



The State of Young People during COVID-19

Findings from a nationally representative survey of high school youth

OVERVIEW

The public health crisis created by the spread of COVID-19 has disrupted day-to-day rhythms across the United States, including an extended closure of school buildings. Myriad news sources and emerging research¹ are reporting on the deep and disparate effects that are reverberating from these closures. But how do young people themselves perceive the impact so far on their learning and their lives?

To answer this question, the Center for Promise at America's Promise Alliance conducted a nationally representative survey² of 3,300 young people aged 13-19.

Overall, the results are deeply sobering:

- While nearly all of the high school youth surveyed (92%) say they are participating in online learning opportunities, more than three-quarters (78%) are spending four or fewer hours each day in class or working on assignments.
- Since their school buildings closed, young people's levels of concern about the present and future have increased, and indicators of overall health and wellbeing have suffered. For example, 30% of young people say they have more often been feeling unhappy or depressed, and nearly as many say they are much more concerned than usual about having their basic needs met.
- More than one-quarter of students (29%) say they do not feel connected at all to school adults. A similar percentage do not feel connected to classmates or to their school community.

These findings suggest that students are experiencing a collective trauma, and that they and their families would benefit from immediate and ongoing support.

Taken together, these findings suggest that students are experiencing a collective trauma, and that they and their families would benefit from immediate and ongoing support for basic needs, physical and mental health, and learning opportunities. Without that support, this moment in time is likely to have lasting negative effects for this cohort of high school students.³

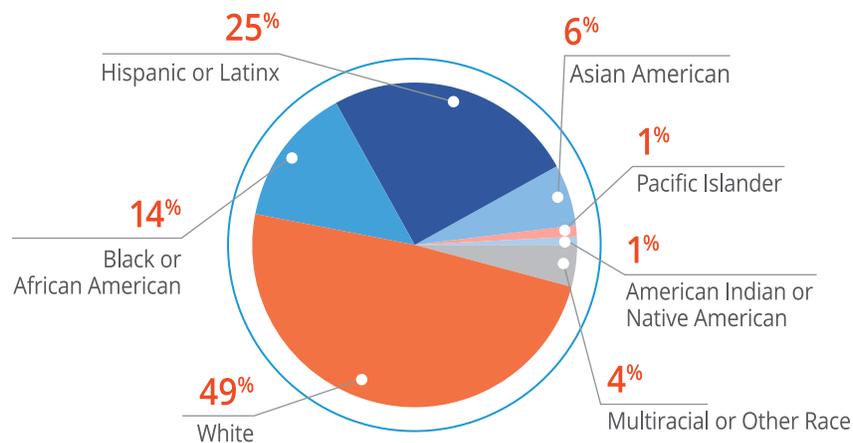
ABOUT THE SURVEY

This brief describes selected data from a nationally representative survey of 3,300 young people, aged 13-19, that was conducted as part of the *How Learning Happens* initiative at America's Promise Alliance. The survey was designed by a team at the Center for Promise and America's Promise Alliance; then administered online by Qualtrics, an online survey platform, over a two-week period during late April and early May 2020. For any young person under 16, consent was obtained via parental consent forms. Respondents were evenly split across grades 9-12 and were 49% female, 50% male, and 1% non-binary.

Demographic breakdown by urbanicity (N=3,300)



Demographic breakdown by race (N=3,300)



Respondents were asked a series of questions about their social, emotional, and academic experiences across both school and out-of-school-time learning settings, including a set of questions related to their specific experiences since being out of school as a result of COVID-19. At the time of the survey administration, two-thirds of respondents had been out of school for more than four weeks.

For a full list of the questions young people were asked, [see the Appendix](#).

The survey builds on findings from a qualitative study that was conducted earlier in the 2019-2020 school year. The qualitative study, *All of Who I Am* focuses on how young people are experiencing and responding to integrated approaches to social, emotional, and cognitive development. The *All of Who I Am* findings, which emerged from semi-structured interviews with 103 young people in six sites, explore six key themes: relationships, belonging, meaningful learning, intentionality, identity development, and agency.

Future research will explore how the quantitative survey findings relate to the themes in the qualitative study.

