POWER IN OUR TRUTHS:
GIRLS AND GENDER-EXPANSIVE YOUNG PEOPLE OF COLOR ON THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

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WHEN SO MANY THINGS ARE HAPPENING THAT AFFECT YOUTH, ITS IMPORTANT TO CHECK IN WITH THEM AND NOT JUST MOVE ABOUT THE WORLD AS THOUGH EVERYTHING IS FINE OR WILL BE FINE WHEN IT ISN’T.

- 20 YEARS OLD, BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN, SHE/HER (OREGON)
ABOUT JUSTICE + JOY NATIONAL COLLABORATIVE

At Justice + Joy National Collaborative, our goals are to achieve collective power to advance justice, establish affirming social narratives, and build ecosystems of support with and for girls, young women, and gender-expansive young people of color. We envision a world in which all cis and trans girls, young women, and gender-expansive young people can achieve their potential and live unapologetic, liberated lives without fear of violence or injustice.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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IMPORTANT NOTE

This is a time of tremendous transformation during which we acknowledge that gender norms are a social construct built on a false binary. We recognize that gender and how we claim our identities is evolving across the spectrum. In response, the language we use to describe ourselves continues to transform and grow.

Some of the content in this report may be triggering. We urge readers to prioritize their wellness and self-care while engaging with the text.

SUGGESTED CITATION


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At the writing of this report, the United States was leading the world in confirmed COVID-19 cases and deaths. Reports in early 2023 estimated 104 million documented cases and more than 1.1 million deaths from COVID-19 related complications. Throughout the pandemic, communities of color were disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, as indicated by a range of health and economic indicators when compared to white communities. People of color were more likely to be hospitalized and die from the virus. Growing gaps in wealth, employment, housing, and access to health care also disproportionately impacted communities of color. For girls and gender-expansive young people of color, many took on the added responsibilities of caring for siblings and family members, supplementing sudden economic hardships, and navigating emotional stressors caused by the pandemic.

As noted by one participant,

“It’s stressful, not just in your academic life but also in your personal life. Many of us are going through a crisis trying to refigure ourselves again. Pandemics had a significant impact on how much we were able to live our life and to readjust to this new way of trying to get back to what used to be normal is difficult.”

-19 YEARS OLD, ASIAN/ASIAN AMERICAN, OTHER & MULTIPLE PRONOUNS, (MINNESOTA)

This brief report includes the findings from survey questions focused on COVID-19 and its impact on the lives of 121 girls and gender-expansive young people of color. The brief includes findings regarding access to COVID-19 related services (i.e., testing and vaccines), concerns about contracting and spreading the virus to others, and the effects of COVID-19 related experiences on their mental health and other key areas in their lives. Finally, we describe the various strategies girls and gender-expansive young people of color used to cope during the first two years of the pandemic.
COVID-19 PREVENTION MEASURES AND TRANSMISSION CONCERNS

During the two years following the national shutdown, regular COVID-19 testing, staying current with recommended vaccines, and abiding by social distancing and masking protocols were determined to be the most effective means of preventing the spread of the virus and reducing the risk of severe health complications and possible death. At the time of our survey, access to testing and vaccines was widely accessible, and communities were loosening social distancing-related restrictions.

The girls and gender-expansive young people of color who completed our survey indicated a high use of testing and vaccine programs (Figure 1). More than 80% indicated they knew where to access these programs and utilized these services. In our survey, girls and gender-expansive young people of color participated in vaccine programs at a higher rate (90.9%) than the national average (81.4%)⁴, and rates of ever testing positive (58.7%) were equal to the general population (58%).⁵

![FIGURE 1](image-url)
COVID-19 CONCERNS AND LIFE CHANGES

There is a growing body of evidence suggesting COVID-19 related stressors have taken a serious toll on communities of young people, especially those in their adolescence.6,7 For example, one study found rates of anxiety, depression, and mood disorders after a COVID-19 related event (COVID-19 diagnosis) were highest among young people aged 12-17 compared to those under age 11. Having a deeper understanding of the primary concerns or stressors during the COVID-19 pandemic could shed insight on the issues needing attention among girls and gender-expansive young people of color and how best to prepare should a similar event occur in the future.

