

Uniting Isolated Voices: Girls and Gender-Expansive Youth During COVID-19



KEY TAKEAWAYS

The Negative Impacts of COVID-19 on Girls

To effectively rebuild an infrastructure of support that honors girls' needs, it is essential to truly listen and center how girls' experienced COVID-19. Nearly all the 1,214 girls who took Alliance For Girls' COVID-19 survey say they have been negatively impacted by COVID-19 in varying and distinct ways. Girls' safety and sense of wellbeing have been compromised, and it is the most underserved girls who say they are bearing the brunt of the pandemic's outcomes. The data illustration below describes the most reported negative effects of COVID-19 by girls.

Increased isolation described as loneliness, lack of connection, missing friends, and feeling trapped



Deterioration of boundaries characterized as lack of privacy and private spaces and blurring lines between home and school

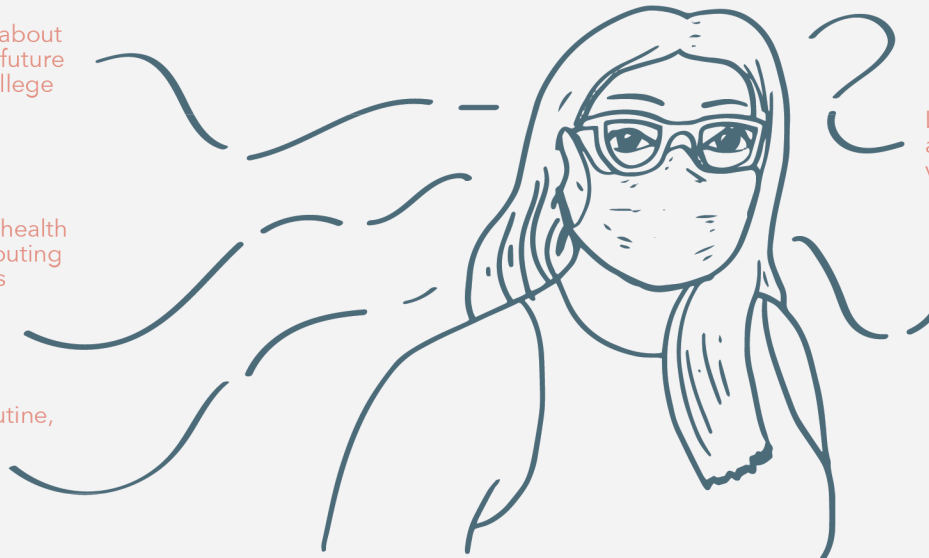
Difficulty with emotional coping described as increased stress, anxiety, depression, worry and overwhelm

Increased caretaking responsibilities of siblings, other family members, and own children

Increased concerns about college, career, and future planning, AP and college prep tests

Decreased physical health and wellness contributing to growing concerns around body image

Loss of structure, routine, and schedule



Loss of enrichment, sports, after school activities, volunteering, and clubs.

Increased pressures around school

Increased barriers to basic needs such as food, housing, financial stability, employment, and technology access.

Increased domestic violence and toxic family dynamics

Loss of motivation also characterized as feelings of boredom, lack of support, and encouragement

Loss of access to specialized services including mental health, healthcare, and special needs



