

A LITERATURE REVIEW: HOW DID COVID-19 AFFECT SINGLE PARENTS AND  
ADOLESCENTS

By

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### **Abstract**

This paper reviews the literature on single mothers and adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, single mothers and adolescents were one of the most vulnerable groups. They were negatively affected by economic resources and emotional distress. **Method:** This literature review was conducted by applying the Ecological Systems Theory, specifically, the exosystem, mesosystem, and microsystem. **Results:** The findings reveal that single mothers struggled financially and mentally. Adolescents struggled with mental health and resources such as internet access, food insecurity, and social support. The findings also revealed that financial insecurity and emotional distress were correlated. **Conclusions:** There were limitations to these conclusions: this research is relatively new, and recent findings are coming to light every day. In conclusion, single mothers and adolescents had a hard time concerning the pandemic but found the stimulus and child tax credit to help tremendously.

Previous research has revealed that many single parents face harsh realities. To help this population, we first must understand the variables affecting them. Single parents are most likely to live below the poverty line and they have a hard time balancing work and home life (Aquilino, 2005). This affects adolescents in the family. Before the pandemic, these families already had challenging obstacles, and 2020 only exacerbated these barriers.

Those below the poverty line found themselves most vulnerable. COVID pushed about 88- 115 million people into poverty (Howton & Felsenthal, 2020). Single-family units found themselves struggling financially and emotionally (Radey et al., 2021). In 2021,  $\frac{2}{3}$  of single mothers lived below the 200% poverty line (Radey et al., 2021). They felt overwhelmed and overstretched; many had to balance work and parenting. At times they had no option but to keep working because they were the main provider for their family (Radey et al., 2021). They struggled with necessities such as bills, food, and school resources (Tatay, 2021). This made them feel overwhelmed and stressed (Tatay, 2021). The research revealed that adolescents were influenced by how their families overcame these tribulations (Li et al., 2021).

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory will be used for this literature review to provide a sounder understanding of how adolescents have been affected. This theory looks at the context of each tier of the environment and how it affects the child's development (Guy-Evans, 2020). Each level can affect one another, negatively or positively (Guy-Evans, 2020). This theory will provide insight into how adolescents were affected during and after the COVID- 19 pandemic. The tiers I will be focusing on are the microsystem, mesosystem, and exosystem.

The microsystem is the environment where the adolescent has direct contact. This is the tier where a child's relationships and interactions affect their immediate surroundings (Guy-Evans, 2020). The mesosystem is the tier that provides the connections between the child's microsystems (Guy-Evans, 2020). This is where the experiences interact and influence each other, ultimately affecting the child. The exosystem is an environment where the child is not involved, but it still affects them through influences on the other systems (Guy-Evans, 2020).

### **Microsystem**

The focus of this tier was on the relationship between adolescents and parents. Some of the recurring themes were mental health and parenting style. COVID impacted families in more than one way, one being mental health. Something to take into consideration is the history of mental health for individuals. Adolescents with a history of mental health and trauma are the most vulnerable group (Bhatia, 2020). During the pandemic, there was a constant fear of illness, which led to a limited amount of social interaction, decreased structure, and less contact with school and teachers (Bhatia, 2020). Before the pandemic, adolescents struggling with mental health had a support system (Bhatia, 2020). They relied on their peers, schools, and community for emotional support, but during the pandemic, this was lost. The findings reveal that many adolescents' parents found an emotional change in their teens. We can see that they lost their social support groups and the resources they relied on. This also affected parents/caregivers; they had an increase in anxiety and stress (Bhatia, 2020). Parents found themselves struggling with job loss and financial difficulties (Bhatia, 2020).

Due to the ongoing stress of both parents and adolescents, this affected their reactions and home environment. Female single parents had higher rates of mental and physical health problems (Patrick et al., 2021). The hardships that single mothers faced during the pandemic led to different parenting styles; permissive and authoritarian (Tatay, 2021). Some parents were more open-minded with their adolescents, while others wanted more obedience (Tatay, 2021). Parenting styles are important because they ultimately affect the relationship between adolescents and mothers. Attachment theory states that parents' stress may reduce their adolescents' feeling of emotional connection and security, resulting in feeling unsafe, insecure, and distressed (Whittle et al, 2020). If parents are exhibiting depression, anxiety, parental hostility, and lower parental warmth, then adolescents are more likely to have increased mental health problems (Whittle et al, 2020). Having a positive relationship with a caregiver is crucial for youth; this leads to healthy development (Whittle et al, 2020).

