

COVID-19's Lasting Impact on Youth Mental Health and Substance Use Trends

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The unexpected COVID-19 pandemic left many young people with no social activities, virtual school and higher rates of nicotine use and prescription drug misuse.¹

In March 2020, young people expected to return to normalcy after a couple of weeks; however, the rising number of COVID-19 cases extended social protocols that made many of us feel housebound. As a sophomore in high school at the time, I was looking forward to watching my peers and older cousins graduate. I was in the midst of preparing for the spring season of track and field. There were rumors regarding the virus, but it didn't cross my mind to think the next year would bring my whole community to a lockdown. That Thursday afternoon in March, my high school was released and we were informed that we would stay home for just two weeks. This deadline ended up expanding exponentially.

With social distancing put into effect, the news and social media was the only source of communication. "Despite accessing information on the internet, **45% of youth respondents reported face-to-face/in person** as their preferred way to communicate with providers."² This new committed virtual world took away the physical human interaction and connection that helped the void of loneliness in youth. The pandemic made many of us realize how imperative social connection and face-to-face communication really is. In such a historic moment as the COVID-19 pandemic, speaking to a mental health provider would have helped ease our anxiety of what was to come.

"75% of youth respondents agree COVID-19 will have a lasting impact on their generation's mental health."³ The time away from school and quick adaptations that my peers and I had to implement in our lives will forever be ingrained in our minds. Lives were lost, along with traditional memories that come with being a teenager in high school. Prom, graduation and senior activities suddenly came to a halt. These activities had to be sacrificed for the benefit of our health; however, the lack of traditional memories felt like our childhood was being robbed from us. Some students in my community only had work to look forward to. Even so, workplaces became unsafe and a target for the virus to spread.

Essential workers were at the forefront of the pandemic, risking their lives to provide for their families. Many essential workers serving on the frontlines of the pandemic were high school students and recent graduates. Most days during the pandemic, **19% of youth felt isolated, 24% reported being depressed, 25% reported being worried/anxious and 27% reported being lonely.**⁴ Not seeing my closest friends in person for over nine months at times made my high school memories lonely. Especially considering the class of 2022 would be graduating, we felt as if our months apart from each other took away our youth experience. These statistics did not automatically drop as schools and public spaces reopened. Resources, lifting mask mandates in certain areas and social activities helped gradually allow a sense of "normalcy" of life before the pandemic – but it is not certain when that full extent will be – adding even more anxiety. In the past few months, many school events that were canceled prior due to COVID-19 have been allowed to be up and running again, but still include multiple restrictions, reminding us that COVID is still with us.

Young people found that substances like alcohol, tobacco, marijuana and illicit drugs were **4-11% easier** to obtain during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵ Substance use was an outlet for many young people who felt isolated from friends and social support, those who had to battle depression on their own and those in toxic households. It is all too common for alcohol, tobacco and e-cigarettes to be strategically sold in stores in marginalized communities in close proximity to where youth reside and congregate.^{6,7} Being exposed to substances at this early age makes it harder to quit as time progresses, creating greater health effects beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.⁸

Another unaddressed inequity during the COVID-19 pandemic was providing adequate information to families and youth who are English second language learners.⁹ Information regarding school updates, vaccinations and public health policies, were not as widespread in languages other than English. Over 50% of my high school population are English second language learners and the pandemic affected them more than me and those with English as their first language, who had quick information to resources and city-wide updates.

The COVID-19 pandemic also allowed many people to wake up and acknowledge the racial injustices that occur in America. Seeing people of color die due to the virus and at the hands of the police with no weapon in sight left me and many of my peers numb. We were tired of seeing people who look like us die because of a lack of adequate response. Protests and marches were in effect to advocate and bring awareness to injustices, but the lives lost right in front of our screens and in our communities were detrimental to our wellbeing. Although this affected my mental health, it was another reminder that if I wanted to see change for people of color, I would need to initiate and advocate for it in my community, and on a national level as I write this blog. I hope that by giving you all a glimpse, along with statistics, of what it felt to be a teenager during this memorable pandemic will inspire others to use online platforms that are available, to combat substance use and mental health illnesses.

The health and social inequities heightened by the pandemic will continue to increase if we don't spread and utilize virtual and in-person resources provided specifically for youth, including:

- Digital platform/social media tools and content such as the [sample social media posts](#), [social media tip sheet](#) and the [share your why](#) youth voice videos developed by the [Getting Candid: Framing the Conversation Around Youth Substance Use Prevention](#) initiative.
- Peer groups/clubs.
- Social interactive documents presented in school and enrichment programs.
- Anonymous Q&A sessions with health care professionals.
- Panels with individuals with lived experience of substance use and/or mental health challenges, including panels that highlight the experience of people of color, essential workers and/or COVID-19 survivors.

BACKGROUND: [Getting Candid: Framing the Conversation Around Youth Substance Use Prevention](#) addresses the rising concern of youth-substance use during the COVID-19 pandemic through the creation of a comprehensive message guide and toolkit to equip youth-serving providers with enhanced skills for delivering meaningful substance use prevention messaging.

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