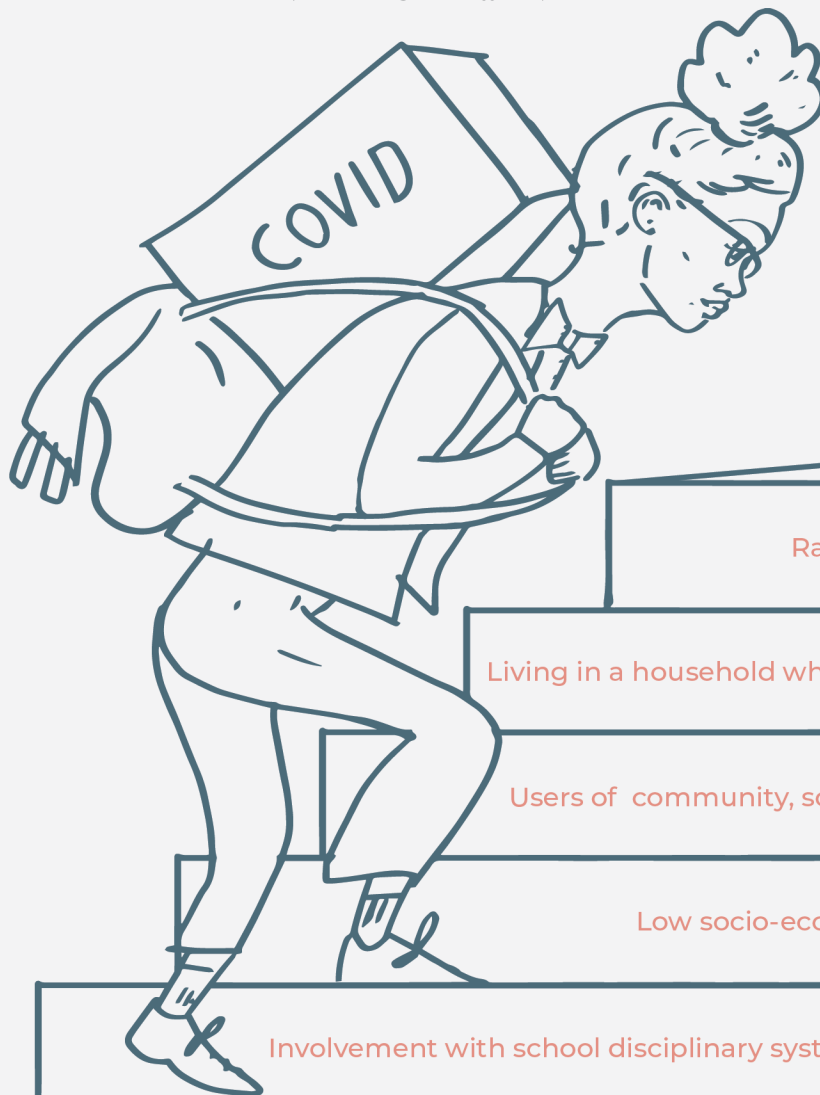
KEY TAKEAWAYS

COVID-19 Exposes the Role of Multiplying Factors Impacting Girls

Girls need positive tethers to responsive systems, supportive relationships, and safe spaces to thrive¹, especially during a global crisis. Girls' responses collected from Alliance For Girls' COVID-19 survey points to how COVID-19's disruption of the systems girls rely on for protection and connection has compromised protective factors² –the conditions that mitigate the likelihood of young people experiencing violence by increasing their abilities to confidently respond to violence (CDC, 2020). Further, these protective factors have been challenged and replaced by what this report is calling multiplying factors – the individual and systemic traits that make girls more susceptible to experiencing the negative effects of COVID-19 with more severity and intensity. Each stair in the data illustration below describes an individual multiplying factor and the mounting challenges ahead for an equitable recovery.

¹ Radical Visions of Safety, page 6, Alliance for Girls (2020).

² "Protective Factors," Centers for Disease Control, <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyouth/protective/index.htm>, retrieved 12 May 2010.



Older girls, especially adolescent and transition-age (18-24)

Girls with Child Protective Services (CPS) involvement

Involvement with school disciplinary systems

Low socio-economic status

Users of community, social, or nonprofit services

Living in a household where a family member is incarcerated

Race and identifying as non-cis gender

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Girls Define the Mental Health and Emotional Supports They Seek

Girls' responses collected from Alliance For Girls' COVID-19 survey show mental health arose as an important factor in girls' lives during the pandemic. Because getting to the heart of mental health can be a vulnerable topic of discussion and difficult to explain, this report looks at how girls characterize their mental health and the supports they need by what they say they have been missing during the pandemic, and what has helped them feel better. By starting with how girls' talk and experience the dimensions of their wellness, effective policies, direct services, and convenience of access can be better crafted to honor girls' needs.

For girls, Mental Health is creating conditions that support the exploration and integration of:

Emotional Health in the form of:

