

“Before COVID This Was Not Normal:” A Photovoice Exploration of College Student Experiences

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Abstract

College students have experienced unique life disruptions and losses due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We conducted this study to gain an understanding of how the pandemic has affected the lifestyle of college students. Findings included: major changes in perceived well-being related to living at home with families, balancing online classes and work, stress and boredom related to isolation from peers, and coping strategies, including substance abuse and physical activity. Research and practice implications are related to increasing opportunities and activities to promote a sense of belonging for students, and also for increased accessible student support services on college campuses.

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has given way to the most significant global challenges across physical and mental health, the economy, and education in the 21st century. Higher education responded by swiftly transitioning to remote operations in Spring 2020. However, this came at a cost with adverse effects on students (Anderson et al., 2021). College students rely on schools for a variety of needs beyond education, including housing, food, technology, and health services. College is also a space where students cultivate personal and professional relationships. The uprooting of stability has resulted in mental-health-related consequences that we are only beginning to understand (Conrad et al., 2021). Schools have continued to have to make in-the-moment policy decisions about instructional modalities, along with policies about vaccination and masking, guided by public health guidelines and political climates (Sahu, 2020).

Young adult mental health is in crisis in the COVID-19 era: a survey administered by the CDC in summer 2020 identified that individuals aged 18-24 reported higher rates of anxiety, depression, trauma, and suicidality than any other age group (Czeisler et al., 2020). For college students, mental health is not only crucial to psychological well-being, but it also has ramifications for academic success and retention. Stress, anxiety, and illness in college students may result in lower grades, dropping courses, or extreme disruptions (American College Health Association, 2019).

Among college students closer to graduating in one study, 60.8% experienced increased anxiety, 54.1% experienced increased feelings of loneliness, and 59.8% experienced increased depression. The majority of students (60.9%) found it harder to complete the semester at home (Lee et al., 2021). However, school-based resources to support student mental health have struggled to meet needs and demands. Even pre-pandemic, research continually illuminated the challenges of universities trying to meet the

mental health needs of their students. College students experience high rates of mental health issues while universities often lack the resources to meet these demands (Auerbach et al., 2018).

Purpose of Study

Collectively, the evolving COVID-19 body of literature continues to provide an abundance of quantitative data about the ramifications for student mental health. Yet, there is less literature available exploring how college-aged students describe their experiences during COVID-19 first-hand. We conducted this study to gain an understanding of what effect the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the lifestyle of college students in one large city in the Northeastern United States.

Methods

The method used in this qualitative investigation was photovoice. Photovoice was first developed in the 1990s (Wang & Burris, 1994). This participatory action research (PAR) approach is used across health sciences, education, and beyond, empowering those who traditionally researched to become coresearchers. Photovoice integrates photography and critical discussion to examine issues from the perspective of coresearchers. Coresearchers take photographs illuminating the guiding research question(s). Next, the coresearcher(s) reconvenes with the researcher and engages in a structured discussion protocol centered around the photograph(s) (Breny & McMorrow, 2021). The goal of PAR methods like photovoice is to promote change at the personal and community level, and to promote a sense of empowerment (Wang, 2006). We used the SHOWeD discussion protocol to guide our photovoice discussions (Wang et al., 1998). While looking at one photograph at a time, the protocol includes the questions (1) What do you See here? (2) What is really Happening here? (3) How does this relate to Our lives? (4) Why does the problem or strength exist? and (5) What can we Do about this? The purpose of these questions is to critically discuss the research topic with a focus on ultimately identifying strategies to empower positive change. Dissemination is encouraged to go beyond traditional outlets, like peer-reviewed journals, and can often take place in interactive gallery exhibits where stakeholders can interact with the findings and each other with a goal of promoting change (Latz, 2017).

The following research question guided this inquiry: (1) What impact has COVID-19 had regarding life at home, school, work, and other extracurriculars for college students?

Theoretical Perspective

Dilthey's Hermeneutics (Dilthey, 1976) was the theoretical perspective guiding this study. Hermeneutics is concerned with understanding the experiences and events of specific groups of people. To reach an understanding, one must consider the whole of a person's experiences, followed by honing in on individual aspects of a person and then returning to the whole (Murphy, 2018). This is accomplished by entering the hermeneutic circle: first, examine the phenomenon from a bird's-eye view and then hone in on individual aspects of the experience before returning once again to the whole of the experience. This return yields a new, deeper level of understanding (Tappan, 1990).

