UNICEF Committee

Increased Mental Health Issues Among Youths

Research Report

Leiden Model United Nations 2023

"let us sing songs of freedom together"

Forum: UNICEF

Issue: Increased Mental Health Issues Among Youths

Position: Deputy Chair

Introduction

The worldwide prevalence of mental health issues among youths has increased alarmingly, particularly following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Severe mental health problems, such as anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation, affect more and more youth, causing rising concerns on their wellbeing. This research report aims to provide a comprehensive overview of this issue, its key terms, major parties involved, a timeline of events, and potential solutions.

Definition of Key Terms

Key term 1: *Mental Health Issues*: Encompasses a wide range of psychological conditions that affect an individual's emotional, cognitive, and behavioral well-being. Examples of mental health issues include anxiety disorders, mood disorders, eating disorders, self-harm, and substance abuse. They may be transient/short-term or persistent/chronic, and their impact on daily functioning may vary from mild distress to severe impairment. Mental health issues can affect anyone, regardless of personal characteristics such as age or background, at any time during his/her life course, rendering them a part of the collective human experience.

Key term 2: *Youths*: Typically includes young individuals between 15 and 24 years of age, marking an important transitional period from adolescence to adulthood. Youth undergo significant physical, emotional, and cognitive changes, increasing their vulnerability to external stressors and potential mental health challenges. In addition, since this phase determines an individual's lifetime health and productivity, addressing mental health issues of youth has a great return-on-investment.

https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/youth/fact-sheets/youth-definition.pdf

Key term 3: *Prevalence*: Signifies the proportion of a population affected by a particular health condition at a specific point or over a specific period of time. The estimated prevalence of mental health issues among youths varies in different countries, as it is influenced by socio-cultural factors, access to mental health care services, and mental health public awareness. For policymakers obtaining reliable prevalence data is a prerequisite to design management strategies, conduct targeted interventions, and allocate resources appropriately.

Key term 4: *Resilience*: Is the ability of an individual to cope with and bounce back from adversity, stress, and challenges in life, and is considered a crucial factor in promoting mental well-being among youths. As resilience is not a fixed trait, it can be effectively nurtured through safe and stable relationships, supportive and inclusive environments, and the development of coping skills. Promotion of resilience enhances protective factors against mental health challenges for youths.

Key term 5: *Early Intervention*: Entails the prompt identification and timely support for youths with mental health challenges with the aim of preventing escalation and long-term consequences. Early intervention strategies involve systematic and universal screening for mental health concerns,

provision of appropriate treatments, and establishment of preventive measures to minimize the impact of mental health issues. Early intervention is cost beneficial since it can significantly reduce the severity of mental health issues and it improves outcomes.

General Overview

The general overview explores the key factors contributing to the increased prevalence of mental health issues among youths:

1. Social Media and Technology Impact:

Social media and the internet inadvertently engage youths in a pervasive and constant stream of information/misinformation/disinformation, comparison, and cyberbullying. Misuse of technology among youths has led to increasing stress and anxiety levels. The COVID-19 pandemic mandates of social isolation and remote schooling intensified the use of social media and technology among youth, as it became the norm for social interactions and education. Although during strict lockdowns remote communication platforms provided a social coping mechanism for the youth, there were significant negative effects that persisted even after quarantines were over. Youth felt increasing pressure to maintain an ideal online persona, feared missing out on social events, which can also contribute to feelings of inadequacy and isolation. Extended screen times have shortened attention spans, disrupted sleep patterns, and substituted face-to-face social interactions, further deteriorating mental well-being. These negative impacts may be reduced by encouraging sensible social media use. Problematic technology and social media use among youths may lead to true addiction with severe consequences, including poor academic performance, inability to build interpersonal relationships and lack of participation in creative or sports activities. The extensive use of social media may become overwhelming for youth, who become immersed in the digital world and neglect the material world. Youth are expected to embark on their personal journey in the true world, where they should discover and develop their own passions and interests. Therefore, during this important stage of development, abuse of technology may become particularly harmful.

