Emerging Trends: The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Families

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected families in myriad ways. Further, those families already marginalized by our systems were hit the hardest by the pandemic, widening already present disparities. Social isolation, juggling changing routines and disruptions in continuity of school and childcare, limited access to health and mental health services, financial insecurity, and uncertainty for the future are among the challenges families have been experiencing.

Health

- Both exposure to and deaths from COVID-19 have had a disproportionally heavy toll on low-income families and families of color.¹
- Parents have experienced a worsening of chronic health problems and mental health conditions, difficulty sleeping, and increased use of tobacco, alcohol and other substances.²
- Black and Latinx families experienced more food insecurity during pandemic.³

Financial Hardship

- Families faced income loss, job loss, financial difficulties, and material hardship as they made difficult choices regarding work, personal safety and wellbeing of their families.
- Child Tax Credit (CTC) mitigated material hardship and helped families maintain financial stability during the pandemic.⁴ Child poverty increased following the expiration of the monthly CTC payments from 12% in December 2021 to 17% in January 2022, the highest rate since the end of 2020.⁵

Social, Emotional, and Mental Health

- Parents experienced isolation, balancing work and family, worry over family getting sick, disruption of childcare and school, inconsistent routines, and expanded caregiver responsibilities all without typical support networks and resources.⁶
- Parental distress is on the rise again (after relief of the vaccine) as the persistent weight and burden of COVID-19 continues after 2 years with new variants emerging.⁷
- Childcare shortages and childcare disruption are linked to both parent and child emotional distress.⁸
- Infants whose mothers were in the first trimester of pregnancy at the height of the pandemic had the lower scores on motor and personal-social domains.⁹
Child Abuse and Intimate Partner Violence

- With lockdowns and virtual school at the beginning of the pandemic and increased isolation overall, there may have been less observation and identification of abuse and domestic violence as well as less access to supports.
- Reports of child abuse and neglect fell during the beginning of the pandemic but the severity of abuse in confirmed cases increased. Confirmed cases were more likely to require medical treatment or intervention.

Long-term Impact of COVID-19 on Families

- Chronic stress during childhood without adequate support of adults can lead to toxic stress, or the chronic activation of stress response system.
- Parents and caregivers play a key role in buffering children from the effects of stress but during the pandemic have been overloaded with threats to their own well-being. Their ability to play the buffering role has been compromised.
- Toxic stress has lasting, long-term effects on health, mental health, and academic success.

---


