

The Unintended Educational and Social Consequences of SARS-CoV-2

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Introduction

The SARS-CoV-2 Coronavirus has ravaged the modern world and the death count is increasing. Every news outlet is talking about the infection rate. However, in the struggle to secure our safety and endure drastic changes to our society, we often forget about the unexpected consequences social change has on our lives. Due to social changes wrought by COVID-19, the state of our mental health, family life, relationships, work, substance abuse, and education have likewise undergone drastic change. In this article, I will examine the unintended consequences of social, familial, and educational change caused by the COVID-19 virus.

Educational Change and Student Mental Health

Though there was significant coverage over medicalDuring these troubling times, the effects of SARS-CoV-2 on social life, such as education moving online, have caused widespread declines in mental health. For example, many students look forward to going back to school after a long summer vacation. In-person education offers socially beneficial aspects like seeing friends again and making new ones. However, as SARS-CoV-2 spread intensely around the world, governments responded by shutting down schools, which removed the social benefits of in-person education. Children, adolescents, and adults could not return to their social lives through their education, and neither would they see their friends in isolation. Likewise, college students felt robbed of their college experiences.

In the National Public Radio (NPR) article “Child Psychiatrists warn that the Pandemic May Be Driving Up Kids’ Suicide Risk,” Rhitu Chatterjee reports on the impacts of the pandemic on the mental health of children. Chatterjee relates the story of Anthony Orr, a high school senior in Nevada and when the Nevada government declared a lockdown. Anthony was looking forward to his senior year high school activities, but could no longer participate due to the lockdown. Though an academically successful student, he decided not to go to college because it was virtual and he did not want to lose the college experience like his senior year experience because of SARS-CoV-2. His family stated that he seemed happy and got a job, but committed suicide in late August, 2020. NPR stated that the school district was troubled, as Orr was part of 19 different student suicides in the school district since shutdowns in March. [1] While this is just one school district, one can imagine that the entire country must struggle with isolation and declining mental health. In fact, Dr.

Susan Duffy, a doctor of pediatrics at Brown University stated, “Across the country, we’re hearing that there are increased numbers of serious suicidal attempts and suicidal deaths.” This is trending across the United States as hospitals are seeing 10–11-year old children with declining mental health. [1]

In the same article, Marisol Cruz Romero, a psychologist and coordinator of the hospital response team at the UCSF Benioff Children’s Hospital Oakland, in California, also reports on increasing suicide attempts by children. She says that the hospital has seen double the responses than last year, before the coronavirus engulfed the United States. (citation) Likewise, an children’s hospital in Indianapolis saw children and teen hospitalization from suicide attempts go up 250%. (citation) This has always an upwards statistic, but the virus has put oil on the flame. The impacts of virtual learning—having students go without seeing other individuals—on mental health suggest a deeply troubling trend. Without accessible stress-relievers for adolescents in a stressful time, such as the comforts and benefits of social life, mental decline in this generation will not only decline, but the trauma may persist as the pandemic abates.

Homeschooling

With education moving online because of SARS-Cov-2, another unintended effect impacts students subject to this technological change—increasing rates of failing grades. In the article “Schools confront ‘Off the rails’ numbers of failing grades” from The Associated press, Carolyn Thompson reports falling grade point averages for students across the United States. Thompson states that the number of students failing has risen approximately twice to three times last year’s average, and cites changes due to distance learning as the reason for the dramatic increase of failing grades. Notably, English courses are most impacted by the change. (citation) Erik Jespersen, the principal of Oregon’s McNary High School, says, “It was completely off the rails from what is normal for us, and that was obviously very alarming, where 38% of grades in late October were failing, compared with 8% in normal times.” (citation) Thompson also states that students in online courses sometimes skip assignments, especially with after school hours and tutoring. Moreover, internet access is spotty for some families, meaning a student could miss an entire day’s work without stable internet access to complete and submit assignments. For example, in New Mexico 40% of students failed one class and in Houston 42% of students received an F in the first

grading period. Consequently, teachers have been trying to find solutions by extending the time to complete assignments and reaching out more frequently to their students.

Regardless, the troubling circumstances with online education have led to the increase of home schooling around the United States, as parents want better alternatives to the forms of education available to their children during the pandemic. Parents worry that the quality of their children's education has decreased with the distance learning experiences implemented by schools. Distance learning is especially difficult for children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) or other psychological disorders. For example, as Kan Mission reports in the article "Interest in homeschooling has 'exploded' amid pandemic,"

There were about 2.5 million homeschool students last year in grades K-12 in the U.S., making up about 3 percent to 4 percent of school-age children, according to the National Home Educators Research Institute. Brian Ray, the group's president, is anticipating that their numbers will increase by at least 10 percent. (citation)

The impacts of distance learning and homeschooling on this generation of students may not be understood until years after the pandemic, such as how their experiences may impact colleges acceptance rates, or call for new ways to configure intelligence.