During the pandemic, adolescents that reported having a better relationship with their parents had better mental health overall (Cooper et al., 2021). In a recent study done in the UK, adolescents that were lonelier had increased symptoms of distress (Cooper et al., 2021). Increased loneliness is associated with mental health problems. Therefore, adolescents that have a closer relationship with their parents, have decreased mental health problems (Cooper et al., 2021). What researchers found was that emotions are connected and can be influential on family cohesion and adaptability (Li et al., 2021). Researchers tried to understand this by conducting a study with adolescents and parents. Adolescents and parents took an online questionnaire where they answered questions about depression, family cohesion, and adaptability. In the

questionnaire, parents and adolescents had to score their own and each other's emotions. The results revealed that the parents who scored high on depression also reported high depressive scores for their adolescents (Li et al., 2021). When adolescents and parents score high on depression, this leads to a more chaotic and rigid family environment (Li et al., 2021). When parents express symptoms of depression, this could lead to creating a hostile environment for their teens (Li et al., 2021). This affects the adolescents, causing them to score high on depression (Li et al., 2021). This was an ongoing cycle. The pandemic brought parents and adolescents into close contact. This affected the mental health of parents and teens, which would then affect parenting styles, and quickly would affect the home environment.

### **Mesosystem**

This tier focused on the interaction between the adolescent microsystems, specifically family and school. To have a clearer sense of the circumstances families faced during the pandemic, I wanted to look into how parents and school officials interacted. The interactions between these systems have a direct impact on adolescents.

During the pandemic, many schools were forced to go remote; this limited the interaction between parents and teachers and adolescents and teachers. In doing so, the findings revealed that parents and students had a harder time keeping track of education and maintaining routines.

During the pandemic, many parents lost communication with teachers; this forced them to take on the teacher roles (Koskela et al., 2020). Parents expressed that this was a difficult task, mainly due to not having the proper tools or knowledge to teach their adolescents (Koskela et al., 2020). From the parental viewpoint, parents expressed that the school environment was more

controlled than being at home (Koskela et al., 2020). They noticed their adolescents had a harder time staying engaged and focused on school work (Koskela et al., 2020). Parents also expressed that they had limited communication with teachers, and they had to learn to balance school and home life (Koskela et al., 2020). They ultimately took on the teacher role (Koskela et al., 2020).

Parents found themselves relying on schools for meals and childcare. Not being able to depend on and have schools as a social support network disrupted daily living (Patrick et al., 2021). Families voiced that they became food insecure because of this closure (Patrick et al., 2021). Single mothers had an increase in workload, home duties, and childcare (Dunatchik et al., 2021). Many single mothers reduced their work hours to help with home learning (Dunatchik et al., 2021). In doing so, this affected their financial situation (Dunatchik et al., 2021). This outcome increased feelings of loneliness, depression, and anxiety in mothers (Dunatchik et al., 2021).

Not being able to communicate with school officials left parents feeling desperate; they were not able to manage their schedules and their adolescents' schedules (Koskela et al., 2020). We know that single- mothers have a harder time doing this because they have limited time and resources to foster home learning (Bayrakdar & Guveli, 2020). A study done by Bayrakdar and Guveli found that single-parent families spent less time doing school work than two-parent households (2020).

We know that children need to have the support of their teachers and parents to be successful in school. During the pandemic, many schools closed because of COVID. This made it harder for teachers and parents to communicate. Due to the closure, single-parent mothers had

an increase in workloads, such as home learning, work, and house duties (Dunatchik et al., 2021). They lacked financial support, time, and necessities such as school and house items. Therefore, the lack of resources inhibited their ability to support their adolescents during home learning. In conclusion, we can see that this tier made a dramatic shift. The adolescent's home-school mesosystem was no longer in a school setting but changed to a home setting. Being in a home setting led to a lack of interaction with peers and teachers. This hindered the adolescents' living circumstances during this period.

### **Exosystem**

The exosystem focuses on the link between immediate environments and settings; the adolescent is not an active participant but is still affected by the outcomes and decisions of this tier. For example, things such as the parent's workplace, mass media, and parents' friends are all part of the exosystem.

