FEBRUARY 2021

COVID-19 and Its Impacts: Adolescent Perspectives

Fall 2020 Survey Results

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About the Study

Mission

The aim of this research was to capture adolescents' perspectives on COVID-19 and its impact on their lives. We gathered their voices through an online survey in order to better understand what they are going through and to help schools in their efforts to support students.

Areas of Focus

The survey was intended for high school students and asked about:

- Impacts and challenges they are experiencing in relation to COVID-19
- Schooling experiences during the fall of 2020
- Trust in institutions and groups in society
- Future orientations & sense of social responsibility

Survey Details

- Online survey of 20-25 minutes
- 21 close-ended questions measuring civic efficacy, social responsibility, future mindedness & trust
- 6 open-ended questions about emotions, challenges, and schooling related to COVID-19
- Coping and mental health resources were provided

Data Collection

Data was collected between October and the first week of December, 2020. A previous survey was conducted in spring 2020. For spring results, please see **the project webpage**.
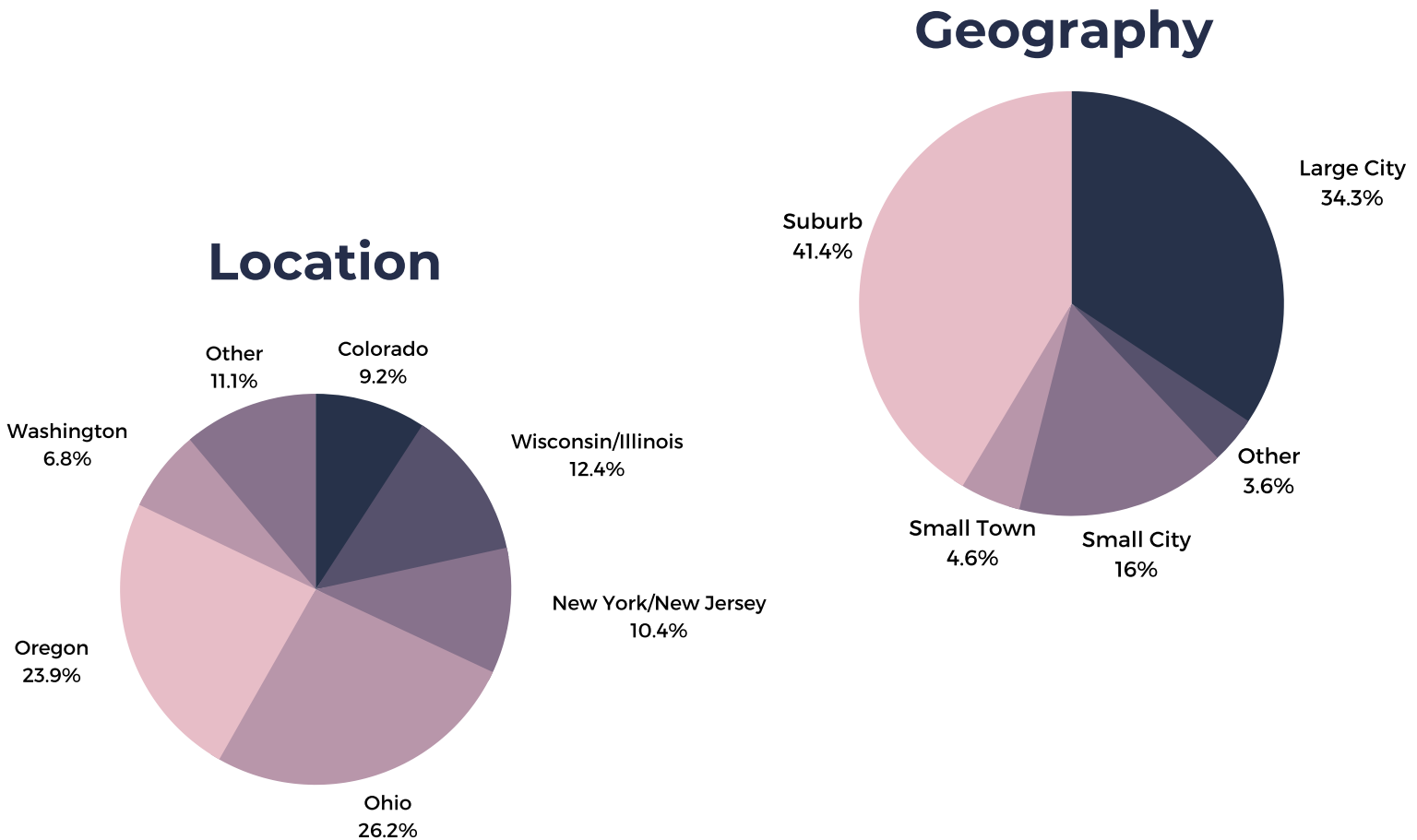
Privacy

Anonymity was maintained in compliance with FERPA and Marquette's Institutional Review Board.

Contact

Questions or requests can be addressed to Gabriel Velez at: gabriel.velez@marquette.edu

Sample Demographics

Geography

Large City
34.3%

Suburb
41.4%

Other
3.6%

Small Town
4.6%

Small City
16%

Location

Other
11.1%

Colorado
9.2%

Washington
6.8%

Wisconsin/Illinois
12.4%

New York/New Jersey
10.4%

Oregon
23.9%

Ohio
26.2%

These numbers were driven by the participation rates at various schools. While a wide range of high schools were invited to participate, in total, 14 schools disseminated the survey to their students. Of these, 7 had more than 200 students participate.
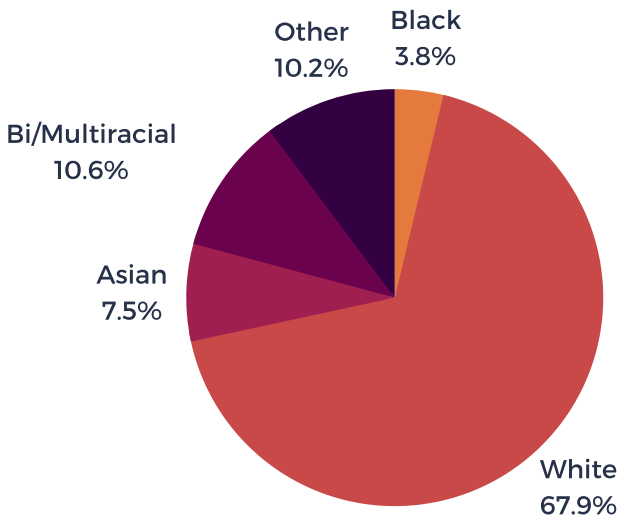
2702

Took our survey

2148

Answered the close and open ended questions

Race

Other 10.2%
Black 3.8%
Bi/Multiracial 10.6%
Asian 7.5%
White 67.9%

Race/Ethnicity was asked separately from whether a student identified as Hispanic/Latino. 22% of respondents indicated that they were Spanish, Hispanic or Latino/a. Of these 606 respondents, 230 or 38% also identified as White.

