

## Teen Mental Health and COVID-19

### Summary

The National Institute for Mental Health has awarded The University of Texas Medical Branch (UTMB) researchers with a \$3.5 million grant to continue studying teen mental health during COVID-19. Researchers from the UTMB Center for Violence Prevention and School of Nursing will measure the impact of virtual and in-person learning, the ability to access education and technology, relationships between parent and children, and whether and how school disruptions may have affected mental health. The research will help uncover the short- and long-term impacts of the pandemic on teen mental, social, and behavioral health, as well as the benefits of administering healthy relationship programming in schools.

### Background

- Adolescent mental health was a concern prior to the pandemic. The stress, isolation, financial problems, and school disruptions caused by COVID-19 made this problem even worse.
- This study of about 2,500 students in southeast Texas is unique in that the researchers are able to account for pre-pandemic mental, social, and behavioral health. The longitudinal study follows youth from the 7<sup>th</sup> grade to 3 years post high-school.

*"The pandemic interrupted those critical developmental years for teens who dealt with social isolation, virtual schooling and economic distress, along with the typical challenges of adolescence." - Dr. Jeff Temple, Project PI*

### What the Evidence Says

- The stress and isolation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic was associated with psychosocial health problems, even after accounting for pre-pandemic health.
- This generation of adolescents will benefit from interventions designed to mitigate these mental and behavioral health impacts, like the healthy relationship program, *Fourth R*. The program is taught in the classroom and can reduce risk behaviors such as:
  - Teen dating violence
  - Bullying
  - Substance use

### Potential Policy Solutions

Teaching violence prevention transforms the health of communities and can lead to intergenerational healing. The *Fourth R* curriculum is a public health intervention that can reduce teen dating violence and improve mental wellbeing. Students, teachers, parents, and community members can interactively role-play to understand what a healthy relationship looks, sounds, and feels like. By experiencing healthy behaviors in the context of relationships, the *Fourth R* promotes mental health and improves decision-making skills. Further, it builds bridges between community agencies and school communities to foster equitable access to resources and services.



*Students on a podcast about mental health discussing the benefits of the healthy relationship program, Fourth R, that was taught in their school*

### Correspondence

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