Preparing for the Future: The Potential Long-Term Impacts of COVID-19 on Utah’s Child and Youth Mental Health

Despite low incidence of COVID-19 complications, Utah’s children could experience significant long-term effects resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Understanding the potential impact of these issues will be important to ensuring a thriving future for Utah’s children.

The purpose of this fact sheet is to identify emerging areas of concern regarding the long-term impacts of COVID-19 on Utah’s child and youth mental health. These impacts will become clearer with time and as more data and information come available.

1 Child and youth mental health needs have significantly increased over the last year.

While data on the pandemic’s effect on child and youth mental health is still in development, national data suggest a significant increase in anxiety and depression among these populations.

Utah’s child and youth mental health needs were increasing even before the pandemic. Careful evaluation of emerging data can help determine the significance of any short-term increases and potential long-term effects.

Nationally, 48% of surveyed parents say that at least one of their children’s mental health worsened during the pandemic.1

(APA, 2021)

Nationally, there was a 24%–31% increase in mental health–related emergency department visits for children ages 5–17 from 2019 to 2020.2

(Leeb et. al, 2021)

Nationally, higher rates of youth suicide ideation and attempts correspond to times when COVID-19–related stressors were heightened.3

(Hill et. al, 2021)
Reduced access to school-based services and supports, and an increase in social isolation from school closures and stay-at-home directives may have contributed to increasing mental health needs among children during the pandemic.

All Utah children lost access to in-person school in March 2020, and some younger children also lost access to child care due to temporary closures of child care programs. Compounding the loss of educational time is a loss of school-based resources, including school meal programs, physical and mental health services, and access to adult mentors and role models. Nationally, 31.6% of parents reported that school closures had been a major problem for their families. Additional research shows children who received virtual instruction were more likely to experience decreased physical activity, time outside, time with friends, and a worse mental state.

Close to 1 in 8 Utah students were still not receiving any in-person instruction by the end of the 2020–21 school year. While nearly half (45%) were receiving a combination of in-person and another form of learning, this combined approach may have resulted in a disjointed learning environment and reduced access to school-based resources.

COVID-19 could also lead to an increase in adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), which have a long-term impact on a person’s health, mental health, and well-being.

ACEs are traumatic events such as neglect, abuse, household challenges (substance abuse and mental illness), domestic violence, and other adversities that occur during childhood (ages 0–17 years). Some ACEs may have been exacerbated during the pandemic as a result of social isolation, job loss, school closures, and other stressors.

While not specific to adults with children in the home, data show substance use, mental-health concerns, and domestic violence increased in Utah during the pandemic. As a result, there may be a corresponding increase in ACEs for children who live in households that have experienced these events. Research on ACEs shows a relationship between the number of ACEs or stressors a child experiences and diminished health and well-being outcomes both immediately, and later as adults. Addressing ACEs early in a person’s life can help reduce these negative impacts.

In a national survey of parents of K-12 students:

- 35% reported that they were very or extremely concerned about their child’s mental health. Parents who identified as Black and Hispanic were 7 to 9 percentage points more likely to report higher levels of concern than parents who identified as White.
- Parents also reported deterioration in their children’s mental health, with a 5-percentage-point increase in the number of parents reporting their children experienced anxiety, and a 6-percentage-point increase in the number reporting their children experienced depression during the pandemic.
- Many parents reported increases in social withdrawal, self-isolation, lethargy, and irrational fears among their children as well.
Mental-health needs emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic will likely be disproportionately greater for children of low socioeconomic status and communities of color.

These groups were more heavily impacted by the pandemic, amplifying prior economic inequalities. For example:

- A study by the Utah Department of Health found the probability of contracting or being hospitalized with COVID-19 in Utah’s “very high-deprivation areas” (areas characterized by social and economic disadvantage) was three times higher than in very low-deprivation areas. The analysis also found these areas were more likely to have higher rates of food insecurity, a lack of health insurance, crowded housing, residents who identify as non-White, and individuals working in manual, essential, and public-facing sectors.

- As of the end of March 2021, 49.4% of Utah adults with incomes less than $34,000 have experienced a loss of employment income since March 2020, compared with 28% of adults with incomes over $100,000.

- During the height of the pandemic, 3.9% of Utah adults with low incomes reported feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge nearly every day, compared with 13.0% of adults with incomes over $100,000.

- Nationally, adults who identify as non-Hispanic Black and Hispanic or Latino are more likely to report symptoms of anxiety and/or depressive disorder than adults who identify as non-Hispanic White (48% and 46% vs. 41%, respectively).

Tracking data and information will help Utah address these issues over time.

The data points presented above are just a snapshot of the potential impact of the pandemic on children and youth in Utah and across the U.S. Areas of concern may be reinforced, and new areas of concern may emerge as more data and information become available. Multiple teams within the State of Utah are internally tracking data points, like those presented above, as part of their COVID-19 response. By monitoring these and other data points over time, Utah will be better prepared to respond with appropriate policies and actions.

“By not responding to the needs of our children that were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, we increase the risk for long-term negative outcomes. Remember... children are one-third of our community, but 100% of our future.”

Dr. Ed Clark
Endnotes