Other included small numbers of American Native or Alaskan Native and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander.

Highest Parental Education Level

Parental education is used often as a measure of class or socioeconomic status. It is not ideal or perfect, but this does show that many of these respondents (around 64%) have college educated parents.
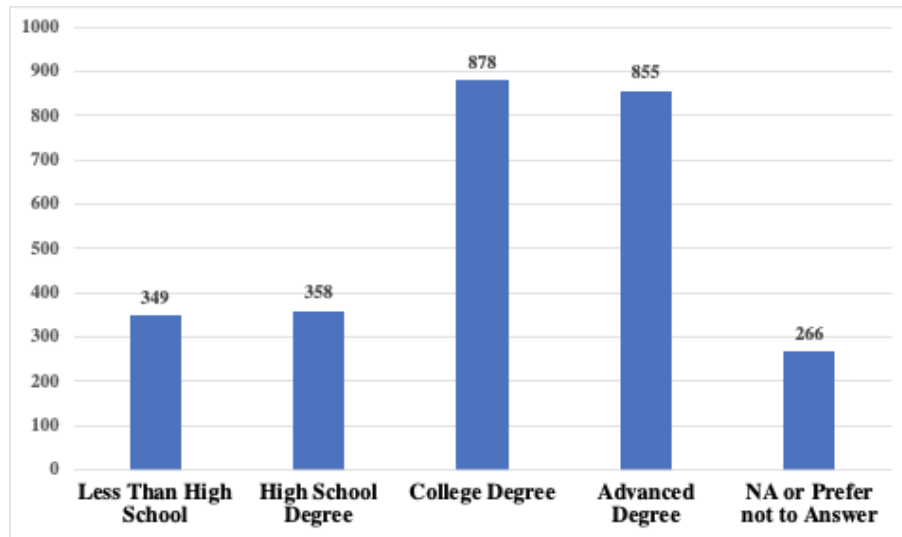
Gender
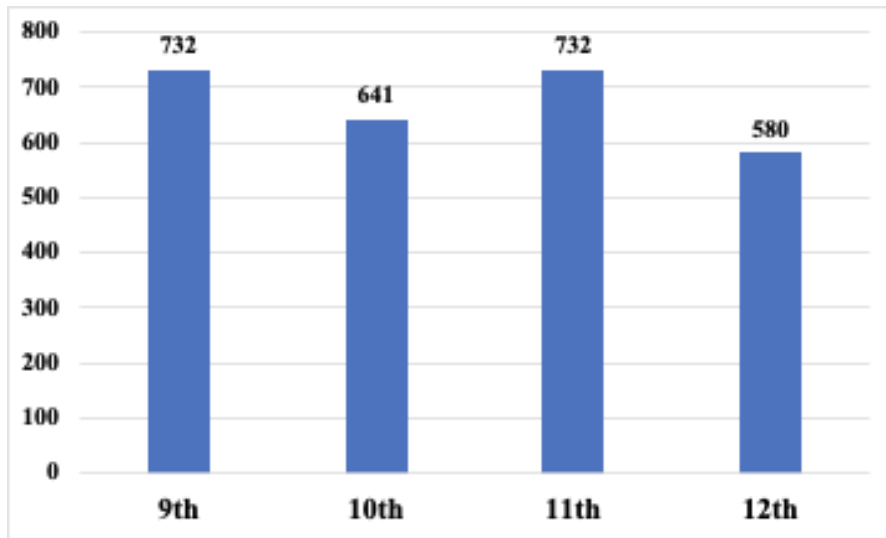
44%
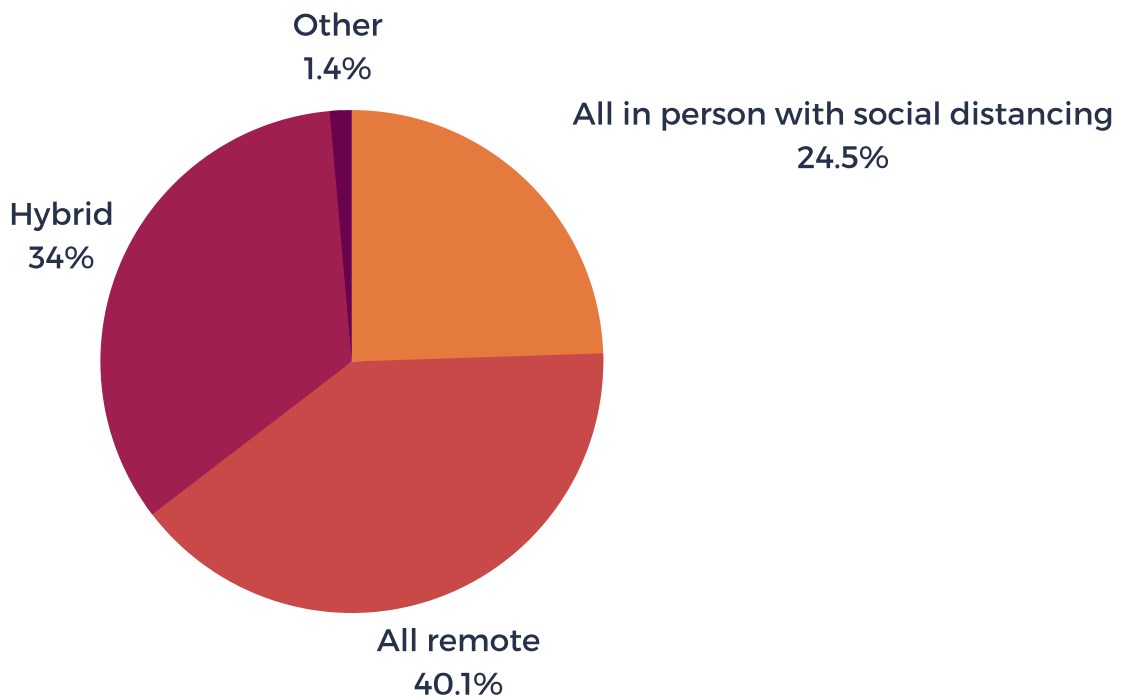Identified as female

55%
Identified as male

1%
Identified as nonbinary or other

Grade Breakdown
(By # of Participants)

