

Young People Are Particularly Vulnerable to Lockdowns

By [Ethan Yang](#)

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In response to the Covid-19 pandemic governments across the world implemented an unprecedented and untested strategy to slow the spread of the disease. Colloquially known as lockdowns, these public health interventions effectively shut down most normal societal functions through the use of stay-at-home orders, school closures, business closures, bans on large gatherings, and travel restrictions. This policy apparatus effectively relegated the vast majority of people to a form of self-quarantine and completely upended the standard social functioning of society. Although these measures were advertised in the United States as a short-term measure, the now infamous [two weeks to flatten the curve](#) policy to shut down societal functions to control the spread of Covid-19 dragged on for over a year.

The damage to society was certainly extensive, with a [3.5 percent annualized economic retraction](#) record in 2020 and a 32.9 percent decline in Q2 of 2020, making this one of the sharpest economic declines in modern history. However, the level of suffering and trauma caused by these policies cannot be appropriately expressed by economic data alone.

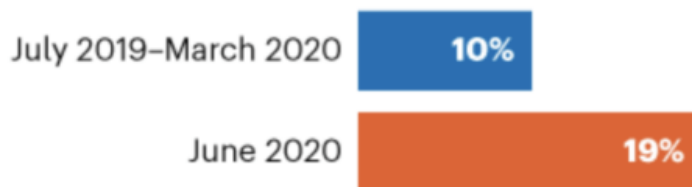
Lockdown policies may have caused a substantial amount of financial damage but the social damage is just as concerning, if not more so. Across the board, there have been increased reports of [mental health issues](#), such as depression and anxiety, that are linked to social isolation, substantial life disruptions, and existential dread over the state of the world. Unlike lost dollars, mental health problems leave real and lasting damage which could lead to complications later in life, if not self-harm or suicide. For young people, [a drastic increase in suicides](#) has claimed more lives than Covid-19. That is because they are far less vulnerable to Covid than older segments of the population but far more negatively impacted by lockdowns.

COVID'S MENTAL STRESS

The percentage of people experiencing symptoms of depression and anxiety has surged amid the COVID-19 pandemic, data from nationally representative surveys show.

■ Before pandemic ■ During pandemic

UK adults reporting symptoms of depression



US adults reporting symptoms of anxiety or depression



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Source: Office for National Statistics (UK data); Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (US data).

Quarantine in general is a traumatizing experience for most people. A study conducted by the Mental Health Foundation found [that](#),

“For a variety of reasons, quarantine can be traumatising for some parents. In a study on post-traumatic stress disorder in health-related disasters, criteria for PTSD was met in 25% of isolated or quarantined parents. The same study found links between PTSD criteria in adults and their children having PTSD symptoms. Duration of quarantine and consequent lack of social and physical contact with friends/family and the outside world has been shown to be associated with increased PTSD symptoms. Similarly, it has been shown that social isolation and associated loneliness have a negative impact on mental health outcomes for adults.”

Although lockdowns have detrimentally affected the entire population, young people (primarily referring to those under the age of 30) have been particularly harmed by these policies at rates much higher than the general population. This is concerning for many reasons. One of the first being that young people make up less than [half of one percent of Covid-19 related deaths](#) in the United States. An article published in the [New England Journal of Medicine](#) noted that in Sweden, where schools remained open, from December 31, 2019, to February 18, 2021, there were zero reported Covid-19 related deaths for children aged 1-16. The second, which will be explained in-depth in this article, is that young people are biologically, culturally, and developmentally more vulnerable to the effects of lockdown policies and social isolation. Finally, young people have very little political voice despite

comprising [around a third](#) of the US population.

The result is a large and critical segment of the population that is not only facing disproportionately greater mental hardship than the rest of the population, both short and long-term, but also lacking the tools to voice their concerns. Such an outcome should not only be a reason for concern because young people are the future of society, but because such damage is a direct result of [unprecedented lockdown policies](#), not the virus.

