

Examining the Effects of COVID-19 on Young Families:

A Comprehensive Review

By

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to study how global crises can play a role in affecting young families. A comprehensive literature review of peer-reviewed journals was conducted to investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on parenting teens. Existing evidence was gathered, examined, and analyzed to gain a better understanding of the circumstances young families have faced since early 2020. Results uncovered three themes, including impacts on ‘parents’, ‘children’, and ‘community supports’. The overall benefits and hardships experienced by adolescent parents throughout the pandemic were then synthesized to create an in-depth review with suggestions for future research.

The Effects of Covid-19 on Resources for Young Families

Parenting is a demanding task, regardless of age. For young parents, the responsibility of raising a child coincides with the overwhelming challenges of maturation. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in the United States rates of teen pregnancy have steadily declined since 1991. In 2019, there were 16.7 pregnancies per 1,000 females ages 15 to 19 years old- down 4% from the previous year (CDC, 2021). Organizations, such as teen parent programs, have shown success by creating a safe and nurturing environment for families to receive education and access to vital community resources. In addition, school-based childcare settings have the ability to offer high-quality supervision and education for young children. These programs ensure nutritious meals and routine face-to-face interactions are provided for students enrolled. Following the onset of the 2019 Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, a majority of public schools and businesses temporarily ceased operations due to safety precautions related to the virus. For an undetermined amount of time, many adolescent parents were left scrambling to provide for their children while maintaining proper care and education for themselves.

The purpose of this comprehensive literature review is to examine how young families, specifically those engaging in school or community-based support, have adapted to the recent changes brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. This study will explore the immense benefits and challenges that parents in high school have experienced over the last two years. It will also dig deeper into understanding the impacts of social distancing on young children and how it has affected their development. Finally, this paper will examine how families' access to community support resources, such as the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women Infants and Children (WIC), have been affected by the virus. It is my hope the information gathered through

this research will be useful in helping young families be connected to resources that provide quality services for them and their children during unprecedented times.

Methodology

A literature review was conducted to examine the effects of COVID-19 on resources for young families. Articles were accumulated through the completion of a database search. The databases utilized in this process were: Academic Search Premier (EBSCO), JSTOR, Sage Premier, Taylor & Francis, Wiley, WOU Library OnDemand, WOU Interlibrary Loan, and Google Scholar. Initial search terms included, '*Teen pregnancy and COVID-19*', '*Adolescent parents and COVID-19*', '*Young families and COVID-19*', '*Social services and COVID-19*', and '*School closures and COVID-19*'. A secondary search was performed using the previous terms, substituting the word '*COVID-19*', for '*Pandemic*'. Overall, 38 separate scholarly articles were gathered. The selection process required abstracts to meet the following criteria; peer-reviewed journals, relevant to the context of parenting during uncertain times, and published since 2020.

Afterward, the collected pieces of literature were reviewed by the author to establish the value of contribution. In the end, 34 articles were selected to be included in this write-up on the basis that they met acknowledged criteria and added significance to the paper. Once the selection was complete, chosen articles were re-read and categorized based on their contents. Three main groups were created, which would ultimately lead to the three established themes; impacts on parents, impacts on children, and impacts on the community support system.

Review of Literature

Impacts on Parents

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought on many challenges for people raising children. Teen parents experience a higher rate of stress, economic instability, and lack of access to quality medical care compared to adult parents (Sadeghi et al., 2021). Additionally, young mothers have taken on a disproportionate amount of social and economic consequences as a result of school and workplace closures (Burki, 2020; Kotlar, 2021; Mangla, 2022). These increased burdens can be connected to negative health outcomes for both the parent and child. Initial research is underway to understand how these adverse conditions have affected young families. A study by Smiley et al. (2021), conducted outreach with 325 young families enrolled in community-based support to gauge the condition of parental mental health. The research states, “On a scale of 0 to 10, participants’ mean retrospective rating of their stress level prior to COVID-19 was 3.9, rising to 7.3 during COVID-19,” (Smiley et al. 2021, p. 561). This shows that stress levels rapidly increased.