Schooling in Fall 2020

Other
1.4%

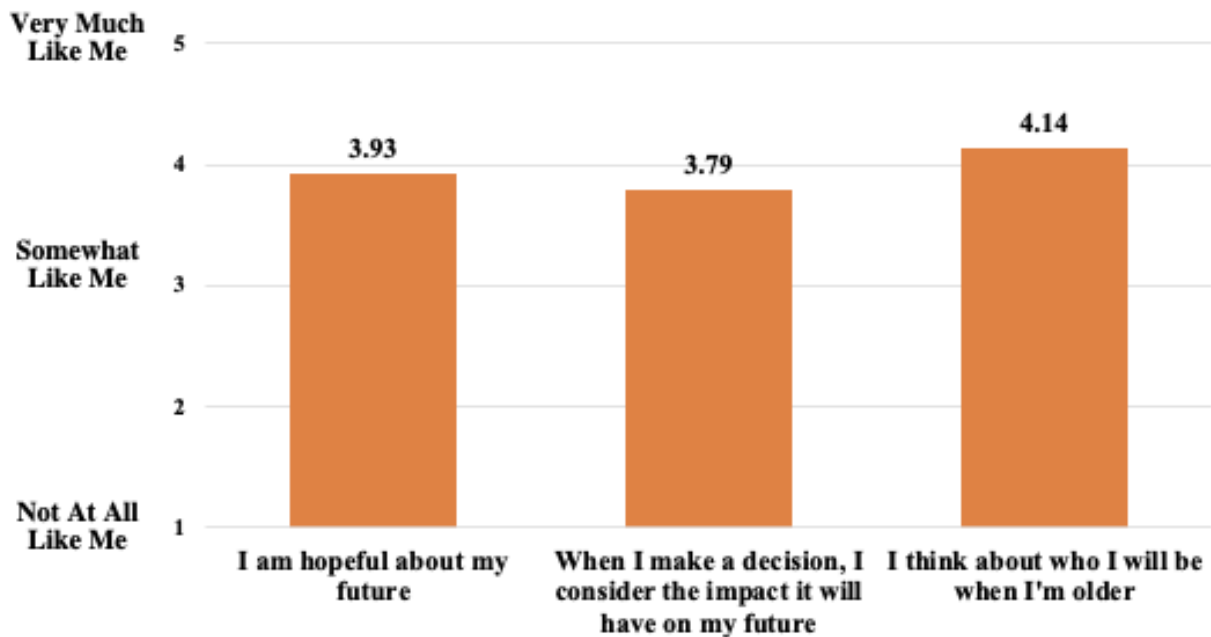All in person with social distancing
24.5%

Hybrid
34%

All remote
40.1%

Future Mindedness

Overall Summary

Mean levels of hope and future thinking were only slightly lower than those in the Spring survey (averages of 4.01, 3.88, and 4.23 respectively).

Overall, these students indicated that they often think about the future, while still expressing hope for what was to come. Almost three-fourths (71%) indicated identified strongly with being hopeful about the future.
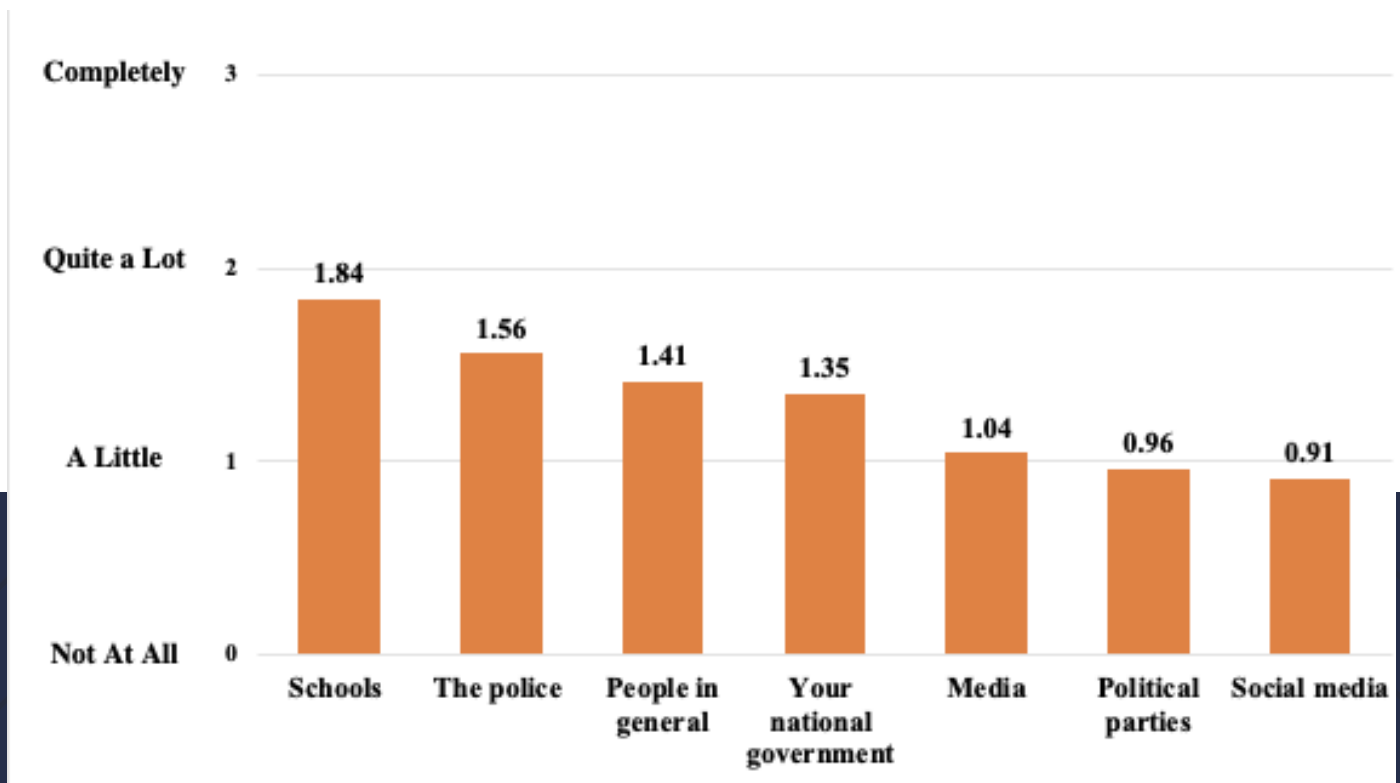
Deeper Dive into Hope About Future
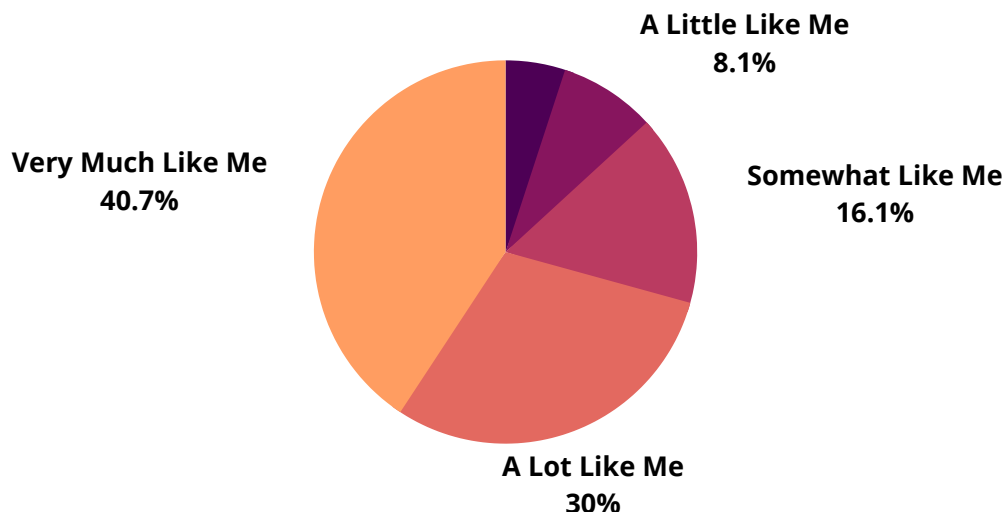
Trust

