

COVID 19 AND YOUNG PEOPLE: UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT

Tatjana Zorcec¹, Tatjana Cepreganova-Cangovska², Danijela Zorcec³

¹University Children's Hospital, Medical Faculty, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, North Macedonia

²Medical Faculty, University Goce Delcev, Stip, North Macedonia

³Student at the Institute of Psychology, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University, Skopje, North Macedonia

Abstract

COVID-19 has impacted individuals of all age groups, including young people. Although young individuals generally experience milder symptoms and better outcomes, they are still susceptible to contracting and transmitting the virus. While they may have lower infection rates, it is crucial for young people to adhere to preventive measures as they can still spread the virus, potentially affecting vulnerable populations.

The pandemic and related measures have also had an impact on the mental health of young people, with increased stress, isolation, and changes in social interactions leading to feelings of anxiety, depression, and loneliness. The closure of schools and the shift to remote learning have presented challenges in terms of education and social development. It is essential for young people to stay informed, follow guidelines, and prioritize their physical and mental well-being during these challenging times.

Keywords: pandemic, COVID-19 experience, young people.

Introduction

The disease known as COVID-19 is caused by a recently discovered virus called SARS-CoV-2, which emerged in late 2019 and quickly spread worldwide, resulting in a global pandemic in 2020. Initially, the outbreak originated in Wuhan, Hubei province, China, where most cases were linked to contact with animals and seafood, indicating a transmission from animals to humans. As COVID-19 continued to rapidly spread across the globe. Number of infection cases varies significantly from country to country. The COVID-19 pandemic has had devastating consequences, surpassing 689 million infections and over 6 million deaths worldwide [1].

Additionally, there are emerging secondary health effects associated with the pandemic [2].

COVID-19, also affected the health of the young people. Fortunately, young people represent a small percentage of cases and generally experience milder symptoms and better outcomes than older adults. However, young individuals were recognized as contributors to the transmission of respiratory viruses. Epidemiological restrictions as social distancing, and virtual schooling and work have disrupted family dynamics and daily routines, with young people spending more time at home. The closure of schools and the shift to remote learning have posed challenges for young people in terms of education and social development. Limited access to resources, reduced social interactions, and the need to adapt to new learning environments have affected the overall educational experience. Curfews, closures, and lockdowns are taking their toll on their emotional wellbeing.

Disturbingly, there have been documented increases in domestic violence, child abuse, mental illness, and substance use globally. Increased stress, isolation, and changes in social interactions can contribute to feelings of anxiety, depression, and loneliness.

Also, this health crisis caused travel limitations, job loss, bereavement, with long-term negative effects, with each individual responding differently based on their vulnerabilities. Those affected by multiple stressors are more likely to exhibit psychological distress.

In this article, we aim to analyze the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of young people in our country, without delving into the characteristics of the virus or its transmission.

Aim of the study

The main aim of this study was to investigate the experience of young people during the pandemic with COVID-19. This includes their thoughts, feelings, fears and practical experience with the virus.

Methodology and sampling

This study was conducted in the time period between January and September, 2022. The sample included 267 young people, age between 15 and 30 years with mean age 23 ± 4.58 years, randomly selected.

For this study we created a questionnaire, containing different aspects of the COVID-19 perception. The survey was conducted online.

The obtained results are presented in tables, graphs, or numerically and discussed. Finally, some conclusions and suggestions are presented.

Results

In the following segment we are presenting some of the results obtained in this survey.

General information about the subjects

From a total 267 subjects, 71% were females and 29% were males.

Out of the total number, 87% were living in cities, 13% were living in villages.

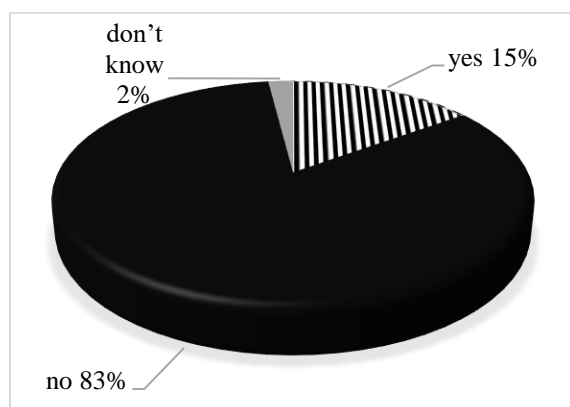
In individual houses lived 45% of the subjects while 55% lived in apartments.