CONCERNS ABOUT CONTRACTING AND SPREADING COVID-19

Contracting and spreading the virus were of high concern for girls and gender-expansive young people of color who completed this survey. When asked how concerned they have been about getting COVID-19 throughout the pandemic, 67.5% indicated they were either extremely or moderately concerned about getting the virus (Figure 2). Only 11.7% of participants stated they were either slightly or not at all concerned.

When asked if they were concerned about spreading COVID-19 to a vulnerable person (i.e., pregnant person, elder, chronically ill), nearly half (48.3%) were extremely concerned, and 25% were moderately concerned. Only 4.3% were not at all concerned about spreading the virus (Figure 3).

![Figure 2](image1.png)

**Figure 2**

How concerned have you been that you would get COVID-19 throughout the pandemic? (N=120)

![Figure 3](image2.png)

**Figure 3**

How concerned have you been that you would spread COVID-19 to vulnerable people? (N=120)
CONCERNS ABOUT CHANGING COVID-19 RESTRICTIONS

In 2022, during our survey, many states began loosening COVID-19 safety restrictions. Specifically, more schools returned to in-school settings, mask mandates were being lifted, and more people were returning to pre-COVID-19 close-contact social activities. When asked if they were concerned about loosening restrictions, over half (55%) of the girls and gender-expansive young people of color in our survey indicated that they felt somewhat or moderately concerned about returning to normal and contracting COVID-19 (Figure 4). Just under a third (28.3%) indicated they were extremely concerned about loosening restrictions and getting COVID-19. Only 16.7% indicated they were slightly or not at all concerned.

COVID-19 RELATED LIFE CHANGES

For many young people, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted school related milestones and special occasions and caused dramatic changes in their connections to positive social supports and networks. These changes included sudden disconnection with family, peers, and educational settings known to be factors related to positive youth development. Many young people also found themselves and their families challenged economically and emotionally as many dealt with sudden sickness with no known cure and death in their immediate families and within their communities. Young people, and the world in general, were forced to navigate these challenges during a time when there were no clear indications of when life would return to “normal”.

FIGURE 4
HOW CONCERNED ARE YOU ABOUT LOOSENING RESTRICTIONS? (N=120)
When asked whether their lives had changed because of the COVID-19 pandemic, more than three quarters of girls and gender-expansive young people of color (76.7%) indicated that their lives had changed either moderately or extremely due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 5). Only 8.3% of participants indicated that their lives had changed slightly or not at all.

To get a general sense of how life had changed, life challenges related to COVID-19 were listed and participants were asked to check off all that applied (Figure 6). The experiences selected by more than half of the participants included developing a new or worsening mental health challenge (60.3%) and experiencing someone in their family getting very sick from COVID-19 (52.1%). Approximately one third indicated they had failed a class or grade (33.9%), someone they loved developed a new or worsening mental health challenge (32.2%), and/or their basic needs were seriously threatened (32.2%). Another quarter indicated someone close to them got COVID-19 and passed away (25.6%) and/or they had lost their job or sources of income (24%). Finally, 11.6% indicated childcare and/or babysitters were not available or were lost due to the pandemic.
SCHOOL CHANGES AND COVID-19

As expected, most participants (77.6%) indicated they missed out on events and opportunities such as the prom, school graduations, homecoming activities, sporting events, internships, and other school related activities due to COVID-19 (Figure 7). These activities are often considered significant milestones marking the end of adolescence and the beginning of young adulthood.

We were also interested in learning about the impact of COVID-19 on girls and gender-expansive young people of colors’ access to school related resources. Amongst this group, responses to access to materials and resources for classes, stable internet connection, computer and other necessary technological devices for school remained relatively the same (Figure 8). Between 45-66% of participants indicated they had access to these resources "every day" during the height of the pandemic and two years into the pandemic. Perhaps the greatest shift was related to having a quiet place to study. At the height of the pandemic, 23.3% stated they had a quiet place to study every day during the pandemic compared to 34.2% of girls and gender-expansive young people of color who responded they had access to a quiet place to study after the pandemic.

