



Having to stay still

Youth and young adults in the Covid-19 crisis

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The American Voices Project (AVP) relies on immersive interviews to deliver a comprehensive portrait of life across the country. The interview protocol blends qualitative, survey, administrative, and experimental approaches to collecting data on such topics as family, living situations, community, health, emotional well-being, living costs, and income. The AVP is a nationally representative sample of hundreds of communities in the United States. Within each of these sites, a representative sample of addresses is selected. In March 2020, recruitment and interviewing began to be carried out remotely (instead of face-to-face), and questions were added on the pandemic, health and health care, race and systemic racism, employment and earnings, schooling and childcare, and safety net usage (including new stimulus programs).

The “Monitoring the Crisis” series—which is co-sponsored by the Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality, the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, and the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston—uses AVP interviews conducted during recent months to provide timely reports on what’s happening throughout the country as the pandemic and recession play out. To protect respondents’ anonymity, all quotations presented in this series are altered slightly by changing inconsequential details. To learn more about the American Voices Project and its methodology, please visit inequality.stanford.edu/avp/methodology.

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Interviewer: What's Covid-19 been like for your family members?

Interviewee: I'd say just adjusting, having to stay still, having to spend more time with family, having to face more problems that you ... didn't have to face.

Adolescence is a stage of development brimming with promise and expectation. It is a time of transition, a time when profound biological, neurological, psychosocial, and emotional changes occur. By definition, adolescence entails movement.

In this report, we focus on the experience of adolescence during the spring and summer of 2020, when Covid-19 interrupted lives and imposed restrictions on our communities. We will describe a period of stillness, when the relentless activity of everyday life paused. That stillness imposed costs on our youth, for whom 2020 represents lost opportunities and shattered dreams. But stillness also came with benefits for some, who found respite from their everyday stresses and fears.

Adolescence spans the period between childhood and independent adulthood, and is generally understood to begin with the onset of puberty and to end in the mid-20s. In this report, we define the period of adolescence to include youth and young adults aged between 10 and 25, in line with the National Academies' recent report on adolescent development.¹ We focus on the experiences of three groups: young adolescents (ages 10–13), middle adolescents (ages 14–17), and young adults (ages 18–25).² Because developmental changes are associated with different stages of adolescence, we would expect youth and young adults' experiences of the pandemic to differ across the three groups. For young adolescents dealing with the onset of puberty, the stillness of the spring and summer was felt differently than for older adolescents and young adults in the midst of the transition to independent adulthood.

Much of what we have learned about how Americans have experienced the pandemic has prioritized the perspectives of adults. Here, our aim is to give voice to the experiences of youth and young adults. These young people have borne many of the costs of the pandemic and shelter-in-place orders, but we have heard little about their lives outside of the difficulties for parents and students imposed

KEY FINDINGS

Most discussion of how Americans have experienced the pandemic has prioritized the concerns and perspectives of adults.

When the viewpoints of youth and young adults are instead prioritized, a singular vision of the pandemic as a *time of stillness* emerges.

This stillness often took the form of reductions in physical activity and social interaction, which in turn brought about feelings of boredom, low energy, restlessness, sadness, and depression.

The main cause of this enforced stillness was a worry about safety. In many cases, parents had to leave the home for essential activities, but they sought to protect their children by “locking them down.”

Although this stillness was often felt as loss, some young people experienced it as a gain that allowed them to spend more time with their family, learn new skills, and enjoy time away from the pressures of everyday life.

An important unresolved question is whether the pandemic will be experienced as tolerable stress or as toxic stress with harmful long-term consequences for youth and young adults. It will be important to pay special attention to the needs of adolescents from disadvantaged socioeconomic groups when determining the appropriate policy response.

by online learning.³ We will show that these months of stillness have altered many aspects of the everyday lives of young people, with possible long-reaching effects.

In the following sections, we describe how the pandemic was felt by youth and young adults. We focus on the losses and gains of this period of stillness, as described by families and young people themselves. We begin by outlining what the science of adolescent development might lead us to expect about the effects of the pandemic on youth and young adults, before describing our data and strategy of analysis.

