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Children, adolescents and the challenges of Covid 19 in Brazil

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Renata Mena Brasil do Couto and Malcolm Bush

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Summary

1.Introduction 6

2.Children and social distancing 7

 2.1. Closing of schools 7

 2.2. The increase in violence 9

 2.3. Mental health 10

 2.4. Socioeconomic impacts 11

3. The children’s view of the crisis 13

4. Final considerations 14

5. References 15

The International Center for Research and Policy on Childhood (CIESPI) is both a research and a reference center operating in conjunction with the Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio). It is dedicated to the development of studies and social projects about children, young people, their families and their communities. Its goal is to inform policies and social practices for these populations thus contributing to children's full development and for the promotion of their rights.



Rio de Janeiro, October 2021

Introduction

This report examines the impacts of Covid-19 on children and youth in Brazil. Initially considered less at risk from Covid, they now constitute an at-risk group because many are not yet eligible for vaccinations and are exposed in school and other venues. At their stage of development, they likely possess fewer emotional tools than adults to deal with the new realities such as social distancing. Moreover, COVID has also contributed to financial stress for families and to domestic and sexual violence. Such circumstances demand new strategies specifically for helping young people cope with the pandemic. Youth living in conditions of poverty and vulnerability are particularly at risk because the new challenges add to the existing challenges in their communities and their lives.

Brazilian law has strong directives about the rights of children and youth to be protected by their families, society and the state and these directives are contained in the 1988 Federal Constitution (Brazil, 1988), the Statute on the Child and the Adolescent (Brazil, 1990), the New Law on Early Childhood (Brazil 2015), which in turn reflect international standards especially the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989).

COVID has struck Brazil hard with over 21 million confirmed cases and 555,000 deaths in a population of 214 million.¹ Brazil is also a

country with a public health system that covers 61% of the population and a wide distribution of public health clinics. But the pandemic has overwhelmed the system in many parts of the country and the current national administration's refusal to take Covid seriously has put the response in the hands of cities and states who, for example, lacked the resources to buy sufficient vaccines on the international market. President Bolsonaro made things worse by mocking vaccines and social distancing. The lack of vaccines was a major problem for the first year of the epidemic although that situation is improving partly because two major health research centers are now producing their own under license with the foreign producers. The one bright spot in this story is that Brazil has a first-class record of vaccinating the population provided it has sufficient vaccines and by July, 2021 for example, the city of Rio de Janeiro was vaccinating people as young as 38 years of age and estimating it could vaccinate 15 to 19 year-olds by the end of August 2021. But this, of course, left younger people unvaccinated and by mid-year no country was vaccinating young people under the age of 12 for lack of efficacy and safety data. While young people generally present no or light symptoms of the disease this is not true for all of them. Brazilian data from March 2021 showed that 779 children up to the age of 12 had died of Covid, 11,628 had been hospitalized and 2,907 required intensive care. Of these totals, 24% of the deaths and 22% of the hospitalizations occurred in the three months prior to May, 2021.²

2. Children and social distancing

Social distancing, while a critical tool for reducing the spread of the virus, has had significant social and economic impacts including the closure of businesses and the consequent unemployment, and the closing of cafes, bars, parks, beaches, schools, childcare centers and other public gathering places. Essential services such as supermarkets, public health clinics, and the Guardianship Council (Conselho Tutelar) remained open but with new restrictions³. While the social and economic impact of these steps was great with poorer families finding it very difficult to put food on the table, the restrictions were not as severe as in some countries. In Italy, for example, at one point, residents needed to download permission slips to leave the house at a specific time for a specific approved purpose and faced very large fines for disobeying this rule.

2.1 Closing of schools

According to a UNESCO report, as early as April 2020, 190 countries had closed schools to prevent the spread of COVID, representing 1.6 billion students. By July 2021, about half the child and youth students in the world were impacted by partial or total closing of schools.⁴

Such closings had significant impacts on the students. In addition to being places for edu-

cation, schools in general offer an atmosphere of stability and normality. Such an atmosphere is especially important for children living in violent and deeply poor communities such as Brazilian children who live in slums (favelas). Additionally, for low-income children, schools are a critical source of meals. (In Brazil, 50 million low-income families qualify by income and other factors for the children's allowance program or Bolsa Familia, representing 25% of all families.)

