

Addressing the Long-Term Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Children and Families

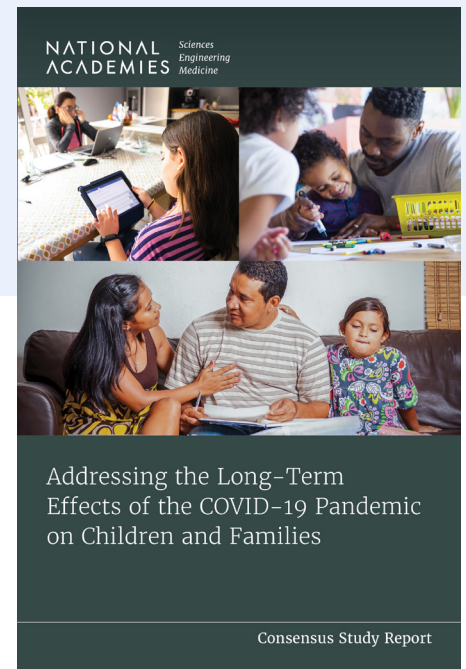
The COVID-19 pandemic¹ has had an unprecedented impact on the lives of children² and their families, who have faced innumerable challenges such as illness and death; school closures; social isolation; financial hardship; food insecurity; deleterious mental health effects; and difficulties accessing health care. In almost every outcome related to social, emotional, behavioral, educational, mental, physical, and economic health and well-being, families identifying as Black, Latino, and Native American, and those with low incomes, have disproportionately borne the brunt of the pandemic's negative effects.

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and families will be felt for years to come. While these long-term effects are unknown, they are likely to have particularly significant implications for children and families from racially and ethnically minoritized communities and with low incomes.

With support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Administration for Children and Families, a division of the United States Department of Health and Human Services, the Board on Children, Youth, and Families of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine convened an ad hoc committee to examine the long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the well-being of children and families. The committee members have expertise in social and behavioral health; mental and physical health; health disparities; education; public policy; epidemiology; early childhood development; trauma-informed care; health equity; education;

¹ This report uses the terms “the COVID-19 pandemic,” “the pandemic,” and “COVID-19” to refer to the global pandemic caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), which began in late 2019, was declared a pandemic in March 2020, and was ongoing as of the date this report was written.

² This report generally uses the term “children” to encompass children, adolescents, and youth; however, other terms may also be used in keeping with the language used in the studies or publications being referenced.



child and adolescent psychiatry; developmental and family psychology; family welfare and social work; behavioral and social science; and economics. Focusing on children’s development across the life course, the committee’s consensus study report identifies the social, emotional, behavioral, educational, mental, physical, and economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and recommends strategies for addressing the challenges and obstacles that the pandemic introduced for children and families in marginalized communities.

THE NEED FOR CONTINUED INVESTMENT IN CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

During the pandemic, many children were separated from learning opportunities, stabilizing routines, school-based mental health resources, peer interactions, and programs that typically support their well-being. While some effects of these stressors were immediate, some may not become apparent until later in individuals’ lives.

Overall, the pandemic disrupted children’s developmental trajectories, which could have long-lasting effects on their social, emotional, behavioral, educational, mental, physical, and economic outcomes. Among a long list of deleterious outcomes, children show increases in dysregulated, internalizing, and externalizing behaviors; increases in concern about their present and future; more time spent feeling unhappy or depressed; lack of social connections; increases in chronic absenteeism; declines in college enrollment; declines in literacy and numeracy; increases in incidence of diabetes type 1 and type 2; delayed preventive care and immunizations; increases in rates of substance overdose deaths; and increases in household food insecurity.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal government provided time-limited provisions to mitigate deleterious health and economic effects on households and individuals. State, tribal, and community-level policies and programs also provided important support for families during the pandemic. However, families most in need often faced the greatest barriers to receiving the benefits of these programs and provisions and were often the least likely to receive them. Moreover, national plans have not yet fully addressed the needs of children

and youth and many of these pandemic-related programs have expired.

Without a focused strategy for investing in policies, programs, services, supports, and interventions to correct the life-course trajectories that were altered by the COVID-19 pandemic, society will pay the cost of a generation of children who enter adulthood with worse mental health, a greater burden of chronic disease, and lower academic attainment than their predecessors. These conditions can lead to worse outcomes for these children as they age through adulthood.