Protection of Human Participants

We obtained approval for this research study through our University’s Institutional Review Board. I (the first author) communicated, verbally and in writing, the purpose of the research, in addition to the potential risks and benefits to the participants, before obtaining their verbal and written consent to take part in the study. I informed each participant of the voluntary nature of the study and that they could end the interview or withdraw from the study at any time.

Participants

This study focuses on two undergraduate students attending a university located in a major city in the Northeastern United States. The two participants were Richie (all names are pseudonyms), a 20-year-old university student and grocery store employee who was considered an essential worker during the COVID-19 outbreak, and Saquon, a 21-year-old student who lost his job early in the pandemic.

Setting

In March and September of 2020, Richie participated in photovoice exercises and semi-structured interviews. In August of 2020, Saquon took part in photovoice exercises and semi-structured interviews. Both participants were quarantined in the city where their university was located during the time of their interviews. All interviews occurred over Zoom videoconferencing.

Data Collection

Before photo collection, I met with participants over Zoom to explain the process of photovoice. For the photovoice exercise, I asked my participants to use their smartphones to capture images that they felt reflected the research question, “What impact has COVID-19 had regarding life at home, school, work, and other extracurriculars for college students in your city?”. I told participants there is no “right” or “wrong” way to take a photo, but their pictures could not include faces or any personal or identifying information. I emphasized to participants that it is their voice that matters while taking these pictures and there is no specific thing that I am looking for as the researcher.

Photovoice Participant Training

After photo collection, I met with participants over Zoom and reminded them that any identifiers in their data would be removed. Participants consented to having the discussion audio recorded. We discussed photos one at a time following the SHOWeD protocol (Wang et al., 1998). Once finishing the protocol, I asked the participants why they chose the picture, and then asked them to create a caption for their picture. Next, I asked the participants several semi-structured questions: (1) What impact has COVID-19 had regarding life at home, school, work, and other extracurriculars for college students in your city? (2) What impact has COVID-19 had regarding life at home, school, work, and other extracurriculars for college students of color in your city? These questions allowed the participants to further discuss the impact COVID-19 has had on their lives in an open-ended fashion.

Data Analysis

I analyzed data using Gilligan's Listening Guide methodology (Gilligan et al., 2003). The first part of the Listening Guide involves listening for the overall plot and identifying dominant themes. The second step is crafting i-Poems, which are constructed by identifying a portion of the transcript and extracting all "I" passages, including "I" and any corresponding verbs and other words deemed significant by the listener/researcher. Each "I" statement becomes its own line in a poem, with all statements remaining in the original order that they were spoken. By doing this, the listener can isolate the "I" voice and identify unique rhythms that may otherwise get lost. The third step involves listening for contrapuntal voices of the participant by focusing on emotions, actions, and beliefs that were present during the interview. The fourth and final step is to compose an analysis by revisiting the participants' entire story and processing the findings based on the first three steps of the Listening Guide. Following these steps illuminates the complex and multilayered nature of the experience of the participant (Gilligan et al., 2003).

Alignment of Hermeneutics With Data Analysis

We selected the Listening Guide because while it was conceptualized as a feminist method, it is also well aligned with, and has previously been used to guide, hermeneutic studies (e.g., Tappan, 2001; Gagnon et al., 2020; Murphy, 2018). The steps of the Listening Guide follow a sequence aligned with the hermeneutic circle, first examining a phenomenon from a bird's-eye view (whole), to examining specific parts closely, and then returning to the whole (Murphy).

Trustworthiness and Credibility

We employed several quality indicators recommended by Brantlinger and colleagues (2005) to establish trustworthiness and credibility. First, member checking occurred with each participant. They had the opportunity to review the interview transcripts and also the final Listening Guide. They had the opportunity to revise, remove, or add anything that they believed necessary to ensure a fair and accurate portrayal of themselves and their experiences. Then, the second author served as a peer debriefer across the study from data collection through to analysis and interpretation.

