

# The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Child Health: A Case Study in Japan

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## THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON CHILD HEALTH: A CASE STUDY IN JAPAN

**Abstract:** This study examines the impact of COVID-19 on child and parent health and the institutes' support for children with difficulties during the pandemic in Japan. Two surveys were implemented from October to November 2020. The "Parents and Children" survey included questions about demographic and household characteristics, the impact of COVID-19 on work and daily life, applications for financial support, relations with children and partners, and health conditions. The final sample comprised 2,582 parents with a child aged 0–18 and 1,032 children aged 9–18. The "Institutions" survey included questions about the impact of COVID-19 on services and cooperation with other related institutions. The final sample comprised 2,298 institutions responsible for education or healthcare services. The response rate was relatively high compared with similar surveys: 53.0% for maternal and child health divisions and 56.5% for child consultation centers. The parents' and children's survey revealed that around 90% of children felt stressed during the pandemic. The institutions' survey revealed that child consultation centers received a greater number of inquiries about children's sexual behavior problems and game addiction. A preventive social work approach is required to give a greater level of support to all children, even in unusual situations like the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, social work, child health

### Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a major effect on children around the world. The arrival of COVID-19 was unexpected and indiscriminate, dividing those who tested positive from those who did not. Various issues, including economic strain, have existed around child poverty during the pandemic. According to the latest estimates from a joint study by Save the Children and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the number of children living in poverty will increase by between 122 million and 142 million in FY2020, reaching more than 700 million, including 591 million from before the COVID-19 pandemic (UNICEF 2020a). With regard to the situation of children living in multidimensional poverty, including lack of education, health, housing, nutrition, water, and sanitation, the number of children living in multidimensional poverty increased by 150 million in FY2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, reaching a total of more than 1.2 billion (UNICEF 2020b).

### Literature Review

Various studies have been conducted to examine the impact of the pandemic on child mental health issues. Previous research in Japan has reported that many children and students showed depression and anxiety. For example, Watanabe and Tobe (2021) performed a two-sweep survey of junior high school students on their awareness of COVID-19. It was demonstrated that many junior high school children showed high levels for perceived risk of COVID-19, and the longer the school closure period, the stronger were the levels of anxiety about learning delays and the loss of normal school life. Using an online survey of parents of primary school grades 1 to 3, Ito *et al.* (2021) revealed that during school closures, families with financial difficulties were more likely to have difficulty maintaining life rhythm, creating a learning environment at home, and providing various forms of care for their children (e.g., playing with them, looking after homework).

## **Research Design**

The author performed surveys of parents, children, health services, and related institutions to examine the impact of COVID-19 on child and parent health, and the change in institutes' supports for children with difficulties during the pandemic. Specifically, two different surveys ("Parents and Children" and "Institutions") were implemented from October to November 2020. The Parents and Children survey aimed to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on parents' work and daily life, applications for financial support, relations with children and partners, and health conditions. The Institutions survey aimed to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the services provided by the institutions responsible for education or health services, as well as on their cooperation with other related institutions. These two surveys enabled the author to examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on parents, children, and related institutions in a cross-sectional way.

### ***The Parents and Children survey***

The study employed an online survey monitor. The Parents survey targeted parents with one or more children aged 0 to 19 as of October 2020. The Children survey was conducted among those who had cooperated in the Parents survey and who agreed to participate in the Children survey. The respondents ranged from age 9 to 18. The survey was conducted on 29 and 30 October and 25 and 26 November 2020, with a total sample size of 2,582 (43.3% male, 56.7% female), of which 1,550 participated in the Parents survey only, and 1,032 of which were children.

### ***The Institutions survey***

The Institutions survey was sent by mail to the following organizations:

- 1,741 municipal child-raising consultation services
- 1,741 municipal maternal and child health services
- 1,741 municipal boards of education
- 237 municipal child consultation centers
- 144 municipal child temporary custody services
- 450 public elementary and junior high schools

The survey was distributed to child-raising consultation services, maternal and child health services and boards of education in each municipality, as well as all child consultation centers and child temporary custody services in Japan. The institutions were asked to answer and return the questionnaire by post or answer on the web. However, the questionnaires to public elementary and junior high schools were sent to the boards of education, asking them to select target schools and distribute the questionnaire to them. With regard to the survey to schools, on the basis of the number of reported COVID-19 cases (cumulative total per 100,000 population) as of September 2020, a total of nine municipalities were selected, three for each stratum, based on the severity of the COVID-19 situation (high, medium, and low; hereafter called the high, medium, and low groups). Up to 50 public elementary and junior high schools in each municipality were asked to participate in the survey. The survey period was between 11 November and 11 December 2020. The response rate of the Institutions survey was 44.0% (number of responses, 2,298; valid response rate, 42.1%; the number of valid responses was 2,198), comprising responses from child-raising consultation services

(response rate, 43.1%; number of responses, 751; valid response rate, 41.4%; number of valid responses, 720), maternal and child health services (response rate, 53.0%; number of responses, 923; valid response rate, 51.7%; number of valid responses, 900), boards of education (response rate, 35.8%; number of responses, 624; valid response rate, 33.2%: number of valid responses, 578), child consultation centers (response rate, 56.5%; number of responses, 134; valid response rate, 56.5%; number of valid responses, 134), and schools (response rate, 42.0%; number of responses, 189; valid response rate, 42.0%: number of valid responses, 189).