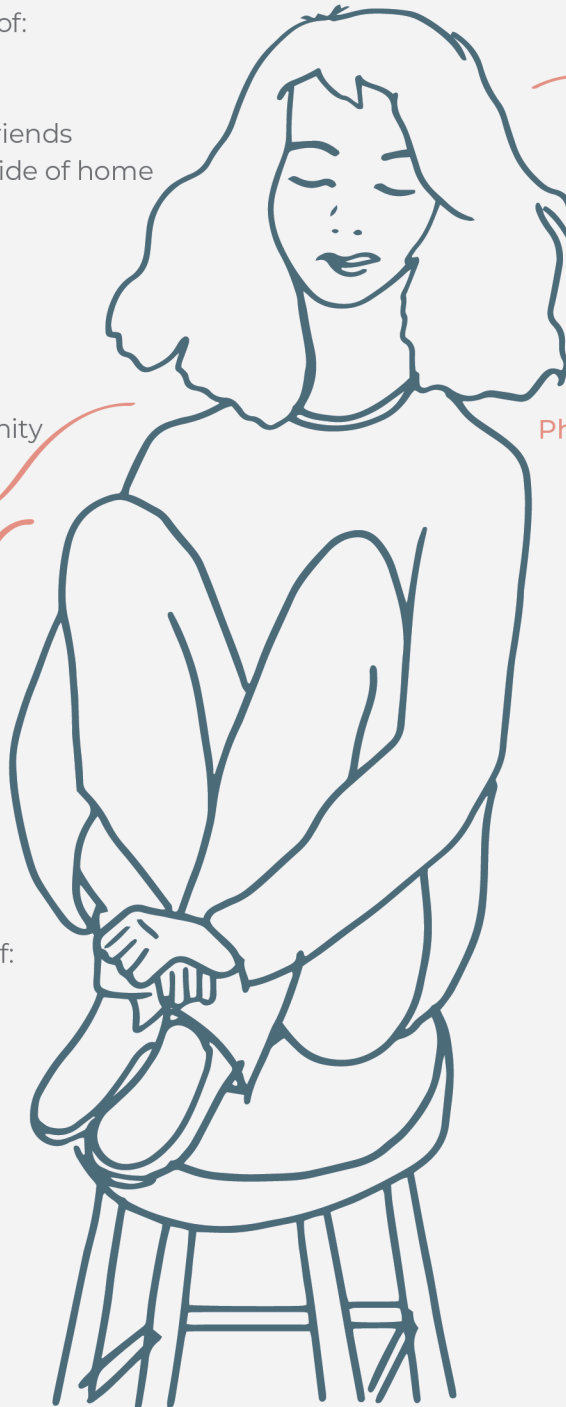
- Connection
- Interaction
- Spending time with friends
- Exploring spaces outside of home
- Privacy
- Enrichment activities
- Clubs
- Afterschool
- Volunteering
- Self-sufficiency
- Belonging to community

Physical Health in the form of:

- Sports
- Dance
- Exercise
- Positive body image
- Yoga

Spiritual Health in the form of:

- Self-care
- Journaling
- Meditation
- Art
- Music
- Self-love
- Self-growth



OVERVIEW

What is the purpose of *Uniting Isolated Voices*?

A post-COVID future is beginning to take shape. This is an inflection point for girls¹, their allies, and leaders across sectors as they begin to design and resource a vision for a better future – one that does not repeat the mistakes of the past nor re-create the same systemic and institutional barriers and burdens for girls.

Between 2016 and 2019, Alliance for Girls (AFG) released its Lived Experiences of Girls report series, which helped create a deeper understanding of the needs of girls in California’s San Francisco Bay Area. As a follow-up to those reports, in early 2021, AFG released its groundbreaking report *Radical Visions of Safety*, in which girls themselves redefined and reimagined notions of safety and healthy relationships, with an eye toward partnering with allies, practitioners, and funders to change programming and make policy and grantmaking more girl-centric. In this report, girls and girl champions reported the biggest roadblocks to achieving safety and healthy relationships were lack of support and systemic, institutional, and operational barriers.

Uniting Isolated Voices: Girls and Gender-Expansive Youth during COVID-19 bridges those reports by grounding their findings in one of the most severe global disruptions in the past one hundred years, the COVID-19 pandemic. This report centers girls’ experiences and further highlights how the reported pre-pandemic barriers to safety and healthy relationships were further dismantled, amplifying the severity of effects of COVID-19 for girls. It also provides a girl-centered and -led **call-to-action guide** in which three categories of allies – educators and service providers, policy and advocacy organizations, and funders – can take action. With this girl-driven road map in hand, allies can fundamentally redress issues wrought by COVID-19 and the underlying second-class citizenship of girls that predates the pandemic. Using this as an opportunity to move away from a “new normal,” we can all instead move towards the dream of a better future.

How was *Uniting Isolated Voices* developed?

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, Alliance for Girls and its youth participatory action research (YPAR) team of youth researchers (Young Women’s Leadership Board) developed a survey to collect data from girls and gender-expansive youth up to age 24 in California.