For this tier specifically, I want to focus on work and finances. Many parents went through a dramatic change during the pandemic, especially in employment. Some parents had to alter their lives to meet their family needs. This alteration affected adolescents.

All family units were impacted by employment during the pandemic, but single-parent families had a higher disadvantage financially. Almost  $\frac{2}{3}$  of single mothers live below the poverty line (Radey et al., 2021). Single mothers make judgments based on budget, cost, and benefits (Radey et al., 2021). Most of their decisions are influenced by work and finances. Many mothers lost their jobs due to the pandemic, and those that kept their jobs expressed that they felt overworked (Radey et al., 2021). Mothers that kept their jobs stated that they had very few



childcare options (Radey et al., 2021). Parents that lost their jobs and had a lower income were more likely to keep their children at home. Parents that kept their job and had a higher income were more likely to send their children back to school (Radey et al., 2021).

Mothers that stayed home had an increase in workload (Dunatchik., 2021). The mothers that continued to work during the pandemic had an increase in childcare and housework duties (Dunatchik., 2021). Work never ended for the stay-at-home mom or the working mom; it simply changed. Mothers that kept their job, had to cut hours at work to be able to balance their new roles (Dunatchik., 2021). When schools closed, mothers felt lonely, depressed, and anxious regarding their new routine (Dunatchik., 2021). They felt immense pressure when it came to home learning. Because of the hardships single mothers faced due to the work environment, it was predicted that children K- 12 would lose about one year of education (Radey et al., 2021).

Work plays a dominating role for single mothers. They must continue to work because they are the main breadwinners. Work often influences finances and this can be impactful on the children living in the home. Before the pandemic, single parents were already at a disadvantage; intact families had income and savings that were 3x higher than single parents (Aquilino, 2005). Single parents are more susceptible to experiencing financial crises; illness, job loss, and reduced support from their noncustodial parents (Aquilino, 2005). Because of these implications, single parents are more likely to expect more out of their adolescents (Weiss, 1979). They tend to rely on them more and expect them to be more responsible, independent, and alert to adult values (Weiss, 1979). And the pandemic only worsened these outcomes.

Tatay's (2021) study looked into this predicament. She did in-depth interviews with multiple mothers that took place in the Philippines; her findings revealed that single parents experienced financial problems during the pandemic. They explained that it was hard for them to provide for their families and this led to a lack of emotional support for their children. Single parents felt a burden, and at times felt emotionally incapable, unable to be a support system for their adolescent children (Tatay, 2021).

However, there was a change with the child tax credit and stimulus. Poverty rates were lower in 2020 than in 2018 (Wheaton et al, 2021). This is because the child tax credit and stimulus provided much-needed help for single parents' households (Wheaton et al, 2021). "A fully available Child Tax Credit would lift out of poverty 1 million Black, 1 million Latino, 850,000 non-Hispanic white, 120,000 Asian and Pacific Islanders, and 70,000 Native American individuals, including children. It would be particularly beneficial for children of color; it would lift an estimated 710,000 Black children, 700,000 Latino children, 60,000 Asian and Pacific Islander children, and 41,000 Native American children out of poverty, and lift millions of more children closer to the poverty line. The impacts on deep poverty would be even larger for Black and Latino children than for non-Hispanic white children (Marr et al, 2020, p. 9)."

### **Findings Across Systems**

In this section of the paper, I will discuss how these findings influenced and connected with the other systems. The pandemic affected the work and the finances of single-parent families. Single- mothers felt a burden to work because their families depend on them, but by doing so, they felt overworked. And those that lost their job felt emotionally and economically

unable to provide for their household. Those that kept their job or lost their job had the same feelings of loneliness, depression, and anxiety. This has a direct influence on the microsystem, when parents work more, this then pushes adolescents to grow up faster (Weiss, 1979).