The science of adolescent development

Adolescence is a dynamic period of exploration and discovery, encompassing learning about self, interests, and relationships, as well as developing skills needed for adulthood. Individual paths of development are shaped by complex interactions between a developing adolescent and their experiences in context. One's course of development is never linear, but in general, access to resources and supports promotes thriving while adversity can inhibit it.⁴ In particular, *toxic stress*, or stress exposure resulting in prolonged activation of the body's stress response system, can take a physiological and psychological toll on the body and lead to negative outcomes across multiple domains (e.g., education, employment, and health).⁵

An important question is whether the pandemic will be experienced as toxic stress, which is likely to enact long-term harm, or *tolerable stress*—a severe disruption that is buffered by environmental supports. The biological changes of adolescence—including puberty and brain development—can enhance sensitivity to social environments and stress, but at the same time, the developmental plasticity afforded by this period creates windows of opportunity for ameliorating past harms. Recent data are ambiguous with respect to the immediate effects of the pandemic on young people. Young adults have reported increases in symptoms of

depression, anxiety, substance use, and suicidal ideation during the pandemic.⁶ But research has also shown that there was a decline in the percentage of teenagers who reported being depressed or unhappy during the pandemic relative to prior years.⁷

Although we have little direct evidence on the effects of a severe and widely experienced crisis, the science of adolescent development would predict that the impacts of the pandemic may be ameliorated or exacerbated by the specific environments in which adolescents and young adults are embedded. The science also makes clear that existing societal inequities will very likely compromise development for some more than others. While vulnerability to mental health concerns generally increases during adolescence, inequities related to health care access, along with disparities in income and wealth, can worsen mental health outcomes for groups experiencing marginalization.⁸ Similarly, the impacts of social isolation, school closures, housing instability, and loss of employment may be felt most deeply by adolescents in communities lacking access to adequate social and economic resources to offset such losses.⁹ While adolescence is a period marked by promise, opportunity, and resilience, such promise may be thwarted by inequitable access to resources.

Data and analysis strategy

The American Voices Project (AVP) interviews members of households aged 18 and older. Given that our interest is in the lives of adolescents and young adults aged 10–25, we have a two-pronged sampling strategy. First, we select all parents of young people aged 10–25.¹⁰ These parents, who may have more than one child in the given age range, are interviewed about their own and their family members' lives. Second, we select all young adults aged 18–25 who were directly interviewed about their own lives.

The AVP does not interview those under the age of 18. We must instead rely on parent reports

to establish how younger adolescents have coped during the pandemic. A limitation of this approach is that parents may not always be fully aware of their children’s experiences and emotional states. Nevertheless, a clear advantage of the intensive interview technique is that parents were encouraged (and prompted) to speak about many different aspects of their children’s lives. Our analysis is not limited, then, to those topics that parents might have identified as the most important. Further, parents were encouraged to speak in detail about their own lives as well as their children’s lives, which reduces the danger that a parent might minimize discussion of their child’s experiences to focus on their own.

The interviews in our sample were conducted between May 1 and August 31, 2020, although our sample is skewed toward the earlier part of this period, with the modal interview taking place in May. The final sample includes 67 interviews, reporting on the experiences of 111 individuals aged 10–25. As we show in table 1, the majority of the sample identified as Hispanic or non-Hispanic Black, with just under 30 percent identifying as non-Hispanic white. The sample was skewed toward low- and middle-income youth, that is, those originating in households with incomes of \$85,000 or below. Approximately equal numbers of male and female young people were included. Although the sample is diverse with respect to socioeconomic characteristics, the relatively small sample size means that it is more difficult to identify differences across groups.

Once the sample was established, we identified the different aspects of adolescent development that our analysis needed to address. Broadly, our interest was in the effects of the pandemic on the (1) physical, (2) cognitive, and (3) psychosocial-emotional development of adolescents, and we designed a coding frame to capture these themes. With respect to physical development, we focused on pandemic effects on exercise, diet, alcohol/drug consumption, and health/illness. Our cognitive development codes captured changes in learning, focus, and memory, alongside changes in access to

education. Finally, our psychosocial and emotional codes captured changes to emotional states or mental health, relationships with family, friends, and others, and behaviors related to the major milestones in adolescent lives.