Results

Richie

Step 1: The Plot

Richie is a 20-year-old college student who works in a grocery store produce department. Richie self-identifies as Hispanic. He moved from Nebraska when he was 10 and now lives in an apartment with his parents. His mother has a preexisting health condition that increases her risk of complications with COVID-19, and his parents' age puts them both at a greater risk compared to Richie. He has been working at a grocery store for a little less than two years. As a grocery store employee, he is considered

an essential employee and has been called into work even though there is a Stay-at-Home order. Richie needs the income to be able to afford living expenses and pay for his college degree. Richie fears that when he goes to work, he may be harming his family, but because Richie is not immunocompromised and does not have any medical conditions that would put him at a higher risk for developing complications from COVID-19, he has been picking up more shifts in the produce department while his coworkers have been calling out sick. Richie needs to continue providing for himself and his family during this challenging time.

Step 2: I-Poems



Fig. 1: Empty train

Richie's First Poem: "Empty Train"

I was the only person on the train
I don't know
I take the bus and train pretty much every day
I guess we can learn that we can not use the train as much
I've never taken a train like that before
I felt weird

I took this first poem out of Richie's photovoice exercise based on Figure 1. He was very surprised to find himself as the only passenger on the train. Richie took the photo in the middle of the day, and he had never been the only passenger at that time of day before. With the COVID-19 pandemic, Richie was finding himself in that situation frequently.



Fig. 2: Panic shopping

Richie's Second Poem: "Panic Shopping"

I don't go to school anymore
I'm working more
I'm so far behind
I'm not confined at home

Richie described the picture as seen in Figure 2 as a good visual of how he felt. While working a shift on a weekend, Richie noticed that the table that normally contains potatoes, sweet potatoes, and bags of onions was empty. In all of his time working at this grocery store, this table had never been empty or even low before. Not only was Richie struggling to keep up with school and his studies, but the store he works at was not able to keep up with panic shopping introduced by COVID-19 concerns.

Step 3A: Contrapuntal Voices of March

Step 3A is grounded in interviews that occurred in March 2020.

The Voice of Need. I heard the voice of need from Richie's interview. Richie needed to continue going to work, he needed to continue his online classes, and most importantly he needed the time to balance his responsibilities and goals during an increasingly stressful and isolating lifestyle. During the interview, Richie told me he was working more now because his coworkers are calling out sick and he needs the money to support himself and his family. He said: "People are starting to not come into work because either they are sick, or scared of getting sick, so they need more people."

Customers have been overwhelming the store in spite of social distancing guidelines. There have been new policies almost daily that Richie needs to keep up with to ensure his own safety and that of others at work. Managers displayed signs all over the store for him and the customers to follow. Richie felt obligated to continue working because he is an essential employee experiencing pressure from managers

who need employees, as well as his coworkers who need coverage. Richie is healthy and still able to get to work, so he felt as though he needed to continue going and supporting himself, the store, and his coworkers who were unable to go.

Not only was he experiencing challenges at work, but Richie also faced the problem of being a college student whose class schedule became online overnight. He needed to set aside time to engage in his classwork, but Richie struggled to find the time without the structure of in-person classes. When we began discussing his academics, he told me: “I don’t go to school anymore. It’s all online ... it’s terrible. I’m so far behind in literally every class.”

Richie struggled with finding the time to continue taking online classes while covering multiple shifts at work. He did not find it easy to take online courses. He was behind and overwhelmed with school, but also found it hard to be studying and learning at home. Before the pandemic, Richie would spend time on campus taking classes and completing homework assignments. Things were different now. Richie said: “My dad’s also working from home so that gets uncomfortable when we’re both doing work there, but I’m not confined at home so it’s not that bad.”

Instead of being confined to his house with his dad, Richie appreciated being able to leave and go to work. However, he was also using this as an excuse to avoid his homework assignments. Completing schoolwork at home felt incredibly difficult. Richie seemed to be struggling with the number of responsibilities he was juggling during the outbreak. Richie found himself at a crossroads between needing the income and needing to set aside time for himself and his education.

When I asked Richie what we can learn from the pandemic and his experiences, his response was very grounded in the moment: “Don’t panic shop, just take it easy. Because when you do, you leave like nothing for the rest of us . . . It’s good to follow social distancing. Stand six feet apart, listen to the signs on the floor.”

