

Life Disrupted: The Impact of COVID on Teens - One Year Later

Resilient but far from unscathed: this follow-up GENYOUTH Insights survey reveals the longer-term impacts of the pandemic on today's youth.

Crises such as a pandemic have two types of impact — those that are immediate and those that manifest over time as a result of chronic stress, ongoing uncertainty and the limitations of ameliorative measures.

In our initial GENYOUTH Insights survey, **Life Disrupted: The Impact of COVID-19 on Teens** (released in spring 2020), we examined the immediate disappointments among youth associated with a school year cut short and missed milestones, the sadness of social relationships disrupted and the fears associated with a crisis that was yet to fully reveal the depth of its impact and longevity. This follow-up survey focuses on the effects among youth of living under pandemic conditions for a year.

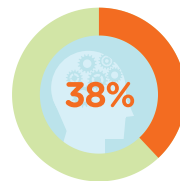
Key Findings

YOUNG PEOPLE ARE STRUGGLING WITH EMOTIONAL AND SOCIAL WELL-BEING THE MOST

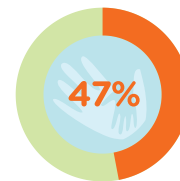
Although most middle and high school students claim to be coping generally well overall — a testament to the resilience of the young — they are far from unaffected. We found that all aspects of our young people's well-being have been impacted to some degree by the pandemic. Ironically, a virus-centered crisis affected physical well-being the least, with **74%** of respondents saying their physical health is good.

ONE YEAR AFTER COVID

83% of middle and high school students surveyed claimed to be coping well, however they are far from unaffected.



of students report their **INTELLECTUAL WELL-BEING** (sharp mind, good concentration, effective learning) is less than good.



of students report their **EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING** (positive outlook and manageable stress levels) is less than good.



of students report their **SOCIAL WELL-BEING** (strong relationships, get along with others, feel loved and supported) is less than good.

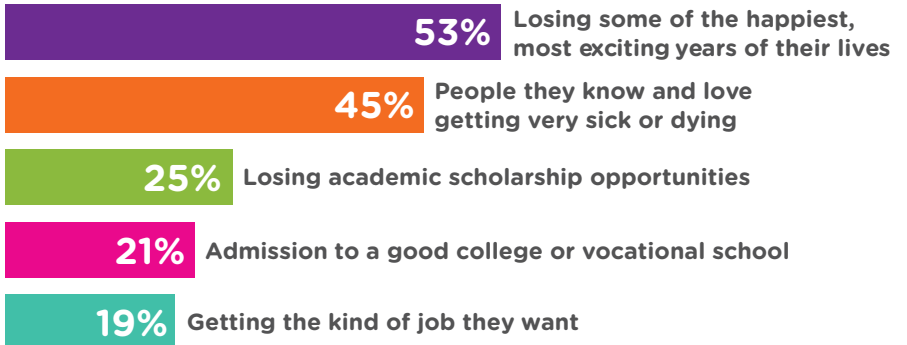
"I have learned how much life can change in an instant, how much I needed and miss being around my friends, how important actually being in school is. I'm missing out on the best experiences of my high school years. Not knowing when this is going to end causes anxiety. Not knowing how this is going to affect my future and plans in life is hard."

—11th Grade Student, Connecticut

Today's students have a strong sense of responsibility for their health and wellness. We know because we ask them. GENYOUTH Insights elevates youth voice through original, timely research on topics that matter to students and to healthy, high-achieving schools.

This GENYOUTH **INSIGHTS** survey was produced in counsel with David Bersoff, PhD, of EDELMAN DATA & INTELLIGENCE

WHAT HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS ARE MOST WORRIED ABOUT



"I'm just surprised how much the kids can actually name [what they are going through]. When we do our physical, mental, emotional, social wellness wheel, many kids recognize how their well-being has declined so much."

—Educator, Middel School, Illinois

YOUTH ARE LOSING SOME OF THE HAPPIEST AND MOST EXCITING YEARS OF THEIR LIVES

A year into the pandemic, we are starting to see concerns among youth about the longer-term consequences of two school years that have been stunted by lockdowns and remote learning. Young people have missed out on activities that connect them to others and allow them to explore and develop their interests, and they have lost their freedom at a stage in life when parents become less important than friends.