Why Are Lockdowns So Harmful to Young People

To understand why young people have been especially harmed by lockdowns, it is important to first know what makes them so vulnerable in the first place. People do not become fully functional and equipped adults from birth. Over many years, important biological functions are developed and important life skills are learned. From a socioeconomic standpoint, youth is also when important social and professional milestones are achieved from establishing relevant career experience to making important friendships. These biological and social factors all further necessitate the need for young people to be able to partake in normal societal functions, which are not only important for their emotional well-being, but their ability to become stable members of society.

An article published by BBC writes about the dangers of isolation and mass quarantine for students when it [notes](#),

“Prof Ellen Townsend, an expert in child and adolescent self-harm and suicide from Nottingham University, says the way students are being treated “is massively damaging for their mental health”.

“It doesn’t make sense to lock up young people,” she says. “We have to move past this one disease - a more nuanced approach is needed.”

The need for younger individuals from children to adolescents to be able to socialize and independently live their lives is wired into human neurobiology. NPR [notes](#),

“Young brains need social connection to feel secure about their identity and place in the world, says Gregory Lewis, who studies the neurobiology of social interaction at Indiana University.”

Being able to socialize not just with immediate family and friends but with broader society through venues such as large events and in-person schooling is essential to human development. This is due to a biological urge to separate from the family to create an independent sense of identity through friendships and experiences that begins with early childhood and refines itself up to late adolescence. According to an [article](#) in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*

“Valerie Braunstein, a psychologist in private practice in Center City who works with adolescents, said that social distancing requirements affect teens differently than adults because it is developmentally appropriate for them to prioritize friendships. She said socially distancing from friends takes a much more negative emotional toll on teens than adults.

“Their task of development is to create social relationships and work on their

own sense of identity and autonomy, so when there are barriers in the way of that healthy developmental goal, that can create negative emotional consequences like anxiety, depression, stress, or anger,” Braunstein said. “I think it’s important for everyone to have empathy for that.”

These developmental priorities make young individuals particularly vulnerable to mass quarantine policies, as they not only remove important factors necessary for maturity but prevent the achievement of biological necessities. A study conducted by the Mental Health Foundation [notes](#),

“Emerging evidence suggests that, amongst the general population in the UK, the proportion of adults experiencing loneliness is highest amongst young adults aged 18-24, with another survey identifying that 50% of 16-24 year-olds have experienced ‘lockdown loneliness.’ This could, as the literature suggests, be a consequence of the loss of peer group support during this (sic) important developmental stages where peer interaction is important for brain development, self-concept construction, and ultimately mental health and wellbeing.”

These increased feelings of loneliness can be attributed to the fact that people in these age groups are not only in an awkward social period but because of their biological needs for development. An article in *New Europe* [notes](#)

“Children, teens, and young adults have a higher need for structure and in-person socialization than older adults. Kids learn vital social skills by physically interacting with one another, including sharing, cooperation, respect, loyalty, and empathy. Child psychologist [Dr. Tali Shenfield](#) believes that most kids can bounce back from short periods of isolation; however, enduring multiple lockdowns could force them to miss key developmental milestones. She also worries that this could lead to a permanent reduction in social competence...

Compounding these difficulties, adolescents rely heavily on their peers for a sense of safety. After age 10, kids become less likely to benefit from the security of being at home with parents, which leaves them more vulnerable to pandemic-related anxiety. Again, virtual socialization can’t fully compensate for this deficit: social media is already a [proven contributor](#) to anxiety, depression, loneliness, and self-esteem problems among teens and preteens. Spending more time online could potentially worsen teens’ sense of isolation rather than making it better.”

In the early stages of life, human biology is programmed to not only make friends and participate in social functions but to make risky decisions that not only fulfill important developmental roles but sensation-seeking inclinations.

The Biological Demands of Developing Brain Chemistry

A study published by Karger [notes](#),

“Regions of the human brain develop at different rates across the first two decades of life, with some maturing before others. It has been hypothesized that a mismatch in the timing of maturation between subcortical regions (involved in affect and reward processing) and prefrontal regions (involved in cognitive control) underlies the increase in risk-taking and sensation-seeking

behaviors observed during adolescence.”

