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# Eating the Young to Save the Old

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**The pandemic inverted the normal meaning of generational sacrifice.**

A new study out of Italy reveals a significant increase in the number of girls entering puberty at a very early age, almost certainly due to the lifestyle changes and stress caused by the pandemic.

“Precocious puberty,” to give the condition its proper technical name, is defined as the development of secondary sexual characteristics, such as breasts, larger testicles, and pubic hair, before the age of 8 in girls and 9 in boys. The condition is generally associated with negative physical consequences, especially reduced stature, and based on the few studies of its broader effects, with emotional and behavioral issues such as

substance abuse, social isolation, truancy, and sexual promiscuity. Danish research suggests that perhaps 0.2 percent of girls and 0.05 percent of boys undergo precocious puberty, but studies from elsewhere indicate there may be wide national variation. Scientists agree, though, that girls suffer from the condition at a much higher rate than boys, even if it isn't totally clear why.

The researchers behind the new study looked at data for 133 diagnosed cases of precocious puberty in girls in Italy between January 2016 and June 2021. They found 72 cases before the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020, and 61 alone between March 2020 and June 2021, or four new cases a month. If, for argument's sake, the pandemic in Italy lasted two years, that would be 96 cases in total, almost three times the number of cases as would have been expected over a period of two years before the pandemic. Although the age of sexual development has been creeping younger for decades in the West, perhaps by as much as three months per decade for girls since the seventies, there's no question that this recently observed increase is not in line with the general trend.

Weight gain is well known to increase the risk of precocious puberty, and the researchers found an increase in weight gain among girls diagnosed with the condition during the pandemic. Girls diagnosed with precocious puberty during the pandemic tended to have higher body-mass-index scores than girls diagnosed with it before the pandemic. They also spent at least two hours a day in front of a screen—rat studies suggest chronic blue-light exposure can bring forward puberty – and nearly 90% of them said they'd ceased all physical exercise. The researchers believe other factors may also have been at play, not least of all “stress, social isolation, increased conflicts between parents, economic status and the increased use of hand and surface sanitizers.” Sanitizers contain significant quantities of endocrine-disrupting chemicals such as triclosan which can interfere with puberty, and can also increase by as much as 10,000 percent the body's absorption of such chemicals from other sources, like thermal paper.

Back in the heady days of spring 2020, nobody could have predicted that the social restrictions brought in to reduce the spread of COVID-19 would result in a spike in cases of precocious puberty among girls in Italy. But it was clear, at least to anybody who actually cared to stop and think for a moment, that if we proceeded with lockdowns, social distancing and mask mandates – as far as we understood those things back then – we would almost certainly cause dreadful unintended harm to the young, especially children and teenagers. But our governments persisted with those measures for more than two years, with the broad support of the medical and educational establishments and the general public, even as the terrible suffering of our younger generations became harder and harder to ignore.

Now that the pandemic appears to be over, and as more detailed research emerges, we can get a better idea of the exact damage that has been done to the young. A true reckoning, however, is likely to prove impossible, because harm is a very difficult thing to quantify beyond “brute” measurements like medical diagnoses and deaths. How do we fully quantify, say, the harm caused by gaining weight and losing your confidence? How do we quantify missed opportunities to meet people, do things, and make the kind of memories that young people should be making?

We can't. Still, we can get a pretty good idea of the scale of the damage, and it's big. According to the American Centers for Disease Control, obesity rates among under-20s have risen at a “staggering pace” due to the pandemic. In a huge study of over 400,000 persons aged 2 to 19 years old, the rate of body-mass-index increase *doubled* during the pandemic. Those who were already overweight or obese before the pandemic experienced the largest increases. Children now exercise less and spend more time on the couch, in front of screens, than ever before.

Unsurprisingly, the pandemic was also a disaster for mental health. Millions of American Gen-Zers were diagnosed with mental-health problems during the pandemic. In a survey of 18-to-24 year olds, 42 percent said they were suffering from a mental-health problems ranging from anxiety and ADHD to PTSD and bulimia, with 25 percent saying the diagnosis came during the pandemic. Seventy percent of those surveyed felt the pandemic had had a negative effect on their wellbeing. A UK study showed that diagnosed eating disorders and episodes of self-harm among teenage girls increased by more than 40 percent during the pandemic, and a University of Calgary meta-analysis claimed that perhaps as many as 25 percent of children *worldwide* were suffering depression and anxiety as a result of the pandemic.

