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Life Disrupted: The Impact of COVID-19 on Teens

We have heard volumes from government officials, health professionals, teen experts, parents and educators, about the COVID-19 pandemic and concerns about its impact on youth. But until now, teens have not an opportunity to share their voice in ways that can guide adults to take action on their behalf.

This GENYOUth Insights survey, conducted in May 2020 with a nationally representative sample of teens ages 13 to 18 from across the United States, explores **seven dimensions of impact and distress** that are impacting youth right now. It identifies **five factors of resilience** that illustrate why and how many teens are coping. And it points to **six key elements of an effective support response** that can help the majority of youth to cope better, especially those who are hurting the most.

Key Findings

Youth are feeling the impact across many areas of their lives, often deeply and sometimes irretrievably.

Among the seven dimensions of impact the survey measured, results show notable disruptions and a huge impact to youth on:

1. **Special Moments** (62% of youth say they are experiencing a huge impact): Missing milestones such as proms/dances, concerts, graduation.
2. **Summer Plans** (61% are experiencing a huge impact): Having summer travel or camp plans cancelled along with activities outside of school (such as scouting, religious activities, sports, clubs, etc.).
3. **Friendships** (58% experiencing a huge impact): Being able to stay close to friends has become a lot harder without being able to see them in-person at school, or to interact with them via activities and informal gatherings.
4. **Athletic Participation** (54% experiencing a huge impact): Loss of a season (or more) of sports and the ability to maintain conditioning, physical and mental health impacts, losing a key part of one's identity and what the future may hold. For talented athletes, sports can offer an opportunity to change their lives forever, which the pandemic has disrupted.
5. **Freedom and Control** (50% experiencing a huge impact): Teens are no longer living their lives the way they want to. Teens are less able to exert control and make their own choices freely.

6. **Educational Future** (31% experiencing a huge impact): Struggling not to fall behind in school and be ready academically for next year, altered college exploration and application processes, including not doing the extracurriculars to be a competitive applicant.
7. **Familial Well-Being** (27% experiencing a huge impact): Impact on how teens are getting along with family members, having basic needs met and overall health of family members.
 - Familial Well-Being also includes **Financial Security** (with 25% of youth experiencing a huge impact): Financial hardships create food insecurity, inability to pay the mortgage, rent or family expenses.

Disruptions from the pandemic hurt some youth more than others.

Key groups of youth are feeling more severe impacts and greater distress levels. The survey identified certain groups based on age, gender, socioeconomic conditions, race/ethnicity and geographic location who are suffering more and may need greater support to cope. Based on the percent of youth who indicated the pandemic has had a **huge impact** on aspects of their lives, we see these notable segments:

- **Upperclassman** (high school juniors and seniors) are closer to college and more likely to have milestone events cancelled. They reported above-average impacts for Missing Special Moments (74% experiencing a huge impact), Loss of Freedom (58%) and Educational Future (42%).
- **African American youth** indexed higher for impact around Missing Special Moments (69% experiencing a huge impact) and Maintaining Friendships (69%), while **Latinx youth** indexed higher for Lost Summer (67%), Athletic Participation (62%), Educational Future (42%) and Familial Well-Being (38%).
- **Youth living in urban areas** indicated higher-than-average impacts for Educational Future (36% experiencing a huge impact) and Familial Well-Being (33%), while those living in **rural areas** had lower impacts around Lost Summer (53%) and loss of Freedom and Control (41%).
- **Youth living in households whose income is below \$50,000 a year** were more likely to feel impacts related to Familial Well-Being (31% experiencing a huge impact), including an impact on Financial Security (35%). **Youth living in households whose income is below \$35,000 a year** reported an even greater impact on Familial Well-Being, with 34% experiencing a huge impact.
 - **Youth living in households whose income is above \$125,000 a year** are not immune to impacts, despite the financial resources that may be available to their families. This group reported above-average impacts for Ruined Summer (70% experiencing a huge impact), Missing Special Moments (68%) and Maintaining Friendships (65%).
- **Females** reported Missing Special Moments (70% experiencing a huge impact), Lost Summer (66%) and Maintaining Friendships (62%) as particular areas of impact.

Forget striving for a ‘new normal,’ teens have their eye on a new and better future.