1. In 2019, Alliance for Girls moved toward more inclusive language to define girls as gender-expansive youth (cis-girls, trans-girls, non-binary youth, gender non-conforming youth, genderqueer youth, and any girl-identified youth) up to age 24. Throughout this report, the use of the term girls encompasses this definition.

The survey asked about their lived experiences during COVID-19 and was administered from March 2020-January 2021. AFG received 2,083 surveys, with 1,214 fitting its inclusion criteria². This report was created through rigorous analysis of girls' survey data and iterative meaning making sessions using the data and analytical insights of AFG's Young Women's Leadership Board (YWLB), AFG staff, and Evaluation Studio, a third-party research team, to paint the landscape of girls' complex needs during COVID-19. Those major insights are focused into three distinct calls to action, which identify the clear issues created or exacerbated by COVID-19, and the necessary strategies and mindset shifts to address those issues. It pays particular attention to the ways that multiplying factors like gender identity, race/ethnicity, systems involvement, and socio-environmental factors have intensified the experiences of already-underserved girls.

What Radical Visions of Safety Report Taught Us About Uniting Isolated Voices

Uniting Isolated Voices details the negative impacts of COVID-19 and the supports that were compromised for girls. In the key takeaways and main findings of what girls share in this report, what becomes apparent is that the severity of COVID-19 can be attributed to how it challenged and upended the benchmark of safety and healthy relationships depicted in the Radical Visions of Safety Report. The table on the next page details the fundamental conditions defined by girls as necessary to achieve a baseline of safety and healthy relationships for themselves.

Table 1. For Girls By Girls: How Girls Define Safety and Healthy Relationships³



Trust	Confidentiality and protection of vulnerability built between peers and adults
Non-Judgment	Open-mindedness and freedom to express authentic self with unconditional acceptance and without feeling judged.
Comfort	Being at ease, carefree, and without stress.
Boundaries	Awareness and regard of what one is willing to give, what one is willing to accept, and what one is needing.
Respect	Emotionally and physically meeting one where they are by valuing their opinions and not making demands to change.
Fun	Experiences marked by laughter, happiness, and humor.
Self-love	Cultivating a relationship with oneself through self-awareness, self-expression, self-confidence, and self-esteem.
Representation	Leaders, role models, and trusted adults who reflect participants' histories, ethnicities, social identities, and culture.
Sovereignty	Sense of control and determination around one's body and environment, allowing freedom from self-consciousness and stigma.

2. Detailed in the research methodologies section of the appendix

3. Alliance for Girls (2021). Radical Visions of Safety, <https://www.alliance4girls.org/wp-content/uploads/AFG-Radical-Visions-of-Safety-Report.pdf>.

Knowing fundamentally what girls need for safety and healthy relationships and seeing the effects of COVID-19 tangibly erode that, gives us a context and framework for seeing the true consequences of the pandemic and a real opportunity to act. Girls are telling us what they need, what works, and what they want to feel safe. In transforming our institutions and systems post-pandemic, we should look to those voices for guidance on how to best invest in and rebuild our ecosystems.

Together with its girl participants, member organizations, and supporters, Alliance for Girls is leading a proactive, not reactive, charge to ensure girls set the agenda. COVID-19 represents a once-in-a-generation chance for girl allies to be accountable in co-creating and resourcing girls' visions for more just post-pandemic systems. This call-to-action guide links girls' COVID-19 experiences to practical step-by-step strategies that can create foundational practices of safety and healthy relationships for girls.

3 CALLS TO ACTION

Call to Action 1: Redefine Schools as Ecosystems for Girls' Wellness

What? Schools should invest in building out and advancing physical and virtual services and infrastructure that support girls' safety, social and emotional wellbeing, coordinated specialized services, and enrichment opportunities.

Why? Girls say schools provide them with myriad benefits that they have missed and needed during COVID-19: private, distinct spaces outside of their home to study and to create and explore identity; peer and caring adult interactions and connections; enrichment, sports, and afterschool activities; and access to counseling and other specialized services. If we want girls to be co-creators of their futures and of their school communities then we must start with girls' experiences and voices in what happens next with school-day spaces.

Objectives The strategies in this call to action can position schools to provide uninterrupted support regardless of severe environmental and personal disruptions (i.e., pandemic, fires, toxic home environments, caregiving and early parenthood). Additionally, these strategies can provide continuous systemic reinforcements for the most underserved groups of girls, thereby girding protective factors, minimizing multiplying factors, and driving radical visions of safety and healthy relationships.