## Results

### *Living conditions of parents and children and receipt of support*

It was found that nearly 90% of surveyed children showed some kind of stress (Figure 2 **I Felt It Was Difficult to Go to School After the School Reopening**). In addition, one-third of surveyed children felt that it was hard to go to school following the school closures caused by the pandemic (Figure 2). This ratio was especially larger among those from families with financial difficulties.

Figure 1 Levels of Children’s Stress by Parents’ Mental Health Status

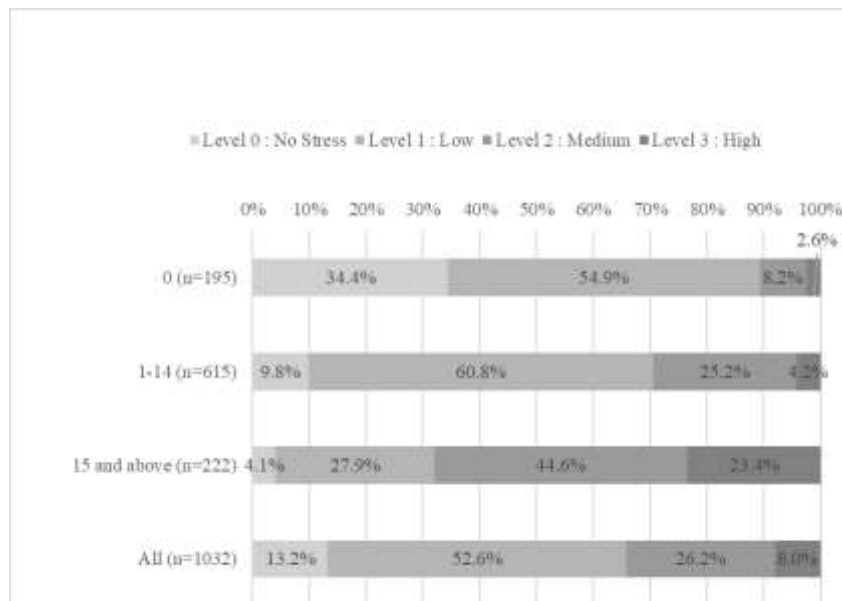
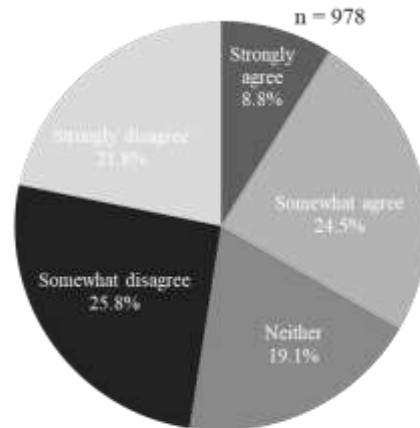


Figure 2 I Felt It Was Difficult to Go to School After the School Reopening



Of the parents surveyed, 37.2% felt some kind of increased burden in spending time with their partner after the change in circumstances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Those with financial difficulties were more likely to experience changes in their work, and these changes led to higher levels of stress among their children. It was also observed that children whose parents suffered from poor mental health were likely to show higher stress levels, and children became emotionally unstable if their parents did not listen to them.

#### ***Conditions of children and support provided by schools and institutions***

During the pandemic, issues related to the household environment rose sharply in April 2020 among the high group. It can be said that home visits by schoolteachers performed every April helped to understand the situations in households. On the other hand, there were more cases among the high group in which parents or guardians refused to visit.

Immediately after the school closures ended, there was a sharp increase in the number of bullying cases reported to the police. However, the number of bullying cases observed at schools dropped to less than half of the total cases of bullying, which may be due to the school closures. Similarly, reports on child abuse by local people sharply increased in May 2020 during the state of emergency, compared to May 2019.

There was a clear increase in the number of cases of spousal violence received by child-raising consultation services, as well as in the number of domestic violence-related abuse consultations received by child guidance centers. Furthermore, there were increased numbers of cases related to sexual issues and game addiction (Figure 3 and Figure 4). These increases became obvious soon after the school closures ended. This means that during the school closures, these cases were not being captured.

