

The Impact of COVID-19 on International Children's Rights and Children's Mental Health in the United States, Japan, Finland, Armenia, and Puerto Rico: A Preliminary Investigation



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This is the second of two companion poster presentations

Introduction

Children are suffering some of the worst consequences of the coronavirus pandemic. COVID-19 has led to a worldwide closing of schools which is affecting the education of approximately 1.5 billion students. Lack of access to education is exacerbating the vulnerabilities of children because many schools have switched to online delivery methods and children no longer have direct contact with their teachers or the school-based mental health professionals. These school professionals are on the "front-lines" of supporting the learning and mental health needs of children. Their work became exceedingly difficult and exhausting when they were required to provide services in both virtual and face-to-face educational environments.

These challenges were further complicated because children in some living situations do not have access to reliable electricity, internet, computers, or cell phones. In those instances, the children's right to education is eliminated (Article 28 of the *U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child* declares that children have the right to education).

Of course, schools are essential for the academic and intellectual development of children, but in many instances, schools also provide nutrition, health, and mental health services. According to a United Nations policy brief, 368.5 million children rely on school meals for daily nutrition. The Article 24 of the *Convention* states that children have the right to health and health services. In terms of mental health, schools also play key roles in providing emotional support, psychological first aid, and stress relief for children and adolescents.

Although COVID-19 has interfered with health and mental health service delivery in schools, many school professionals are being flexible and maintaining psychological resilience during COVID-19 (Chen & Bonnano, 2020).

Methods

Participants.

The participants for this preliminary investigation were 71 anonymous school professionals who answered a brief online survey about the psychosocial impact of COVID-19. The participants included teachers and school-based mental health professionals who were recruited through professional organizations.

Measures.

The survey had five open-ended questions and three questions on a 7-point rating scale. In addition, guest lecturers on COVID-19 provided personal communications.

Data Analysis.

The quantitative data collected from the participants' online surveys were presented with descriptive statistics. The qualitative data were analyzed according to the three stage method describe by Ary, Jacobs, & Sorensen (2010): 1. Organizing and familiarizing, 2. Coding and reducing, and 3. Interpreting and representing.

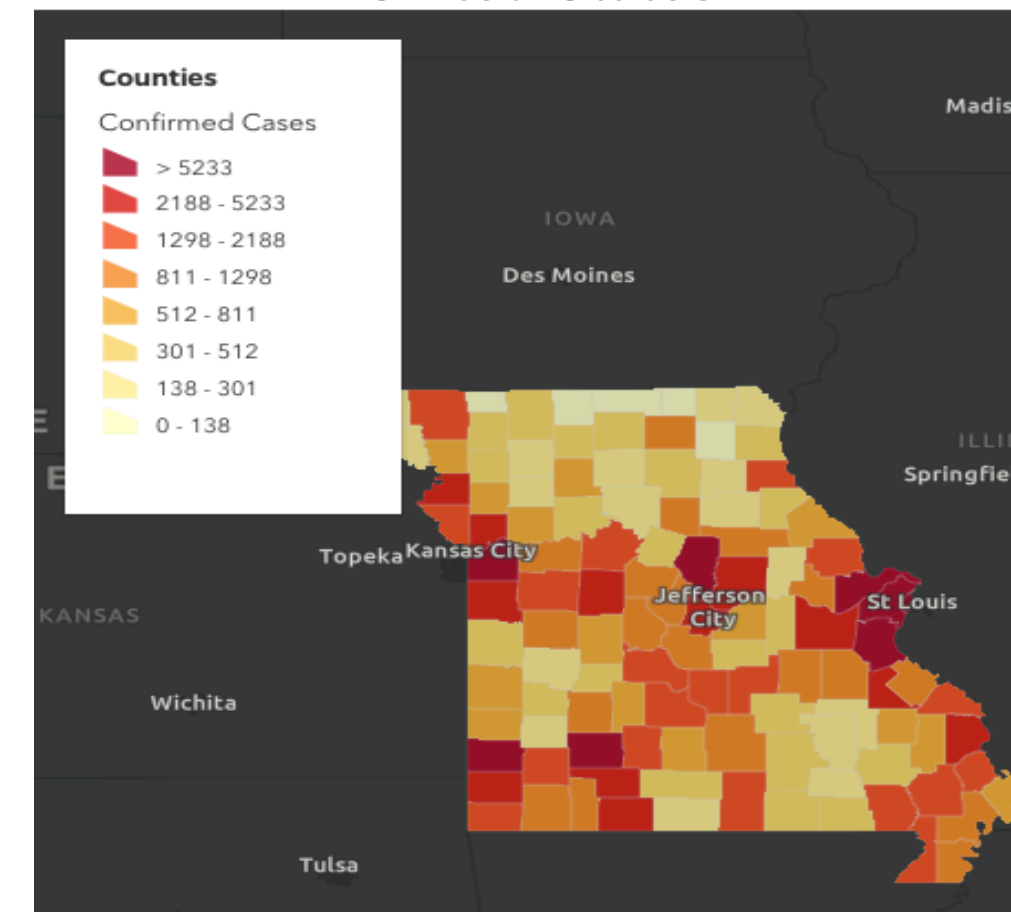
Limitations.