FIGURE 7
DID YOU MISS OUT ON A SCHOOL RELATED OPPORTUNITY (E.G. PROM, GRADUATION, HOMECOMING, SPORTS EVENTS, INTERNSHIP, ETC.) DUE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC? (N=116)

Yes 77.6%  
No 19%  
Not Sure 3.4%

FIGURE 8
DID YOU HAVE ACCESS “EVERYDAY” TO: “YES” RESPONSES (N=121)

- Materials/resources for classes: 45%  
- Stable internet connection: 47.5%  
- Computer/other devices for school: 64.2%  
- Quiet place to study: 34.2%

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resource/Activity</th>
<th>Access “Everyday” During the Pandemic</th>
<th>Access “Everyday” After the Pandemic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Materials/resources for classes</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stable internet connection</td>
<td>47.5%</td>
<td>44.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Computer/other devices for school</td>
<td>64.2%</td>
<td>66.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quiet place to study</td>
<td>34.2%</td>
<td>23.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, has anyone in your household lost income, sales, or work due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on employment, business, or the economy? (N=117)

While these numbers remained relatively the same from 2020 to 2022, it is worth noting the low levels of access to necessary school related materials and technology in general among girls and gender-expansive young people of color participating in the survey. Less than 50% of participants indicated they had access to materials and resources for classes and stable internet connection every day during the height of the pandemic and after or two years into the pandemic. Further, fewer than 65% of participants across both time periods indicated that they had access to a computer or other devices for school related activities every day.

Economic Changes and COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic had and continues to have a serious impact on our economy and the ability of individuals, families, and entire communities to survive, least of all thrive. When asked about the economic impact of COVID-19 in their lives, 60.6% of girls and gender-expansive young people of color indicated that someone in their household had lost income, sales, work, or other forms of economic support due to the impact of COVID-19 on employment, businesses, and/or the economy (Figure 9).

Mental Health and COVID-19 Pandemic

As with other studies and reports, girls and gender-expansive young people of color indicated they had developed challenges with their mental health and emotional wellbeing due to the COVID-19 pandemic. When asked if their mental and emotional wellbeing became a lot worse due to the pandemic only 9.2% of participants either disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement (Figure 10). Most participants (59.2%) either strongly agreed or agreed with this statement, with the remaining 31.7% responding that they neither agree nor disagree.

Figure 9

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, has anyone in your household lost income, sales, or work due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on employment, business, or the economy? (N=117)

Yes 60.6%
No 24.7%
Not Sure 14.6%

Figure 10

My mental health and emotional wellbeing has become a lot worse because of circumstances related to the COVID-19 pandemic. (N=120)

Strongly agree 22.5%
Agree 36.7%
Neither agree/disagree 31.7%
Disagree 5%
Strongly disagree 4.2%
When asked about ease of accessing mental health supports only 55% of girls and gender-expansive young people of color indicated they could easily access mental health supports if they wanted or needed them, with the remaining indicating they could not or were unsure if they could easily access these services if wanted or needed (Figure 11).

**FIGURE 11**
I HAVE ACCESS OR COULD EASILY ACCESS MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORTS IF I WANTED OR NEEDED THEM. (N=120)

**FIGURE 12**
WHAT ARE SOME THINGS THAT HAVE HELPED YOU COPE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC? (NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS MENTIONING THE STRATEGY, N=121)

COPING STRATEGIES DURING THE PANDEMIC

Given the unprecedented nature of COVID-19 and the level of mandated social isolation that took place during the first two years of the pandemic, individuals were challenged to identify or develop new coping strategies to mitigate the impacts of reduced social interactions, social supports, and trauma and adversity created by the pandemic. To better understand how girls and gender-expansive young people of color created positive spaces for themselves, we asked the following open-ended question: “What are some things that have helped you cope during the COVID-19 pandemic?” Using a basic theme analysis approach, ten themes were identified from the data, with four coping strategies being reported most often (Figure 12).

CREATING POSITIVE PERSONAL TIME

Engaging in positive activities during personal or alone time was reported by the most participants (62 out of 121). This coping strategy included a range of activities such as reading, journaling, meditating, listening to music, cooking, cleaning, personalizing their personal space, crocheting, getting a pet or becoming a “plant parent”, life planning, creating consistency and a
routine, taking morning baths, relaxing in their hammock, gardening, thinking positively about life, being intentional, learning new things, and for some, crying.

