

Retrospective Analysis of COVID-19 Impact on Social + Emotional Development in Children of Low-Income Communities from Head Start

Gabrielle S. Li^{1*}, Satya P. Sanapati^{1*}, Amy Han²

¹Indiana University School of Medicine; ²Indiana University School of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry; *Shared First Authorship

Background

Geminus Head Start is a federal program that works with children under five years old from low-income communities to promote school readiness. The organization in Northwest Indiana provided anecdotal data on delayed social and emotional development of children during the pandemic. Studies have shown that adverse childhood development can have a severe psychological and physiological impact on health outcomes into adulthood. However, there has been a lack of research on quantifying the extent of damage from the pandemic on our Head Start children, who mainly identify as Black/African American.

Methods

Geminus Head Start provided demographic data including race, postal codes and DECA for over 4650 students from 2019-2023. DECA, Devereux Early Childhood Assessment, is used by educators to evaluate children's social emotional competence for early intervention. In this study, we are investigating the DECA categories, including initiative, self control, and attachment/relationships. We analyzed DECA scores via ANOVA along with listening into the teacher focus groups.

Results

Students had increased attachment/relationship scores from the 2019-2020 school year to the 2020-2021 school year (36.69 to 44.59). However, following COVID-19 to the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 school years, these scores dropped to 23.51. When looking at the second protective factor, self regulation, the opposite trend was found. The scores went from 18.79 in 2019-2020 down to 14.68 in 2020-2021 and eventually up to 23.51 in 2021-2022.

Conclusion

Like most institutions, the pandemic has created a time of isolation and instability for our children and their families. In particular, these children have not been able to access adequate conditions to develop emotional and social maturity. Lacking this development can lead to several negative health outcomes as it may impact mental health and the ability to create healthy supportive networks.