In response to this crisis, Human Rights Watch recommended that governments offer adequate responses to the school closings including other means of continuing education, providing balanced meals and giving families clear public health advice.⁵

The school situation for Brazilian students has numerous challenges and, as in many countries, many conflicts about the right policies. The National Campaign for the Right to Education for example in its guide to COVID 19 lays out eight reasons for not substituting in-person learning with distance learning. They include breaking the principle of face-to-face universal education. Distance learning faces the challenge of many teachers not having adequate access to the internet nor having the training. Nonetheless, public health professionals have in general supported distance learning for a period of time.

Student access to the internet is an even bigger problem. According to the Continuing

Brazilian National Household Sample (PNAD) for 2017 to 2018 while 75% of the population had access to the internet, 45% of those people only had access through cell phones, a deeply inadequate instrument for following classes and for long lasting activities. In 23% of households with internet the connection was mobile broadband which is much more expensive than fixed broadband. Olavo, Nebot, and Chagas (2020) point out the low-level of schooling that many parents had, their lack of preparation for leading a distance learning session and the problem of many people living in a small space which makes a good learning environment impossible.

It was hoped that initiatives to distribute teaching materials and the transmission of lessons by open television networks and radio were possible solutions for improving distance learning. But in Brazil, these efforts were done without planning, and without the involvement of educational professionals. In Rio, there existed a state network to stimulate self-guided learning with diverse bibliographic and technical resources, but few students had access to such resources (Rio de Janeiro, 2013, p.2.). A controversy about the federal minister of education's role in the emergency and his replacement resulted in the responsibility for distance learning being handed over to municipal and individual state public systems. (In Brazil, high school education is the responsibility of the individual states and elementary education the responsibility of municipalities.)

While Rio had a plan to distribute cards to students for unlimited internet access, most students relied on their parents' support to get access. There were also plans to provide basic food baskets to families lacking jobs or other financial support, but the distribution plans were so caught up in bureaucracy that they were discontinued in the public education system although sanctioned by law (Lei no. 13.987, April 7, 2020). In the event, in many low-income communities' food baskets were distributed by nonprofit organizations including churches and pre-school centers with little help from the municipality.

The difficulties seemed to have diminished with the partial return of in-person classes. By June, 2021 for example in Rio, 85% of schools were opened with 140,000 students.⁶ Students had the choice of returning to classes or continuing with online learning in contrast to teachers who were under enormous pressure to return to in-person classes even if they had not been vaccinated and they had been included in the list of priorities for vaccinations quite slowly.⁷ With continuing high rates of COVID infections and the hospital intensive care units full, fear of infection became part of the routine of these workers who also had to cope at the same time with both on-line and in classroom teaching.

According to the Rio municipal department of education only schools capable of adopting appropriate hygiene protocols could re-open

but according to front-line teachers the reality was different. In information given to the national newspaper, O Globo, an anonymous teacher said that in-person classes had returned to her school but that the director did not have the money to purchase protective equipment and that the municipality did not provide it. Each teacher had to provide his or her own mask and while the municipality provided alcohol-jell it did not provide the containers to dispense it.⁸ The state teachers union went on strike to protect the health and the lives of teachers when the city called for the re-opening of the schools in February, 2021. The union regularly sent reports to the municipal department of education about the COVID situation in the schools along with data on the numerous cases of infection and death.⁹

Young people abandoning school, a recurring problem in Brazil, increased during the pandemic. In 2020 about 1.38 million children and adolescents between the ages of 6 and 17 left school representing 3.8% of all students. We should add to this number the 5.5 million children and adolescents who still have access to school and the 4.12 million who after graduating were not engaged in any form of education to get a sense of the size of the problem (UNICEF, 2021). It is hard to exaggerate the impact of social distancing and school closings on the lives of young people.