2. *Academic Pressure*:

Over time competition for college admissions has intensified and greater emphasis is increasingly placed on standardized testing. Thus, increasingly higher academic expectations have been imposed on youths leading to the fear of underachievement, burnout, anxiety, and depression. The intense and constant academic work without any recess can adversely affect youths' mental well-being. Additionally, educational systems suffer from a complete lack of a balanced focus on holistic development, including emotional intelligence and coping skills, contributing to the mental health burden. Implementation of student-centered learning approaches and promotion of an appropriate growth mindset can alleviate academic stress.

3. *Family and Peer Relationships*:

The pandemic had significant psychosocial consequences for families and school communities, that affected the most vulnerable groups disproportionately. Additionally, it is estimated that many youths have experienced losses of primary or secondary caregivers globally, adding a major adversity in their lives with an excess toll on their mental health. Family struggles worsened with family dynamics becoming increasingly more dysfunctional and leading to parental separation and divorce. Peer relationships were also strained contributing to emotional distress and feelings of isolation among youths. Therefore, many youths are lacking support and understanding from family and peers,

hindering their ability to cope with stress effectively. Youths need strong buffers against the development of mental health issues, including familial bonds and positive peer relationships. Thus, earnest communication among family members and strong school communities should be encouraged.

4. *Economic and Employment Challenges*:

During the pandemic many businesses suffered significant losses and the job market became unstable. In the aftermath of COVID-19, soaring inflation has increased the cost of living disproportionately to average incomes. The uncertain job market and financial hardships have affected youths in great numbers, since unemployment and low wages are more prevalent among them. Unstable employment or lack of it and consequent financial stressors can exacerbate mental health issues, may lead to anxiety and depression, and impact overall well-being. Moreover, the transition from education to the workforce can be inherently stressful, with the potential burden of student loans or financial responsibilities adding to their mental health struggles. Governmental policies that enhance stable youth employment, specialized job training, and financial support may be implemented to alleviate economic stress.

5. *Substance Abuse and Self-Medication*:

External stress and emotional disorders increase the likelihood for some youths to resort to substance abuse as an erroneous coping mechanism. Truly, substance abuse and misuse, including alcohol and illegal drugs, can worsen preexisting mental health issues and lead to addiction. Mental health issues and substance abuse exacerbate one another, creating a challenging cycle, that can become vicious and perpetual. Therefore, treatment and prevention strategies should address both aspects simultaneously to become effective. Indeed, there are effective early intervention programs and harm reduction strategies for substance abuse among youths available.

6. *Access to Mental Health Services*:

Access to mental health services is crucial for timely support and treatment of mental health issues. Youth living in rural areas or low-income communities may be disproportionately affected from limited access to mental health services, let alone high-quality services. Provision of mental health services was essentially halted during the lockdown, until telehealth options developed and reached increasingly larger segments of the society. Barriers for youths to seek help for mental health concerns include social stigma, long waiting times and high treatment costs. A characteristic example is the mental health care system in Greece; comprehensive services are available to the public for free, but social stigma is still very prevalent, the waiting times are outrageously long (often more than 6 months' wait) and private sector alternatives are generally expensive. Thus, access to mental health care for youths may be further impeded. Governments should expand the existing mental health care services and improve the quality of care provided, integrate mental health into primary health care settings, and promote telehealth options to improve accessibility.

Major Parties Involved

1. *World Health Organization (WHO)*:

The WHO is a leader in creating global mental health policies and promoting public awareness of mental health issues among youths. The WHO has developed a Comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan that focuses on improving mental health care and services, particularly for young individuals; it

supports action plans for countries to develop mental health strategies and advocates for securing appropriate funding and resources to address this issue. Additionally, mental health programs for vulnerable youth populations are implemented by the WHO in collaboration with UNICEF and other organizations.