After the interview transcripts had been coded, we identified the main developmental themes emerging in each of the age groups. In the discussion below, we describe only those themes that were common to a set of transcripts.¹¹ Throughout the analysis, we were attuned to systematic variation across socioeconomic groups. Of special interest were two possible types of variation: first, variation in *experiences* of the pandemic across groups, and second, variation in *responses* to similar pandemic experiences. We find much similarity in experiences of the pandemic across socioeconomic groups, but some variation in responses to

Table 1. Distribution of age and socioeconomic characteristics.

Age (n=111)	
Young adolescent (10–13)	21%
Middle adolescent (14–17)	27%
Young adult (18–25)	52%
Gender (n=104)	
Female	51%
Male	49%
Household income (n=77)	
Low (<\$30,000)	48%
Middle (\$30,000–\$85,000)	42%
High (>\$85,000)	10%
Race/ethnicity (n=103)	
Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish (of any race)	42%
Non-Hispanic white	27%
Non-Hispanic Black	21%
Non-Hispanic other race	10%

Note: Total n=111 young people. Percentage distribution shown for those with non-missing data. All adolescents were included in all analyses, even where data were missing on one or more socioeconomic variables.

those experiences. Again, given the relatively small sample size, we cannot rule out the possibility that we are simply unable to detect systematic variation in experiences of the pandemic. That we are able to detect some socioeconomic variation in responses to pandemic experiences, however, provides reassurance that substantial variation in experiences of the pandemic would also have been identified had it been present.

Stillness as loss

The interviews with families and young adults describe a wide variety of experiences of the pandemic, and a wide variety of responses to the changes that the pandemic ushered in. But it is hard to avoid the conclusion that, for most young people, the pandemic has been a time marked by loss. In this section, we describe the losses, and the reactions to those losses by young people and their families.

A loss of movement

My son, he's had a couple of what I called meltdowns, or just crying. He can't stop crying and I'm like, "What's going on, bud?" And he's like, "I just—" He's like, "I don't know." He said, "I don't know." He's like, "I just want to get out of the house." You know, it's kinda like he's having a panic attack. Like, he's suffocating.

Parent of young adolescent

The shelter-in-place orders imposed in the early months of the pandemic brought everyday life to a halt. In the vast majority of the country, these orders dramatically reduced population movement, and restricted close contacts among members of different households.¹² For young people, this sudden loss of movement was deeply felt.

In their descriptions of pre-pandemic life, the interviews painted a picture of young lives bursting with physical activity. Younger adolescents were caught up in basketball, football, dance, swim-

ming, and volleyball, while older adolescents and young adults filled their spare time with biking, walking, and working out. When shelter-in-place started, these activities stopped. Young people no longer participated in team sports, and while some adolescents continued to go outside, many simply stayed inside the home. Although there are longstanding concerns about the amount of exercise undertaken by young people, the decline in physical activity due to the pandemic is clearly unprecedented in recent times.

The overwhelming emotional responses among young people were boredom, low energy, and restlessness.

It has not been well appreciated to this point that shelter-in-place orders imposed a special burden on children and younger adolescents. Although the orders of course applied to everyone, people were allowed out of the home to carry out essential work, grocery shopping, and other necessary activities. But the adults were the ones to leave. Parents routinely describe leaving their children at home while carrying out these activities, so that the children would remain safe from the virus. Prioritizing the safety of children is a sentiment that continues to shape younger adolescents' lives in the post-shelter-in-place period. For example, one parent of adolescent children recounted at the end of May:

I've literally kept my kids in the house since February or something. They stay in the house.

My husband and I are the only ones who leave.

Parent of young and middle adolescents

As the initial wave of Covid-19 passed, parents remained cautious, and the overwhelming sentiment—even as late as July—was that it was safer for families if children’s time outside the household was limited.

Young adults living with their parents were also urged to stay home and limit contact with those who were not family members. On the whole, it appears that older adolescents and young adults living with other family members were at home for much of the time. When they did not stay at home, tensions could arise:

Well...he does go out. He goes out a lot...he goes out a whole lot and he interacts with people and I've been trying to tell him, "Don't bring the corona here with us."