Overall

Levels of trust for respondents were generally low, and similar to Spring survey collection. Schools also ranked highest for the previous sample, with an average of 1.92. followed by police (1.72), people in general (1.51), and national government (1.43).

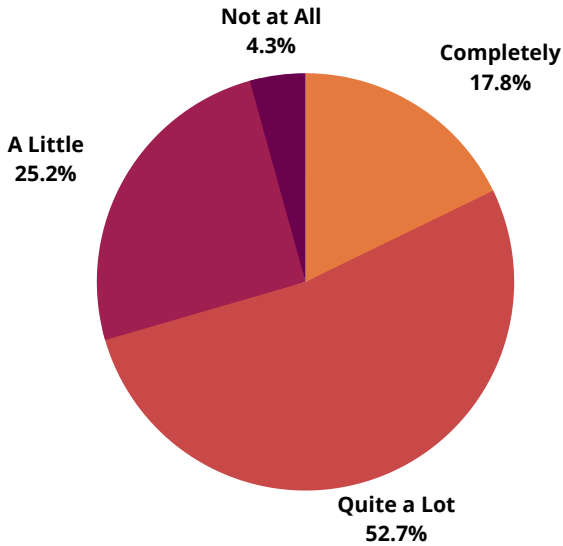These results indicate that schools may offer one of the best institutional routes to working with and supporting young people through some of the challenges of COVID-19.

Combined with civic attitude measures, these results indicate that low levels of trust do not necessarily mean that these young people are feeling disengaged or disconnected from responsibility and involvement in their communities.

Schools

Not at All
4.3%

Completely
17.8%

A Little
25.2%

Quite a Lot
52.7%

Police

Not at All
15.9%

Completely
18.1%

A Little
30.8%

Quite a Lot
35.2%
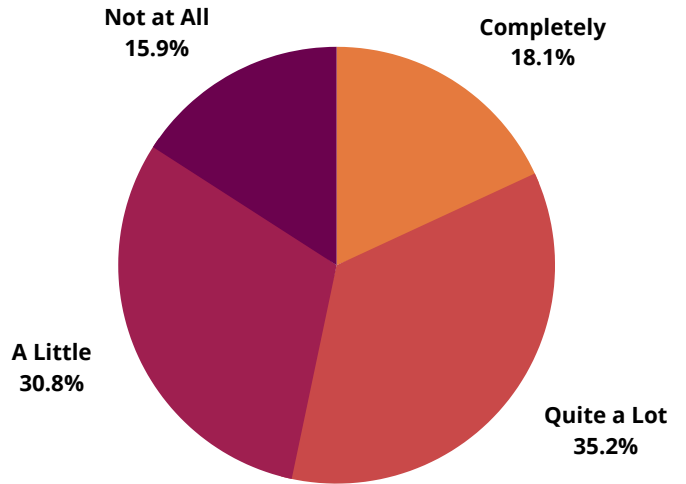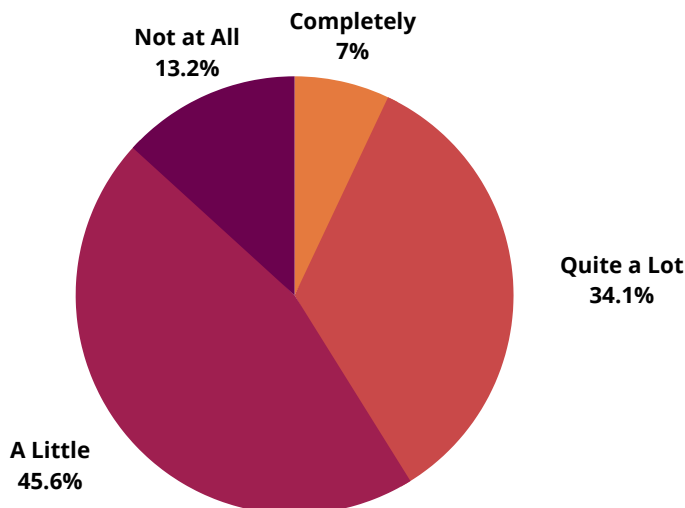
These deeper dives into responses in individual questions demonstrate that respondents were quite evenly split on institutions of the state, while demonstrating at least some trust almost across the board in schools.

National Government

Not at All
13.2%

Completely
7%

Quite a Lot
34.1%

A Little
45.6%

Civic Attitudes

Civic Self-Efficacy

Respondents expressed that they felt able to contribute to the communities they belong to. 88 % of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "Even though I am a teenager, there are ways for me to get involved in my community," while 81 % indicated agreement with "I can make a positive difference in my community."

Only around 2 % strongly disagreed with each of these statements.