Figure 3 Changes in the Number of Cases of Game Addiction Reported to Child Consultation Centers

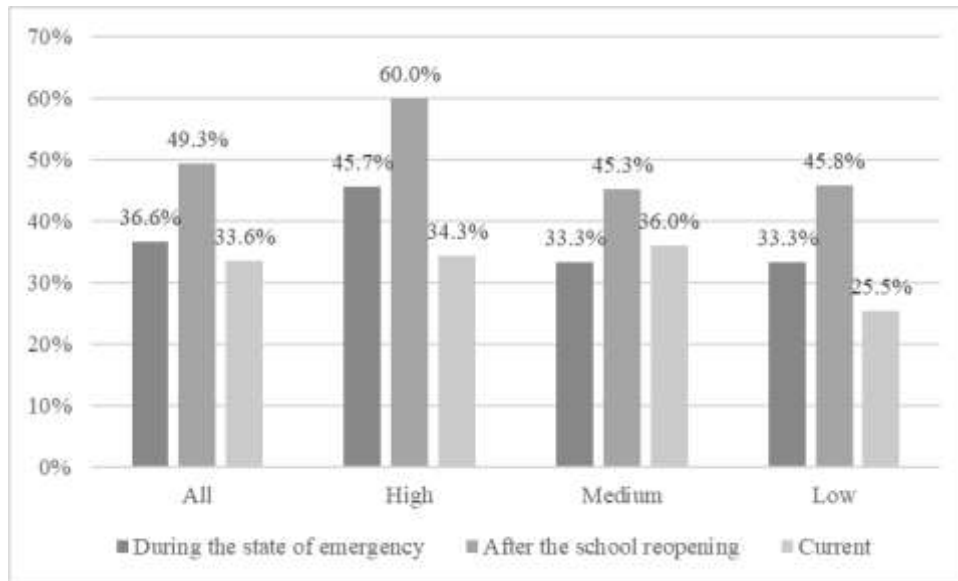
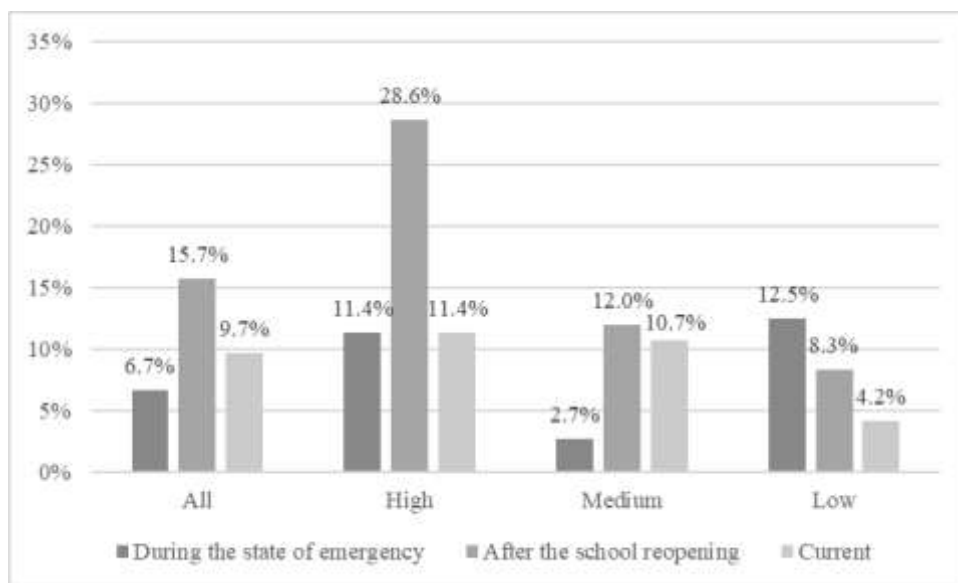


Figure 4 Changes in the Number of Cases of Sexual Issues Reported to Child Consultation Centers



## Discussions and Conclusion

This study revealed that although discussions of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic so far have been mainly focused on economic factors affecting adults, the impact clearly fell on children as well. It was revealed that 90% of children experienced some kind of stress. Economic strain and being forced to stay at home caused family discord, resulting in child abuse, domestic violence, and problematic issues for children, such as sexual behavior problems and game addiction. In addition, 30% of children said they found it difficult to go to school, which may have led to an increase in the number of truancies and suicides. These risks were higher among families with financial difficulties.

The following are the implications for policymaking. First, setting up a system is not enough, and the system needs to reach those who are in need. Furthermore, there is still prejudice against those who

receive financial support. The survey revealed that such barriers may have discouraged those in need to apply for the support. Financial support that does not need to be applied for and that is paid automatically to those in financial difficulty should be considered. Second, it is necessary to implement digitalization so that children's information can be shared, checked, and used in the welfare and education divisions, and to minimize clerical work there. The Cabinet Office is expected to consider the establishment of a system that eliminates the resistance to data utilization among the welfare and education divisions. Third, community-based support is effective in support for isolation (Okinawa Prefecture and Osaka Prefecture University, 2019) and is expected to become an important measure not only for combating poverty but also for combating isolation.

The current study has potential limitations. First, since the Parents and Children survey was performed online, the surveys may have not reached those with low income. Second, it might have been possible that since the situation during the COVID-19 pandemic was different from municipality to municipality, some questions in the Institutions survey might not have been applicable to some municipalities.

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