

Psychosocial Profile of 12- to 17-Year-Old Students at a Private High School in Manila: Study Protocol



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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Adolescents have been reported to have persistence of psychosocial behavioral issues even after the lockdown caused by COVID-19. According to Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, the adolescence stage is a phase when an individual finds a sense of self and personal identity by pursuing their own individual values, beliefs and ambitions. The pandemic lockdown has given us a unique opportunity to observe the effects of prolonged quarantine and limited social interactions on the psychosocial development of this age group.

Methodology: This is an ethically reviewed and approved protocol for a cross-sectional descriptive design to estimate the prevalence of psychosocial effects of post-COVID-19 lockdowns on children aged 12 to 17, utilizing the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). Participants are adolescents enrolled in Junior High School, Education High School, or Senior High School at a private institution in Manila. Individuals already diagnosed with cognitive impairments or psychological disturbances were excluded.

Intention for Publication: We are publishing the copy of our ethically approved proposal to increase transparency of our study. We believe that investigating the psychosocial development of adolescents to explain the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic is a unique approach to understanding its effects on their mental health. We hope that by making our protocol available, other investigators may be able to replicate our study in other subgroups of this population (ie, public schools, street children, home-schooled kids, etc.). It is our hope that if the study is replicated enough, we can have sufficient data to do a meta-analysis and get more accurate estimate of the effects.

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted multiple domains of adolescent development worldwide. In the Philippines, where strict lockdowns and prolonged school closures were enforced, adolescents were particularly affected by limited opportunities for peer interaction, academic participation and psychosocial exploration. According to Erik Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development, adolescence is a critical period for identity formation, situated within the developmental conflict of identity versus role confusion.[1] Interruptions to normative social experiences during this period may hinder the formation of a stable self-concept and acquisition of social-emotional coping mechanisms.

Emerging studies have shown persistent psychosocial and behavioral challenges among adolescents following the reopening of schools. Wang, et. al., noted that psychological issues remained high even after students returned to in-person learning, emphasizing the need for support from families, educators and mental health professionals.[2] Araujo, et. al., further identified the broad effects of lockdowns on child development, including impaired access to healthcare, reduced physical activity and interrupted educational routines.[3] These stressors, combined with social isolation, have been associated with anxiety, depression and disruptions in emotional and behavioral regulation.[4]

The SDQ, a validated tool developed by Goodman[5] provides a reliable means of assessing emotional symptoms, conduct problems, peer relationships, hyperactivity/inattention and prosocial behavior in youth.[6,7] It has been widely used across different cultures, including in the Philippines, where it has demonstrated appropriate psychometric properties among adolescents.[8] The SDQ also

offers a unique opportunity to correlate observable behavioral trends with theoretical frameworks, such as Erikson’s psychosocial stages, by aligning subscales with developmental expectations.

In the Philippines, few studies have explored the psychosocial impact of the pandemic on adolescents in school settings, particularly within private institutions. Given that Filipino adolescents often derive identity and autonomy within family- and peer-centered cultural norms, understanding how pandemic-related restrictions shaped their development was crucial. This study addresses that gap by examining the psychosocial developmental effects of the COVID-19 lockdown among high school students aged 12 to 17 from a private educational institution.

The objective of this pilot study was to estimate the prevalence of emotional, conduct, hyperactivity, peer relationship and prosocial behavior problems in this population after the COVID-19 lockdown. The study also aims to identify potential differences across high school levels—junior, senior and education high school—and to determine whether the SDQ can feasibly be administered in a school-based cross-sectional setting. Findings from this study may serve as a baseline for school mental health assessment tools and future programmatic interventions targeting adolescent psychosocial well-being in the post-pandemic era.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study holds an important value in understanding the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic on the psychosocial profile of adolescents, a population experiencing a critical developmental stage marked by identity formation and social integration, as outlined in Erikson’s psychosocial theory. Disturbing standard social, educational and recreational environments

Table 1: Study Objectives

Primary objectives	Endpoints/ Measures
1. To estimate the psychosocial profile after lockdown on Education, Junior, and Senior High school students of UST.	1. Measure: Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) Endpoint: Mean SDQ score among the three high schools
2. To estimate the prevalence of emotional, conduct, peer relationships, prosocial problems, and hyperactivity/inattention in adolescents ages 12-17.	2. Measure: SDQ Endpoint: Domain scores (Emotional, Conduct, Peer Relationships, Prosocial Problems, and Hyperactivity/Inattention) across age groups.
3. To identify any differences in the SDQ scores of junior high school, senior high school and education high school in UST.	3. Measure: Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) Endpoint: Mean SDQ Score comparison among the three high schools.

