publication 8

[Mental health and well-being implications of the COVID-19 quarantine for disabled and disadvantaged children and young people: evidence from a cross-cultural study in Zambia and Sierra Leone](#)

Sharpe, Darren, et al., *BMC Psychology*, May 2021

Data from Zambia and Sierra Leone show that disadvantaged and disabled children in the global south have increasing anxieties and fears centered on accessing offline educational resources and income loss in the family effecting food security and their ability to return to education. Mental well- being

scores were found lower in females, children aged 12–14 and participants with two or more disabilities. The study calls for a rationalized and planned mental health support strategy at a community level that unlocks and leverages access to good quality COVID-19 support and educational packages, as addressing the unmet needs of youth with complex health is shown to have clear benefits both for the individual and the community.

Publication 9

[Depression and anxiety symptoms associated with internet gaming disorder before and during the COVID-19 pandemic: A longitudinal study](#)

Teng, Zhaojun, et al., *Journal of Behavioral Addictions*, March 2021

Both videogame use and Internet Gaming Disorder (IGD) severity increased significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially for young adolescents. More specifically, pre-pandemic depressive and anxiety symptoms predicted greater videogame use and IGD severity during the pandemic period. Although playing videogames can be an effective way to cope with the mental health challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, balancing the time spent gaming is paramount. More importantly, specific vulnerable populations such as adolescents should be the focus of targeted mental health preventative initiatives to curb addictive disorders related to technology use, because they appear to present with greater vulnerability in comparison to children.

Publication 10

[Adolescent well-being and learning in times of COVID-19 — A multi-country study of basic psychological need satisfaction, learning behavior, and the mediating roles of positive emotion and intrinsic motivation](#)

Holzer, Julia, et al., *PLos One*, May 2021

This research identifies psychological characteristics that relate to adolescents' well-being in terms of positive emotion and intrinsic learning motivation, and key characteristics of their learning behaviour in a situation of unplanned, involuntary distance education. Data were collected via online questionnaires in eight countries from Europe, Asia, and North America (N = 25,305). Experienced competence and autonomy were consistently found to relate to positive emotion and intrinsic learning motivation, and in turn, active learning behaviour in terms of engagement and persistence. The high proportions of explained variance speak in favour of taking these results into account when designing distance education in times of COVID-19.

Publication 11

[Online art therapy in elementary schools during COVID-19: results from a randomized cluster pilot and feasibility study and impact on mental health](#)

Malboeuf-Hurtubise, Catherine, et al., *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health*, March 2021

Art-based therapies, including mindfulness-based art therapy, have shown promise to increase children's well-being and reduce psychological distress. Results from this pilot and feasibility study show that both an emotion-based directed drawing intervention and a mandala drawing intervention may be beneficial to improve mental health in elementary school children, in the context of the current COVID-19 pandemic, and that the implementation of both interventions online and remotely, through a videoconference platform, is feasible and adequate in school-based settings.


©UNICEF/UNI338676/Mariame Diefaga. In Congo, children are back to the classrooms after months spent at home due to school closures due to COVID-19.

Part 3. Library Update: Facts and Figures

The UNICEF Innocenti Children and COVID-19 Research Library contains a total of 2,134 records to date, among which there are 1,342 journal articles, 161 evidence syntheses and reviews and 423 policy reports and briefs. In particular, 1,064 new records have been added to our research library from January to June 2021.

The library has so far collected 667 studies focusing on the mental health of children, youth and their parents or caregivers during the pandemic. Mental health research is often associated with other topics, such as parenting and parental stress, reduced physical activity and social interaction, school closures, and vulnerable populations, including children in low resource settings and with pre-existing conditions, such as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), depression and anxiety related issues.

Figure: number of records to date by type
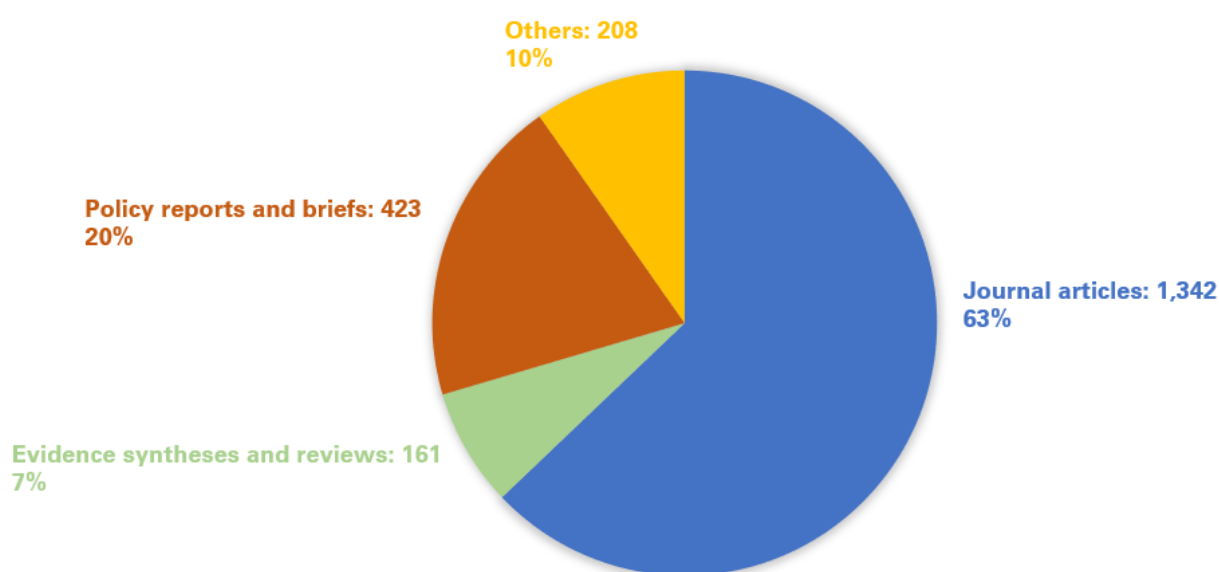
Other trending research in the library looks at the impact of COVID-19 on general health (1,007 records), education (475), child protection (341), social protection, well-being and equity (327).