Parent of young adult

Young adults living independently were of course largely free from parent-child conflicts around social distancing, but it is clear from the interviews that there was nevertheless a high degree of compliance with social distancing requirements, and that many young adults felt uncomfortable when leaving the home. Indeed, the interviews revealed a great deal of fear of the outside world:

Well, we got to stay home, so we could protect ourselves, because you don't know when this virus is going to attack your body...you hear the news that like certain people die at home because they just went to a restaurant and they got the virus... you can't do nothing but just take care of your body.

Young adult

Independent young adults were more likely to be working as essential workers than those living with parents, and these individuals expressed some discomfort about the risks that they were exposed to by virtue of their employment. In general, whether living alone or with parents, the majority of young adults in our sample were concerned about the virus, and were taking steps to keep themselves and others safe.

The loss of movement experienced during shelter-in-place orders and the months following had consequences for physical health. Increased food consumption and decreased physical activity had predictable consequences, and many were worried about weight gain and a loss of fitness. One young adult described the experience as follows:

A couple of times my friends would be like, "We want to go on a hike, let's go." ...That just... picture somebody melted into a couch, their muscles extremely weak and fatigued and just like, "No, thank you."

Young adult

There is also evidence in the interview data that the pandemic worsened existing health problems for adolescents, both because poor diet triggered existing health vulnerabilities such as diabetes, and because medical treatment was postponed.

Although the physical health consequences of the loss of activity were difficult for some, the mental health consequences were also substantial. The overwhelming emotional responses among young people were boredom, low energy, and restlessness. For example, in the following extracts, two young adults summarize their responses to shelter-in-place:

Honestly, I haven't really been feeling well. I don't know if, because of quarantine. I just been feeling like insomniac, like I don't really sleep properly anymore and I been feeling kind of restless too, but when I do get up it's like my energy is kind of like blah.

Young adult

I've been keeping to myself ever since the coronavirus...the energy here feels a little bit doomed, like everything with coronavirus happened and it does affect me a little bit and I don't like it, I can't even... It might sound weird, but I kind of drive off other people's energy. So, if their energy is low, so is mine; I don't feel like doing much at all.

Young adult

Parents of younger adolescents describe similar reactions to the loss of movement and external stimuli experienced during the pandemic. One parent of two younger adolescents explained:

It is a lot more difficult for the kids because kids get really bored. Adults understand you know why we're stuck in here but kids don't, they don't want to hear it.

Parent of young and middle adolescents

These responses to the shelter-in-place orders and subsequent social distancing were common to young people in all three of our age groups.

Loss of movement was a significant challenge for our youth. The shelter-in-place orders set the stage for this loss of movement, but anxieties about protecting young people from the virus seem to have further exaggerated the extent to which they were confined to the home. The immediate physical and mental effects of this loss of movement appear to have been considerable.

A loss of independence and interaction

I think the only thing that we struggled with that, they didn't have no separation from one another at all during the day, and that was what was the harder for them to get used to was just having to deal with one another all day, every day in a small area.

Parent of young and middle adolescents

Loss of movement had consequences for the level and type of social interaction that adolescents and young adults could enjoy. Shelter-in-place orders and social distancing created both a loss of independence for adolescents *and* a loss of social interaction, as young people who had been in the throes of gaining independence from their families and developing their own identities and relationships were pulled away from their independent lives and back into the family full-time.

The loss of independence was particularly strongly felt among young adults who were not yet

financially independent. Some even referenced the regression to earlier stages of adolescent development in expressing their dismay:

It just felt weird, because I felt like I had already reached the stage of adulthood where I was learning to be independent and then because of Covid, I have basically had to rely on my mom the full time and it just sucks because even right now that I'm looking to move out...I can't afford to move out. I would have used April, May and June to save up money to move out, but I don't have that ability anymore.

Young adult

Parents of young adults who had been forced home had similar concerns:

I'm kinda disappointed that she is having to move back home, that she can't get on with growing up, you know, I know she is not the only one.