2.2 The increase in violence

The interruption of in school attendance has

robbed children of part of their network of protection. Remaining in home for long periods of time increases tensions and family conflicts and the unrestricted use of the internet can enable the sexual grooming of children and digital sexual abuse. In general, teachers are trained to notice adverse behavior and, if necessary, report the different forms of violence against children. So, the closing of schools also reduces the reporting of violence against children. In the same way, being cut off from other families, friends and neighbors with whom a child has a good connection adds to this separation from sources of help.

Campaigns such as Childhood Brazil's "Covid 19 is also dangerous for children and adolescents" have become crucial.¹⁰ This campaign challenges adults to be more present in the daily lives of their children informing them of the dangers of on-line abuse and reminds children and adolescents that no-one has the right to physically or verbally assault them either inside or outside the home. It also encourages young people to maintain a conversation with adults they trust and to report any abuse.

In the first months of the pandemic, several studies (see for example Platt, Guederi and Coelho, 2020) reported on the decrease in reports of domestic violence against children and adolescents as a result of social distancing even though the numbers of actual cases according to research evidence had not diminished. For the year 2020, Brazil reported a number of re-

ports of violence against children and adolescents higher than any year since 2013. There were 95,247 reports on the Disc 100, a reporting system of the Ministry for Women, Family and Human Rights¹¹. The greater parts of the reports were about children aged 5 to 9 with the main aggressors being fathers or mothers.¹² Paradoxically continue Platt et al., “the home, the environment most secure for people to be protected against the new corona virus until there is a vaccine readily available, could be the least safe place for many children and adolescents (Platt et al., 2020, p.2).

According to Levandowski et al., (2020), the suspicion of underreporting of reports of violence are likely valid because the same thing happened during the Ebola epidemic in West Africa. According to UNICEF (UNICEF, 2020), studies show that during the epidemic there was an increase in underreporting, delays in reporting, and damage to the quality of care given to victims of abuse. The structures for the well-being of young children and community mechanisms were weakened and the absence of informal networks of support such as friends, teachers, caregivers, parents and community members left children and families more vulnerable. During the COVID epidemic, the 136 countries that replied to the UNICEF survey reported an interruption of services geared to protecting children against violence.¹³

Concerned with this new threat to children's safety, in March 2020 the Brazilian National

Council for the Rights of the Child and the Adolescent (CONANDA) issued a document “Recommendations of CONANDA for the full protection of children and adolescents during the COVID 19 Pandemic” (CONANDA, 2020). The document, in general, affirms the importance of intensifying the comprehensive protection of children and adolescents in times of special risk given the likely threats to the development of the young. The fact that children, adolescents and their families have been removed from such regular activities as school and work, and face uncertainties, stress, social isolation and economic problems, means that they are likely to be more at risk of domestic violence and abuse. It also argues that the Guardianship Councils and health services must take steps to deal with the increase in the cases of violence against children (CONANDA, 2020, p.3).

2.3 Mental health

The CONANDA report drew attention to the fact that in general some families are not able to deal with challenges and that the epidemic brought on new challenges. It is not uncommon for parents and responsible adults to neglect the emotions and needs of their children, ignoring tantrums, disobedience, frustrations and inattention. Behavior problems could be a call for help and an early sign that a child is having mental health issues, particularly during a crisis such as COVID. Just as adults, children and youth are facing a series of situations which produ-

ce suffering, with limitations on movement, restrictions of space, not being able to meet adults in the family or friends, go to parties, or engage in travel and leisure activities. Added to this are the fears of being infected, of having familiar faces become sick, the end of in-person school, and the anxiety and irritation of parents.