It is likely, as new research comes to light, that we will continue to be surprised by new manifestations of the harms caused by the pandemic social restrictions. For instance, the growth of newborn babies' brains may have been affected. A study of babies born in New York between March and December 2020 showed that the babies' social, gross, and fine motor skills were reduced compared to those of a sample of babies born before the pandemic. Increased maternal stress during pregnancy, as well as reduced interactions with other babies and caregivers after birth, were probably to blame. Although the shifts were slight, the researchers remind us that small changes can have huge effects at a population level. The effects of this arrested development may take many years to make themselves known.

Our parents and grandparents deserve our respect and care. Even so, it's hard not to see the pandemic and its effect on the young as a kind of monstrous act of vampirism on a societal level. It's as if the older generations have literally sucked the life out of the young to sustain themselves. And what makes it worse is the fact that it probably didn't even work: the social restrictions may not actually have had any real effect on mortality at all, as study after study is now telling us.

The response to the pandemic was basic filial piety gone haywire. Thinking about it in these terms is apt because filial piety, or *xiao*, is the Confucian virtue of all virtues, and both COVID-19 and the lockdown response came from China. Just as we, in the West, had no system of ancestor worship to compare to Chinese *xiao*, which governs virtually all aspects of life and sees the younger generations of a family totally subordinate themselves to their elders and even the dead, so we had no form of political response to compare to the lockdowns. In March 2020, we got both at once, and maybe it's no coincidence.

Perhaps the crowning horror of the Chinese system of filial piety, historically, was *gegu*, or filial cannibalism. Filial cannibalism is found in the animal kingdom, and generally involves parents eating all or part of their offspring to ensure the reproductive health of the individual or wider brood. The Chinese seem to be the only human group in history to have adopted the practice themselves, and in their hands it serves not to increase future reproductive success, but to demonstrate the submission of the young to the old. In a practice documented across many centuries, children would offer parts of their own bodies up for consumption by their elders, usually a portion of the thigh or upper arm, or fingers. The practice, which was intended to nourish the elders both physically and spiritually, might also be accompanied by coprophagia, as the young consumed the feces of their parents and grandparents.

As a societal manifestation of filial cannibalism, the pandemic response was a one-off. No other event has so spectacularly, or devastatingly, seen the young sacrificed to the old the way they were during the last three years. But it could happen again: there's very little indication that any lessons have been learnt from the pandemic – any lessons that are worth learning, that is – and we're being told that “Disease X” is just around the corner. Further lockdowns, on the same logic as the original ones, are entirely possible, if not inevitable.

By using the *gegu* analogy, I'm not trying to suggest that the West was suddenly seized by a foreign mania in March 2020—not entirely, anyway. The truth is that the ground for such an apparent deviation from “the way we do things” was well prepared, over many decades or even centuries. Anybody who really wants to

understand how we got to this point needs to go and read Ivan Illich's *Medical Nemesis* (also known as *The Limits of Medicine*), to see how and why the modern discipline of medicine, with its promise of "solving" pain through technical intervention, has made us far less free and capable to govern our own lives, and far more prey to authoritarian interventions that deprive us of our fundamental liberties in the name of "public health." Long before 2020 came around, we were already a society prepared to sacrifice just about everything, including our own young, in the name of avoiding pain and death: we just didn't know it yet.

The *gegu* analogy speaks to a more general tendency at work today in the West which is making our societies so hostile to the basic interests of younger generations, including not least of all a suppression of the desire to reproduce. I write often about the environmental and biological factors driving the unprecedented fertility crisis in the developed world, but there are social and economic forces at work in the same direction that are no less powerful. Barely any nations in the West today, with the exception of Hungary, provide incentives of any sort to young people to encourage them to start families. Instead, Western nations rely on endless mass immigration to keep the population machine churning, while our younger native generations struggle to make ends meet. We're told the U.S. is now "barreling towards the same fertility crisis as Japan," with one in ten men in their thirties being virgins, and a third of women being childless.

The promise of rising prosperity that was once handed down from generation to generation is gone, and instead the young now look at the old and see things they are never likely to have: houses, spouses, and kids of their own. "Fur babies," vasectomies, and "van life" are the new symbols of the barren and the dispossessed.

In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud noted that all civilizations require the sublimation of the basic drives and instincts of their citizens to function properly. No society can serve only to fulfill the pleasure principle. But if a society pushes too hard and exerts so much pressure that its citizens have no meaningful outlet for their inborn desires, "one can be certain that serious disorders will ensue." Freud clearly believed such rebellion would be justified. We'll see whether the West's young think so too.

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