Although we were able to receive IRB approval for our study with school professionals, we were not able to receive IRB approval for our proposed study with children. This is unfortunate because our focus is on the rights and mental health of children.

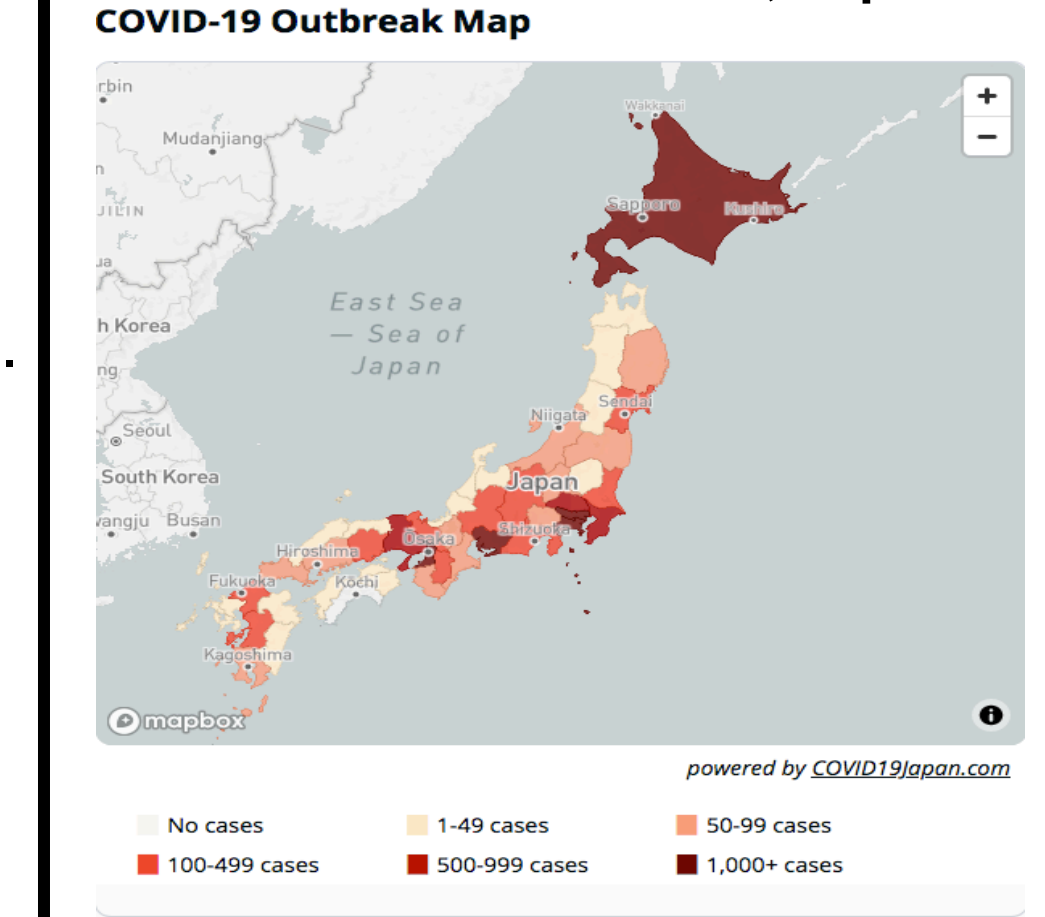
Results and Discussion

COVID-19 Infections in Missouri, U.S., Hokkaido, Japan, Finland, Armenia, and Puerto Rico

Concerns in St. Louis, Missouri, United States



Concerns in Hokkaido, Japan



United States	476.65
Armenia	410.09
Puerto Rico	201.46
Finland	39.14
Japan	12.71

Note. Situation on 11/18/20
Source: World Health Organization
<https://worldhealthorg.shinyapps.io/covid/>

Variations in COVID-19 Infection Rates by Location

Levels of COVID-19 infection rates vary by countries and regions within countries. COVID-19 rates are higher in Armenia and Puerto Rico due to war and natural disasters. Armenia's "war" with COVID-19 has been complicated by the Nagorno-Karabakh actual war. Puerto Rico has faced multiple crises simultaneously: earthquakes, COVID-19 and water shortage.

Due to differing national policies, Finland has a cumulative number of 19,935 COVID-19 cases, whereas its neighbor Sweden has 196,446 cumulative cases.