FINDINGS

This research brief offers a snapshot of young people's self-reported:

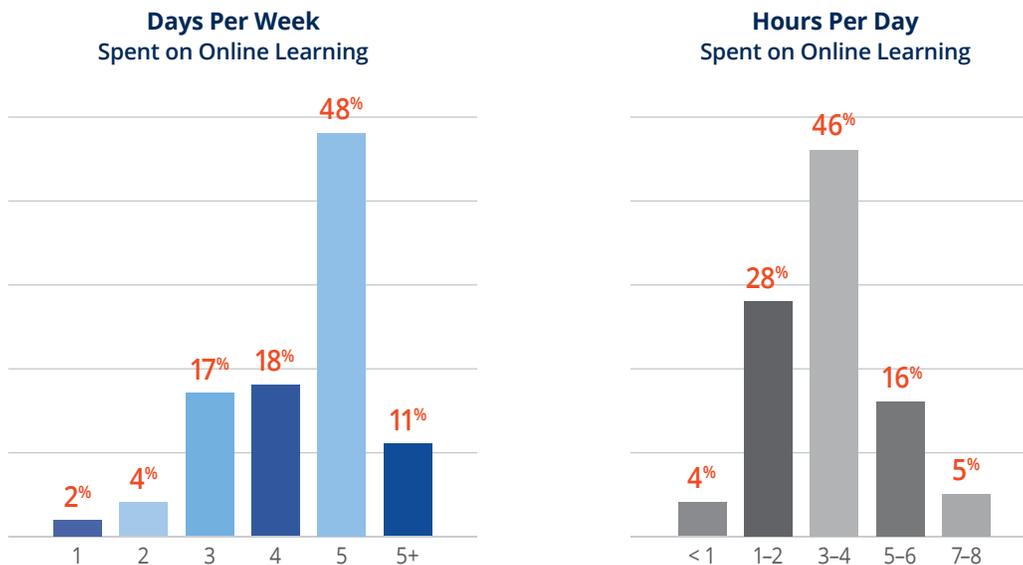
- Participation in online learning;
- Connections to peers, adults at school, and their school community;
- Top-of-mind concerns; and
- Indicators of health and wellbeing.

Data were disaggregated by race/ethnicity, urbanicity (e.g. whether young people lived in a city, suburb, town, or rural setting), and whether their parents were born in the United States. With a few notable exceptions indicated below, this survey did not find statistically significant differences among young people's responses by these groups. That is, while COVID-19 undoubtedly is having disparate and damaging effects on families in different circumstances,⁴ high school students across the country at the time of the survey report feeling its impact in similar ways.

The sections below offer more specific analyses.

Showing up to learn, but fewer hours per day

Although just over half of students report participating in online learning or working on assignments five or more days a week, **three-quarters** report spending between **1 and 4 hours** on these activities during a typical day—far less time than a regular school day.⁵

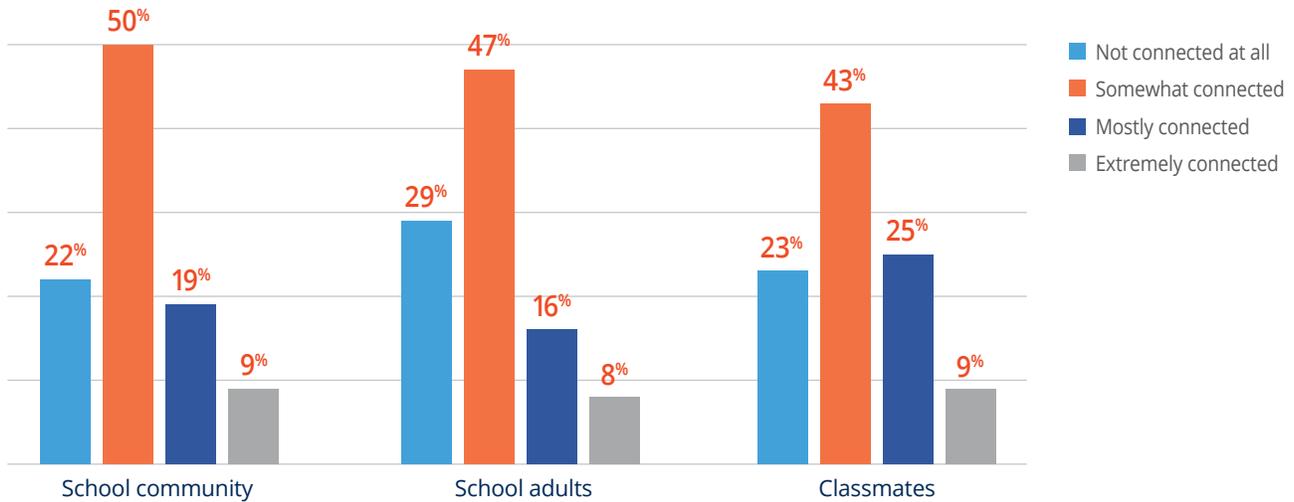


Less connected to classmates, adults, and school

Approximately one-quarter of students are feeling disconnected from their school communities, school adults, and classmates. Combined with the limited number of hours per day most students are spending on classwork, this indicates that a large number of students are isolated from caring adults other than family members and from their peers during this time.