Adult Stress, Domestic Violence, and Divorce

Additionally, parents losing their jobs and unstable job security due to the pandemic is another potential source of stress and trauma that impacts the mental health of children and teens. This compounds stress due to social isolation with loss of income in the family sphere. Lost jobs and income likewise destabilize family life, even as issues with personal space arise with education and jobs going virtual. This may cause trauma for everyone in the household, especially for children and teens with declining mental health due to virtual education. In fact, a study conducted by the New York State Psychiatric Institute called "Google Searches for Suicide and Suicide risk factors in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic" suggests an increasing adult suicide risk. They compared data from google searches between March 3rd, 2019 to February 29, 2020 and March 1 to April 18, 2020. The analysis states:

Google search behavior appears to have dramatically changed following the emergence of COVID-19 in the United States, particularly for queries related to financial difficulty ("I lost my job," 226%; "laid off," 1164%; "unemployment," 1238%; "furlough," 5717%) and the Disaster Distress Helpline ("disaster distress helpline + disaster distress hotline," 3021%). Searches related to suicide are lower than expected, while searches related to general mental health and help-seeking are moderately elevated. . . . However, searches for queries representative of financial difficulty have also been shown to have a positive association with suicide rates . . . and the scale at which search volume for these queries increased in the present study is remarkable. (citation)

These results thus reveal a correlation between financial difficult, the prevalence of mental decline, and increasing suicide rates during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Moreover, isolation and quarantine practices can compound adult stress during the pandemic, resulting in increasing rates of domestic violence. In the research article "Sheltering in place and domestic violence: Evidence from calls for service during COVID-19," Emily Leslie and Riley Wilson find a 7.5% increase in domestic violence calls during the first 12 weeks of implementing SARS-CoV-2 precautions, calls notably increasing most during the first 5 weeks at 10%. Many of the callers called for shelter. This evidence suggests a direct correlation between sheltering in place and instances of domestic violence. (citation) ABC Chicago reported nearly 30,000 domestic abuse cases in 2020 alone. (citation) Individuals could not flee their own home because of isolation imposed by precautions against SARS-CoV-2.

This increase in instances of domestic violence could be due to the mental separation between work and home. An association which developed in the industrial revolution, stress is associated with the workplace, whereas the arrival home is mentally associated with destressing. With the spread of the virus, the normal separations we find between work and home collide, potentially causing confusion and frustration. The collision and conflict between these associations may largely contribute to the aggression and dysfunction of established family dynamics. The failure to destress at home and elsewhere may displace aggression and

violence into domestic abuse. Consequently, the lockdown procedures implemented due to the pandemic have caused more household tensions, arguments, and contributed to the declining mental health of children and adults alike.

Likewise, this isolation period increases the rates of divorce and couple counseling. In "Pandemic Drives Couples to Divorce or to Seek Help," Christiane Lehmann states, "In the U.S., sales of online self-help divorce agreements rose by 34% this spring compared to last year, and family lawyers surveyed in April and July reported a 25% to 35% increase in requests to start divorce proceedings compared to the same time in 2019." (citation) She states that her firm is seeing a substantial increase in clients as the "craziness of this pandemic is leading people to more insanity." (citation) Oftentimes, individuals in couples have aspects of their lives which they like to do alone. However, with potential outlets for independence closing, couples may encounter more conflict. Researcher Maya Luetke, a PhD candidate at the school of Public health at Indiana University, Bloomington, surveyed couples to determine how rates of conflict between couples have changed during the pandemic. The study reported a 34% increase in conflict since the beginning of the pandemic. Luetke claims that conflict between couples has increased because everyone is stuck in their households, struggling to negotiate new responsibilities, concerned about their health in regards to contracting the virus, and getting tired of each other. Luetke advises that "it's important for [couples] to find ways to balance connectedness and intimacy in the partnership with support for personal autonomy and independence and to have some things set aside for each partner." (citation) In this manner, the pandemic exacerbates issues within the populus.

Substance Abuse

People suffering from stress may also look for relief through substance use. Individuals may use substance as an attempt to escape reality, but this behavior comes at a troubling price. With the increasing rates of anxiety and social withdrawal due to the pandemic, rates of substance abuse are rising. The aftermath of substance abuse during the COVID-19 pandemic could become another pandemic unto itself. The centers of Disease Control and Prevention states that

. . . as of June 2020, 13% of Americans reported starting or increasing substance use as a way of coping with stress or emotions related to COVID-19. Overdoses have also spiked since the onset of the pandemic. A reporting system called ODMP shows that

the early months of the pandemic brought an 18% increase nationwide in overdoses compared with those same months in 2019. (citation)

With the number of substance dependence disorders and deaths due to overdoses increasing, this trend does not appear like it will abate soon. The opioid epidemic has not stopped since the COVID-19 virus affected the United States, and the country has witnessed an increase in opioid-related deaths. The circumstances of the pandemic have led people to abuse not only opioids, but other depressants like alcohol as well. In an article from the American Psychological Association titled "Drinking, Coping, and COVID-19," Charlotte Huff states:

Potential stressors that can foster more reliance on alcohol are nearly ubiquitous these days—from financial insecurity to juggling work and childcare from home to protests and racial unrest. Alcohol misuse also boosts the chance of contracting the virus, as it can impair the body's immune system. (citation)

Moreover, Laura Kwako, a clinical psychologist and a health scientist administrator at the National Institute for Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), states: "Prior studies conducted in the wake of traumatic events, such as hurricanes and other natural disasters, indicate that some people are likely to escalate their drinking, possibly as a coping mechanism related to stress." (citation) Kwako finds that drinking has increased 22% in February and 27% from April. Moreover, the United States will not see the entire effects of the pandemic on drinking behaviors until a couple of years after the pandemic. This research concludes that individuals without outlets for entertainment and other activities will use substances to enhance their experiences in isolation. (citation) This concept corroborates a study called the Rat Park experiment. In the experiment, a rat is put in a cage with two water bottles. One is filled with an opioid and one with water. If a stimulus is placed in the cage, the rat will drink the normal water and survive. If there is no stimulus, the rat will drink the water with the opioid until its death. Unfortunately, this experiment holds water during the pandemic.

Conclusion

Many of the unintended social, educational, and familial consequences of SARS-CoV-2 reveal their impacts in the contemporary moment. However, most of the unintended educational and social consequences will continue to impact the younger generation of students affected by the pandemic, as

the effect will reverberate throughout the coming years. Furthermore, the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic will call for ways to improve educational and social conditions for students and families during this time, and merit further study on heavily impacted and vulnerable members of society.

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