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Research shows young people’s declining mental health has worsened since COVID-19

Young adults have experienced a sharp decline in mental health since the arrival of COVID-19, research from the Australian Catholic University has revealed.

The findings come from the Our Lives project – a longitudinal study which is following life pathways of a single age cohort of 2,000 young people from Queensland. The study commenced in 2006 when cohort were 13 years old. They are now aged 27.

In a survey undertaken in June 2020, it was found that women were more likely to report a drop in their mental health during the pandemic than their male counterparts. Individuals in insecure work, or those living in urban areas, were also likelier to report a decline in their mental well-being since the previous survey in late 2019.

The Our Lives lead investigator, Professor Zlatko Skrbis, Interim Provost of Australian Catholic University, said the data revealed a worrying reduction in the mental health of young people since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Well before COVID-19, many of the participants in this study were reporting declining mental health. At the age of 22, in 2015, 82% of respondents described their mental health as excellent, very good, or good. By 2019, when the participants were 26 years old, this had fallen to 70%.

But the situation has worsened in 2020. In June 2020, shortly after the national lockdown period had ended, the number of those reporting good to excellent mental health had fallen a further four percentage points to 66%. Employment concerns and loneliness have contributed to this decline.

“Although we have been seeing a consistent decline in the mental health of our participants over the past few years, the COVID-19 pandemic has most definitely accelerated this trend. While emergency welfare measures may have helped mitigate or delay some of the economic impacts of restrictions, physical distancing has still taken an emotional toll with many of our participants reporting feelings of isolation. Concerns over longer-term employment have also been a major issue” Professor Skrbis said.

Security in young adults' housing and relationships provided a key buffer against the negative psychological impacts of COVID-19 with young adults living out of home with a partner reporting substantially better mental health during the pandemic than those who are single and living with parents, housemates, or on their own.

These findings, however, have highlighted the importance of accessible and affordable mental health services.

“We know that barriers such as cost and stigma can prevent younger people from accessing mental health information and services, which only serves to exacerbate the challenges they face, particularly if they are already more socially marginalised” notes Professor Skrbis. “Yet COVID-19 has also helped bring mental health discussions out into the open. By illustrating how widespread such challenges are, we hope these findings will help to further reduce the stigma associated with help-seeking and direct more attention to the support young people need.”

Professor Zlatko Skrbis is available for interview.

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