Table 2: Eligibility Criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Rationale
Age 12-17 years old	In an attempt to establish a sense of self and personal identity, teenagers actively pursue their own unique values, beliefs, and goals in accordance with Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development (1963). This is the theory's fifth stage, which deals with identity vs role confusion. Teens are becoming more independent and thinking ahead to their careers, personal lives, families, and homes, among other things. As a result, the group selected individuals between the ages of 12 and 17.
Exclusion Criteria	Rationale
Children diagnosed with pre-existing mental health condition i.e. - ASD, ADHD, Depression, PTSD	Children with mental problems and chronic somatic conditions are already known to be at risk for psychosocial problems. In general, they rate their well-being, emotional and social functioning, and psychosocial health lower than their healthy peers (Zijlmans, J., et al., 2021).

due to lockdowns and school closures introduced unprecedented stressors that may have adversely impacted emotional regulation, peer relationships and self-concept development. Through the use of the SDQ as a validated behavioral screening tool, this study provides an empirical framework to assess the persisting effects of pandemic-related isolation on adolescents aged 12 to 17. By examining the findings within developmental features, the study contributes to a deeper comprehension of long-term implications of forced social isolation. It emphasizes the urgent need for coordinated and guided psychosocial support from families, schools, mental health practitioners and policymakers in the post-pandemic period.

METHODOLOGY

Ethics Approval

This Ethics Review Board of the Faculty of Medicine and Surgery approved this study (Approval No. UST: A002-40-LE112; REB Code: 2024-09-TERO-PSYCHOSOCIAL).

Study Design

This study is a cross-sectional pilot study.

Participants

Participants were selected from a private school in Manila, including students from Education High School (EHS), Junior High School (JHS) and Senior High School (SHS). Only those aged 12 to 17 without diagnosed mental health conditions such as Autism Spectrum Disease (ASD), Attention-Deficit/

Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Depression, or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) were included.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited from UST High School using stratified random sampling across EHS, JHS and SHS. Ten students were randomly selected from each group, totaling 30 participants. Informed consent was obtained from both students and their parents or guardians.

MATERIALS

- The primary research instrument used in this study was the SDQ (<https://www.sdqinfo.org/a0.html>), a widely recognized behavioral screening tool designed to assess emotional and psychosocial well-being of children and adolescents aged 2 to 17 years.
 - Paper form
- Informed consent forms
- Case report forms to record demographic profiles (ie, age, gender, educational level)

OUTCOME MEASURES

Self-report version of the SDQ for ages 11–17 was used to assess the psychosocial well-being of participants. The YouthinMind online platform was used to score the questionnaires, providing automated analysis based on recognized standards. Access to the service cost \$30 and covered up to 100 responses. The results included a Total Difficulties Score and five subscale scores: Emotional Symptoms,

Table 3: Scoring table for Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire

Measure	Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire			
	Results			
	Close to average	Slightly raised (/slightly lowered)	High (/Low)	Very high (very low)
Total difficulties score	0-14	15-17	18-19	20-40
Emotional problems score	0-4	5	6	7-10
Conduct problems score	0-3	4	5	6-10
Hyperactivity score	0-5	6	7	8-10
Peer problems score	0-2	3	4	5-10
Prosocial score	7-10	6	5	0-4

Conduct Problems, Hyperactivity/Inattention, Peer Problems and Prosocial Behavior, which were used to evaluate the effects of the COVID-19 lockdown on students.

PROCEDURE

The research began with obtaining approval to conduct the study across three departments: Junior High School (JHS), Education High School (EHS) and Senior High School (SHS). After securing parental consent and student assent, the SDQ questionnaires were distributed to respondents. They were given 10–15 minutes to complete the survey. Once collected, the completed questionnaires were scored using the YouthMind scoring platform.

Declaration of Competing Interest

No source funding

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Author's Contribution

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Maria Elizabeth Mercado, MD, MAS: Oversight of 1A, 2C, 3B

Kathryn Baltazar-Braganza, MD: Guidance for 1A, 2C, 3B

Legend

1. Research Project
 - A. Conception
 - B. Organization
 - C. Execution
2. Statistical Analysis
 - A. Design
 - B. Execution
 - C. Review and Critique
3. Manuscript Preparation
 - A. Writing the First Draft
 - B. Review and Critique

Supplementary Material

Questionnaire.pdf (Double click the paperclip icon to open) 

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