And they are worried. High schoolers in particular are voicing concerns about their future as they lament what they have already missed out on.

WHAT ARE THE SIGNALS OF THE STRUGGLE?

While youth tell us they are coping, they are still feeling the impacts of the pandemic physically, socially and emotionally. **Areas where they are struggling the most:**

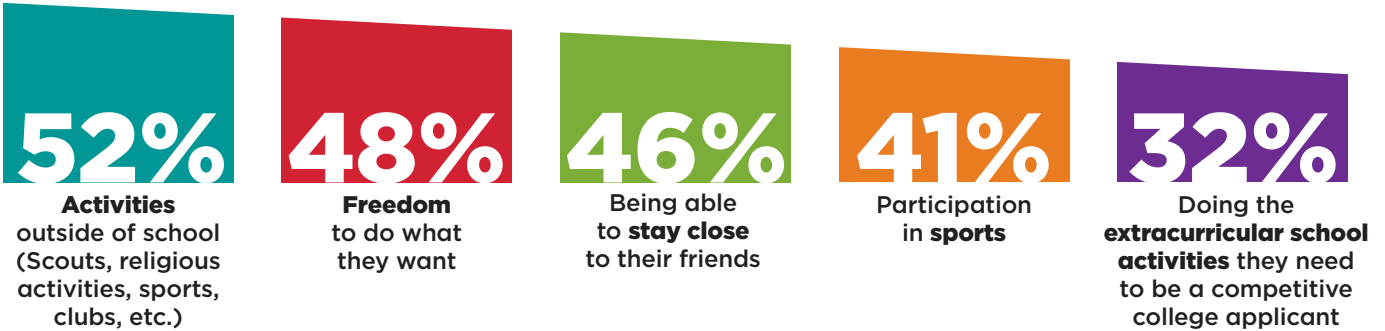


"I miss going to school and being around my friends more than I thought I would. I miss being in the classroom learning, instead of remote learning."

—8th Grade Student, Virginia

THE BIGGEST IMPACTS ON YOUNG PEOPLE'S LIVES

For youth, the pandemic abruptly ended some of the most important experiences that build social, emotional and physical health. Youth experienced a huge negative impact from the pandemic in five key areas. Percentage of youth experiencing a "huge" negative impact in...



FINANCIAL HARDSHIP AND ACADEMIC READINESS FOR NEXT YEAR AND BEYOND LOOM AS THE MOST WORRISOME LONG-TERM IMPACTS

Although less prevalent than the pandemic's impact on daily activities and social relationships, financial hardship and compromised academic readiness have the potential to lead to greater suffering and more worrisome long-term consequences than missed proms, athletic events and graduations.

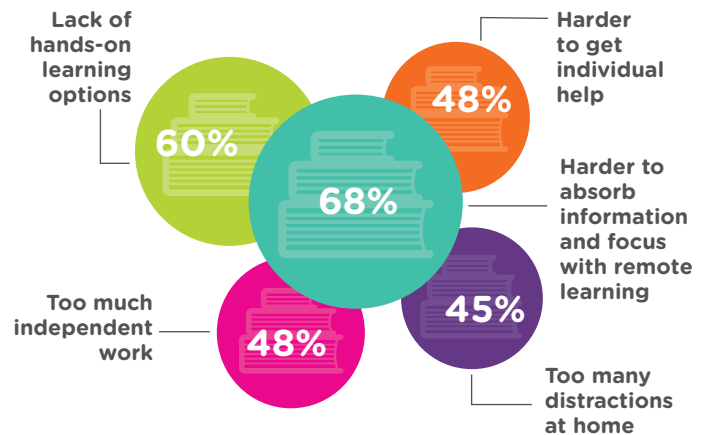
■ Almost a **quarter of youth** are worried about their family suffering long-term financial hardship. That statistic goes up to 3 in 10 for Black youth in households making \$50K or less a year.

■ **30%** of youth say that the pandemic has had a "huge" impact on their academic readiness for next year. The number increases to **73%** if you include those who say there has been "some" impact on their academic readiness for the following school year.