“I went outside in my backyard way more than I used to, and took up bike riding, skateboarding, and painting more! It was nice to focus more on myself and figure out more of the person I really am outside of how other people see me or how I am used to seeing myself. I got to think about what I really want out of life and hopefully find some direction/meaning.”

-28 YEARS OLD, LATINOX/E, OTHER & MULTIPLE PRONOUNS (MINNESOTA)

**EXERCISE AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITIES**

The second largest theme included coping strategies related to exercise and physical activities (41 out of 121). While most responses in this category simply mentioned “exercise” others identified more specific activities such as Zumba dancing, swimming, going on walks, hiking, yoga, working out, Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, and biking.

“I did daily workouts.”

-15 YEARS OLD, ASIAN/ASIAN AMERICAN, SHE/HER (WASHINGTON)

“I started going on walks with my family to get my mind off of the worries I felt and to get some exercise in for our mental health.”

-18 YEARS OLD, HISPANIC/LATINOX/E, SHE/HER (TEXAS)

**ENGAGING IN THE ARTS AND OTHER CREATIVE ACTIVITIES**

Creative or artistic activities were the third most mentioned coping strategy (21 out of 121). This category of activities included things such as getting a hobby, learning to play the guitar, painting, learning to dance, writing things such as music, poetry, and plays, and drawing.
“Crafting, beading, podcasts, walking, and writing poems.”
-23 YEARS OLD, AMERICAN INDIAN/ALASKA NATIVE, OTHER & MULTIPLE PRONOUNS (MINNESOTA)

CONNECTING WITH SOCIAL SUPPORTS

The fourth most mentioned coping strategy included activities related to connecting with social supports and peers (21 out of 121). These strategies included keeping in touch with and talking to friends and family, talking with a favorite teacher, and connecting with their mentor.

“Some things that have helped me cope during the pandemic was keeping in touch with close friends and discussing the problems at hand. By doing so my friends and I helped to keep each other entertained and comforted all while being miles apart. We created ways to entertain ourselves in group activities while being in our own homes during the pandemic.”
-23 YEARS OLD, BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN, SHE/HER (MISSISSIPPI)

“Facetiming friends, talking to my favorite teacher, journaling.”
-18 YEARS OLD, ASIAN/ASIAN AMERICAN, OTHER & MULTIPLE PRONOUNS (CALIFORNIA)

Finally, participants also mentioned engaging in a variety of coping strategies that included religious activities, watching television and movies, gaming, seeking counseling or therapy, working, volunteering, organizing in their communities, and engaging in social media related activities. Several respondents indicated that they did nothing or that they did not cope well during the pandemic.
The COVID-19 pandemic has had far reaching impacts. While no individual was spared, some communities bore more than their share of the burden. As reported by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities Black, multiracial, Latino/x, and Asian communities fared far worse on many key indicators of economic and social wellbeing compared to white communities throughout the course of the pandemic. While many hardships were mitigated by Federal relief efforts, issues such as food scarcity, inability to pay or catch up on rent or mortgages, difficulties covering household expenses, and unemployment persisted for many communities of color.

For girls and gender-expansive young people of color, the result of our brief survey highlights the tremendous toll of the pandemic in their social and emotional lives and wellbeing. Not only were they impacted economically, but emotionally, with nearly 60% indicating a worsening of their mental and emotional health since the start of the pandemic. This is understandable given the stressors endured during this time – witnessing serious illness and death, mental health challenges among family and peers, and losing out on key supports, events and activities known to support young people as they grow into adulthood. And, while many girls and gender-expansive young people of color identified strategies to cope with this unprecedented historical event, the toll on their lives remains.
SOME THINGS THAT HAVE HELPED ME COPE DURING THE PANDEMIC WAS KEEPING IN TOUCH WITH CLOSE FRIENDS AND DISCUSSING THE PROBLEMS AT HAND.

- 23 YEARS OLD, BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN, SHE/HER (MISSISSIPPI)
ENDNOTES