2. *United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)*:

UNICEF works on safeguarding the rights and well-being of children and adolescents globally. Through various programs, partnerships, and advocacy efforts, UNICEF strives to address mental health issues among youths. The aims include the provision of psychosocial support, quality education, and universal access to health services. UNICEF's initiatives to improve mental health outcomes for youths often materialize in collaboration with governments, NGOs, and communities. Moreover, UNICEF is a strong advocate for integration of mental health policies in crucial sectors of our society, i.e., education, child protection, and public health.

3. *National Institutes of Health (NIH)*:

The NIH, particularly its National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), is a leader in mental health research and funding in the United States of America. NIMH's research focuses on improved understanding of mental health issues among youths and development of evidence-based interventions. NIMH's contributions include the development of effective treatment modalities and prevention strategies for mental health challenges. Additionally, the NIMH funds groundbreaking research on youth mental health, which then fosters the development of evidence-based comprehensive mental health interventions.

4. *Mental Health Associations and Foundations*:

National and regional mental health associations and foundations work towards raising public awareness, reducing social stigma, and providing support for youths with mental health issues. To name a few of these organizations, Mental Health America, The Trevor Project, and the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), that offer resources, helplines, and advocacy for policy changes to improve mental health services and support for young individuals. A significant stronghold, that secures a needs-based approach, is the involvement of youths in the design and implementation of mental health initiatives.

5. *Educational Institutions and Schools*:

Schools and educational institutions are main players in addressing mental health issues among youths as they can implement mental health education programs, establish counseling services, and create supportive environments to promote mental well-being. School counselors and educators are in a unique position to identify early signs of mental health issues and connect students with appropriate resources. Moreover, educational institutions and schools may opt to integrate social-emotional learning and mental health education into their curriculum to foster emotional intelligence and resilience among students.

6. *Youth-Led Organizations*:

Youth-led organizations are dedicated to mental health advocacy and support. Knowledge of the unique mental health challenges faced by youths helps address them effectively. Through these organizations young people play a significant role in developing mental health policies, raising awareness about mental health issues, and providing peer support. Youth-led initiatives strengthen a

sense of community and reduce the stigma of mental health issues, enabling young individuals to seek help as necessary.

Timeline of Events

1. *2008 - The Mental Health Gap Action Programme (mhGAP)*:

The World Health Organization launched the mhGAP initiative focusing on youths as a priority group. The aim was to bridge the gap between mental health needs and available resources. Thus, through the program non-specialist health workers were trained to deliver mental health interventions in settings with limited resources, leading to increased access to mental health care.

2. *2012 - The Global Burden of Disease Study*:

This study highlighted the increasing burden of mental health issues among youths and stressed the need for targeted interventions and policy changes. Based on its findings, governments, organizations, and policymakers prioritized mental health on the global health agenda.

3. *2017 - Instagram Implements Mental Health Support Tools*:

Instagram first introduced tools to promote mental well-being, including content warnings for potentially sensitive posts and anonymous support options, as a recognition of the potential impact of social media on youths' mental health. This crucial step represented a significant initiative by a major popular social media platform to prevent and address mental health issues among its users.

4. *2019 - Youth-Led Mental Health Initiatives Gain Momentum*:

Various organizations and initiatives advocating for mental health led by youth gained momentum around the world. It was important that young individuals became leaders in raising awareness, sharing personal stories, and promoting mental health support for their peers. Relevant initiatives have contributed to reducing the social stigma of mental health challenges and empowered peers to seek appropriate services.

5. *2020 - COVID-19 Pandemic and Mental Health Impact*:

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted youths' lives significantly and increased mental health issues related to the loss or serious illness of loved ones, compulsory or self-imposed social isolation, uncertainty regarding the future, and remote learning. As a period of global emergency, the pandemic highlighted the importance of mental health support for youth during crises. Following a period of greatly restricted access, governments and organizations made appropriate adaptations to accommodate increased needs for mental health services during the pandemic.