See box at right for the top five learning challenges that youth are facing due to the disrupted educational environment.

BIGGEST LEARNING BARRIERS

30% of students said the pandemic has had a "huge impact" on their academic readiness. And more than half of students (**53%**) said they are not learning or keeping up with their classes as well as they were before the pandemic; among this group, barriers include the following:

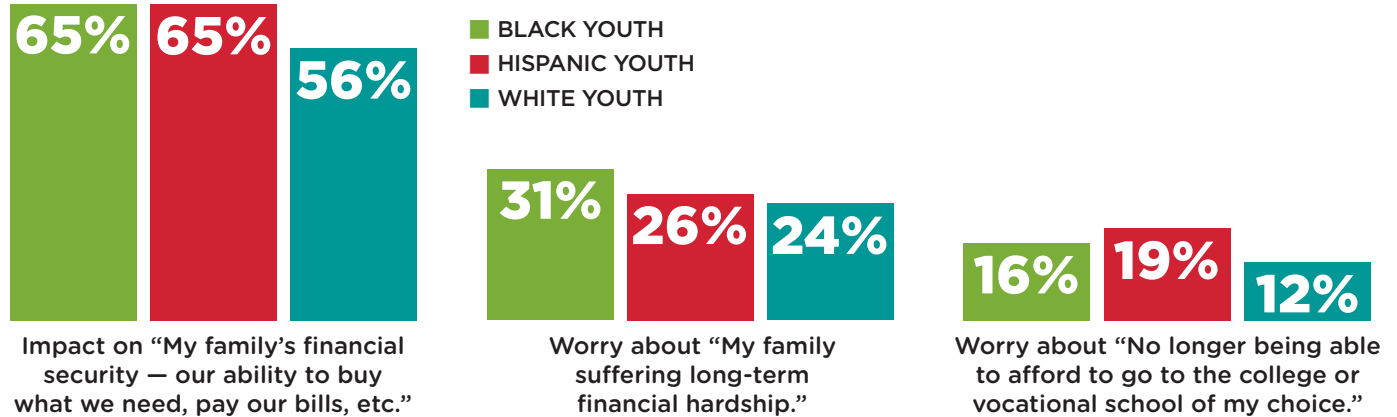


"It's not just the at-risk students who are struggling. It's also the students who should be achieving more but are underachieving. When do you hold students accountable and when do you raise the expectations? We're not really challenging them."

—Educator, High School, Massachusetts

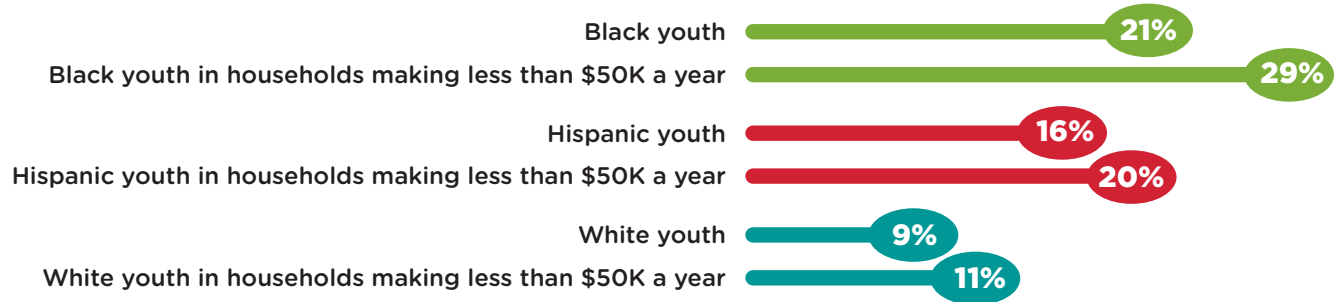
INEQUITABLE IMPACT ON YOUTH

INTENSIFYING FINANCIAL WORRIES Financial worries were a top concern across all youth in GENYOUTH’s spring 2020 COVID survey. In this follow-up survey, Black and Hispanic youth are feeling more worried about family finances than their White peers, who may be re-bounding faster.



