



CONCERNS AND EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG ADOLESCENTS IN THE ERA OF COVID-19

RESULTS FROM THE 2020 GLOBAL EARLY ADOLESCENT STUDY IN FLANDERS, BELGIUM

Key Findings

- Knowledge of COVID-19 transmission and prevention is high, but hybrid school reopening's and need for personal connection has lowered adherence to prevention measures
- Remote education was challenging for adolescents and led to high levels of concern about personal performance, especially for girls
- Girls are experiencing very high rates of anxiety

Flanders, Belgium



Quantitative Data collection:

Dates: Dec. 7, 2020 - Feb. 4, 2021

Methodology: In-person CASI (computer assisted self-interview)

Qualitative Data collection:

Dates: Sept. 24 - Oct. 20, 2020

Sample: Focus Group Discussions

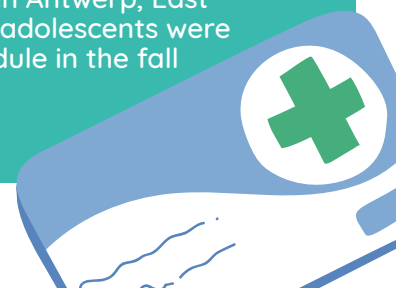
The state of COVID-19 in Ghent

In Belgium, the first cases of COVID-19 were reported early February 2020. As of April 14th, 2021, 930,603 cases have been reported in Belgium and 23,566 people have died from the pandemic. Following the outbreak, a host of public health policies were instituted, to curb transmission rates. These measures included, school closures between March and June 2020 and hybrid education since then, and restrictions on mobility and social contacts since the beginning of the outbreak. These policies are likely to have profoundly changed young people's social interactions and educational experiences.

The present data were collected between September 2020 and February 2021, at a time young people were partially back in school, partially learning remotely, and restrictions on social movement were still very much in effect.

Methods

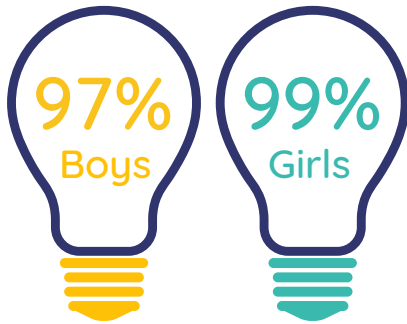
This study about adolescent experiences during COVID-19 is part of the Global Early Adolescent Study, a multi-site study on how gender impacts the health and well-being of young adolescents living in poor urban communities in 11 countries across 5 continents. In Belgium, participants were located in Antwerp, East Flanders, and West Flanders. Their baseline GEAS survey was conducted in 2019 when adolescents were aged 10 to 14, with their Wave 2 follow-up conducted concurrently with the COVID module in the fall of 2020. Data collection was done remotely with a sub-sample of the GEAS cohort. The participants had an average age of 14.9 at the time of the study.





Knowledge and Behavior

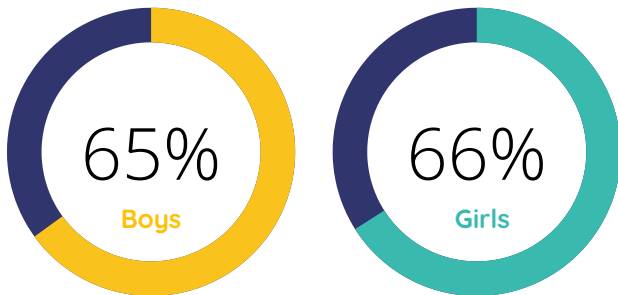
Key Takeaway

- Knowledge of COVID-19 transmission and prevention is very high. However, adherence to preventative practices is not straightforward for young people due to hybrid school reopening's and the sociocultural needs of this age group.





Percent of boys and girls that felt they were well informed about COVID*

 I have heard that Covid-19 is a kind of flu that is more lethal for the elderly people but spreads quickly because there is no medication. **(Boy)** 





Percent of boys and girls that actually practiced preventative measures last time they left the house**

 Yes, in the beginning I was more scared too, I think, so I really kept my distance from everyone but after that I started to find my 'bubble'. **(Boy)** 

Participants were asked: Which of the following actions can reduce the risk of catching the Coronavirus (COVID-19)?



 Items in green are not scientifically proven to prevent COVID-19

 I'm scared but I adapt quickly because I'm already a little used to it but after all those months of quarantine and so you just get used to it yourself. **(Girl)** 



Economic Impact



33%

of boys

27%

of girls

Report income reduction within the family



9%

of boys

8%

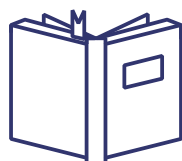
of girls

Report household food insecurity

Key Takeaway

- About one third of adolescents report job loss or income reduction in their families, with relatively low levels of food insecurity.

Education



33%

of boys

46%

of girls

Are concerned about completing their current grade



That was more difficult because we weren't used to it yet, and that there was, say, less explanation for a course or something. And that that is more difficult to understand and that was all so unusual for us. (Girl)



Distance learning was pretty hard for me. I'd rather be taught at school anyway. (Boy)

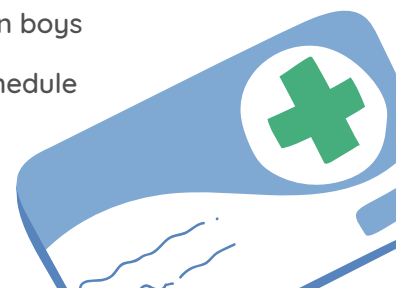


I also found it very difficult to do all those exercises alone because I'm not someone who is very motivated to do them myself so that was a very bad time for me. (Girl)



Key Takeaways

- Girls were significantly more concerned about completing their current grade than boys
- Most participants reported challenges with remote learning and maintaining a schedule without the structure of in-person schooling



Health and Wellbeing

Overall health has decreased during COVID for adolescents in Belgium***



Actually really bad with me, because normally I exercise twice a week and all that stopped and then I started eating way more and that really got worse. (Girl)



Both boys and girls have high levels of anxiety****



I've always been someone who gets a lot of stress from little things. And the fact that corona and its measures were added to this, that was sometimes really too much for me. And then I was really stressed (Girl)



Key Takeaways

- Overall health has declined slightly for boys and more so for girls
- Adolescents are experiencing high levels of anxiety, with almost half of boys and two thirds of girls reporting anxiety symptoms in the past two weeks
- Anxiety was often associated with challenges of remote education and worries about returning to in-person classes

Conclusion

The results of the GEAS show the vulnerability of adolescents living in poor urban settings in three provinces in Belgium during the COVID-19 pandemic. Young people who have experienced drastic changes in their daily lives have difficulty adjusting and adhering to social distancing measures, partially due to the shifting national mandates. The change to remote education and subsequent isolation from their social network has led to high levels of anxiety in all adolescents, but especially among girls.