Only 36 studies provide evidence on the impact of COVID-19 on refugee and migrant children and adolescents. There are only 25 studies on the impact of COVID-19 on children and adolescents with physical disabilities.

In terms of the geographical origins of the research, 105 countries and territories are covered by the existing evidence base. Among all records, only 24% (516) specifically generate evidence from at least one LMIC, with the highest numbers being from China (85), India (55), Bangladesh (30), Indonesia (20), Brazil (20), South Africa (16), Iran (14), Kenya (13), Ethiopia (11), Pakistan (11), and Nigeria (10). More evidence is needed in conflict-affected LMICs, to complement existing studies from Lebanon (3), Yemen (2), Syria (2), Myanmar (2), and Palestine (1).

Remaining studies within the library either have no specific geographic emphasis or focus on HICs only, including studies mostly from the US (212), the UK (81), Italy (66), Canada (47), Spain (33), Australia (27), Japan (26), and Germany (22) and other industrialized countries.

(All numbers are updated as of 30 June 2021.)

Part 4. Editors' Pick: What's Emerging and Trending?

Vaccinations

An increasing amount of research is focusing on vaccinations, in particular on vaccine acceptancy and the perceptions and attitudes of parents towards vaccines, including during pregnancy. Research shows that the "strongest predictors of vaccine acceptance included confidence in vaccine safety or effectiveness, worrying about COVID-19, belief in the importance of vaccines to their own country, compliance to mask guidelines, trust of public health agencies/health science, as well as attitudes towards routine vaccines".

Disability

In the past three months, we have seen an increase in research on the impact of COVID-19 on children with disabilities, including young women and girls. A large amount of research also focuses on parenting for children with developmental disorders such as Autism Spectrum and ADHD, with evidence coming mostly from industrialized countries, but also from the Arab Region. The needs of children with physical and intellectual disabilities and their caregivers during COVID-19 could be potential material for a future systematic review.

Education and Online Learning

Education is consistently a top trending topic including online learning and the use of digital technologies by children during the pandemic. Among the latest evidence, we highlight a UNICEF report on remote learning options for pre-primary students during the pandemic and UNESCO's research on challenges in returning to in-person classes in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). Interesting country focused research includes Save the Children's and UNICEF's joint education needs assessment in Cambodia; a longitudinal analysis of learning loss in Ghana; evidence from Nepal on the role of education in breaking the cycle of migrant child labour during the pandemic; and a case study

from Iran on the impact of increased screen time on the health and sleep patterns of children.

What's still Missing?

For many LMICs, there is still no specific country-focused evidence on children and COVID-19. There is little current evidence on the impact of COVID-19 on refugee and migrant children as well as on children living in conflict and fragile settings, and in situations of heightened vulnerability.

We also found a relatively limited number of studies on the relationship between COVID-19 and wider environmental aspects such as water and sanitation.

Published research engaging children's perspectives during the pandemic is also still limited.

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Veer Panjwani (10) attends online school during COVID-19 lockdown.

Part 5. Other Useful Links

♦ UNICEF Innocenti's <u>Children and COVID-19 research library</u>

♦ <u>COVID-19 and children U</u>NICEF Data Hub

♦ <u>COVID-END</u> COVID-19 Evidence Network to support Decision-making

♦ PubMed <u>LitCovid</u> hub focusing on biomedical/clinical and other health-related research

♦ WHO <u>COVID-19 database</u> focusing on biomedical/clinical and other health-related research

♦ Cochrane <u>COVID Rapid Reviews</u> focusing on biomedical/clinical and other health-related research

♦ <u>Save the Children Resource Centre</u> searchable for COVID-19 practitioner and policy content

♦ <u>Evidence Aid'</u>s COVID-19 collection of summaries of systematic reviews

♦ <u>SSHAP</u> Social Science in Humanitarian Action Platform

♦ <u>Centre for Global Development</u> COVID-19 and violence against women and children tracker

♦ University of Oxford's <u>COVID-19 Government Response Tracker</u>

♦ Johns Hopkins University <u>Coronavirus Resource Centre</u>

♦ Epistemonikos <u>L*OVE</u> platform on COVID-19 focusing on biomedical and health-related research

♦ <u>Campbell Collaboration</u> COVID-19 response database, on public health, economics and social science

♦ EPPI-Centre's <u>living systematic map</u> of COVID-19 evidence

♦ EPPI-Centre's <u>Living map of systematic reviews of social sciences research evidence on COVID-19</u>

♦ <u>The COVID-Minds Network</u> of longitudinal studies to explore the effects of the pandemic on mental health

©UNICEF/UNI341021/Panjwani. Social distancing in seating is ensured at Mamta Diwas(VHND) at Chanota Fadia, Gujarat.

About This Digest:

Each quarterly thematic digest features the latest evidence drawn from UNICEF Innocenti's Children and COVID-19 Research Library on a particular topic of interest. Updated daily, the library is a database collecting high-quality research from around the world on the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19, with the potential to inform programmatic and policy work for children and adolescents.

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