Parent of young adult

Young adults who were already living away from family—who were often working or had children of their own—were more likely to retain their independence than those still reliant on their parents for support. However, as the first quote highlights, many of the young adults who were on the path to independence before the pandemic found their aspirations thwarted because of furloughs, job losses, family illness, and the move to online education.

Among younger adolescents, the pandemic heightened tensions in some families. Adolescents who had been exploring their independence faced new and tighter restrictions on their behavior after the pandemic began. The science of adolescent development emphasizes the importance of the early teenage years for “learning” independence and testing boundaries, so it is not surprising that tensions would be high in the context of the strong behavioral restrictions imposed during the pandemic. For example, one parent interviewed

in June, who had kept her children at home since early March, recounted:

My son...this was his first year, you know, in high school and he got his first girlfriend, and every weekend, it was a movie or you know, out to eat, and I completely cut everything out. So, it was hard on them. They didn't like me for, you know, not letting them go anywhere, but I tell them, "Look, you don't understand. It's not just you. We got a whole house here."

Parent of middle adolescent

Some parents even saw value in the pandemic enabling a higher degree of control over their children, particularly when those children had been testing boundaries before the pandemic hit:

Corona has been pretty good in the sense that we had to all stay home, and [she] used to running the streets, and running around, and being free to do whatever and I never let my kids do that. So, corona was really good for her in the transition of staying here, because she wasn't allowed to leave...And I could blame it on corona, I didn't have to be the bad guy.

Step-parent of middle adolescent

Although many parents describe tensions with younger adolescents, most of the reactions of adolescents to the loss of independence and interaction appear to have been internally directed. Boredom, sadness, and depression were most commonly reported as responses to this loss.

A loss of markers of progress

Your whole life you are like, "Oh, you should go to college," like since kindergarten they are like, "What you want to do? You should go to college, go graduate." And like...you just have this vision of you walking the stage for school and they are just stomped on, it's gone. They ripped the carpet out from right under your leg, and you're not going to get that.

Young adult

The pandemic hit as the school year was drawing to a close. Across the country, students completed their final year of college and high school education online, graduation ceremonies were cancelled, and a generation lost the opportunity to attend a high-school prom.

The loss of graduation was universally recognized, remarked upon by *all* of those who had been due to experience this celebration.

Milestones such as graduation play an important role in adolescent lives; these milestones mark the path to independent adulthood, and celebrate growth and achievement. Among older adolescents and young adults, the loss of graduation ceremonies was frequently mentioned as one of the costs of the pandemic. Reactions to this loss ranged from disappointment that graduation ceremonies and parties did not happen, to resentment and anger that the culmination of many years of hard work could not be commemorated. Notably, many parents also described their own disappointment at the loss of their child's graduation ceremony:

With this virus, I'm missing out the experience of seeing my son graduate. I want to see my son walk the stage. That's something every parent look forward to with their kids when they get to that situation of graduation. We don't want to see them think that they wasted twelve years and they're not going to walk the stage.

Parent of young adult

This sadness and concern was expressed in particularly strong terms by BIPOC and low-income parents. Indeed, the loss of graduation was one of the few events for which we saw variation with respect to socioeconomic background in the interview data. Although all families regretted the loss of graduation, those in more disadvantaged socioeconomic circumstances appeared to regret it the most. Both parents and young people described with gratitude some of the alternatives to traditional graduation ceremonies that were put into place, such as online ceremonies, and drive-thru graduation celebrations. But the strong sense of disappointment in losing this important milestone was unmistakable.

The loss of graduation was universally recognized, remarked upon by *all* of those who had been due to experience this celebration. Milestones such as prom were less frequently mentioned, but where they were, the narratives were especially poignant. For example, a high school senior who had lost the opportunity to attend her final high-school prom recounted:

All my four years—or freshman, sophomore, and junior year—the one thing I looked forward to the most was prom. And in fact, that I think I should experience. I was like ready for it. I had my prom dress ready. I even had a date which I didn't expect.