Step 3 B: Contrapuntal Voices of September

In September 2020, the first author had the opportunity to follow up with Richie.

The Voice of Caution. I heard the voice of caution from Richie during his follow-up interview. Richie was still working and taking classes online, but he had since moved out of his home with his parents. Richie said:

It’s pretty much still all the same you know. School’s online, work’s still different than what it was before COVID, uh I guess the biggest difference is I’m not living with my parents anymore. I moved out ... It’s definitely easier because it’s closer to work and I don’t have to live with my parents anymore.

Richie was very cautious about spreading COVID-19 and moved into an apartment with his coworkers to limit the number of people he encounters as an essential employee. When I asked Richie what he thought about classes being remote for the Fall 2020 semester, he said: “My classes are alright. They are

a lot better than they were last semester. Everyone has had time to like figure it out, teachers and students, so it's obviously not ideal but it's not that bad."

Richie was not opposed to classes being online because he thinks it is the best option given the ongoing current situation with COVID-19. He would not want to go to in-person classes even though it was typically what he preferred. He thought the risk of COVID-19 would be too high for in-person instruction and was relieved that the semester was more organized than in the spring.

Richie was very concerned about the upcoming holiday and flu season because grocery stores become notoriously busier during the holidays, which means more people would be coming in and out of his small store. Although Richie has taken precautions to limit the spread of COVID-19, he cannot prevent an influx of customers. When talking about this, Richie said: "I'm kind of worried for the fall, especially for work because it's holiday season. And then you know we're supposed to get this whole second wave with the flu season and all that. So that kind of scares me."

Step Four: Analysis

Richie is a 20-year-old essential employee during the COVID-19 pandemic. He needs to provide for himself and his family and feels obligated to help others whenever he can. He was raised by his parents who are at higher risk for adverse reactions to COVID-19, and he wants to keep them healthy and safe. I then looked closer at the various components of Richie's story, such as his i-Poems and his contrapuntal voices, which showed me how he was feeling and thinking through his own framework. Through Richie's i-Poems, it became clear to me that the pandemic caused Richie to be overwhelmed at work and with his studies. I heard the voice of need and the voice of caution because he needed to continue going to work, taking classes, and caring for his family, but he also needed to be cautious with the pandemic and spreading himself too thin. By listening to his voice and individual parts of his story, I was able to better understand the whole of Richie and his experiences.

In the case of Richie, the most significant takeaway from COVID-19 had been an increase in stress. He had been working harder to keep the shelves stocked for customers who flood the stores during times of crisis. He knew that if he could help people such as his coworkers during this time, then he would cover their shifts because he is not immunocompromised. For Richie, an increase in work meant a decrease in the amount of time he had for schoolwork. This was especially challenging. He now felt as though he was on his own in terms of schoolwork because he no longer meets in person with his professors.

During the follow-up interview, I found Richie to still be experiencing increased stress. Richie seemed to have adjusted to the increase in work and classes online, but he still feared for his safety and the safety of his friends and family. Richie distanced himself from his family and moved into an apartment with coworkers to limit his possible spread of COVID-19. Richie was very fearful of the upcoming holiday season because work would become even more crowded, and he was worried about that risk of disease would also increase as the weather became colder.

Saquon

Step 1: The Plot

Saquon is a 21-year-old college student studying computer science and he self-identifies as half Greek and half Asian. Saquon lives at home with his mom and dad who are at a higher risk for adverse reactions to COVID-19 due to their ages. Because of this, his family has been strictly following state and public health guidelines.

Saquon is unemployed and unable to find a summer internship in his field. Saquon has been collecting pandemic unemployment benefits while spending time isolated at home. Before the pandemic, Saquon would spend his time out with friends, but due to COVID risks, he now just stays home. This isolation has led Saquon to turn to both marijuana and working out to relieve his stress. Saquon finds remote learning to be very challenging and is not looking forward to the fall semester. He feels as though he needs in-person instruction to retain information. He thinks it is too easy to wake up and open a laptop to access a class and finds it rewarding to put effort into getting up and going to class.