Meaningful differences in disconnection are showing up across student populations. Asian students are more likely to feel disconnected from their school communities than White, Black, and Latinx students; Latinx students report feeling less connected to both school adults and peers than either White or Black students. Students in rural communities report feeling less connected to their school communities than students in cities, towns, or suburbs.

During this time, how connected do you feel to...



More concerned about basic needs, health, and academics

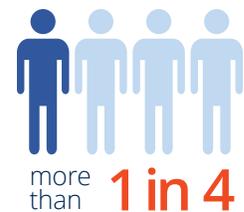
More than half of young people are much more concerned than usual about their own and their family's physical and emotional health. In addition, a sizeable proportion of young people are much more concerned than usual about their current and future education, including their grades and getting into college.

Percent of students who are "much more concerned than usual" about...



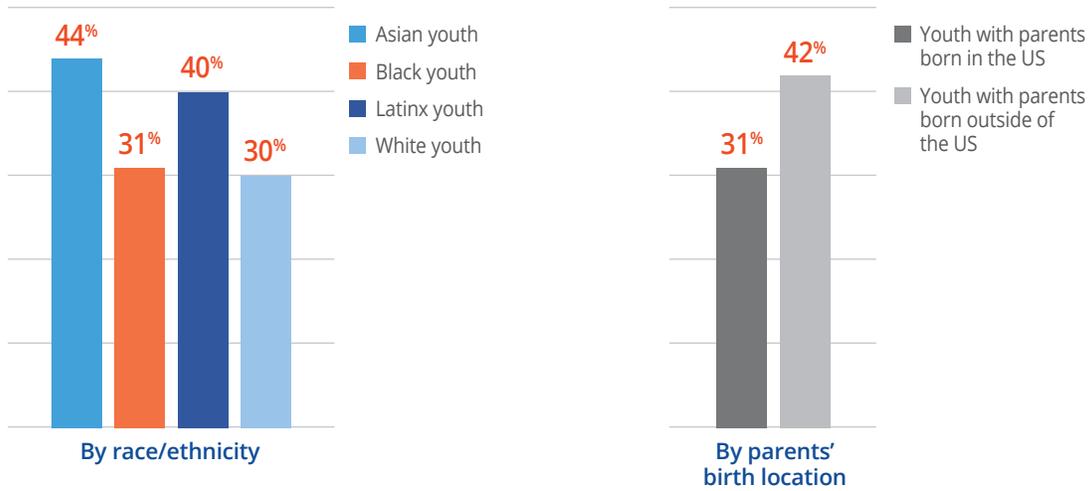
Experiencing poorer emotional and cognitive health

In addition to the growing concerns young people have for themselves and their families, their emotional and cognitive health is also suffering. When asked about specific indicators of emotional and cognitive health,⁶ **more than 1 in 4** young people reported an increase in **losing sleep because of worry, feeling unhappy or depressed, feeling constantly under strain, or experiencing a loss of confidence in themselves.**



While all young people reported poorer health, meaningful differences among groups emerged. Young people living in cities were 15% more likely to report poorer health indicators than those in rural areas. Asian and Latinx youth were significantly more likely to report poorer health than Black or White youth. Youth with parents born outside the United States were one-third more likely to experience poorer health than youth whose parents were born in the United States. These findings may reflect the greater risks that COVID-19 presents for some racial groups and in more densely populated places.

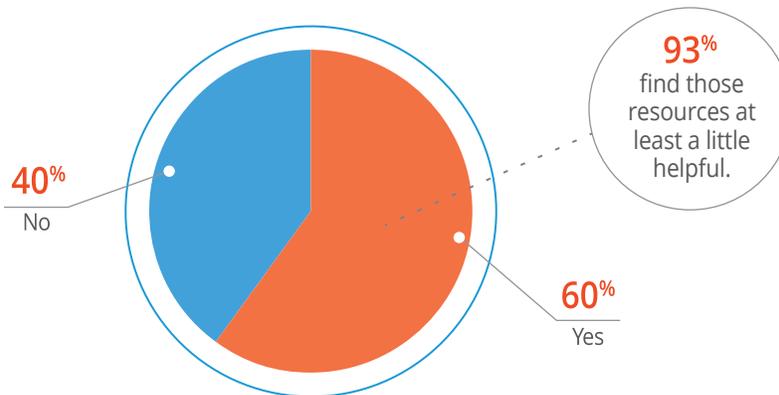
Percent of youth reporting poorer emotional and cognitive health



