

# How Covid lockdowns hit mental health of teenage boys hardest

*New research findings are contrary to what had previously been thought about pandemic's effect on children's wellbeing*

[Hannah Fearn](#), Sat 23 Mar 2024 12.00 EDT



*When schools closed during lockdown, many teenage boys were isolated from their peers. Photograph: Carol Yepes/Getty Images*

Teenage boys were hit hardest by the Covid lockdowns, with their mental health failing to recover despite the return to normality, according to the most comprehensive academic study of its kind.

Early research into how lockdown affected children indicated that [girls had suffered more significant mental health problems](#) than boys.

However, a new study carried out by academics from three UK universities, published in the journal *European Child + Adolescent Psychiatry*, found that over the long term, teenage boys' mental health was more adversely affected.

The research followed a cohort of about 200 children, aged between 11 and 14 at the time, asking them and their mothers to assess their mental state. It logged data from each child before lockdown, three months after

the measures started and again at 15 months into the pandemic.

Researchers then compared this data with historical records that show the usual pattern of mental wellbeing for boys and girls during adolescence.

The academics found that while both sexes had an immediate decline in their mental health, boys then did not experience the natural improvement in mental wellbeing that usually comes with maturation as they move through the teenage years.

Dr Nicky Wright, a lecturer in psychology at Manchester Metropolitan University and a co-author of the paper, said: “The key message of this is that we expect more boys to be at risk of mental health problems now than we would before [the pandemic].”



*Boris Johnson announces the first lockdown in March 2020. Photograph: PA Video/PA*

“Girls, on average, are more likely to suffer with mental health problems than boys. But the girls in the study followed their usual pattern, suggesting the experience of lockdown had a more significant impact on boys than girls.

“There wasn’t a pandemic effect on girls’ depression. When you account for puberty and development, it’s consistent with previous trends,” said Wright.



[Young and old: how the Covid pandemic has affected every UK generation. Read more](#)

This weekend marks four years since the first UK lockdown was called on 23 March 2020. [Schools](#) were closed, leaving teenagers who were used to spending at least six hours a day surrounded by peers isolated from society. Work set by teachers for home schooling took an average of between two and three hours a day for most adolescents to complete, and with many parents working, lots of teenagers were left alone for long periods of time.

For those who were moving between primary and secondary school during the pandemic years, lockdowns also disrupted integration into new social groups and the chance to form friendships.

For older teenagers, universities and colleges switched to virtual lectures and seminars, leaving new students unable to form bonds with others.

The psychologist and writer Wendy Gregory said the findings of the study echoed changes to her client list in her private practice. “Lockdown has had a horrific impact on mental health, particularly in boys and young men, and partly I’m seeing the results of this now as I’m getting a lot more seeking therapy,” she said.

“There has been a big upturn in males seeking mental health support generally

across the age ranges, and for teen boys there has been a huge uptick.”

In south London, Dr Jen Wills Lamacq, a child psychologist who works in state schools, said she has seen the pandemic effect on boys’ mental health first-hand, including increased difficult behaviour. She believes the decline in young male mental health was triggered by the rupture to their lives at a crucial point in adolescent development.

“Lots of boys, to regulate their emotions, may want to be outside, doing something active and around other people, without necessarily talking. For long periods of time, they were deprived of opportunities to regulate their mental wellbeing in a way that comes naturally to them,” she said.

For parents of teenage boys and young men, the findings may come as little surprise. Single mother Rebecca\*, from London, says

her teenage son, who was already receiving counselling before the pandemic, had a breakdown during lockdown that resulted in him becoming violent and police being called to restrain him.

“He was doing his GCSEs and when lockdown happened at first it was a huge relief because he didn’t have to go into school, as that was a trigger for anxiety, but losing that routine was awful and he had a breakdown. He had a psychotic episode where he was hearing voices. The police came and were very hard with him, and they put him in handcuffs in front of me,” she said.

Rebecca’s son is now an adult and his health has improved from that crisis point, but she says lockdown has had a lasting impact on his mental wellbeing. “I think it was dreadful. I think there will be repercussions for years to come for all kids,” she said.