Levels of civic self-efficacy were similar to those expressed by the Spring survey sample.
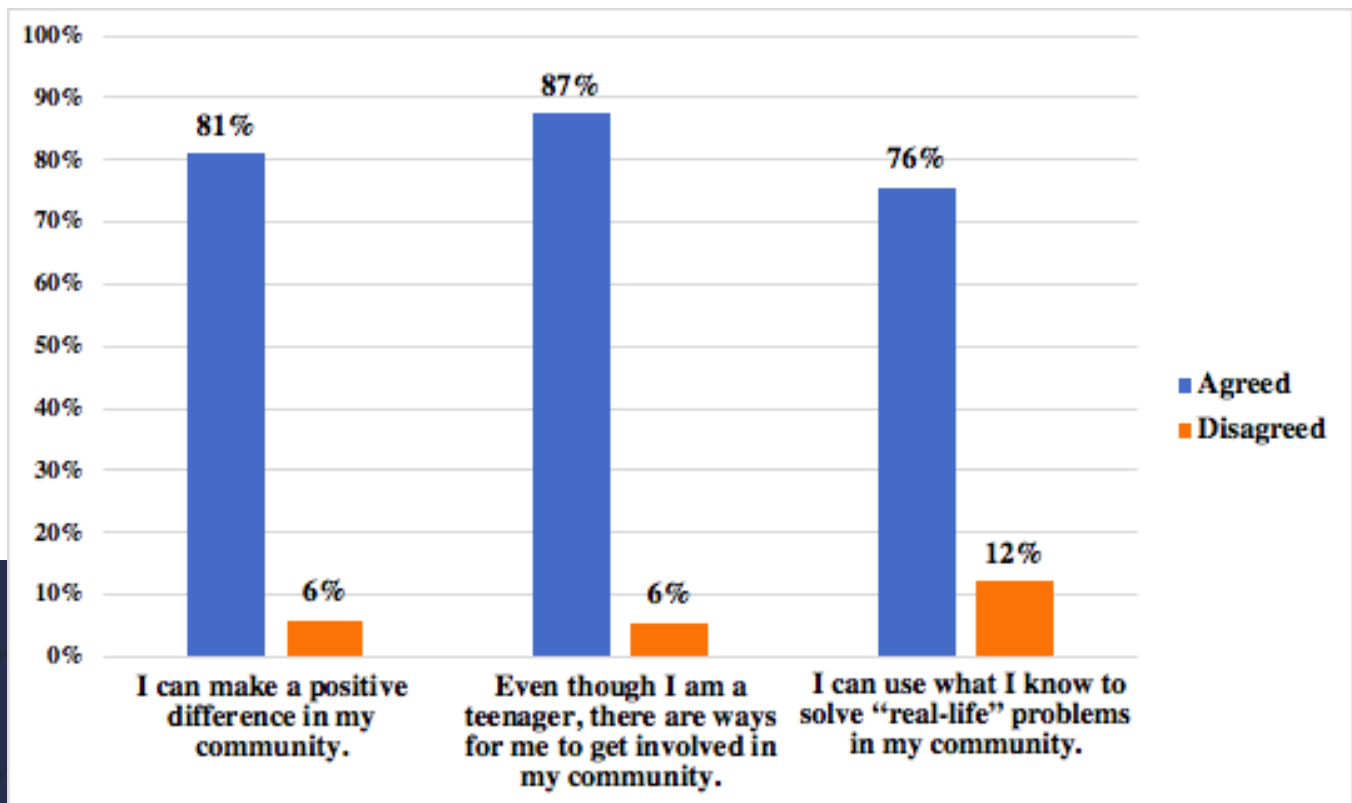
Social Responsibility

Responses to close-ended questions on social responsibility were also high, with students particularly expressing feeling that they should protect the environment.
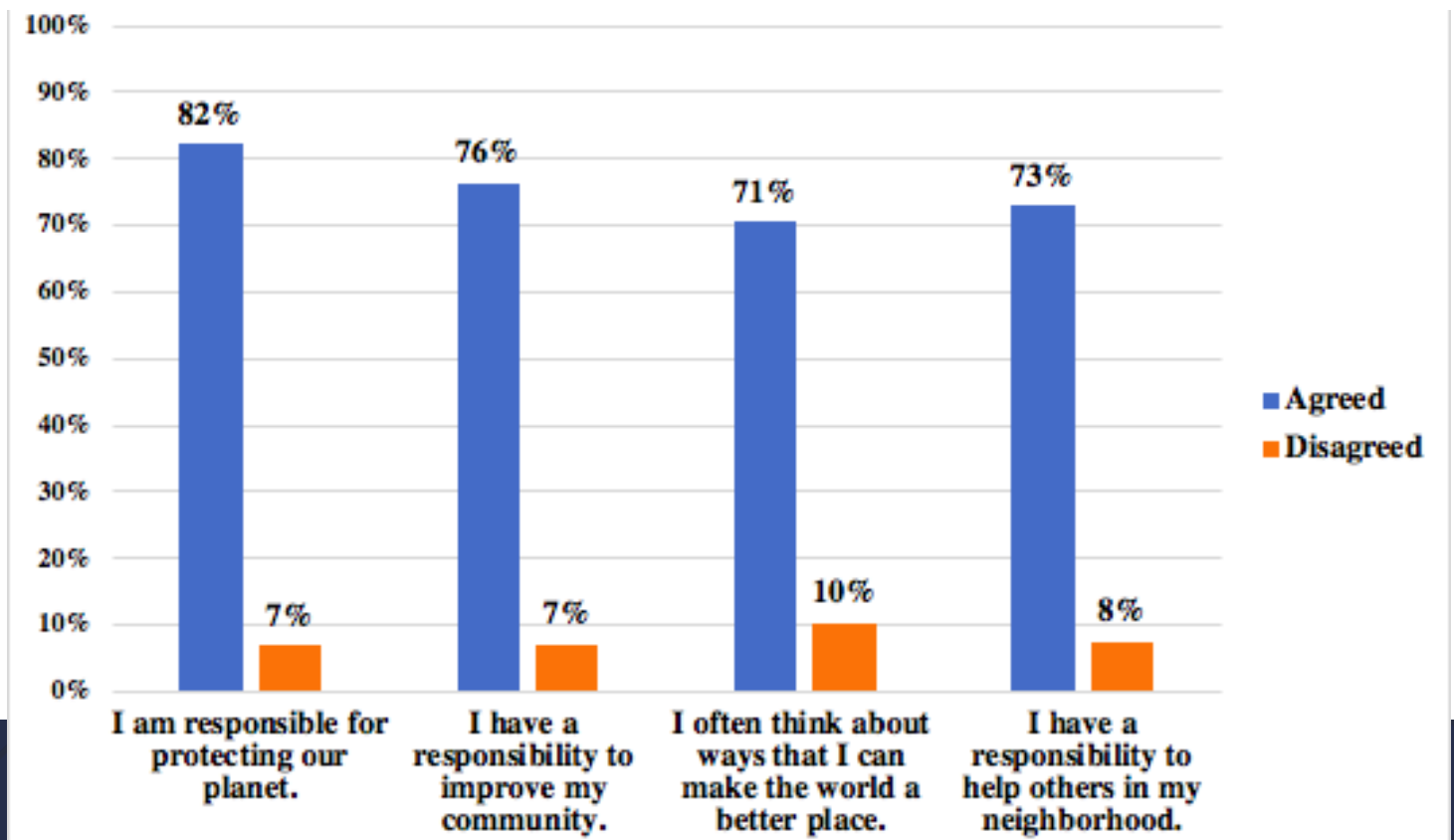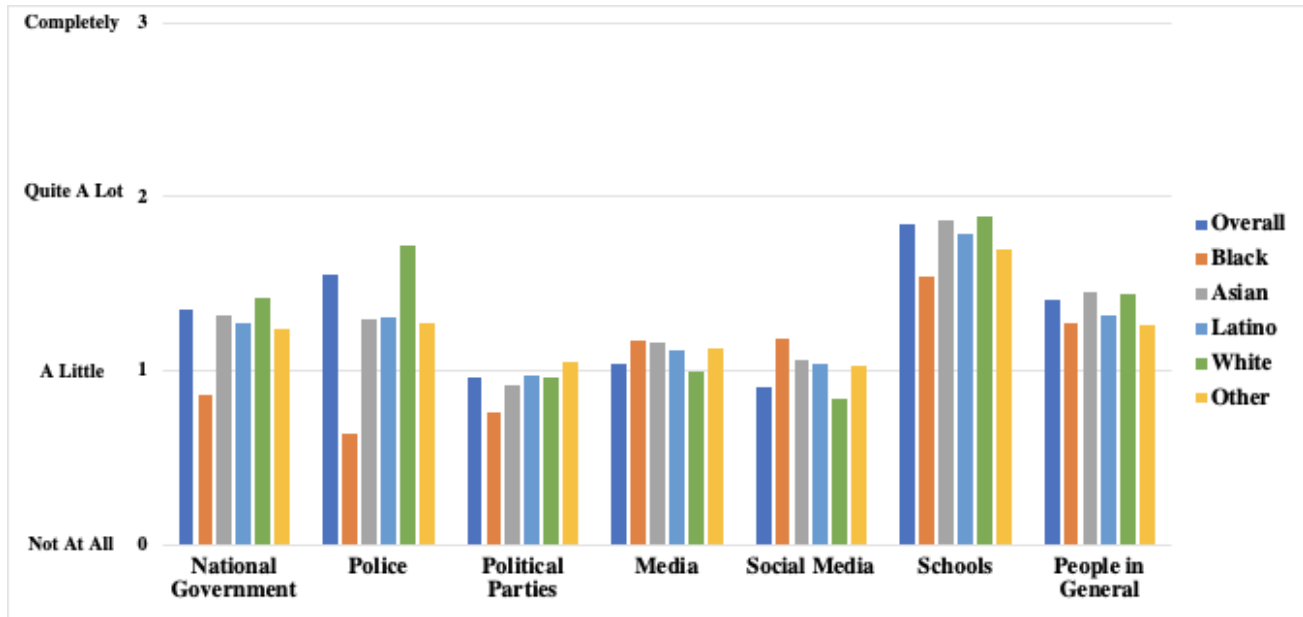
Less than 10 % disagreed or strongly disagreed with the questions asking if they have a responsibility to improve their community or help others around them.