There are several causes attributed to the increase in stress levels for teen parents. The fear associated with contracting, or a family member contracting, COVID-19 was a main concern for many young parents. One mother, who was interviewed for a study on how COVID-19 affected adolescent parents, reported how increased stress early on in the pandemic was related to fear of leaving the house to buy baby supplies, like diapers and formula (Astle et al., 2021). Not only was fear connected to the virus itself, but to supply chain shortages which have left grocery store shelves bare and parents scrambling to find crucial items. Furthermore, long-term social distancing- a crucial component of stopping the spread of COVID-19, has impacted both parents and their children. Mangla (2021), examined how isolation has had

adverse effects on the mental and physical health of young girls in India. It was concluded that extended periods spent indoors coupled with physical inactivity and social isolation have negatively influenced overall well-being (Mangla, 2021).

Another hardship noted by parents throughout the pandemic was the loss of employment. Over 90% of young working parents surveyed by Smiley et al. (2021), mentioned their job had been affected by COVID-19. Without a reliable source of income, nearly a quarter of respondents worried about losing their family's housing (Smiley et al., 2021). As mentioned previously, women have experienced a higher rate of adversity compared to their male counterparts. An article by Burki (2020), reports that mothers were 1.5 times more likely than fathers to have lost or quit their jobs after the onset of the pandemic. This claim is also supported by research conducted during similar deadly virus outbreaks. The author states, "During the 2013-16 Ebola outbreak, they [women] endured higher levels of unemployment than men and subsequently took considerably longer for them to re-enter the workforce" (Burki, 2020, p. 904). Young moms are at a disproportionately high risk to fall behind financially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, teen mothers are not the only ones who have been impacted over the last two years. Fathers, especially young Hispanic dads, have also seen an increase in responsibility attributed to parenting during the pandemic. One theme, discussed in Recto & Lesser (2020), points out how young fathers are more likely to work in frontline jobs (i.e., food services, grocery stores, cleaning & sanitation) to provide for their families- which put them at an even greater risk of contracting the virus. Like mothers, teen dads also experienced a greater sense of stress related to COVID-19. Fathers who were not in a relationship with the mother of their child

also faced difficulties regularly seeing their child in person due to stay-at-home mandates and physical distancing orders (Recto & Lesser, 2020).

In early 2020, when schools began closing their doors in precaution against COVID-19 most child care centers followed suit for a period of time. With the exception of a few staying open to provide for the children of essential workers, teenage parents were left responsible to care for their children while simultaneously making the switch to distance learning themselves. An article from the journal of *Fiscal Studies*, wrote, “Parents are coping with huge additional demands on their time to care for and educate their children from home, and poorer families have been receiving less support from schools in doing so” (Blundell et al., 2020, p. 293). The added commitment of caring for a child while completing graduation requirements from home can be almost too much for even the strongest individuals to handle.

At an already increased risk of teen pregnancy, suicide, and dropping out of high school, First Nations children and young people are a population who have experienced many consequences accompanying the pandemic (Raman et al. 2020). The *Indigenous Adolescent Girls’ Empowerment Network*, released a statement on supporting Native American girls during the COVID-19 pandemic. Pollen et al., (2021) found the following:

Many AI/AN [American Indian/Alaska Native] girls live in unstable situations and have limited access to broadband and cell phone service, which threatens school progress as well as reducing tele-options for counseling, health services, mentor contact, peer bonding, and social support, (p. 3).

Connecting young families to resources, including technology, during the pandemic was vital in ensuring they have the tools to succeed.