Young adult

This is a family for which we have interview data for more than one household member, and the prom's cancellation is also described by the respondent's older sister:

So, she was really excited at first. She had already bought her dress, her heels, everything. So, the fact that she couldn't do it anymore, she just got really sad.

Older sister of young adult

Other families described the loss of special trips and family celebrations. Although these losses were never portrayed as devastating to young people or families, it is clear that the pandemic was responsible for many similar small sadnesses.

Young adults who were not enrolled in school and living independently also lost milestones. For these young people, the loss of special occasions was less prominent than the losses that arose as a consequence of the economic crisis. Before the pandemic, young people living independently had been expecting promotions, saving for their first houses, and anticipating buying their first car. These important markers of independent adulthood were taken away. A young woman summarizes the experience as follows:

Before the pandemic happened, I had things lined up to go well for me. As in I had finally saved up enough to get a brand-new car with work and how much I was getting paid, with my promotion. I was going to have enough to keep up a good car payment. And then you know, also save up like, at the same time, save up for down payment for a house. So, those are things that I was just kind of looking forward to and kind of had finally been at the point to do those things and then the pandemic happened and it's like now it's stay home, now you don't get paid what you were getting paid.

Young adult

For the most part, these young adults understood their losses to be temporary, but they were uncertain about how long it would now take for them to achieve their milestones.

It is easy to discount the importance of adolescent milestones, particularly in the context of a national health and economic crisis. But for those affected, the loss of milestones may be a long-lasting source of regret and sadness.

Stillness as gain

There can be no doubt that the Covid-19 pandemic has imposed great costs on our nation's youth and young adults, and many families have experienced losses. But this has also been a time for discoveries, and for new appreciation of some aspects of life. In this section, we outline some of the gains of stillness reported by families and young people during the spring and summer of 2020.

Stillness created time for building connections—to self, others, and interests—time previously restricted by busy work and school schedules.

Gaining time for connection and self

So, I'm not going to lie. Like staying home for me is awesome. I love it. I love it. I'm an introvert. I love video games. I have a ton of like online friends. And it, it's awesome. I finally have time to train my dog. I finally have time to pursue my dreams. I finally have time for art. I'm not spending every waking second at work, trying to make ends meet.

Young adult

Adolescence is typically a period when young people increase time with peers, spending less time with family.¹³ While parents, youth, and young adults were acutely aware of how the pandemic disrupted opportunities for independence, some spoke favorably about how the stillness afforded time to deepen family connections. Parents noted how busy teen schedules were brought to a halt, creating more space for family:

I think God has a way of setting the record straight at times when he needs us to refocus, so he's slowed everything down and now our focus became each other, taking care of each other, spending time with each other, laughing with each other, so that has been a blessing because before that it was football practices, cheerleading practices and you're just ripping and running and constantly going, going, going and so the slowdown in that aspect, it was helpful.

Parent of young adolescent

Young adults—both those living with parents and those living independently—appreciated opportunities to connect with their family members.

Yeah, so like I said, I didn't really spend a lot of time at home, because I was constantly on the go. So, since the pandemic has hit, I feel like I definitely felt closer to my family.

Young adult

I mean, I think it's a lot—like a couple of good things. So, like me and my family are a lot closer now.

Young adult

Opportunities to explore interests and take on responsibilities during adolescence are important for identity development and for scaffolding the transition to independent adulthood. While many participants lost meaningful opportunities to explore outside the home, for some, the stillness afforded time to pursue hobbies and build new skills. Sometimes parents scaffolded these opportunities:

I think I've realized in my parenting...I definitely babied them. I don't know what you can handle, so I'll just do everything for you... since I'm working so much, I can't. So, they're doing dishes, they're cleaning up, they're pulling things in a new way.

Parent of young adolescent

Other parents of younger adolescents observed that their children had more time to spend on hobbies that were accessible from home or allowed for social distancing, from reading to fishing to repairing lawn mowers.

Some young adults who experienced a slowdown of employment or educational responsibilities used this time to explore meaningful activities.

I'm not as tired work wise, but at the same time it tend to boring pretty fast unless I'm doing something of course, so that's why I like try to do the gardening and stuff like that.