INCREASED IMPORTANCE OF SCHOOL MEALS Many students experienced an increased need/reliance on school meals during the 2021-21 school year — and that need was greatest among Black and Hispanic students. When layering in household income, the increased need for school meals is even greater.

Percentage of students whose reliance on school meals increased during the 2020-21 school year:



THE SCHOOL IS NOT CURRENTLY SEEN AS AN ENTIRELY SAFE ENVIRONMENT BY STUDENTS

The obvious fix would seem to be to get students back into the classroom as soon as possible. But, as with all things COVID related, it is not that simple. Currently, **47%** of the young people we surveyed are attending at least some in-person classes. Of those who do attend in person, only **42%** feel fully safe from COVID while in school. Sending students into an environment where they, and perhaps their teachers, do not feel safe may simply be trading one set of learning challenges for another.

“People are saying they need to get us back into schools to save the students’ mental health, but the real problem is that we’ve been forced to change how we learn so many times in the past 12 months that it is damaging to continue to do so. I want to be back in school as much as the next person, but I just hope that the decisions being made are for the well-being of the students.”

—11th Grade Student, Indiana

FEELING OUT OF CONTROL... BUT HEARD

Unsurprisingly, considering the disruptions from the pandemic, most youth (**56%**) don't feel in control over their lives right now. But importantly, nearly all youth feel heard by the trusted adults in their lives.

In GENYOUth's spring 2020 **pandemic research**, 80% of teens said that adults were listening to them when making decisions that affect youth during the pandemic. In this second wave of research, **91%** of teens say they feel heard and that their thoughts are considered by parents, and **73%** of teens say they feel heard by their teachers and school officials. This is good news, given that an important way for adults to support and guide youth is by listening to them. Rather than making flawed assumptions about what youth are feeling, adults can support teens in articulating what helps them cope the most, what they are not getting that they need and where they are feeling the most distress. Using these insights, adults can find additional, and more effective, ways to help strengthen teens' resilience, especially for those suffering the most.

WHO'S LISTENING TO YOUTH?



91% of youth agree that **parents/guardians** are "considering my thoughts and feelings when making decisions regarding the pandemic that affect me."

73% of youth feel heard by **teachers and school officials** when they "make decisions regarding the pandemic that affect me."

What Needs to Be Done

This research points to six areas where programmatic school-based interventions, engagement by nonprofits and the business sector, and government support will be necessary to address the pandemic's impact on our young people. **Specifically, we need:**

- 1 Continued financial assistance and food support** through schools, especially for the 25% to 30% of young people whose families are facing long-term financial hardship.
- 2 Mental health support** for students as they return to the school setting with compromised emotional and social well-being. This includes mental health support for teachers, many of whom have experienced their own traumas and hardships, and therefore will not be at their best or strongest just when their students will be needing them the most.

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- 3 Tutoring and academic catch-up programs** to help students who have fallen behind and require extra individual help to be better prepared for next year.
- 4 Extra coaching and athletic catch-up programs** to help student athletes who may have missed two seasons of their sport and as a result are out of shape with rusty skills.
- 5 Protocols that ensure safety**, but that still allow for social interaction. These include changes to the building and school procedures and other necessary reassurances to make returning students and teachers feel fully safe in the classroom, school common areas and on the trip to and from school.
- 6 Remote learning infrastructure development** and enhancement both to support any continuation of remote learning through the end of this pandemic and to maintain students' academic performance and readiness should something happen in the future that necessitates closing schools.

METHODOLOGY

Online survey conducted February 11 to 24, 2021, with a sample of 1,035 middle, junior and senior high school students ages 13-18 from across the U.S. Results were statistically weighted to ensure a representative group by gender, age and geography. Two focus groups with educators (conducted by video conference) were held to help interpret survey findings and report content.

Highlights from this survey were presented during GENYOUth's Healthier School Communities Webinar hosted on March 24, 2021.

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GENYOUth empowers students to create a healthier future for themselves and their peers by convening a network of private and public partners to raise funds for youth wellness initiatives that bolster healthy, high-achieving students, schools, and communities. We believe that all students are change-agents who deserve the opportunity identify and lead innovative solutions that positively impact nutrition, physical activity, and success. www.genyouthnow.org

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