6. *2022 - Mental Health Integration in Educational Curriculum*:

Mental health education was first integrated into educational curricula by some countries. Thus, the significance of mental health in youths' overall well-being was recognized. Educating students about mental health, emotional well-being, and coping strategies, provide youths with essential life skills and promote early intervention.

Possible Solutions

1. *Strengthening Mental Health Education*:

Comprehensive mental health education in schools may help raise public awareness, reduce social stigma, and equip youths with coping strategies. This education should include stress management, emotional regulation, and skills development on recognizing mental health concerns and seeking appropriate help. Mental health education should also focus on the importance of self-care and the protection of one's mental well-being from potential harm.

2. *Increasing Access to Mental Health Services*:

Mental health services should become universally affordable and accessible. This could be accomplished through partnerships of the public and private sectors, community-based clinics, and telehealth platforms. Governments should prioritize the support and expansion of mental health infrastructure with the allocation of sufficient funding and resources. Additionally, outreach for underserved youth populations could be made possible with the development of mobile mental health clinics and online counseling services.

3. *Promoting Work-Life Balance and Well-being in Workplaces*:

Employee mental well-being should become priority for employers, who should provide flexible work arrangements, stress management programs, and supportive work environments. Employers could be given incentives to create workplaces that support employees' mental health needs and foster a culture of openness. Mental health support in the workplace may also be enhanced through employee assistance programs and mental health training for managers.

4. *Promoting Positive Social Media Use*:

Social media platforms should secure positive online experiences and provide resources for mental health support for their users. In addition, social media companies should be mandated to implement effective tools of identification and timely intervention to prevent the spread of harmful content and cyberbullying. Moreover, social media platforms may provide access to online communities with active mental health influencers, who can decrease social stigma and encourage seeking mental health support.

5. *Early Intervention and School-Based Support*:

Early intervention school programs are in a central position to identify and provide support for youths with emerging mental health concerns, including counseling and therapy services. Identification of mental health challenges' warning signs requires adequate training for school counselors, who should in turn be offered appropriate assistance and reflective supervision. School-based programs can improve early identification of mental health issues with universal screening initiatives and improve access to care with peer support.

6. *Enhancing Mental Health Data Collection*:

Governments and organizations should invest in reliable mental health data collection and appropriate analysis to gain better insight on the prevalence and trends of mental health issues among

youths. Relying on representative data is a prerequisite for establishing screening strategies, allocating resources, and developing universal and targeted interventions.

7. *Community-Based Mental Health Initiatives*:

The development of community-based mental health initiatives should be prioritized and encouraged with the collaboration of local authorities, schools, healthcare providers, and youth organizations. These initiatives offer significant advantages as they can provide a continuum of care, including preventive services, early intervention, and ongoing support for youths' mental health needs.

8. *Youth Participation in Policymaking*:

Interventions make sense when they are relevant, effective, and inclusive; an efficient way to achieve this is engaging youths and youth leaders in mental health care policymaking and initiatives. Participation in youth advisory groups or forums may be appropriate venues, through which youths may directly impact their own lives.

Sources

1. World Health Organization. (2021). Mental health of young people. https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-of-young-people

2. National Institute of Mental Health. (2021). Any Disorder Among Children. https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/any-disorder-among-children.shtml

3. Mental Health America. (n.d.). Young people & mental health. https://www.mhanational.org/issues/young-people-mental-health

4. Instagram. (2017). Expanding the Instagram Community to More People: https://instagram-press.com/blog/2017/09/14/expanded-comment-moderation-and-new-ways-to-report/

5. United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). (2021). Mental Health. https://www.unicef.org/mental-health

6. World Health Organization. (2020). mhGAP intervention guide for mental, neurological, and substance use disorders in non-specialized health settings. https://www.who.int/mental_health/mhgap/en/

7. Patel, V., Saxena, S., Lund, C., Thornicroft, G., Baingana, F., Bolton, P.,... & UnÜtzer, J. (2018). The Lancet Commission on Global Mental Health and Sustainable Development. The Lancet, 392(10157), 1553-1598. https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(18)31612-X/fulltext