Young adult

And so, one of the things is I really like to paint but with my job, there's no way I had time to... But, you know, I've definitely gotten that time back and I've done those things that I wanted to do; Read, paint, tune my guitar and try and pick that back up a little bit.

Young adult

In addition to deepening connections to family and interests, for some, stillness created space for self-connections:

This is why I said it's a blessing in disguise because you are finding things about yourself that you didn't know, let's say you find out talents that you know about you had, or you just enjoying your company

Young adult

Thus, while the losses of movement, independence, and interaction described in the previous section were felt significantly, participants also shared ways in which stillness created time for building connections—to self, others, and interests—time previously restricted by busy work and school schedules.

Gaining skills and giving back

I've been doing a lot more at work as well. It helps me keep my mind off the coronavirus I even forget sometimes that it's even a thing. I get invested and it takes me off my mind, I get to relax think about, let yourself go and working, so it's been pretty great

Young adult

Developing skills to cope with challenges during adolescence may help mitigate vulnerabilities to negative mental and behavioral health outcomes.¹⁴ While many participants noted adverse impacts of the pandemic on mental health, several young adults described proactive steps they took to cope. The means of coping varied but typically involved a conscious investment of time in activities to keep from worrying about the pandemic.

Yeah, no, my stress definitely did go up like around March through May, that really was just why, so stressed and at first I was coping with smoking more and drinking more maybe. That proved to be like really destructive, like it exacerbated some of my issues and what I found really works quite well is meditating.

Young adult

That's one thing that I am coming to struggling with a little bit is just lack of motivation, trying to keep myself busy... Me and my roommate made ourselves a project, I don't know if you've ever seen this, but we're making a coffee table. We've been doing that for the past week or so and we've got pretty much the entire woodworking, I went to a glass place and got the glass cut the other day. So, it's just something to keep us busy.

Young adult

In addition to needing effective ways to cope with challenges, adolescence is a time for developing skills to support adult roles and responsibilities. For many participants, the pandemic thwarted opportunities for independence, but some young adults noted how the time allowed them to cultivate new habits.

At first, before I thought I didn't have time to make breakfast before work but now that I've done it repeatedly, I know, I definitely do have time and that's something that I do want to do when I go back to work... [and] now that I make dinner every night, it's second nature, it's so easy. I know what meals are quicker than others.

Young adult

Importantly, while growth in identity and independence tend to be emphasized as hallmarks of adolescence, social and biological changes in adolescence support youths' increasing capacity and desire to contribute to others.¹⁵ Accordingly, several young adults shared how they were able to provide support to family members as various needs emerged.

I've also been helping out the family a lot. Helping my mom with paying some of the bills after a certain time, they get backed up and they need help and my cousin, he had a birthday, so I gave him a birthday present to help out with his stuff.

Young adult

My fiancé has two little sisters...His mom has...a hard time doing a lot of activities. So, we wake up at 7:30 in the morning. We get the girls ready, to leave the house by 7:45. We drop them off at the babysitters. We're back at the house around 8:30... and then I start cleaning the kitchen and the living room and then we'll go upstairs and we'll clean the upstairs, while we're doing laundry and stuff, because with the two girls, every single day is a mess. So, every single day we're cleaning, yeah and then they go through a lot of clothes too.

Young adult

Young adults primarily spoke about contributing to their family members, providing support with rent or assisting elderly relatives. As noted previously, they were also conscious of maintaining a safe distance from non-resident family members in order to minimize spread of the virus.

Contributing was mentioned less often for contexts outside of the family; however, it was still a priority for some.

I'm still pretty active in my community too obviously with Covid things have been a little bit affected, there's been a lot of less volunteering... So, I mean a lot of us are doing good, and getting back out and volunteering.

Young adult

Yeah and so we were lucky enough that we already had Google classroom setup and I was the one managing it so, I had to teach my master teacher, which was ironic too, because the whole year she is teaching me what to do in the classroom and as soon as we switched over, I had to teach her how to go on Google Meet, how to post assignments, all of the electronic stuff that we were doing.

Young adult

Notably, parents did not often discuss ways in which their younger adolescent children were contributing to the community or household, which may reflect how the pandemic restricted opportunities for movement among younger adolescents.