In August 2020, a national survey undertaken by Datafolha showed the increase in anxiety and sadness in students in the public school system. While 46% of students reported a lack of motivation in May, that figure had reached 51% by July. Those reporting difficulties maintaining their daily routines jumped in the same period from 58% to 67%. A total of 74% of the sample reported themselves sad, anxious or angry.¹⁴

A report from the British National Health Service registered an increase of 20% in the number of young people referred to mental health services for the year 2020 compared with 2019. The number of young people with mental health problems in the country was one out of six compared with one of nine three years earlier.¹⁵

Playing, which is so important to the development and well-being of children, was also affected by the pandemic. Playing is known to contribute to learning and development in young children providing diversion, entertainment, pleasure, self-esteem and self-confidence (Barba, 2020). Children accustomed to playing in the streets, in the homes of friends, in school, in the company of peers, had to reinvent their games and rediscover places in their homes to

play. This was not an easy task given the very small homes in favelas, and the presence of other family members who were also in isolation and often obliged to work from home. Parents had to juggle work and their children's studies. Abreu and Fassao (2020) nonetheless affirmed the importance of not "pedagogizing" the atmosphere of the family because the family should not become like a school.

According to Munoz, Pascoal and Crespo (2020), one of the biggest complaints of Spanish children was that their teachers provided them with a lot of work without any recognition of the fact that during the pandemic the children had other tasks, that they were feeling tired, exhausted and sad. These authors also pointed out that the children were worried about their grandparents, the environment, and their parents' financial situation in addition to wishing to return to school.

2.4 Socioeconomic impacts

Many Brazilians became unemployed during the pandemic due to the restrictions on circulation outside the home and the closing of non-essential services. During 2020, employment figures showed record levels of unemployment and of so-called discouraged workers, workers in the labor market age group who had given up looking for work. In the trimester ending February 2021, the total number of people unemployed in Brazil reached 14.4 million representing an unemployment rate of 14.4%. The

number of discouraged workers reached 5.9 million or 5.6% of the workforce.¹⁶

The increase in unemployment drove an increase in poverty. The national poverty rate which was 24.8% in 2019 reached 29.9% in 2021 according to researchers at the Research Center on the Macroeconomics of Inequality at the University of Sao Paulo. We should point out that in Brazil the poverty rate had been diminishing up to 2014 due to key government programs such as the Family Allowance (Bolsa Familia), the increase in the minimum wage, greater access to education, and a growing economy. Since 2015, however, the pattern inverted and poverty began to grow. The federal government's response to the economic impacts of COVID in 2020 included the introduction of Emergency Auxiliary Aid or the Corona Voucher of R\$600 per person payable to informal workers, low-income workers, and micro-entrepreneurs among others. This action halted the increase in poverty. But this aid was halted for three months between January and March 2021 and then reduced to R\$150 thus engendering an increase in poverty. While 68.2 million people received the benefit in 2020 that figure shrank to 45.6 million in 2021. (Nassif-Pires, Cardoso, and Oliveira, 2021).

A UNICEF Brazil study showed the direct impact of the economic crisis on children. Sixty-one percent of survey respondents with children or adolescents said their family income had decreased by December, 2020. Eight percent of all the respondents who had children

under 18 years of age living with them said that their children sometimes did not eat because of lack of money to buy food. This number reached 21% for families in economic classes D and E (UNICEF Brazil, 2020A)

Food insecurity became a major problem during the epidemic. By the end of 2020, 59.4% of the Brazilian population or 124 million people were encountering some degree of food insecurity. This particular indicator had been worsening since 2013 when just 22.6% of the population was in that situation (Galindo et al., 2021).

Certain families are in particularly difficult situations. Christfell et al., (2020) point out the reality of low-income families living in the peripheries of cities, areas which often lack infrastructure including the basic sanitation needed to prevent the spread of COVID 19. (In Brazil some of the poorest communities are in the peripheries of large cities). Many families live in houses with a few small rooms and many family members so that social distancing is impossible. (In Rio in some of the favelas some of floor plans are only 16 meters square.) Many residents work in the informal economy in small establishments and cannot meet social distancing requirements at work. Brito, Rosa and Trindade (2014) make another point about some of these families: ... generally they are not organized as nuclear families but as a network of trust in which there are moral obligations to help the other (Ibid, 2014, p. 402). While this structure is a source of help, it also puts additional burdens on families which have some resources.

