Title: (Comparing) Cognitive difficulty between age groups before and during COVID-19

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Background/Purpose: With over 107,119,078 confirmed COVID-19 cases nationwide, the pandemic has affected most aspects of life, including cognitive ability (Herrera et al., 2023). More research is needed to determine how the pandemic has altered the number of people experiencing cognitive difficulties.

Methods: Comparing the 2018 and 2021 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS), data from 842,649 Americans of various age groups (18-24, 25-44, 45-64, and 65+) were examined. A cross-tabulation was used to explore relations between age and cognitive difficulty.

Results: In 2018, 11.5% of adults reported experiencing cognitive difficulty, whereas in 2021, 12.5% of adults reported experiencing cognitive difficulty, $\chi^2_{(DF=1,\ N=842,649)} = 39.88$, $p < .001$. Of note, this increase in difficulties was observed for emerging adults ($\chi^2_{(DF=1)} = 53.6$, $p < .001$) and young adults ($\chi^2_{(DF=1)} = 39.51.8$, $p < .001$) only. Cognitive difficulties across the pandemic years did not differ for either middle-aged ($\chi^2_{(DF=1)} = 3.2$) or older adults ($\chi^2_{(DF=1)} = 0.4$).

Conclusions: There are relations between age and increased cognitive difficulty in emerging and younger adults during the pandemic. Cognitive ability of middle-aged and older adults was less affected by the pandemic. More research is needed to determine how exactly the pandemic has affected cognitive ability in emerging and younger adults both biologically and psychologically.