While evidence suggests that many teen parents encountered a rise in negative symptoms correlated with COVID-19, that was not the case for all families. One study, published in the *Journal of Adolescent Research*, examined the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lives of adolescent parents. Through mixed method analysis, researchers interviewed 406 Latinx pregnant and parenting teens and their families. Strengthened relationships between families was the number one theme associated with the positive effects of the pandemic. Several teen parents mentioned how school closures increased the amount of time they were able to spend with loved ones who were in the same household as them. Furthermore, parents expressed the relationship with their children was also intensified (Astle et al., 2021). These findings are powerful in reminding us that not every family was negatively affected by the repercussions linked with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Impacts on Children

An article titled, “Advocating for Children During the COVID-19 School Closures,” from *Pediatrics Perspectives*, investigated the impact of school-wide closures which have affected critical health and education services for nearly 60-million children in the United States (Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020). Prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, around 60% of children were enrolled in some variation of childcare service. Types of childcare included preschool, childcare center, home daycare, extended family member care, and babysitter/nanny (Calarco et al., 2020). The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) National School Breakfast Program, School Lunch Program, and Child and Adult Care Food Programs serve nearly 35-million children each day. Researchers found children who rely on school and government

nutrition programs were one of the most vulnerable populations during the pandemic (Dunn et al., 2020).

Initial legislation has provided flexibility in the way schools distribute meals to students who are in need. An innovative response has been made by the USDA through the implementation of waivers intended to replace the cost burden school meals relieve (Kinsey et al., 2020). Additionally, some school districts have created bus route drop-offs or socially distanced pickups for families who are able to be present during allotted meal distribution times. However, this still leaves a portion of students who do not have access to regular hot meals outside of their school programs. Recommendations for the future include continuing to adapt and implement food assistance programs for families with young children or who are pregnant or nursing (Pérez-Escamilla et al., 2020).

Preschools and childcare centers that resumed operations or stayed open during the early months of the pandemic had to create and implement new protocols to protect the health and safety of their students. Due to inconsistencies in leadership and mandates, many states varied in the level of precautions they put in place. An article by Blum & Dobrotić (2020), which outlined potential reopening policies, noted the following:

- (1) public-health focused, where only older pupils are allowed back to class, who can keep ‘social’-distancing rules while ECEC services remain closed;
- (2) education-focused, where transition years are allowed back to class (e.g. older students taking school-leaving exams, younger children in last pre-school/primary school year);
- (3) social -inequality focused, where ‘disadvantaged’ children gain earlier access (e.g. from families social-assistance receivers, or asylum seekers);

(4) work-family focused, where ECE and (lower classes of) primary schools re-opened first (i.e. before secondary schools), or certain parent-based criteria are developed allowing earlier access (e.g. employed single parents, dual-earners). (p. S554).

Each of these options favors a specific focus group, often leaving the children of adolescent parents out of consideration.

A study by the *International Journal of Early Childhood* examined how three different countries, including the United States, responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. For one preschool in California, this included: strict disinfection protocol, social distancing, and limited class sizes of 10 children per classroom (Samuelsson et al., 2020). By reducing school and daycare class sizes, some programs had to switch to only offering half-day formats in order to have time to sanitize and accommodate multiple sessions of students. This has put pressure on parents who work to be able to pick/drop off their children during routine work hours, along with teachers who are overworked and understaffed. Other preschools and early learning centers decided to take the remote learning approach, sending drop-off activity bags and filming interactive videos for families to interact with at home.

Young children have faced complications transitioning to virtual learning. A lack of self-regulation was one reason cited in research by Dong et al. (2020) about the difficulties preschool-aged children have faced during COVID-19. Nearly half of parents in one study reported their child(ren)'s academics and learning were a factor in their stress (Brown et al., 2020). Additionally, 24% of parents interviewed in a second study claimed increased behavior problems in their children (Smiley et al., 2021). Necessary distancing requirements have also made a severe impact on families' ability to socialize with other children outside of the home.

With stressed parents spending more time isolated with their kids, the possibility of child maltreatment increases (Douglas et al., 2020; Nayak et al., 2021). However, an investigation by Brown et al. (2020), discovered that cumulative stressors from COVID-19 did not play a significant role in increasing the risk of child abuse potential.

