

# The traumatic impact of a COVID-19 outbreak on adolescent girls at a boarding school in Zimbabwe

Hillary J Musarurwa  
Tarisai C Bere

## Background

On the 17th of April 2021 it was announced through a tweet by the Permanent Secretary of the Zimbabwean Ministry of Information, Publicity and Broadcasting that 120 learners at St David's Bonda Girls High School tested positive for COVID-19. The few days following this announcement saw the number rise to 294 of the 976 students testing positive for the disease with the remainder of the school population either testing negative or not having been tested at all. Those learners who had tested positive were put into isolation to help stop the spread of the infection. The boarding school was turned into a quarantine and isolation centre for the rest of the month with no learners or staff members being allowed out of the premises.

COVID-19 not only raises public health concerns but also causes several psychological distresses with patients in isolation reporting a range of positive and negative intended and unintended consequences (Shaban et al., 2020). Because of the isolation, the fear of death, and associated stigma, many patients with COVID-19 infection go through mental distress (Sahoo et al., 2020). The impact of social isolation on adolescents needs to be better documented, and there remains a significant evidence gap on their lived experiences during the pandemic (Klein et al., 2009; Jiao et al., 2020). There is also less attention paid to psychological and other impacts of the pandemic COVID-19 in comparison to its impact on physical health (O'Sullivan et al., 2021). Findings from some studies show that adolescents are particularly vulnerable during the COVID-19 quarantine periods and may be at risk for developing psychological distress symptoms that extend beyond a crisis, including depression (Ren et al., 2021).

## Research Aim & Questions

### Aim

The aim of the study was to explore and document the lived experiences, challenges and coping strategies of a group of Zimbabwean adolescents during a COVID-19 outbreak at their boarding school.

### Research Objective

To measure event-specific distress in adolescents after a stressful life event.

### Research Question

What is the level of distress and hope amongst the adolescents following the COVID-19 outbreak they experienced?

## Methods and Data Collection

A survey questionnaire consisting of the Impact of Events scale-Revised (IES-R) and Children's Hope Scale (CHS) and a sociodemographic data form was administered, physically and online, to the learners at the school between 7 October and 11 November 2021. A total of 187 (response rate of 77%) fully completed the questionnaires were included for analysis.

### Data Collection tools

The IES-R is a self-report scale, consisting of 22 items, which uses three subscales developed to measure subjective anxiety and difficulty associated with traumatic (in this case a COVID-19 outbreak). The IES-R yields a total score (ranging from 0 to 88) and scores can also be calculated for the Intrusion, Avoidance, and Hyperarousal subscales. The total IES-R score is evaluated as an indicator of normal (0–23), mild (24–32), moderate (33–36) or severe ( $\geq 37$ ) psychological effect.

The CHS assesses two components, agency (ability to initiate and sustain action towards goals) and pathways (capacity to find a means to carry out goals). The CHS measures goal-oriented thinking using six youth-appropriate items. These measures are presented with a six-point Likert-type response format (1 = none of the time to 6 = all of the time) with total scores ranging from six to 36. Higher total scores reflect higher hope among the child participants.

## Results

### Impact of COVID-19 outbreak on the learners

A significant number of learners (39%) reported moderate to severe psychological impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak

Level of traumatic impact	Number	%	Mean total IES-R
Normal (0 - 23)	84	46%	11.31
Mild (24 - 32)	29	16%	29.93
Moderate (33 - 36)	18	10%	33.94
Severe ( $\geq 37$ )	53	29%	50.43

A analysis of the subscale scores shows that the learners are tapping into avoidance to deal with their trauma following the COVID-19 outbreak at their school. Intrusive thoughts are second highest with some learners getting hyperarousal.

Subscale	Mean total score	Mean	STD	Cronbach's alpha
Avoidance	12.42	1.55	0.896	0.7476
Intrusion	7.77	0.97	0.859	0.8138
Hyperarousal	7.06	1.18	1.057	0.7863
Total IES-R	27.25	3.70	2.48	

### Hopefulness

33% of the learners were highly hopeful with the majority (49%) reporting medium levels of hopefulness after the event. A worrisome 18% of the learners had no hope at all.

Low (< 3)		Medium (3 to 4.67)		High (> 4.67)		Cronbach's Alpha
Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	0.7149
30	18%	84	49%	56	33%	

## Key implications

- Adolescents are significantly susceptible to psychological impacts of COVID-19 outbreaks and administering the IES-R soon after these in schools can help identify cases of severe PTSD and provide the much needed support before the learners are seriously affected and resign to hopelessness.
- This can be done through the co-designing of peer counselling or self-managed interventions in low-to-middle income countries where there is a scarcity of clinical psychologists.
- There is need to further understand the relationship between the IES-R and CHS scores and the learners' COVID-19 results as well as their age.
- It would also be useful to see how possible resilience builders such as family income, previous exposure to stressful events and home location (rural/urban) relate to the learner's IES-R and Hopefulness scores.

## Policy recommendations

- Policymakers and school authorities should assess the impact of COVID-19 outbreaks early so as to explore ways to mitigate their impact on the mental health of adolescents in schools, more so for the boarders who are often away from their parents when these events happen.
- There is need to promote interventions that address trauma amongst learners.
- Learners should be provided with platforms to externalise their trauma such as teacher-pupil conversations, online story-telling and creative writing forums..

## References

- Jiao, W. Y. et al. (2020) 'Behavioral and emotional disorders in children during the COVID-19 epidemic', The journal of Pediatrics. Elsevier, 221, p. 264.
- Klein, T. P. et al. (2009) 'Young children's responses to September 11th: the New York City experience', Infant mental health journal. Wiley Online Library, 30(1), pp. 1–22.
- O'Sullivan, K. et al. (2021) 'A Qualitative Study of Child and Adolescent Mental Health during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Ireland', International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health . doi: 10.3390/ijerph18031062.
- Sahoo, S. et al. (2020) 'Lived experiences of the corona survivors (patients admitted in COVID wards): A narrative real-life documented summaries of internalized guilt, shame, stigma, anger', Asian Journal of Psychiatry, 53, p. 102187. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajp.2020.102187>.
- Shaban, R. Z. et al. (2020) 'SARS-CoV-2 infection and COVID-19: The lived experience and perceptions of patients in isolation and care in an Australian healthcare setting', American Journal of Infection Control, 48(12), pp. 1445–1450. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajic.2020.08.032>.
- Weiss, D. S. (2007) 'The impact of event scale: revised', in Cross-cultural assessment of psychological trauma and PTSD. Springer, pp. 219–238.