Children's Hospital of Philadelphia PolicyLab

Addressing the Global Crisis of Child and Adolescent Mental Health

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Over the course of the past year of the global COVID-19 pandemic, growing attention has focused on the mental health and well-being of children and adolescents. The study by Racine and colleagues1 calls attention to a critical need that must be addressed to respond to the global mental health effects of COVID-19 on the world's children and adolescents. This meta-analysis consisting of 29 studies totaling 80?879 youth globally found prevalence estimates of clinically significant depression and anxiety symptoms to be significantly higher than the estimates reported prior to the onset of COVID-19 and subsequent lockdowns. Of added concern, throughout the past year, the authors found that prevalence rates for depression and anxiety increased as the pandemic progressed.1 Notably, differences were found in rates of depression and anxiety symptoms for older adolescents and girls, with both groups expressing higher rates compared with younger children and boys, respectively. Likely, these findings may not be surprising in the context of the extraordinary changes faced by youth including social isolation, loss of peer interactions, and other lost supports no longer accessible through schools and communities. Racine and colleagues1 highlight concerning escalations in the mental health needs of children and adolescents, including important sex differences. This meta-analysis suggests that globally, children and adolescents may experience increased rates of psychological distress requiring clinical attention and emphasize the importance of continued ongoing longitudinal research to fully understand whether clinically significant symptoms are sustained, exacerbated, or resolved over time. This level of inquiry will ensure the ability to understand and respond to future mental health needs of children when these crises arise.

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