Adolescents are then left to become responsible for household duties (Weiss, 1979). When parents are not able to financially provide for their family, they become emotionally distressed, this affects the microsystem (Patrick et al., 2021). The microsystem is where the child has direct contact with everything around them, specifically focusing on the parent and adolescent relationship (Guy-Evans, 2020). When parents feel distressed because of outside variables, this affects their mental health (Patrick et al., 2021). This then changes their relationships with others, specifically their children (Patrick et al., 2021). Parents that exhibited feelings of distress had more of an authoritarian parenting style (Tatay, 2021). In doing so, this can cause a rigid relationship between adolescents and parents (Tatay, 2021). Negativity affecting the microsystem means that both the adolescents and parents are being affected by the work environment (Radey et al., 2021). But when the child tax credit and stimulus were introduced, this decreased the stress, and parents were able to provide the necessities for the family. This not only puts them above the poverty rate, but it provides peace of mind to parents. Giving the parents peace of mind means that they will have better interaction with their adolescents because as we know from the microsystem, parents and adolescents influence each other's emotions (Whittle et al., 2020).

Although this sounds like an ideal plan, we must remember that these findings are new, and these are predictions of what may and could happen if we continue to release the child tax credit and stimulus. As of January 2022, the monthly child tax credit is no longer being

distributed (Parolin et al., 2022). We have seen an increase in child poverty (Parolin et al., 2022). It was reported that the monthly child tax credit kept 3.7 million children from poverty (Parolin et al., 2022). Once the child tax credit ended, poverty rose from 12.1 % to 17 % (Parolin et al., 2022). And this number will continue to increase. We must remember that this information is changing due to the nuance of the pandemic

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, COVID- 19 affected the whole world, but single- mothers and adolescents were at a higher risk. Single families struggled financially and mentally. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory was used to better understand these findings, particularly as related to the microsystem, mesosystem, and exosystem. Through this approach, we learned that each tier is connected, and thus influences one another.

Families went through an array of changes when it came to COVID. These changes affected the microsystem, specifically the adolescent and parent relationship. Parents and adolescents influenced each other's emotions (Whittle et al, 2020). When a parent expressed negative emotions, the adolescents would also express negative emotions (Whittle et al, 2020). These emotions were due to several things, one being, a lack of support.

In the mesosystem, parents and adolescents could no longer depend on schools for support. COVID-19 affected the mesosystem by changing how adolescents interact with school; school no longer was a separate identity outside of the home, but it became home life (Dunatchik et al., 2021). Before COVID, adolescents spent the majority of their time in schools. This is

where they were able to make connections with peers and teachers. In doing so, this formed a social support network for them. They were also able to get away from home life and create a space with their peers. This changed when schools closed down and moved into the home. Adolescents could no longer depend on the social support that they once had. The interactions with friends and teachers did not exist (Dunatchik et al., 2021). The mesosystem changed to where adolescents were now depending on their families for this support (Dunatchik et al., 2021). With this new way of living, there was an increase in school, work, and house duties (Dunatchik et al., 2021).

This increase in home duties and work duties affected the parents' exosystem. Some parents lost their jobs while others had to cut their hours to meet their adolescent's needs, this affected finances and put single families at a disadvantage (Patrick et al., 2021). Parents at this time found themselves emotionally distraught; these emotions affected the microsystem.

This research clearly illustrates that COVID harmed single-parent family units, but it raises questions about what might happen next. This research is new, and new studies are revealed every day. Based on these conclusions, researchers should look for new patterns and implications that may arise from this.

Through this literature review, fundamental problems arose during COVID-19; we can see how this affected single families. Some prevalent themes were finances, mental health, and a lack of social support. To help these families, I believe we first must implement a type of child tax credit. From the previous research, we learned that this helped parents and supported their lives.

Second, I also feel we should offer free mental health classes. These classes would be provided to single-parent families. Single parents and adolescents should participate together at least once a week. Mental health professionals would give these families the proper tools when it comes to tackling stress, anxiety, and any other problems. The main objective here is for parents and adolescents to learn how to work together. In doing so, parents and adolescents would learn how to properly manage and regulate emotions. This will have a positive effect on the overall cohesion of the household.

And third, I think schools and parents should work together. Schools should offer a program where adolescents can get one-on-one support. This would be an after-school program, and the teacher/ staff would work with adolescents when it comes to homework and overall performance in school. When we establish that one-on-one support, it is easier to see when a child is struggling academically and emotionally. This staff/ teacher should then meet with the parent once a week, during this time, the staff/ teacher needs to establish a relationship with the parent. The parents should be aware of everything that is going on, but most importantly, they need to be involved. These are just a few suggestions to support single-parent families. I hope that through this research, our community will be able to understand how we can better help these families.

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