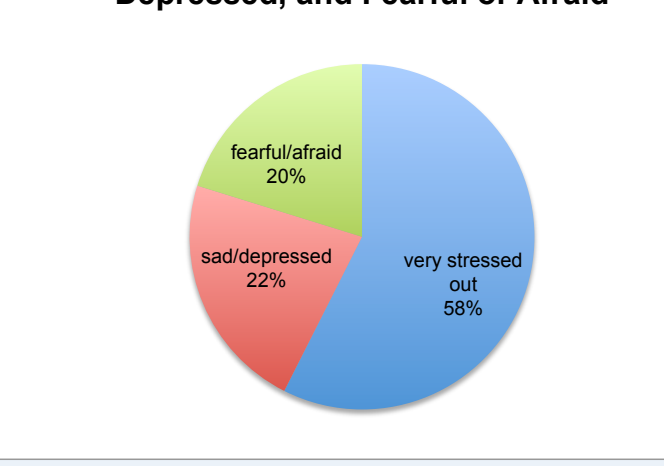
Other examples of variation include St. Louis, MO and Hokkaido, Japan. Here are possible reasons for the higher infections those places.

We are very individualistic in the United States, especially Missouri, and that reflects that we are more concerned about our own personal desires not to wear masks than we are about the safety needs of others.

The Japanese government launched two promotional campaigns 1) Go To Travel and 2) Go To Eat. These campaigns subsidized domestic travel and eating out, and unfortunately these strengthened the COVID-19 pandemic in Japan, especially in Hokkaido.

Participating School Professionals' Emotional Responses to the Impact of COVID-19: Summary of Qualitative Data (See Figures and Table 2 below)

During COVID-19, Participants Report Feeling Very Stressed Out, Sad and/or Depressed, and Fearful or Afraid



Participants didn't describe just feeling stressed – rather, they described feeling incredibly stressed out, extremely stressed, feeling unlimited stress, suffering with stress, being stressed, exhausted, and overworked, etc.

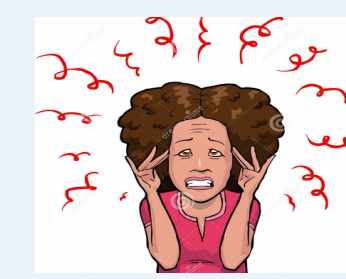


Table 2. Examples of Emotional Responses to the Coronavirus Pandemic

Very Stressed Out 58%	I have witnessed stress in school personnel, stress in caretakers if school children do not have with proper equipment for online learning, and stress in family members who have difficulty accepting limitations of lockdown. (Puerto Rico). Teachers have more work to do, and they have more things to worry about every day, so they are always stressed out. (Japan) The isolation of the population over 70-years-old in initial phase [of COVID-19] was done too rigidly, leading to very stressed grandparents coping alone with the situation. (Finland).
Sad and/or Depressed 22%	We must try not to be too depressed. (Armenia). With COVID-19, children's daily living changed a lot; children became afraid of parents' losing their jobs. The isolation caused sadness. (Finland). I am in mourning, the Armenian nation around the world is in mourning (Armenia). COVID-19 has limited our capacity to physically connect with one another, which has resulted in feelings of grief and isolation. (Puerto Rico).
Fearful/afraid 20%	Students feel uneasiness about continuing to perform due to their fear of [COVID-19] infection. (Japan). I have fear of me or family members contracting the virus. (U.S.)

Since March of 2020, the Association of Trauma Outreach and Prevention (ATOP) Meaningful World has been providing weekly support and healing groups on Zoom every Thursday. Zoom makes international participation possible in these meetings.

In our program, we emphasize viewing crises (such as the coronavirus pandemic) as opportunities to use our knowledge of psychology to promote mental health, well being, and psychological resilience. And so, we decided to hold weekly "Resilience Meetings" that are based on the ATOP approach. These meetings are well received, A typical comment is, "I appreciate the time and thought put into our weekly resilience meetings. I think it is an important time to bring the learning process down to a more humanized level and foster meaningful camaraderie in the class." (Xavior Baker, personal communication, 11/19/20).

Summary Statement

This preliminary investigation found that many teachers and school-based mental health professionals report feeling stressed out, sad, fearful, and overworked as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. Our study is a beginning. The results from Japan, Finland, Puerto Rico, and Armenia suggest that we should do more in depth studies of emotional responses to COVID-19, the effectiveness of our Resilience Meetings, variations in responses to COVID-19, by location and the implications of COVID-19 for international children's rights and children's mental health. In order to support Article 28 and Article 24 of the *Convention*, school professionals need much more support. The Seven-Step Integrative Healing Model (Kalayjian, 2010) is an effective way to create meaningful bridges between students, teachers, and their families because it focuses on interconnectedness, meaning making, empathy and shared support. (Natasha Morales-Rivera, Meaningful World, personal communication, November 11, 2020).

References

- Ary, D., Jacobs, L. C., & Sorensen, C. (2010). *Introduction to research in education*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth
Chen, S. & Bonanno, G.A. (2020). Psychological adjustment during the global outbreak of COVID-19: A resilience perspective. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy* 12, (S1), S51–S54 ISSN: 1942-9681 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/trp0000685>
Kalayjian, A. (2017). *Forget me not: 7 steps for healing our body, mind, spirit, and mother earth*. Monee, Illinois: Sojourn.