Levels of Trust

CIVIC IDENTITY QUESTIONS

As can be seen above, Black participants expressed slightly lower trust in the national government, police, and schools.

For the other close-ended questions, there was slightly less hope expressed by Asian respondents (3.81 average versus 3.93 overall).

Otherwise, average responses to the future oriented and social responsibility questions were relatively consistent.

OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

In comparison to other participants, Latino/a students more often expressed mental health concerns in relation to their school experiences in the fall.

Almost half of Latino/a respondents (45%) described their experience as negative.

Compared to the other groups, a higher rate of Black participants noted feeling nothing at at all (almost 10% of the sample)

There was less mention among Black students of being sad (25% versus 32% overall) and only one Black participant who explicitly described feeling stressed.

Differences by Other Demographic Factors

Gender

Female participants had slightly higher averages for a few of close-ended questions.

Specifically, they expressed higher average levels of being responsible for protecting the planet (4.36 to 4.13), and thinking about making the world a better place (4.05 to 3.80).

OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

In relation to open-ended questions, female students were more likely to say that they felt sad. Almost 4 out of every 10 expressed feeling this way.

They also were more likely to note feeling stressed (11%, in comparison to 2 % of those who identified as male) and worried (21 % to 12 %).

In line with those findings, female participants were more like to note mental health struggles tied to their schooling (over 20 %), while 4 in 10 said their school experience in the fall was negative.

Type of Schooling

Those who were all remote had lower levels of hope in comparison to those who had in person instruction (3.85 average to 4.04).

There were slightly higher levels of trust for those with in person instruction, except for school and people in general, which were roughly equal across the groups.

OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

Remote students more often focused on academic concerns and struggles with mental health, including lacking motivation.

Almost one half of remote participants said their school experience was negative. Only 20 % of in person students said this, while 29 % said their fall was positive.

Key Takeaways

Takeaway #1:
Amid Challenges, COVID Life is Normalizing and Students Are Coping

- Across multiple questions, these young people described feeling a sense of how life amid COVID-19 had become something they were used to.

- Some responses to this effect, however, were almost contradictory. Participants would say that they were not affected or that they had become indifferent, but then continue on to list emotions, changes, or challenges they were facing.

- Many described COVID-19 and its impacts on their lives as challenging, but the new normal.

In Their Own Words:

"Broadly, this school year's changes have been a challenge. Hoping for a normal year is silly at this point, and I guess COVID has challenged my ability to adapt to change which I now feel pretty good about."

"I used to feel fearful and uneasy whenever I heard about COVID-19, but now it has just became part of life."

"My schooling experience has been weird but I have figured out how to cope with it."

"Pretty good, very very stressful, but I like the way my school has set up online learning."

#1 SUBTHEME A: COPING & SILVER LININGS

- Though not a majority, there were a number of students who described being able to effectively handle the changes due to COVID-19, to have adapted to them, or to be striving to make the best of the current situation.

- These included participants who noted improved relationships with parents, appreciating the extra time, getting extra sleep, or valuing aspects of their life that they were currently missing.

- Furthermore, 24% of respondents indicated that they did not see negative impacts on their futures, saying that their lives and schooling would return to normal or that they didn't know what would happen.

In Their Own Words: Takeaway #1

"Some opportunities that I have experienced this fall is being able to slow down and appreciate all the things that I do have and spending more time with my family that I live with."

