

# Have girls been left behind during the pandemic?

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A new study by universities including City, University of London shows that girls' mental health was affected more than boys by the COVID-19 pandemic and the wave of associated school and childcare closures.

Girls' total emotional and behavioral difficulties increased 1.619 points more compared to boys (corresponding to 28% of a standard deviation). Furthermore, the [gender differences](#) were more pronounced in [lower-income families](#).

Girls from lower-income families experienced a 2.162 point (37% of a standard deviation) higher increase in emotional and behavioral difficulties during the pandemic. Meanwhile, in higher-income families, the gender difference was 1.306 points (22% of a [standard deviation](#)).

Before the pandemic, there was no difference in total difficulties by gender. During the pandemic, total difficulties increased among girls, but not among boys.

The study—by academics from City, University of London, the University of Wollongong (Australia), and Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology University (Australia)—is based on data from the UK Household Longitudinal Study (UKHLS), known as Understanding Society. The UKHLS comprises responses from approximately 40,000 households.

In April 2020, all respondents of the UKHLS were invited to take part in a new COVID-19 survey, which includes questions on the impact of the pandemic.

The participants who accepted the invitation were surveyed once a month (every two months from July 2020). Researchers used all COVID-19 surveys available to date which included information about children's mental well-being (July, September and November 2020 and March 2021).

As a measure of child mental well-being, the study used the scores of the UKHLS Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). The SDQ is a

behavioral screening questionnaire for children, which includes 25 questions covering five areas: hyperactivity/inattention, emotional symptoms, [conduct problems](#), peer relationship problems, and pro-[social behavior](#).

Answers to these questions (excluding those on [prosocial behavior](#)) were summed to create a 'total difficulties' score ranging from 0 to 40. In every UKHLS wave, parents answer the SDQ for 5- and 8-year-old children. In every [second wave](#), 10–15-year-old children self-complete the SDQ.

In the COVID-19 survey, parents completed the SDQ for 5–11-year old children, and 10–15-year-old children self-completed the SDQ in selected waves. The study's analysis mainly focused on 10–15-year-old children, whose answers to the SDQ are expected to measure their mental well-being more accurately.

Dr. Agne Suziedelyte, a co-author of the study, based in City's Department of Economics, said:

"The results of the research point to strong gendered impacts, with emotional and behavioral difficulties increasing more among 10–15-year-old girls than boys during the COVID-19 pandemic relative to the pre-pandemic years.

"Gender differences in the pandemic's effect on children's mental well-being were observed among all income groups, although these differences are more salient in lower-income families."

The study shows a larger increase among girls compared to boys across most domains of the SDQ (emotional symptoms, hyperactivity, conduct problems, and peer problems). Conduct problems decreased among both boys and girls during the [pandemic](#), but more so among boys.

The study is published in the May 2022 edition of *Economics Letters*.

**More information:** Silvia Mendolia et al, Have girls been left behind during the COVID-19 pandemic? Gender differences in pandemic effects on children's mental wellbeing, *Economics Letters* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.econlet.2022.110458](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econlet.2022.110458)

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