Saquon reflected on how many Chinese students were facing racial discrimination during COVID. While he described that he had not personally experienced any racial discrimination, he did say that his friends had made jokes with him about being of Asian heritage and potentially having COVID-19 because of it.

Step 2: i Poems

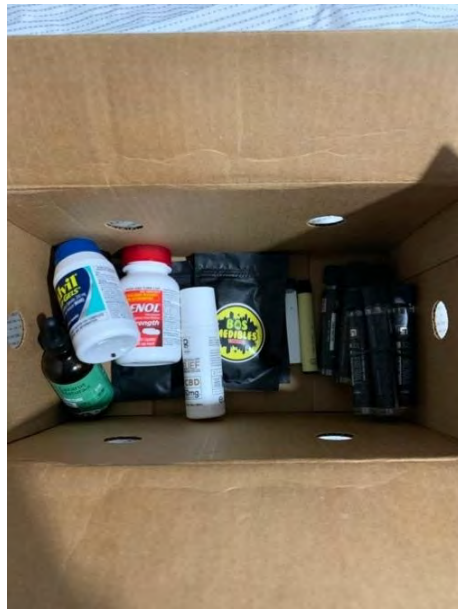


Fig. 3: Fun box

Saquon's First Poem: "Fun Box"

I had never really done any weed or vaping
I'm at home
I'm bored

I just put everything in
I just grab from it like every so often
I'm putting everything in a box
I do consider it substance abuse to an extent
I would be out and about
I'm kind of just home

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Saquon rarely used marijuana. Saquon was now at home with no real responsibilities until school started in September. He could not go out with his friends. He described how his substance use had increased drastically because he felt like there was nothing else to do. Figure 3 is his picture of his self-described "fun box" with marijuana products that he keeps in his room for when he is feeling anxious or bored.



Fig. 4: Responsibility

Saquon's Second Poem: "Responsibility"

I have a responsibility
I have to do it
I am working out
I can't see it being problematic
I can see the fun box being problematic
I'm going to have the responsibility
I have the responsibility to just be there and focus
I'm prepared to show up
I am
I am a student
I'm me

Saquon has worried that he was relying too much on substances and needed to motivate himself. He bought the watch to begin working out and give himself a sense of structure and accountability. His workouts revolved around the time. Once the clock struck noon, and again at 5 p.m., he would work out regardless of any potential excuses. Saquon needed structure in his life, and he was able to feel a sense of control by focusing on his daily schedule of workouts.

Step 3: Contrapuntal Voices

The Voices of Boredom and Accountability. I heard the voices of boredom and accountability tightly intertwined together from Saquon’s interview. Saquon found himself trapped at home over the summer and had no responsibilities or motivation to be productive. His lack of responsibility caused him to feel stressed because he felt like he should have been doing something with his time. Saquon turned to substance use because of this stress. Saquon said:

And I do consider it substance abuse to a certain extent, but to me other than school coming up there’s no real reason for me to stop. So, for me this is like oh this is normal, this is me chillin’ in the summer. But before COVID this was not normal. During the summer like last year, I’d be out and about like on the beach or something like that, like hanging out with friends. But now, like nobody really wants to hang out, nobody really wants to go to the beach. So, I’m kind of just home playing video games often.

Saquon struggled to find motivation because he had no real responsibilities. He had no reason to stop using marijuana as frequently. He began considering his behavior normal for him and many of his friends felt the same way about themselves. He had many friends who turned to alcohol instead of marijuana. Compared to them, he thought that he was being much safer, and his actions carried less severe side effects.

His COVID-related circumstances caused Saquon to feel anxious because he believed he was not doing anything productive and as a result, experiencing challenging times during COVID-19 mentally. He was able to change his mindset once he began working out. He said:

Because I had a lot of ups and downs during quarantine for whatever reasons. Like I had a lot of dark spots for some reason. Like I had some really dark spots ...a lot of what I think it was, was at night I would worry like I need to be doing something. That idea would always run through my mind like I need to be doing something productive, but I can’t. So, the one thing that saved me from being a nervous wreck all the time was working out because here I have like one thing to do and there’s a very clear goal.

