Changes in Depression Symptoms Among Youth During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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The prevalence of depression among youth had been increasing before the COVID-19 pandemic. The early stages of the pandemic were associated with substantial increases beyond the historical trend, especially among girls. One of the factors thought to drive this increase was the disruption to socialization and isolation. The current study investigates the association between depression with socialization, the pandemic, and sex. Data from the National Consortium on Alcohol and Neurodevelopment in Adolescence, a longitudinal study of 830 youth, are used in this study. Participants reported their socialization during the early phases of the pandemic in addition to measures assessing well-being via weekly self-report measures. Depression was measured via a clinical instrument issued 3 times during the first two years of the pandemic. Linear mixed-effects models were used to investigate the associations. A 4.6-point increase on the CES-D-10 depression scale was associated with the onset of the pandemic among females (p < .001). The increase was 3.0 points for males (p < .001). There was wide variation in the amount of in-person socialization that youth reported, even in the first few months of the pandemic. There were no discernible associations between depression and socialization during the early phases of the pandemic (p > .84). The pandemic was strongly associated with increases in depressive symptoms. Public health interventions early in the pandemic were thought to impact depression rates by limiting socialization; however, the results from this study do not support that mechanism as a primary driver of depression.