Finding support helpful, when it is offered

The survey findings point to a **greater need for social and emotional support**. Although most young people say that an adult from their school has suggested tools and resources for them—and the vast majority of these young people say the resources are at least a little helpful—a large percentage say no adult from school has suggested this kind of support.

Percent of youth offered social or emotional support by an adult from their school



IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

These survey findings, in the context of current events, show that young people are experiencing collective trauma fueled by changes in their immediate circumstances combined with ongoing uncertainty. COVID-19 will continue to shape how, when, and where learning happens across the country. Efforts can and should begin now to buffer the kinds of stresses young people report. Here are three important and urgent recommendations.

- **Understand young people's evolving concerns.** These data provide us with a glimpse into young people's experiences over the past couple of months, suggesting that they are increasingly anxious, unable to concentrate, and feeling disconnected and isolated. Yet many unanswered questions remain. It will be vital to keep exploring and understanding the impact this pandemic has on young people at school and beyond.

Emerging research from America's Promise Alliance, City Year, The Education Trust, Learning Heroes, Educators for Excellence, and others cited in this brief will help illuminate present concerns and potential responses. Adults who are available over the summer—school administrators, camp counselors, coaches, health providers, elected leaders—can listen to what the young people in their communities are saying to inform a timely, personalized, locally-informed response. Ongoing, intentional listening can range from informal phone or text check-ins to surveys administered over the phone or online.

- **Prioritize social and emotional wellbeing, including mental health.** All young people need to feel safe and have their basic needs met in order to engage in learning. Their survey responses suggest the need for a renewed commitment to making sure that students have the necessary resources to support their social, emotional, and cognitive wellbeing. This includes stabilizing, where possible, families' insecurity about basic needs.⁷ Communities can explore **trauma-informed care**⁸ and healing-centered practices as a framework of support for young people. Teachers and families, who are deeply affected by the pandemic as well, will also need intentional support in order to continue responding to the young people in their sphere of care.
- **Strive towards equity.** While these findings signal the need for universal supports because all young people are suffering, existing and emerging research clearly illustrate the inequities that existed before the spread of COVID-19 and are likely to be exacerbated by it. Thus, it is crucial for communities to uncover and respond to their young people's unique needs—considering how to tailor and scaffold their supports accordingly. Timely, personalized support is an essential component of mitigating the learning losses that young people are experiencing as a result of their extended time away from formal schooling and other opportunities to learn.

Research and experience affirm that young people need the right supports in order to thrive.⁹ This nationally representative survey gives us a glimpse into some of the ways that young people are experiencing the effects of COVID-19. The findings urge communities to reconnect with continuing and returning students in a way that recognizes that they are starting in a new place, profoundly changed by their time away from school.