Youth are displaying admirable reliance and even optimism as they experience a reset on life. Even while they experience disruptions and distress, teens are able to see a brighter future and positive outcomes. Survey results point to **five factors of resilience** that are helping youth to cope:

1. **They have perspective.** Only 33% of teens see themselves feeling the impact of these disruptions in their lives for a period of several years or more.
2. **Adults are listening to them.** 80% of teens say that adults are listening to them when making decisions that affect them during the pandemic.
3. **They are getting good adult support.** In particular, adults are helping youth cope by providing them with access to technology (reported by 64% of youth), keeping them informed of what is going on (60%), reassuring them that everything will be alright (57%), giving them quality one-on-one time (56%) and establishing new routines (53%).
4. **They are engaging in self-help,** doing and finding things to help keep themselves positive, such as reading, watching movies and listening to music (61%), doing things with their family (57%) and connecting with friends virtually (55%).
5. **They are seeing silver linings** in the situation, such as getting more sleep (45%), experiencing less school pressure (43%) and having a less packed schedule (40%).

In addition, teens have learned important and reaffirming things about themselves and the world.

What youth want from adults to help them cope: six things.

The survey points to six key elements of an effective support response that can help the majority of youth to cope better, especially those who are hurting the most. Youth told us they need:

1. **A sense of what school will look like next year:** needed by 30% of youth who want to reduce the uncertainty in their lives by having a sense of what their new future will look like.
2. **Something to relieve the boredom:** 29% of youth say boredom is a big issue for them – and it’s likely a problem that will become more acute as the school year ends and there is little to nothing on the horizon to replace that activity.
3. **Reliable information about how long the disruptions will last:** needed by 26% of youth. It is easier to hang on and hang in when you know how much longer you need to last.
4. **Confidence the government knows what it is doing:** needed by 22% of youth who say they currently aren’t feeling this. There is nothing more anxiety provoking than a lack of competent leadership during a time of crisis.
5. **Some aspects of normalcy in their lives:** needed by 19% of teens. In a world in which they feel disempowered and without control, the familiar and the routine can feel like islands of sanity in a sea of uncertainty.
6. **A feeling of financial security:** needed by 17% of youth. As the pandemic and its economic impacts continue or even accelerate, giving youth a sense that their family will have their basic needs met is critical for coping.

A supportive response from adults that includes all six of these elements will help the majority of teens to cope with the pandemic and the disruptions it is causing. Two out of three (66%) youth say they need, but are not currently getting, one or more of these six elements. And among youth who report the highest level of worry or sadness related to COVID-19 impacts, nearly three out of four (72%) say they need, but are not currently getting, one or more of these six elements to help them cope better.

The Bottom Line

As time goes on, the pandemic will further disrupt lives, putting youth's coping abilities and resilience to the test even more. Even if adults don't have all the answers, they still can help youth navigate the disruptions and distress caused by the pandemic.

Keep youth informed. Perhaps more than anything else, youth are seeking information about what's happening and what it means in their lives.

Seek and listen to youth input. Ask young people for input on what school might look like in the coming year to help them feel more in control and give them a sense of belonging to the school community.

Problem-solve together. Engage youth in problem-solving and decision-making to help to give them a sense of control.

Help youth cope with uncertainty. Adults can monitor their own level of anxiety, help to build a routine and help give youth a sense of agency.

Keep youth active during the summer. Schools and community-based organizations should help to ensure summer activities are coordinated with schools' summer plans and shifting start dates, and that activities are available to youth who need them most during the summer.

Athletics: Play it forward. When it comes to sports and athletics, youth can use this time to focus on skill-building and training. They can stay in shape off the playing field by working out alone or in small groups, and study the playbook, films or other information to get smarter about their sport.

Address financial concerns. Parents/caregivers can keep teens appropriately informed about their family situation and even engage teens in finding and taking advantage of supports available to families, such as food pantries (visit SAP4Kids.org to find local feeding sites, for example) and various relief programs.

Co-create the future of education. The crisis has sparked dialogue in many sectors, including education, on how to re-imagine the future. Including youth voice and ideas in this dialogue is vital, and it will help our school communities better meet the needs of all.

METHODOLOGY

Online survey conducted May 1 to 6, 2020 with a nationally representative sample of 1,025 middle, junior, and senior high school students, ages 13-18. Results were statistically weighted to ensure a representative group by gender, age, race/ethnicity, and geography. An advisory committee of health, education, nutrition, and youth engagement experts and practitioners provided guidance on the research topic, hypothesis, and online survey content. One student focus group (conducted by phone conference) was held to inform the survey content and questions.



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