The ability to access health and preventative care for young children and adolescents has also declined as a result of shutdowns from the pandemic. Vaccinations, including those against flu and rubella, have decreased significantly across the world (Shumba et al., 2020; Barron et al., 2022). On top of that, thousands of children with disabilities have had their interventions suspended (Raman et al., 2020; Mangla, 2021). According to research conducted by interviewing a group of families, without necessary intervention outreach services, parents who have children with disabilities worry that their child is at a disproportionate risk for negative long-term health impacts. Parents also shared their concerns that young children, who were not yet school-aged, were frequently ignored when requesting intervention services over the last two years (Nayak et al., 2021).

Impacts on Community Support

Comprehensive community support has also been found to be a protective factor for young families experiencing hardships connected to COVID-19 (Astle et al., 2021). A community can be described as the collective group of people you rely on when times are tough. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen how different aspects of the community have come together to assist those in need. Some purposeful examples of communities include; extended-family, social support & health services, and emergency funding for local, statewide, and national programs directed to provide relief from the pandemic. Currently, the literature

demonstrates that high-risk populations, such as young families, face greater inequity long-term when their access to a community support system is denied.

Access to community mental health care and reproductive services is one area that has experienced a decline due to the chaos that accompanied an unexpected global health catastrophe. According to Shumba et al., (2020), during the pandemic, maternal prenatal visits were often delayed or skipped altogether out of fear of contracting the virus at a doctor's appointment. Consequently, leading to more negative health outcomes and increased infant and maternal mortality rates. Data from Smiley et al. (2021), showed that 22.7% of their sample of adolescent parents had changed their method of birth control during the COVID-19 pandemic. And 18.2% of those same parents reported having their access to birth control changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is important to note, that a study by Ehmer et al., (2021) saw an uptake in the number of mental health visits young mothers attended over a 6-month period, once platforms were transitioned to virtual technology.

One study, which examined the effects of COVID-19 on adolescent pregnancy in the Appalachians, suggested the rate of teenage pregnancy did not significantly increase in the region following statewide shutdowns (Paudel et al., 2022). Yet, a study of rural sub-Saharan African areas showed that lack of access to sexual and reproductive healthcare during emergencies leads to an increased rate of adolescent pregnancies (Zulaika et al., 2022). Over the last few years, impacted countries have responded to these claims by significantly increasing sexual health education outreach in a youth-friendly manner (Thorne et al., 2020). Unfortunately, progress from this project has been capped due to the global closures and regression is imminent-unless there is an effective transition to combined virtual and in-person health services.

Social services have played a crucial role in protecting the needs of vulnerable populations throughout COVID-19 (Redondo-Sama et al., 2020). Nayak et al. (2021), identified a theme of ‘community mobilization’ when questioning parents about what they considered to be resilience factors during a crisis. They said, “Diverse agencies in both communities came together to provide support and coordination for families with young children” (Nayak et al., 2021, p. 8). When families were in need of essentials, like food and access to safe housing, government and non-profit organizations worked in tandem to create a network of assistance. One of the first responses from agencies that provide in-person support to families was to decipher how to transition care to a platform that was considered the safest option for participants and providers.

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women Infants and Children (WIC) was one organization that quickly implemented alternatives to in-person services delivery following the onset of the pandemic. WIC provides critical nutrition support for low-income pregnant women, mothers, and infants/children until the age of 5 years old. The evidence prior to the pandemic showed that structural barriers, including lack of transportation or ability to take time off of work, were the leading causes behind why WIC-eligible women chose not to participate in the program (Vasan et al., 2021; Ventura, 2021). Socially distant services were provided through a variety of methods, including via telephone calls, text messages, online education, email, and video appointments. In addition, extended benefits waivers allowed some states to reduce the need for frequent contact by offering four months’ worth of benefits at a time (Whaley & Anderson, 2021).