Emerging from the crisis

The stillness of the spring and summer of 2020 changed the lives of our nation's young people. Across the country, the normal course of adolescent development was disrupted by the pandemic and shelter-in-place orders. Given the overwhelming changes in daily life wrought by the crisis, we would expect to see the effects of this disruption across different domains of adolescent development: physical, cognitive, and psychosocial-emotional. Of particular concern is whether increased levels of stress were experienced as

toxic stress, with long-lasting consequences for an adolescent's life-course, or whether they were experienced as tolerable stress, with no persisting negative consequences.

We have described the experiences of youth and young adults during the pandemic stillness. The AVP interview data reveal young people's forbearance and resilience during this unusual period, but also a great deal of pain and stress. Many young people experienced substantial losses. They lost freedom and independence, time with friends and family, and long-planned celebrations of achievements built on hard work and sacrifice. At the same time, we see evidence that young people were resilient in the face of this immense disruption, and faced the pandemic with strength and flexibility. New skills were learned, time with family led to stronger relationships, and time alone was cherished. The interviews suggest, then, that negative consequences of this period are likely, but that some mitigation is also likely to have occurred.

Much of the discussion of youth in the context of the pandemic has focused on those issues that adults and caregivers appear to be most concerned about. The difficulties of arranging online schooling and worries about human capital development have dominated the discussion of how young people have coped during the pandemic. The interview data of course reveal much parental anxiety about education, but when asked about their *children's* experiences of the pandemic, parents invariably recognize the wider effects of this period on their children's wellbeing. In point of fact, very many parental descriptions of adolescent life focus on their child's non-educational experiences; issues such as mental health, physical health, relationships, and social distancing are raised with great frequency. An important lesson to take from the AVP data is that media discussions that prioritize parental anxieties around education should be augmented with discussions about the non-educational experiences that are shaping developmental trajectories in this pandemic period.

It remains to be seen whether the pandemic,

Parental anxieties around education should be augmented with discussions about the non-educational experiences that are shaping developmental trajectories in this pandemic period.

shelter-in-place orders, and associated stress will have long-lasting effects on adolescent development. To mitigate any negative effects, policymakers should be considering which supports might need to be put into place to enable adolescents and young adults to get back on track. It will also be important to examine which adolescents are most likely to lack sufficient family or other support in recovering from the stress of this period, and to ensure that these adolescents are given additional resources. An interesting feature of our results was the lack of heterogeneity with respect to socioeconomic characteristics. We saw little systematic variation related to these characteristics, and indeed, much similarity in how youth and young adults responded to the pandemic and shelter-in-place. It is possible that the stillness itself produced this result, and that in the short term at least, the pandemic was experienced as a pause during which the concerns of everyday life were less prominent.

As the pandemic stretches into the winter, and families adapt to the new environment, we would expect to see a divergence in young people's experiences. With the virus surging and economic relief out of reach, those in disadvantaged socioeconomic groups are less well-positioned than their advantaged peers to adapt to changing circumstances. As we begin to look to a time beyond the pandemic, we must also be mindful of more severe long-term

effects for those in disadvantaged socioeconomic groups. Prior research would lead us to expect such long-term effects, and it would therefore be prudent to design policies that offer additional support for these adolescents.¹⁶ Understanding the perspectives of young people, and centering their voices, will be important in determining the most appropriate policy response.

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Notes

1. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2019. *The Promise of Adolescence: Realizing Opportunity for All Youth*. Washington, D.C.: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/25388>.
2. Note that these groups differ a little from the stages of adolescence identified in the National Academies report. Given the small case numbers, we divide pre-adult adolescents into two groups rather than three, and all of those aged over 18 are included in the young adult category.
3. The educational consequences of the pandemic for our young people are addressed in a separate crisis report, and we therefore do not discuss them in detail here.
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10. We use the term "parent" to refer to all caregivers of adolescents.
11. We followed standard procedures for the analysis of qualitative interview data, e.g., Gerson, Kathleen, and Sarah Damaske. 2020. *The Science and Art of Interviewing*. Oxford University Press.
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