The Pandemic Disrupted Adolescent Brain Development

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Before COVID, American teenagers’ psychological health was already in decline. The pandemic, with its sudden lockdowns, school closures and other jolts to normal life, made that downward slope steeper. The ensuing mental health crisis has given researchers a rare opportunity to gauge how an extraordinary event such as a public health catastrophe can physically affect the brains of teenagers.

Preliminary results for some of these studies are starting to be reported—and they are sobering. At the annual Society for Neuroscience conference in Washington, D.C., this week, Elizabeth Powell, a program officer at the National Institutes of Health, characterized the situation as a definitive disruption in normal adolescent brain development.