Research by Ventura (2021), surveyed 185 mothers to describe WIC participants’ experiences with remote service delivery. High levels of satisfaction were reported with phone

appointments (96%), interactive texting (96%), online education (94%), email (93%), and video appointments (80%). Responses to feelings about the continuation of virtual services were varied. They found that 25% of mothers preferred remote services instead of face-to-face meetings. However, this left three-quarters of respondents who wished for in-person appointments to resume in some capacity. This study suggests that WIC participants were overall satisfied with the social distancing changes made to service delivery of the program, but only for the necessary amount of time.

Home visiting is a crucial component of comprehensive care for young families which has also been impacted by the pandemic. Partnerships between families and home visitors have demonstrated positive outcomes in several areas related to maternal and child health. Overall, studies have shown that virtual home visiting can be successful in connecting families to vital support (Fogler et al., 2020; Marshall et al., 2020; Ehmer et al., 2021). In response to COVID-19, the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) Initiative made the switch to virtual platforms. Accessing the \$15 million dollars of grant money allocated to support telehealth providers through the CARES Act, MIECHV rapidly adapted services to fit the needs of enrolled families. Marshall et al. (2020) researched how MIECHV transitioned to teleservices. The most common challenge they found were barriers (e.g., lack of video, sufficient internet service, or knowledge of technology) which limited families' access to socially distanced interactions with home visitors.

Finally, one of the most important aspects of the community mentioned throughout various points of literature was a connection to family. Multigenerational households are a cultural norm for a number of young parents, especially those from Latinx and Asian American families (Astle et al., 2021). For this reason, teen parents who reside within a multi-family home

are more likely to look to them for morale. As stated in a study by Astle et al. (2021), “Consistent with research on adults, adolescent parents have reported that their main sources of social support are their co-parenting partners, typically their own mothers and their child’s biological parent” (Astle et al., 2021, p. 3). Moreover, young parents reached out to family members more often as a way to stay connected during times of isolation (Recto & Lesser, 2020; Astle et al., 2021).

For young dads, family support was beneficial both physically and emotionally. Recto & Lesser (2020), state, “Young fathers often need guidance and instruction from their support network to help them transition to their parenting role” (Recto & Lesser, 2020, p. 371). It is important to note that teen dads face unique challenges, including feeling alienated or left out of healthcare settings. Restrictions and limitations to healthcare facility visitor policies have increased this burden for young dads. Seeking peer relationships with other fathers who are in a similar position is one way adolescent parents have relied on their support community throughout the entirety of the pandemic.

Conclusion

The purpose of this comprehensive review was to examine the literature pertaining to how COVID-19 has impacted the lives of adolescent parents and their families. Peer-reviewed articles, published since the start of the pandemic, were analyzed and synthesized to create a detailed picture of what young families have experienced during this time. Throughout the process, three specific themes were uncovered: 1) Impacts on parents 2) Impacts on children and 3) Impacts on community supports. The collected literature supported the notion that caretakers,

especially young parents, experienced an increase in tribulation directly linked to the COVID-19 pandemic.

These stressful events lead to higher rates of mental and physical health concerns for teen mothers and fathers. Both young children and adolescent parents faced hardships associated with making the switch to distanced learning. Finally, the pandemic took a toll on the community and its embedded support systems. Local, statewide, and national organizations had to act quickly in order to supply necessary aid to families in dire situations. Agencies, which relied on in-person communication, also had to re-imagine their systems to provide high-level care in a socially distanced format. While the majority of testimonials from young parents focused on the negative impacts of the pandemic, several researchers alluded to resilience factors (like spending more time with family) as positive outcomes.

There have been several scholarly articles written on the topic of COVID-19 since the start of the pandemic. However, only six of the 34 articles reviewed for this paper were specifically analyzed from the perspective of adolescent parents. Additionally, only one article prioritized the viewpoint of the young father. Limitations to the aforementioned studies also include restrictive data collection procedures (due to social distancing protocol) and the relatively short period of time that has passed from the start of the COVID-19 outbreak until now. Because of this reason, the implementation of further research is recommended to fully understand the plethora of unique experiences teen parents from diverse backgrounds have. Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic has transformed the global dynamic of normalcy. For adolescent parents and their families, the significance of these changes will leave a lasting impression.

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