

Adolescent wellbeing in the wake of the pandemic¹

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Introduction

Pandemic-related restrictions had a significant impact on children and young people, with prolonged school closures and restrictions on social interaction and engagement in leisure activities. The effect of these measures on adolescent wellbeing during the pandemic has been well documented in Ireland and internationally. However, less attention has been paid to whether particular stressors, such as parental job loss or challenges in remote learning, during the pandemic have had a long-lasting effect on young people's wellbeing. This research addresses this gap by using Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) data spanning the period before, during and after the pandemic.

Data and methods

The research is based on GUI data for Cohort '08, who were surveyed before the pandemic at 9 years of age, completed a short online questionnaire during the pandemic (December 2020) and were surveyed again by telephone at 13 years of age in the late/post-pandemic period (2021/22). Pre-pandemic wellbeing is captured using the mother-reported Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), which captures socio-emotional difficulties. Wellbeing during the

1 This ESRI Research Bulletin summarises the findings from Laurence, J., Smyth, E. (2026). COVID-19 pandemic stressors and their longer-term association with young people's wellbeing. PLoS One 21(5): e0347875.

2 Available at <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0347875>

pandemic is measured using the Mental Health Inventory 5 (MHI-5) measure of overall wellbeing. Wellbeing in the late/post-pandemic period is measured in two ways: the MHI-5 measure of overall wellbeing and the Short Moods and Feelings Questionnaire (SFMQ), which captures depressive symptoms.

Although pandemic-related restrictions affected everyone, families differed in their exposure to job and income loss and in the resources available to support remote learning. The analyses take account of a range of pandemic stressors, including having a quiet place to study, access to a suitable electronic device to enable home schooling, help at home with schoolwork, a household fall in income, reduced contact with friends, a decline in sports engagement, increased screen time, arguments with family members and worry about the virus. The analyses used nested ordinary least squares regression models.

Results

Several aspects of the pandemic experience are linked to poorer wellbeing in 2021/22. An income shock for the household is linked to poorer wellbeing, even taking account of levels of financial strain post-pandemic. Not having a quiet place to study while schools were closed is linked to more depressive symptoms post-pandemic. Adolescents who saw their friends less than usual (even though schools had reopened in December 2020) and those who argued more with their parents during the pandemic had poorer wellbeing afterwards. Furthermore, young people who increased their screen time were more likely to report depressive symptoms. Many of these factors operate by shaping wellbeing during the pandemic which, in turn, is linked to worse wellbeing post-pandemic. However, household income shocks and increased screen time have a direct relationship with later wellbeing, even after accounting for mood during the pandemic.

In keeping with other international research, girls reported poorer wellbeing than boys during and after the pandemic. Our research shows a widening of this gender gap in wellbeing, particularly for girls with lower wellbeing during the pandemic. Reduced contact with friends is also found to have had a stronger impact for girls than boys.

Conclusions

The research provides new insights into the effects of the pandemic on young people. While all faced common challenges, family resources affected their experience of the pandemic, with income shocks and disruption to family and peer relationships all having longer-term effects on their wellbeing. The patterns point to the need for sustained support for adolescent wellbeing rather than assuming a 'return to normal'. The findings point too to the importance of incorporating youth wellbeing into planning for any future crises.