"Challenges: I am a pretty social person so I missed talking to people while in quarantine. However, I think there are a lot more benefits to quarantine such as I was able to connect to my family a lot more and I learned how to do a lot of things I've always wanted to do."

Takeaway #2:
Continued Stress and Remote Schooling Impact Mental Health

- Broadly, many participants described struggling to be motivated, maintain focus on school work, and cope with stress. These mental health challenges were related to the stresses of school, factors in their family lives, and the general experience of COVID-19.

- The range of mental health concerns that arose in participants' responses ranged broadly. Some detailed extreme boredom, while others described feelings of exhaustion and/or despair.

- The isolation of quarantines, remote schooling and COVID-19 life generally—whether imposed from the outside or as a choice to protect themselves and loved ones—weighed on some of these students.

In Their Own Words: Takeaway #2

"It is very draining and repetitive. It's still weird to me to be doing school at home. I often lack motivation to just get up in the morning, and when I am in school everyone just feels like strangers."

"My schooling experience has been completely virtual this fall, so it has been relatively detached and more difficult than normal. There is not the same connection with teachers and classmates and it feels like we have more work and are always doing homework. It also feels more independent and sometimes isolating."

"It's been awful. I can't keep up with my work and I just have no motivation to do anything. Most days I just lay in my bed unable to get up because the amount of energy that school and schoolwork drains from me."

#2 SUBTHEME A: WORKLOAD IN SCHOOL

- Many of these young people described feeling like the workloads they had to manage were overwhelming.

- They expressed that their teachers and schools were either not attentive to the difficulties of online/hybrid learning or of managing all the stresses and demands these students faced during the pandemic.

- **The high workload was directly connected by some of these participants to mental health issues and struggling to balance everything going on in their life (such as demands from their family, stresses and anxiety, or their class and homework).**

In Their Own Words: Takeaway #2

"Awful. Teachers and staff refuse to acknowledge the effect their teaching has on mental health. And if they do acknowledge this, nothing changes. They reach out about mental health only so they can say that they did. They preach mental health but completely ignore it. It is disgusting."

"Terrible. I'm getting good grades but only because I stay up until 2 am to get my work done because all of my teachers are piling on work. It's not easy for me to balance school, sports, family and the stress of the pandemic."

"School has been a lot harder because the amount of work I am receiving is still the same but the circumstances are not. Due to my anxiety and depression it has been harder to concentrate and get motivated to do my homework."

Takeaway #3:
Emotions Were Often Intense, Reflecting Social Experience and Mental Health

Overall, participants described varying emotions. Under one tenth said they were indifferent (7 %) or felt nothing (6 %), while many more noted intense feelings related to COVID-19 and its impacts on the world and their lives.

Of the feelings noted, sadness, anger, frustration, and despair were the most salient.

#3 SUBTHEME A: SADNESS

- Sadness (32 %) was the most common emotion articulated by respondents.

- Many simply stated sadness, while others specifically described the extent of the pain and suffering caused by COVID-19.

- A few also noted sadness about feeling like they were missing out on key experiences or opportunities in their life.

In Their Own Words: Takeaway #3

"I feel saddened for all the deaths but mostly disappointed we haven't come together to end the pandemic."

"I get anxious about hearing about Covid. It makes me think of all the stuff I am missing out on and make me long for normal life."

"Sad because my life has really been turned upside down, and a lot has been postponed or canceled now."

#3 SUBTHEME B: ANGER & FRUSTRATION

- About a fifth of participants expressed feeling frustration and anger.

- Though some discussed feeling this way about the situation generally, more described being upset by how it was handled (i.e., by the government), limitations on their lives, or actions of others (e.g., ignoring the guidelines and recommendations).

- Another set of participants, mostly in response to how COVID-19 was affecting their life, expressed anger and frustration about its potential impact on their future plans.

  - What they mentioned included job opportunities, internships, playing sports, and earning scholarships to college.

In Their Own Words: Takeaway #3

"There seems to be a divide...at my school. There are those who continuously engage in parties or large group events, rallies, or other events with a large risk of spreading COVID, and there is another group that is relatively safe and engages in few of these events throughout the entire year. I would venture to say that roughly 60% of students do NOT care about the COVID regulations, and this has made a new challenge this fall for those of us that do."

"It is a disease, and it can be very dangerous, but we are children growing up in fear, and people make it out to be more than it is...I could go on and on, but the government just needs to say this, if you are at risk we will take care of you, if you are not at risk, then you['re] fine. We need to get this country moving! People who are not at risk need to stop living in fear!"

#3 SUBTHEME C: DESPAIR

- About a tenth of these young people described feeling a sense of being overwhelmed or of depression because of COVID-19 and its impacts on those lives.

- This group included those who felt that what had become the new normal in their lives was awful, as well as those who seemed to struggle with coping with the depth of the sorrow and challenges (societal or personal) during this time.

In Their Own Words: Takeaway #3

"I most often feel exhaustion. Yes, it is helpful and necessary to receive information ...However, I feel that this virus is never ending...We keep building up information, and it makes me feel exhausted. Almost as if there will be no end, and we will have to continue living like this for a very long time."

"I feel hopeless. What am I supposed to do with my life if I can't go to places and enjoy life with those around me? I am exhausted with staying at home for so long due to COVID-19."

"There is a lot of depression and worried feelings, as many people do not know what is coming in the near future, and things changed suddenly and are continuing to change."

Takeaway #4:
Schooling Experiences Mixed, And Often Tied to People Around Them

- Participants' reports of school experiences in the fall were mixed across positive (22 %), neutral (18 %) or negative (36 %) feelings.

- In-person learning was preferred for a myriad of reasons, including because it was easier to focus, see friends, and ask teachers questions.

- Still, some described positive experiences online–often due to school or teacher support–while those in person sometimes expressed frustration at limitations on socializing or strict social distancing rules.

- It was noteworthy that there was less mention of the future and college impacts than in the spring survey, and minimal direct comparison to schooling in the spring during quarantines.

#4 SUBTHEME A: SCHOOLS AND TEACHERS

- Students were mixed in their feelings about their teachers, but overall positive experiences were tied to teachers who were communicative, understanding of the challenges of the current situation, and flexible with work and deadlines.

- Participant reports of their schooling experiences depended on instructional mode and how their school was handling changes.

- Negative sentiments were tied to missing friends, struggling with learning, and challenges of technology.

In Their Own Words: Takeaway #4

"I often find myself struggling to interact with people while still being socially distant. It is all such a new concept and it still feels weird how we can't be close to one another anymore."

"I think it will hurt my college chances and search—I would be visiting college campuses...right now, but I cannot. I would be starting to take the SAT and ACT and other tests, but I cannot. I would be joining more extracurricular activities, getting involved in my community, and maybe getting a job, but I cannot."

