

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

December 3, 2020

The Honorable Joshua Gordon, M.D., Ph.D.
Director
National Institute of Mental Health
6001 Executive Boulevard
Bethesda, MD 20892-9663

Dear Director Gordon:

We write to request information about the efforts the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) is taking to study the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the mental health of children and young adults and to encourage NIMH to prioritize these efforts to improve the ability of policymakers to respond to this pressing matter.

Recent reports have highlighted the increased prevalence of anxiety and depression among children and young adults as the current public health crisis persists.¹ While this pandemic has taken a toll on the mental health of many Americans, the impact has been especially severe on teenagers, who rely on friendships and connections while handling the pressure of high school. One recent study found that nearly one-third of surveyed high school students reported feeling unhappy or depressed in recent months, and more than a quarter of those students felt disconnected from teachers, classmates, or their school community.²

Earlier this month, the CDC released data showing that the proportion of children's emergency room visits related to mental health had increased significantly during the pandemic – increasing 31 percent for children between ages 12 and 17 from March to October compared to the same period in 2019.³ There was also a 24 percent increase in emergency room visits for children between ages 5 and 11. These troubling findings only further highlight concerns about the psychological effects that this pandemic is having on young people, and in particular on adolescents who are members of historically disadvantaged populations.

No one is immune to the stress that has accompanied the pandemic, and many aspects of this public health crisis have been demonstrated to adversely affect the mental health of children and young adults. Over 13 million people have had coronavirus in our country, and studies have

¹ Goldberg, E. (2020, Nov. 12). *Teens in Covid Isolation: 'I Felt Like I Was Suffocating'*. New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/12/health/covid-teenagers-mental-health.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

² Margolius, M., Doyle Lynch, A., Pufall Jones, E. & Hynes, M. (2020). *The State of Young People during COVID-19: Findings from a nationally representative survey of high school youth*. Americas Promise Alliance. https://www.americaspromise.org/sites/default/files/d8/YouthDuringCOVID_FINAL%20%281%29.pdf

³ Leeb, R., Bitsko, R., Radhakrishnan, L., Martinez P., Njai R., Holland, K. (2020, Nov. 13) *Mental Health-Related Emergency Department Visits Among Children Aged <18 Years During the COVID-19 Pandemic – United States, January 1-October 17, 2020*. Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/pdfs/mm6945a3-H.pdf>.

shown that children are more likely to report mental health issues if they personally know someone infected with the coronavirus.⁴ A record rate of 22 percent of children had an unemployed parent in the early months of the pandemic, and research shows that children are more likely to report mental health problems when a parent or guardian loses a job.⁵

As the lead federal agency for research on mental disorders, we respectfully request that you respond to the following questions:

1. What initiatives at NIMH are underway to research the mental health impact of this pandemic on children and young adults, including both the short-term and long-term consequences?
 - a. What steps is NIMH taking to ensure your studies cover a range of communities and populations to account for the different backgrounds and circumstances of children experiencing symptoms of mental health disorders?
 - b. What systems are in place to ensure that these findings are shared with relevant agencies, Congress, and the public to help inform the decisions of policymakers?
2. As social media and online platforms emerge as critical communication tools during this pandemic, do you have any specific initiatives underway to study the connection between the increased dependence on social media and mental health for children and teenagers? If so, please explain.
3. Could additional resources be used to facilitate or improve or accelerate the body of research on the intersection of the pandemic and children's mental health? If so, please describe.

We look forward to hearing about your research initiatives to protect and improve the health of the American people, including the mental health needs of the youngest members of our society.

Sincerely,

/S/ Amy Klobuchar
Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator

/S/ Elizabeth Warren
Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator

/S/ Margaret Wood Hassan
Margaret Wood Hassan
United States Senator

/S/ Tina Smith
Tina Smith
United States Senator

⁴ Goldberg, E. (2020, Nov. 12). *Teens in Covid Isolation: 'I Felt Like I Was Suffocating'*. New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/12/health/covid-teenagers-mental-health.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

⁵ DeParle, J. (2020, Oct. 31). *When Parents Lose Their Jobs, Their Children Also Suffer. But Sometimes There's a Consolation*. New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/31/us/politics/unemployment-parents-children-coronavirus.html>.

/S/ Jacky Rosen
Jacky Rosen
United States Senator

/S/ Robert P. Casey, Jr.
Robert P. Casey, Jr.
United States Senator

/S/ Sherrod Brown
Sherrod Brown
United States Senator

/S/ Robert Menendez
Robert Menendez
United States Senator

/S/ Angus S. King, Jr.
Angus S. King, Jr.
United States Senator

/S/ Tim Kaine
Tim Kaine
United States Senator

/S/ Richard Blumenthal
Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator

/S/ Christopher S. Murphy
Christopher S. Murphy
United States Senator

/S/ Kyrsten Sinema
Kyrsten Sinema
United States Senator

/S/ Chris Van Hollen
Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator

/S/ Debbie Stabenow
Debbie Stabenow
United States Senator