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COVID-19-related lockdown takes toll on young peoples' mental health

A new University of Cape Town (UCT) study into the emotional well-being of young people during the COVID-19-related lockdown in South Africa has revealed that majority are suffering from depression.

In South Africa, more than seven million young people aged 18 to 35 already live in income poverty and close to 10 million are not in education, employment or training. These young people typically experience a multitude of deprivations – such as food insecurity, poor health and geographic exclusion. These deprivations and their intersections – income poverty influences food security, which again impacts on health, for instance – complicate young people's transitions from adolescence to adulthood.

The pandemic is likely to worsen existing social challenges in the already vulnerable young people.

The [study](#) conducted by Dr Gibson Mudiriza and Associate Professor Ariane De Lannoy at the Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit (SALDRU) at UCT assessed the prevalence of, and factors associated with, depressive symptoms among young people age 18 to 35. They utilised data from a web-based cross-sectional survey with 11 700 participants covering all the provinces of the country.

"Our results show a prevalence of depressive symptoms of 72% among the young participants, which is high and worrisome when compared to mental health results among youth gathered outside of the COVID-19 context," said Mudiriza. "When disaggregated by various characteristics, the prevalence of depressive symptoms was found to be higher among older, female, and white youth and those with higher education."

Mudiriza explained that multivariate regression analysis further shows that depressive symptoms were positively associated with being female, being older, having higher education and residing in urban informal areas, while they were negatively associated with being employed and offering family care.

In contrast, being employed and providing family care were significantly associated with decreasing depressive symptoms. Of these factors, age and education exerted greater association with depression. "Estimates by gender pointed to important underlying differences between male and female participants, driven by specific individual factors. The results showed that age had a greater association with depressive symptoms for male participants, while education had a greater association for female participants," said Mudiriza.

Depressive symptoms were also slightly higher among participants in urban informal areas compared to participants in urban formal and rural areas. "The high rate of depressive symptoms among participants in urban informal might be driven by their fear and high probability of contracting the virus due to dense living conditions and poor sanitation in these areas. These conditions make social distancing and handwashing difficult, thereby increasing the risk of infection," said De Lannoy.

Education came to a halt when schools and universities were briefly closed, and the closure of most businesses led to the loss of income and jobs among many who were employed before lockdown. "As a result, young people are experiencing increased levels of insecurity in a context where the majority were already vulnerable and disproportionately affected by unemployment and poverty," said De Lannoy.

She pointed out that the income and job losses together with the fear of contracting the virus, breakdown in social interactions, as well as increased uncertainty about the future are likely to trigger a wide variety of mental health problems like panic disorder, anxiety and depression.

These findings suggest that while combating the COVID-19 pandemic, policymakers need to also pay close attention to mental health problems experienced by young people in the country, as those with depressive symptoms might see their chances to reconnection to education or employment hampered by the effects of mental ill-health, once lockdown is released.

[Read the full study.](#)

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