"I feel that my teachers have little to no care about students' lives outside of the classroom and how hard this is on us. The transition especially has been poorly executed."

#4 SUBTHEME B: LEARNING

- A large number of participants who discussed academics indicated their learning was impacted. Impacts ranged from not being able to learn as well online (e.g. due to a lack of resources and support when they did not understand something), to struggles with format and technology (e.g., Zoom fatigue).

- Some expressed concern these effects on their education would mean they were not going to be as smart and that college or career trajectories would be negatively impacted.

- A small, sizable group tied their academic successes or struggles to their attitudes and responses. About 10% of those who talked about academics noted their own role in successfully adapting or not, such as by describing how they had been able to acclimate or saying they were being lazy.

In Their Own Words: Takeaway #4

"It hasn't been terrible. The teachers are doing their best with online school and I'm grateful to still be learning new things and having some opportunities to connect with people. However, I am tired of being at home on screens all day and not being able to see my teachers, friends, and classmates. Having to constantly schedule time to talk to people is frustrating because I can't just say hi to them in the hallways or between classes."

"It has been nice to be in school because I am more focused and motivated. At home it is hard to stay focused sitting in front of a screen for 7 hours a day when it is not...as interactive as being in school. There is also very little interaction in school with friends which can be kind of hard."

Key Takeaway #5:
For Many, Social Connections And Lack Thereof Shape Experiences

- Contact with friends, school personnel, and classmates was a common theme in participants' responses. Those who were in person either expressed joy at being back with their friends, or frustration with the inability to informally socialize due to strict social distancing guidelines.

- The void created by lack of getting informal time with classmates was particularly challenging for freshmen who did not know others at their school.

In Their Own Words: Takeaway #5

"I already know that my social skills have gone out the window. I know that I am and will stay anxious and very 'down' for a while. my friendships have been affected greatly. I feel that I will no longer be as outgoing as I used to be and will have to work my way up to being 'normal' again."

"Being away from people and interacting with an online environment complicates learning and mental health."

"I can't even meet my friends for coffee outside and with school getting increasingly harder it's hard for me to continue to reach out to friends because...I have so little time to do so. It has also made making friends in school really hard."

"I have to do remote-learning, and all my extra curricular activities are much different this year... Especially as a freshman...it is even harder to make friends when you're not on campus."

Recommendations

#1: Acknowledge Challenges While Maintaining Academics

#2: Explain and Justify Social Distancing Rules

#3: Normalize and Contextualize

#4: Support Re-Imagined Futures

#1: ACKNOWLEDGE CHALLENGES WHILE MAINTAINING ACADEMICS

- Participants across questions generally noted that this time was difficult for them, including balancing various demands, emotions and stresses, and changes in their lives.

- They indicated that they wanted schools to be able to acknowledge and be attentive to this context, but still wanted to be able to maintain as much as normal in their daily lives as possible.

- Schools and educators can therefore be attentive to connecting and listening to students about struggles, such as with workload or grades, but still trying to create spaces of connection and community.

- Some specific areas that would serve these students are spaces outside of class to connect with teachers and ask questions, and opportunities for students to meet and engage with each other (such as some form of extracurricular activities).

#2: EXPLAIN AND JUSTIFY SOCIAL DISTANCING RULES

- Across questions, students often referred to social distancing, masks, and other COVID-19 guidelines. They described these in talking about schooling, and effects on their lives, and thinking about the future.

- These rules evoked many emotions, such as anxiety about getting COVID, frustration with those who did not follow rules or anger with the strictness of school personnel.

- Some contextualized rules, saying that limits were frustrating but understandable. This seemed to temper emotional reactions.

- It is important that students feel they have a voice. While they may not get what they desire—a more "normal" school experience—including them in the process and explaining rationales as part of a dialogue can help them contextualize and feel respected.
  - Options include discussions in homeroom, school town halls, and student advisory committees.

- Overall, such inclusion of their voices in these processes can help support feelings of agency amid many other challenges and changes that are beyond their control.

#3: NORMALIZE AND CONTEXTUALIZE

- When students took the survey, over half a year had passed from when the pandemic began impacting their lives. Some students described successfully adapting, and for others, changes have become a "new normal." Some even described becoming indifferent to issues related to COVID-19.

- Still, there continue to be many struggles these young people must face, including being motivated, feeling isolated, and trying to keep up with their learning.

- These challenges are different across individuals, are real, and need to be acknowledged. Students may need help from adults in educational contexts to provide some sense of normality while also recognizing differences and giving spaces to share and process struggles.

- It is important they have opportunities and supports to process what this means for them. Possibilities include:
  - Individual and group reflections on COVID-19 and changes in their lives
  - Sharing with each other positive experiences or coping strategies they have done with their families, friends, or themselves

#4: SUPPORT RE-IMAGINED FUTURES

- Participants described many impacts on short-term and long-term futures. A small group did note positive changes, and these tended to focus on being more appreciative of their social lives and society being more health conscious.

- In reference to their personal lives, participants noted a myriad of negative changes affecting their academics, college prospects, activities, social life, and broader society (like government and the economy).

- Combined with the quantitative results on future mindedness, it is clear that many of these young people are not only trying to cope in the present, but also figuring out what the future will hold for them given all that has been impacted by COVID-19.

- Schools can provide structured and supportive spaces (through homeroom, college counseling, etc.) for adolescents to talk about what has changed and to guide them in concretely thinking through options, challenges and new environments or opportunities.

Limitations and Points of Clarification

THE SAMPLE

- At a school level, some students did not choose to participate. It is likely that there may have been patterns among those non-participants' thinking and experience that is not reflected in this data
- Not all respondents who started the survey completed it. Of more than 3,000 respondents who began, 2702 completed the closed-ended questions and 2148 responded to at least some open-ended questions

ANALYSES BY DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

- The broad analyses across the whole sample, due to the types of schools with the most responses, over-represent the perspective of White, male participants from urban cities
- Analyses were broken down by certain demographic characteristics (race/ethnicity and gender) and the report includes notes of where key differences were identified
- For more detail, please contact the researchers

TIMING OF SURVEY AND RELATION TO FIRST ROUND

- The study was conducted primarily in October and November, 2020. This time period spanned the presidential election, but we did not ask specifically about this topic. It arose in only a few responses in relation to emotions (e.g., frustration, anger, stress).
- While the survey was similar to the one conducted in the Spring of 2020, these were different participants.
- A small group (N=54) from the Spring survey did complete a Fall survey, and will be interviewed in 2021. These participants are not part of the current analysis, and updates on this part of the study can be found on the study website.