Ongoing investments should be targeted to children and families from racially and ethnically minoritized and low-income communities, who bore the brunt of the pandemic as it exacerbated pre-existing societal inequities. Without targeted investments in programs, services, supports, and interventions to counteract the pandemic’s direct and indirect negative impact on child and family well-being, the pandemic’s impacts are likely to be long lasting, with negative effects not only on children and families but also on society at large.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing on available evidence from the COVID-19 pandemic and lessons from previous disaster recovery and public health crises, the report offers a set of recommendations. The recommendations are a path forward to recover from the harms of the pandemic and to address the inequities that have made the pandemic’s impact disproportionate. The committee’s recommendations focus on the following areas:

1. addressing the immediate and short-term effects (direct and indirect) of the pandemic on children and their families;
2. mitigating potential shifts in the life-course trajectory of children and families due to the pandemic;
3. collecting and quickly responding to comprehensive, child- and family-focused data to help understand the pandemic’s ongoing effects on children and families; and

4. preparing for the next pandemic (“pandemic proofing”).

Prioritizing the immediate and short-term effects—direct and indirect—of the pandemic on children and their families. The federal government should develop a clear plan for supporting children and families, with a focus on those who have faced the greatest negative burden of the pandemic: children and families who are Black, Latino, and Native American and those with low incomes.

Mitigating potential shifts in the life-course trajectories of children and families who have experienced the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a substantial toll on the social, emotional, behavioral, and mental health outcomes of children and adults. Low-income and racially minoritized families have experienced the most negative effects of the pandemic largely because of pre-existing inequities in access to societal opportunities to thrive. Federal, state, and local agencies should develop policies, provide resources, and support targeted interventions that help children and adolescents process their pandemic experience; cope with uncertainty and change; rebuild social, cultural, and community connections; and readjust to group learning environments.

Preparing schools and early childhood providers for the next pandemic (“pandemic proofing”). Support for enrolling and re-engaging children at all levels of education should be expanded with the goal of returning enrollment and attendance rates in formal education to pre-pandemic levels, if not higher. Investing in evidence-based interventions to promote socioemotional development and address education gaps created during the pandemic can compensate for missed learning and return students’ academic achievement to pre-pandemic grade-level expectations or better. It is also critical to attract and support an expanded educator workforce to strengthen the early childhood sector as well as support the K-12 staffing needed to restore missed learning. Because COVID-19 will likely be circulating for the foreseeable future and other infectious diseases may

arise, it is also necessary to invest in infrastructure within school facilities so they can remain open and safe during future surges or a new pandemic.

Addressing physical and mental health needs. To address the physical and mental health effects of the pandemic, all children will need access to high quality, continuous, and affordable health care. Children and families need ready access high-quality treatment and preventive behavioral health services in clinical settings, communities, and schools. This can be achieved by strengthening and expanding Medicaid at the federal level—including establishing and enforcing national standards for equitable payment rates, presumptive eligibility, multi-year continuous eligibility periods, and network adequacy.

Addressing economic and social policy to expand key safety-net programs. The federal government should support federal paid family leave and paid sick leave programs, reissue and continue the pandemic-era expansion of the Child Tax Credit, and incentivize states to expand key safety programs, including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and childcare subsidies. To enhance safety net capacity, states should be incentivized to expand the number of families served in these safety net programs, raise the floor benefit levels, and reduce administrative burden for program participation.

Collecting and quickly responding to comprehensive, child- and family-focused data to help understand the pandemic’s ongoing effects on children and families. Evidence about the short-term effects of the pandemic on children, youth, and families is emerging, yet the long-term effects remain unknown. To better understand the pandemic’s effects on life-course trajectories, significant investments are needed to build a pandemic-focused research and data infrastructure. Public and private agencies at the local, state, and federal levels should collaborate on the systematic linking of child- and family-level data from health care, education, social services, child welfare, and juvenile justice systems. Federal agencies also should fund rigorous research on the effects of the pandemic.

Together, the report’s recommendations for programs, supports, and interventions to counteract the negative effects of the pandemic on child and family well-being offer a path forward to recover from the harms of the pandemic, address inequities, and prepare for the future.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

The Report Highlights was prepared based on the Consensus Study Report *Addressing the Long-Term Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Children and Families* (2023). Copies of the Consensus Study Report are available from the National Academies Press at www.nap.edu. Recordings of the open sessions organized by the committee are available on the National Academies website at <https://www.nationalacademies.org/our-work/addressing-the-long-term-impact-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-on-children-and-families>.

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Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education

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