ENDNOTES

- 1 See, for example, Ananat, E. O. & Gassman-Pines, A. (2020, March 30). *Snapshot of the COVID Crisis Impact on Working Families*. Econofact. econofact.org/snapshot-of-the-covid-crisis-impact-on-working-families; Bailey, J. & Shaw, O. (2020, June 1). Analysis: How are families navigating COVID-19? This week-by-week survey of 500 parents has some answers. *The 74Million*. the74million.org/article/analysis-how-are-families-navigating-covid-19-this-week-by-week-survey-of-500-parents-has-some-answers/?fbclid=IwAR0HhuiSbpmh4U-2jU2CeQTX3z7Zlmt2bmkcHmVtUBSuerqC7xDPwdDFpIQ; Cantor, G. & Sims, L. (2020, April). *The unequal impact of the COVID-19 crisis on households' financial stability: Who is more likely to be immediately hurt and why*. Prosperity Now. prosperitynow.org/sites/default/files/PDFs/Scorecard%202020/Unequal_Impact_of_COVID-19.pdf; Lasard, L. & Schacter, H. (2020, April 15). Why the coronavirus crisis hits teenagers particularly hard: Developmental scientists explain, here's what parents and educators can do to help during social distancing. *Education Week*. edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/04/16/why-the-coronavirus-crisis-hits-teenagers-particularly.html; Wood, B. (2020, April 10); The disparities in remote learning under coronavirus (in charts). *Education Week*. edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/04/10/the-disparities-in-remote-learning-under-coronavirus.html
- 2 Sampling parameters were used to ensure that our sample matched the population of high school students in the United States with respect to grade in school, race/ethnicity, gender, and region. Representative sampling is a strategy used to enhance external validity and improve confidence in the ability to generalize findings and estimates from the sample to the broader population of youth across the United States. Laursen, B., Little, T. D. & Card, N. A. (Eds.) (2011). *Handbook of developmental research methods*. Guilford Press.
- 3 See, for example, the “seven threats to graduation” and the findings about the effects of different types of support in Don't Quit on Me. Center for Promise (2015). *Don't Quit On Me: What young people who left school say about the power of relationships*. America's Promise Alliance. americaspromise.org/report/dont-quit-me
- 4 New research indicates that there are disparities between individuals in racial and economic groups in the opportunities that students and families have to engage with schools, how they are engaging with these opportunities, and how they are feeling about their current circumstances. See for example, The Education Trust (2020). *Parents overwhelmingly concerned their children are falling behind during school closures*. The Education Trust. edtrust.org/parents-overwhelmingly-concerned-their-children-are-falling-behind-during-school-closures/; Kurtz, H. (2020, April 10). National survey tracks impact of coronavirus on schools: 10 key findings. *Education Week*. edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/04/10/national-survey-tracks-impact-of-coronavirus-on.html
- 5 Both teachers and parents report similar overall levels of participation in remote learning. See for example, Learning Heroes (2020, May). *Parents 2020 | COVID-19 Closures A Redefining Moment for Students, Parents & Schools*. Learning Heroes. belearninghero.org/research/?utm_source=socialtoolkit&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=spring2020_earning&utm_content=parent2020; Educators for Excellence (2020, May). *Voices from the classroom: A survey of America's teachers on Covid-19 related education issues*. Educators for Excellence. e4e.org/sites/default/files/voices_from_the_virtual_classroom_2020.pdf
- 6 The General Health Questionnaire is a 12-item instrument that is widely used around the world as a diagnostic tool for mental illness and as a general measure of psychiatric wellbeing. Goldberg, D.P., Gater, R., Satorius, N., Üstün, T.B., Piccinelli, M., Gureje, O., & Rutter, M. (1997). The validity of two versions of the GHQ in the WHO study of mental illness in general health care. *Psychological Medicine*, 27, 191-197.
- 7 A new report from the American Psychological Association on stress indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic is significantly affecting parental stress and wellbeing around their ability to access basic needs. American Psychological Association, (2020, May). *Stress in America 2020: Stress in the time of COVID-19*. American Psychological Association. apa.org/news/press-releases/stress/2020/stress-in-america-covid.pdf
- 8 Margolius, M., Pufall Jones, E., Hynes, M. (2020). *Creating Cultures of Care: Supporting the whole child through trauma-informed practice*. America's Promise Alliance. www.americaspromise.org/resource/creating-cultures-care-supporting-whole-child-through-trauma-informed-practice
- 9 Center for Promise (2013). *Developing Youth Systems: Creating transformational change for our nation's young people*. America's Promise Alliance. americaspromise.org/resource/developing-youth-systems-creating-transformational-change-our-nations-young-people/; Varga, S. & Zaff, J.F. (2017). *Defining Webs of Support: A New Framework to Advance Understanding of Relationships and Youth Development*. America's Promise Alliance. files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED584033.pdf



About the Center for Promise

The Center for Promise is the applied research institute of America's Promise Alliance, dedicated to understanding what young people need to thrive and how to create the conditions of success for all young people.

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About America's Promise Alliance

America's Promise Alliance is the driving force behind a nationwide movement to improve the lives and futures of America's children and youth. Bringing together national nonprofits, businesses, community and civic leaders, educators, citizens, and young people with a shared vision, America's Promise leads campaigns and initiatives that spark collective action to overcome the barriers that stand in the way of young people's success. Through these collective leadership efforts, the Alliance does what no single organization alone can do: catalyze change on a scale that reaches millions of young people.

Acknowledgments

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Additional Resources

America's Promise Alliance is continually compiling [a list of resources](#) that can be helpful to young people, families, and all who work with and care deeply about children and youth. In the coming months, watch for additional research from America's Promise Alliance on the pandemic's effects on young people, including its influence on their workforce readiness and employment.

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