3. The children's view of the crisis

This account so far has relied on published material. But CIESPI has always insisted on hearing young people's points of view about important issues. So, in concert with the Circle of Action of the Brazilian National Coalition on Early Childhood (RNPI), CIESPI reached out to children to learn some of their reactions to the pandemic. In this particular effort, young children spoke and drew some of their thoughts and feelings about COVID 19.¹⁷ The Circle of Action talked to thirty-two children between the ages of four and eleven from various parts of Brazil including the states of Bahia, Ceará, Goiás, Pernambuco, Piauí, Rio de Janeiro, Rio Grande do Sul and São Paulo. The children were invited to make drawings of their impressions of life under COVID and then to talk about those drawings.

The young people's general reactions were strong and clear and included such thoughts as:

I hate the pandemic.

Sad; many people in our family are dying.

No-one can touch anyone.

This life is so boring! I hate the pandemic.
Sad; many people in our family are dying.
It is difficult to be so far from the world.
No-one can touch anyone. I am living a long way away from my grandmother and that is horrible. I miss her. Her house is so

wonderful. Here, I live in an apartment. I am so agitated. I cannot bear living in the apartment. I cannot go out. I cannot play with my friends.

They had specific reactions to missing school.

If everyone dies, I won't be able to go to school.

It is so awful, because we have to spend so much time on the computer to do our classes. But it is also good, because we can spend so much time with our families. It is difficult to spend so much time looking at a screen, because you end up being distracted by anything. But it is also good, because we can spend so much time with our families. In school you can understand better.

I am always thinking about school, I always loved everything about school. I loved recess. I loved everything there at school. Now I look at this pandemic and I am completely scrambled up. I want to be able to hug my teachers because I really miss them.

The children were also asked about their hopes for the future.

I want everyone to be well.

I want the world to change and for only love

to be inside it.

I want people to understand that the world is equal and that everyone is like everyone else.

That quarantine ends and everyone can hug.

The responses from children are complex, coherent and compelling. Public and private organizations and families have had to make many decisions about children's lives because of the epidemic. These responses show that children should and can be part of the conversations and decision-making processes.

4. Final considerations

The COVID situation in Brazil remains uncertain as it does in many countries. At the beginning of July 2021, the new peak of cases appeared to be diminishing but on August 1, the seven-day running average of new cases was still 35,000. There is growing evidence about kick-back schemes in vaccination purchases. And the president of the Republic continues his denials about the seriousness of the epidemic and appropriate public health responses.

There is a vigorous debate about whether protection measures such as social distancing are hurting the economy. They certainly hurt small businesses and the tourist trade which is

an important part of the Brazilian economy. But more waves of the virus will cause even more economic damage. What can be done, however, are financial stimulus programs which guarantee some measure of family income and improve the financial health of businesses especially small and moderate sized enterprises (Toneto, Cardomingo, and Carvalho, 2021). A longer-term challenge is reducing systemic income inequality in Brazil which declined between the presidential terms of Lula Ignacio da Silva from 2003 on but started to increase again in 2015.

Children and youth have suffered very much from Covid and the economic downturn especially those in lower-income families. They tend not to be heard by administrators and policy makers. Yet they are the best, if fallible, informants as to what they are going through and have ideas about how to improve their situation. Children of different ages can be heard in different ways but as a variety of CIESPI research shows even young children can express themselves well.¹⁸ Youth are exploring ways to be heard in public gatherings about their situation and needs and again CIESPI has explored ways of doing this. The COVID crisis brought serious challenges for everyone but also revealed long standing challenges for young people. The revelation of the longer-term challenges is a new opportunity for action.

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¹⁹ See www.ciespi.org/br/en/Projects/Current-Projects-17 for examples.

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