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YOUTH LIFE SATISFACTION AND SOCIAL INTERACTION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Background

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced public health measures ranging from the complete restriction of in-person school- and community-based socialization to reopening phases reminiscent of pre-pandemic life. This study compared child and youth life satisfaction between lockdown and reopening, while investigating the role of social interaction and its mediums as predictors of well-being.

Methods

This study used longitudinal data on youth aged 11-18 from the COVID-19 Ontario Provincial Assessment and Tracking of Child and Family Health (ON:PATH). ON:PATH was a study conducted between January 2021 and December 2022 to monitor the mental health and well-being of children in Ontario, Canada during the COVID-19 pandemic. Caregivers of children aged 4-18 were recruited through a nationally-representative survey research panel with youth aged 11-18 identified for additional self-report. This study examined youth self-report data from Time 2 (May-June 2021) and Time 3 (October-November 2021).

Life satisfaction was measured on a scale from the 2019 Canadian Health Survey on Children and Youth. Social interaction was measured using (1) frequency of weekly in-person meetings and (2) time spent calling and messaging based on scales from the Ontario Child Health Study. Primary analyses consisted of multi-level, linear mixed-effects models.

Results

Models consisted of 281 individuals and 422 observations over two time points. 138 (49%) participants identified as female, 135 (48%) as male, and 8 (3%) as other. The mean age was 14.91 (SD = 2.12).

Mean life satisfaction was lower in times of lockdown than in times of reopening ($\beta = 0.30, p < 0.05$). Increased in-person interaction predicted better life satisfaction, regardless of the state of the pandemic ($\beta = 0.17, p < 0.05$). Loneliness may mediate this relationship. However, virtual interactions had a negative association with life satisfaction—particularly during reopening ($\beta = -0.13, p < 0.05$).

Conclusion

These findings demonstrate an overall need to increase youth access to in-person socialization opportunities at school and in the community—with the goal of improving long-term life satisfaction and well-being. Results also point towards improving measurements of online communication, which would allow researchers to more precisely understand the context and nuance surrounding youth virtual interactions.