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Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Physical Activity in Children: A Systematic Rapid Review

Alex Ramirez B.S.

Wayne State University, hf1018@wayne.edu

Ashley Rapp MPH

Henry Ford Health System, arapp2@hfhs.org

Abigail C. Radomsky B.S.

Wayne State University, abigailradomsky@gmail.com

Sara Santarossa PhD

Henry Ford Health System, ssantar1@hfhs.org

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ABSTRACT

Background: Prolonged lockdowns, put in place to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, may have altered physical activity (PA). The goal of this systematic rapid review was to synthesize the global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on PA of children.

Methods: Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analyses (PRISMA) guidelines were used to conduct a database search on 03/29/2021. Included studies were peer-reviewed, in English language, and encompassed both a measure of PA during the COVID-19 pandemic and PA data for children aged 18 and younger. The database search yielded 677 unique citations and, ultimately, 69 articles were included in the review.

Results: During the COVID-19 pandemic, frequently reported PA included walking, unstructured play, and virtual PA through online platforms. Of the articles that reported changes in PA of children during the COVID-19 pandemic, 89% reported PA (e.g., frequency, intensity, duration, or the percentage of children who met PA recommendations) of children decreased. Boys, younger children, children who lived with other children, and children with more outdoor play space had higher levels of PA.

Conclusions: The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in decreased PA among children around the world. Further work is needed to develop policies to support global PA increases.