This is part of the reason why young people have a desire to be out on the playground during childhood and out partying during the later stages of adolescence. The ongoing development of the human brain takes years, which explains the maturation of priorities and self-control in the later stages of life. During the adolescent stages, brain chemistry tends to create a desire to make riskier decisions, pursue social activity, and seek pleasure. A study published in the *Journal of Current Opinion In Behavioral Sciences* [notes](#),

“Although adolescents appear to have full access to many of the cognitive foundations of decision-making, several aspects of decision-making such as intertemporal choice, prospective evaluation, and integration of positive and negative feedback are not yet tuned to typical adult levels. Still other processes that inform decision-making are uniquely amplified during adolescence: learning from direct experience, reward reactivity, tolerance of ambiguity, and context-dependent orientation toward risk in exciting or peer-laden situations.”

Having access to social opportunities, whether that is in-person schooling, large events, time out with friends, and other aspects of normal society, are especially important to young people due to their gradually maturing and evolving brain chemistry that demands such experiences.

Missing Meaningful Life Events

One year for a young person is far more significant than a year for an older individual. This is not only because of ongoing physical maturation but because of the way life events are structured in human upbringing. These important events could range from making meaningful connections in the first year of college to memorable events such as sports and school dances to creating critical foundations in entry-level jobs. All of these were wiped out by lockdowns, which further exacerbate the vulnerability of young people to lasting psychological and developmental damage. The economic downturn caused by lockdowns also hit young workers especially hard. [CNBC](#) writes,

“More than one in six young people, aged 18-29, have stopped working since the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, the UN’s International Labour Organization said in its fourth report on the [impact of Covid-19 on the global workforce](#).

While this is only a slight increase on the nearly 14% of young people unemployed in 2019, the ILO pointed out that the youth unemployment rate was already higher than any other group...

The ILO said that more than four in 10 young people, aged 15-24, employed globally were working in hard-hit sectors when the crisis began and nearly 77% of this cohort were in informal jobs, compared to 60% of adult workers aged 25 and above. ”

Alongside the economic vulnerability, young people are also in a fragile social stage in life, full of important events that were taken by lockdowns. Valerie Braunstein notes for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* [that](#).

“There’s also a heightened sense of loss and grief for teens because of their expectations of how things were going to go — think proms, graduations, summer jobs, and travel — before the pandemic, Braunstein stressed.”

We can apply this logic to college students as well who are in an incredibly powerful transition period in their lives that includes living independently from their families, fulfilling sensation-seeking needs, and finding their place in the world. Lockdowns have taken important life experiences from college students such as graduations, networking opportunities, conferences, parties, and friends. Regardless of how important or trivial these things may be, they all play an integral role in social development as well as overall mental well-being. As a result, young people are hit twice by lockdowns, once because of their biological needs, and the second from their unique position in life that is full of meaningful events.

It goes without saying that for those in disadvantaged positions, such as existing mental health issues, low-income households, and fragile families, these factors are only exacerbated. An article in the BBC [notes](#),

[“Primary school-aged children saw rising problems with emotional and behavioural issues](#) linked to stressed parents trying to juggle work and home-schooling, while [83% of young people with mental health needs said lockdown was making them feel worse](#). Lockdown also exposed children to other risks such as domestic violence, cramped housing and strained family relationships, with the poorest families hurt most.”

Key Takeaways

This article is the first part of what will be a two-part series. It has outlined the reasons why young people are especially vulnerable to lockdown policies which have not only failed to contain the virus but have wrecked society. Part two will recount the damage done by such policies on age groups under 30.

Societal norms and practices exist for a reason and part of that is because of biological traits. When government policies ignore these scientific truths about human nature in favor of world views that believe that people’s lives are simply switches that can be flicked on and off, that is a recipe for disaster. The inability of policymakers to acknowledge and grasp the basic biological needs of young individuals has resulted in nothing but disaster for all segments of the population. Lockdowns have failed to adequately protect the elderly from Covid-19 and unleashed a new public health crisis upon the young that may take years to fully understand.

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Ethan joined AIER in 2020 as an Editorial Assistant and is a graduate of Trinity College. He received a BA in Political Science alongside a minor in Legal Studies and Formal Organizations. He currently serves as Local Coordinator at Students for Liberty and the Director of the Mark Twain Center for the Study of Human Freedom at Trinity College.

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