Strategies

- Build coalitions between schools and girls' service providers to create a true continuum of services⁴, something that was already missing pre-pandemic.
- Extend representation to uplift girls' experiences about what mental health means for them to leverage recovery funds for targeted mental health and emotional supports.
- Integrate a broader continuum of caregiving support to young parents and families.
- Create inclusive spaces for girls, young parents, and other affinity groups to foster conditions for safety. Create and develop tools and mechanisms for safety through quality virtual enrichment opportunities as continual options and alternatives for connection.

4. Alliance for Girls (2021). Radical Visions of Safety, <https://www.alliance4girls.org/wp-content/uploads/AFG-Radical-Visions-of-Safety-Report.pdf>.

- Establish, integrate, and expand mental health and trauma-informed counseling, practices, and infrastructure into school-day learning and out-of-school time.
- Provide wellness workshops that integrate spiritual, emotional, and physical health.
- Offer professional development for teachers around SEL engagement, virtual learning quality, trauma-informed practices, and flexible curriculum and classroom structures.
- Increase internet access and connectivity at outdoor school spaces.
- Expand accessible, hybrid tutoring services.
- Expand accessible, hybrid college and career counseling, support, and resources.
- Require digital literacy workshop for girls provided through schools.

Call to Action 2: Leverage Policy and Advocacy Organizations as True Allies

What? Policy and advocacy organizations should align on critical issues, led by girls' voices around what they perceived as their hardest-hit areas as a result of COVID-19.

Why? When girls describe their pandemic experience, they commonly share how one or more of the negative effects of COVID-19 identified in the data affect them; many are also experiencing one or more multiplying factors which render their COVID-19 experience even more intense. In aggregate, girls' voices are illustrating the profound institutional and systemic deficits that continue to pervade and work disproportionately against the most underserved girls; these deficits are calling out for swift policy and advocacy action.

Objectives The strategies and steps in this call to action can provide continuous systemic reinforcements for the most underserved groups of girls, thereby girding protective factors, minimizing multiplying factors, and supporting conditions to create safety and healthy relationships.

Strategies

- Relieve unequal caregiving burdens by advocating for national paid sick leave, paid family leave, and subsidized daycare and preschool. Girls experience disproportionate caregiving responsibilities as young mothers and in sibling and family support.
- Including girls into the caregiver policy conversation as they are often expected to serve as the key caregivers in their families and communities.
- Advocate and increase awareness around the need for wraparound services for girls, which address and connect the mental, physical, and spiritual needs of girls. Create more viable public spaces for connections by expanding internet access and connection outdoors in public parks and libraries.
- Create and adequately resource more dedicated, physical spaces where girls can feel safe, be themselves, and not worry about judgment or expectations.
- Advocate for an expanded understanding of mental health so that it can be more inclusive of all girls' experiences and build an infrastructure of support based on what they voice as their needs and wants.
- Increasing government and systemic efforts to consistently collect more girl-centered data to better support and understand the experiences, challenges, and needs of girls.

Call to Action 3: Provide Dedicated Funding to Uplifting Girls

What? Funders now have clear and targeted ways they can provide funding and resources based on exactly what girls say they need and how it will support them.

Why? Girls say that COVID-19 demonstrated the degree to which they rely on strong systems, like public services, schools, and community supports, to get their needs met; COVID-19's systemic disruptions have impacted underserved girls and their families the most.

Objectives Funders can help redress existing infrastructural and institutional gaps to provide stable and comprehensive assistance for girls and girl-serving organizations.

Strategies

- Prioritize funding for organizations specifically addressing the direct negative impacts of COVID-19 on girls and that eliminate the barriers for safety and healthy relationships.
- Fund intergenerational (i.e. parents, guardian, caregivers, adults) learning and service delivery to recognize the family and community context in which girls are served, and to redistribute the burden of growth, change, and healing for girls.
- Prioritize a culture of funder accountability so partners wanting to make real change in girl-serving ecosystems are responsible and transparent in meeting these goals.
- Provide more flexible funding and operational funding for organizations serving girls.
- Involve girls and girl-serving organizations in decisions about funding priorities, strategy, outcomes, and gaps.
- Invest in capacity-building of girls themselves through training and workshops in skill-building or financial literacy, intergenerational services and training, inviting girls from grantee organizations to sit on a youth grantmaking board.
- Fund and subsidize internship and employment opportunities that are equitably compensated for the most underserved girls and invest in their future growth.