Saquon described feeling better while he was working out. He knew that he needed structure and rules to feel physically and mentally healthy. He purchased the watch over the summer to give himself more structure to his day. Saquon motivated himself to work out by utilizing his watch. The usage of his watch provided Saquon not only with structure, but also with time management. Although Saquon had limited responsibilities and an abundance of free time, he said: “Eventually I learned like, hey the watch, it’s giving you time. And there’s only a certain amount of time in a day. And I made the realization that I need to spend my time more efficiently.”

Step Four: Analysis

In the case of Saquon, the most significant takeaway from the COVID-19 outbreak has been the implications of an increase in unstructured free time. To protect himself and his higher risk parents, Saquon stopped socializing, and his isolation led to increased anxiety. Saquon talked about how he experienced some dark times during quarantine. Isolation and lack of structure led him to use marijuana frequently. He said there was not much else he could spend his time doing, so using his “fun box” became the new normal for him. He mentioned that many of his friends also increased their usage of marijuana and alcohol. Saquon talked a lot about how substance use was his solution for relaxation.

After purchasing his watch, Saquon began to become more physically active to give himself something to do, and it was a way for him to motivate himself and provide structure to his day. He was very systematic with his approach to spend his time more efficiently. Overall, I believe Saquon struggled during COVID-19 because of a lack of motivation and an increase in free time, which led him to feel stressed and anxious. He was able to benefit from following a strict workout schedule every day.

Discussion

College students are in a distinct phase of development known as emerging adulthood, a phase bridging adolescence with young adulthood. This phase of life is associated with increased autonomy and a myriad of choices pertaining to personal, educational, and professional pathways. It can also be characterized as a time of rapid change and instability different than other life phases and is a peak time for the onset of mental health disorders, including anxiety, depression, and substance abuse (Auerbach et al., 2018). College students living through the pandemic have experienced unique disruptions and losses associated with this phase of their life, including moving back home to live with family, adjusting to online learning, and changes to or cancellations of milestone events (Sahu, 2020). Although both participants were students from the same college and both lived at home with their families during the initial stages of the pandemic, our participants illuminate different challenges associated with being a college student during COVID-19. However, both students experienced new stressors pertaining to time and concerns about inadvertently putting their family at risk for contracting COVID. Richie’s stress stemmed from not having enough time to balance academics while working, while Saquon’s stress increased because of an increase of unstructured time.

Consequences Related to Changes in Routine, Time, and Isolation

The results from this study aligned with Firkey et al.’s (2020) study. Similarly to Richie and Saquon, they found that students reported increased anxiety and decreased quality of life. Richie and Saquon talked repeatedly about how stressed and anxious they felt in light of dramatic changes in their lives. Richie struggled with balancing work with learning how to become an online college student, attending class, and completing coursework from his home. His home was a place where he felt it was difficult to concentrate on academics, and he was also stressed about harming his family each time he came home from his job at the grocery store. While Richie was balancing multiple roles, Saquon lost his job at the

beginning of the pandemic, and also made a decision to stop socializing in order to protect his family from COVID exposure. Saquon felt bored, and his days became very unstructured. Saquon immediately stopped seeing friends during the onset of the pandemic, leaving him isolated and bored. In response, he began to experiment with cannabis and over-the-counter pain medications and ultimately created a “fun box” to try to find pleasure and escape. The 2020 study by Firkey and colleagues also found that students reported an increase in alcohol and cannabis use. Even prior to the pandemic, adults aged 18 to 25 had the highest rate of drug use of any age group.

Protective Factors

We identified two protective factors in this study. For Richie, things improved for him when he decided to move into an apartment with his friends. This provided a space for Richie to feel a sense of belonging among peers outside of courses, and to return to the activities of emerging adulthood (Auerbach et al., 2018). Prior to this, Richie only saw peers in online classes. Otherwise, he was at work or staying at home with his family. There are a variety of reasons some college students may not be able to live independently, however, so this also illuminates the importance of offering a variety of inclusive opportunities to be involved with extracurricular activities in the school community. Extracurricular activities exist outside of academic grades and requirements with voluntary participation, typically centered around special interests (Bartkus et al., 2012).

Saquon illuminated the benefits of physical movement. Saquon described feeling increasing anxiety, boredom, and loneliness as a result of his new lifestyle during the onset of the pandemic. Initially, his solution was to develop a “fun box” of drugs to pass the time and numb uncomfortable feelings. However, purchasing a watch and making the decision to build a regular daily fitness routine was a positive decision point. In one study, 46.7% of college students chose to engage in physical activity (PA) to take care of their mental health (Lee et al., 2021). The benefits of PA for both physiological and mental health are well documented. Recent research studying college students and PA indicate that PA can serve as a critical facilitator for protecting and increasing positive mental health, even during a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic (Maher et al., 2020).

Limitations

One limitation to this study was directly related to COVID-19-related public health guidelines. Because of rapidly evolving conditions in March 2020, the participants in the study were identified via convenience sampling. The first author knew the participants well, and that may have affected the content and nature of what participants shared in photographs and interviews. Also, this was a stressful and unpredictable time for all individuals involved, which led to interviews that were concise in nature. During a different period, we may have had more time for lengthier interview sessions. Another limitation was the number of people involved in the study. It became obvious, even with only two participants, that each person was experiencing a very different situation during COVID-19. A greater number of participants from different geographical areas with different financial and cultural backgrounds would likely have yielded further diversity of experiences. Additionally, due to the nature of qualitative research,

the results of this study cannot be generalized. Rather, we hope to achieve particularizability through rich, deep descriptions so that the reader may identify how participant findings may apply elsewhere (Brantlinger et al., 2005).

Implications for Research

In the U. S. Surgeon General's December 2021 Advisory on youth mental health, he emphasized the need for more research to identify and support youth mental health needs in a timely manner. He explicitly identifies that, in order to design effective support solutions, we need to understand the experiences of, and directly engage with, young people, especially those with multiple risk factors (Murthy, 2021). We urge future researchers to consider including visual methods like photovoice, and PAR, in their research studies for several reasons. First, photovoice emphasizes empowering individuals as coresearchers and prioritizes how they view and describe their world experiences (Latz, 2017). Second, photovoice emphasizes personal and community action based on findings (Breny & McMorrow, 2021).

Photographs serve as a unique element for coresearchers to communicate their experiences and ideas for change, and for consumers of research to connect with the findings and promote change. Using photography as part of this study allowed us to connect with the participants in a deeper way. Especially during the early days of the pandemic, it served as a unique way to connect and share during a period marked by intense isolation for researchers and coresearchers alike. The photos conveyed their experiences in a way that may not have been captured in traditional interviews or surveys, which benefits the research process and also dissemination.

We recommend that researchers continue to explore the experiences of diverse college students across different types of universities. Finally, we recommend further research focusing on culturally and linguistically diverse students. This is critical because of the heightened likelihood of physical, academic, and emotional risks and consequences students of color face during COVID-19 and beyond (Murthy, 2021).

Implications for Practice

We echo other recommendations urging more availability of mental health support services for college students. Both of our participants described experiencing more mental health issues than before the pandemic, which is consistent with other research (e.g., Surgeon General of the United States, 2021). Saquon’s interview highlighted how students may be turning to substances to cope, and Richie’s interview highlights the many roles students play (e.g., student, employee, family member) and the associated stress that may accompany juggling those roles and responsibilities. In a multi-country survey on college student well-being, students reported that support from instructors and administrators played a mediating role in their well-being (Plakhotnik et al., 2021). However, research also illuminates that most students do not receive treatment, likely due to inadequate resources offered on university campus (Auerbach et al., 2018). We must make ample accessible student support services a priority.

Additionally, this study highlights the importance of cultivating opportunities for students to build relationships. Extracurricular activities promote a sense of belonging, and can decrease stress and increase life satisfaction across personal, social, and academic experiences (Çivitci, 2015). Both of our participants had experiences of loneliness and isolation. There was a noticeable absence of school-related discussion beyond challenges of online learning. We encourage universities to prioritize community building and extracurriculars.

Concluding Thoughts

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented higher education with unprecedented challenges pertaining to mental health, academics, and overall wellness. It is critical to continue to center the voices of college students to guide university decisions and policies affecting them. We strongly recommend photovoice as one way to support this endeavor and empower young people to be heard and included in plans to create and sustain new measures of support.

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