Most of the young people, 79% lived together with their parents, 10% lived with their emotional partners, 2% lived in student housing, 9% selected the answer “other”.

In our sample, we had 72% of university students, 4% students on master studies, 14% were working, and high school students were 10%.

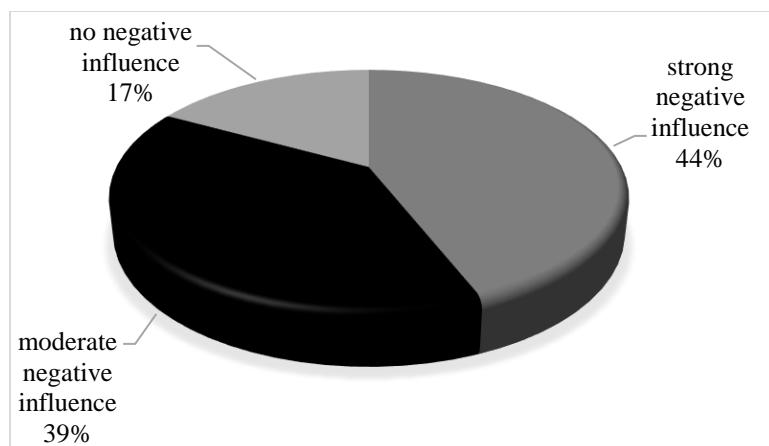
Economic impact from the pandemic

From an economic point of view some families from our sample had difficulties in terms of losing their job places (Pie 1).



Pie 1. Has a member of your immediate family lost their job due to the pandemic?

Additionally, 44% answered that the pandemic negatively influenced their financial status, 39% answered that they had small economic consequences, and 17% answered that there has been no change in their finance stability (Pie 2).



Pie 2. Did the pandemic negatively influenced your financial status?

Attitudes and behavior towards the pandemic

The majority of participants, specifically 89,4%, expressed serious concerns about their own health, fearfull of infection in 61% and perception and concern of possible death in 34% of the participants.

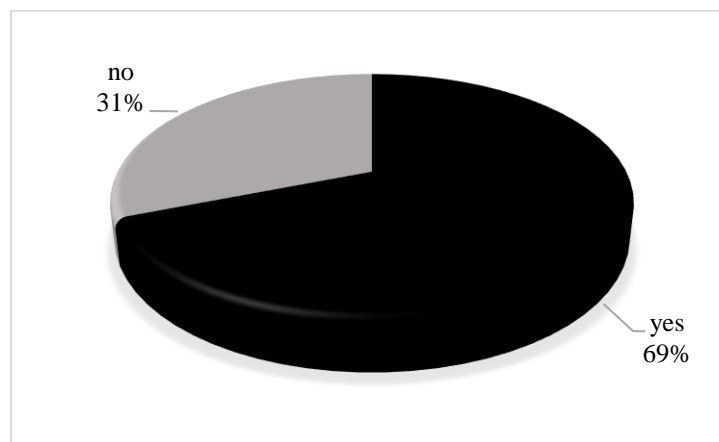
Furthermore, majority of the subjects reported that their levels of anxiety and fear were much higher in the beginning than in the later stages of the pandemic as 89% indicated greater anxiety at the beginning and 11% reported increasement later.

Opinions about the necessity of preventive measures such as wearing masks and practicing social distancing were affirmed by 81% of participants, while 19% responded negatively. Concerning hand hygiene, 41% reported washing their hands more frequently during the pandemic, while others maintained their regular habits. Social distancing was practiced by 22% of the participants, 52% acknowledged doing it sometimes, and 26% denied practicing it. Regarding the impact of quarantine and lockdown measures, 73% of participants expressed great frustration, while 27% were indifferent.

On the question “Do you belive that we will ever return to the normal life as before the pandemic” 64% replied “yes” and 36% replied “no”. On the question “Do you belive that pandemic with corona virus will end in 2023” 81% replied “yes” and 19% replied “no”.

Psychosomatic health during the pandemic

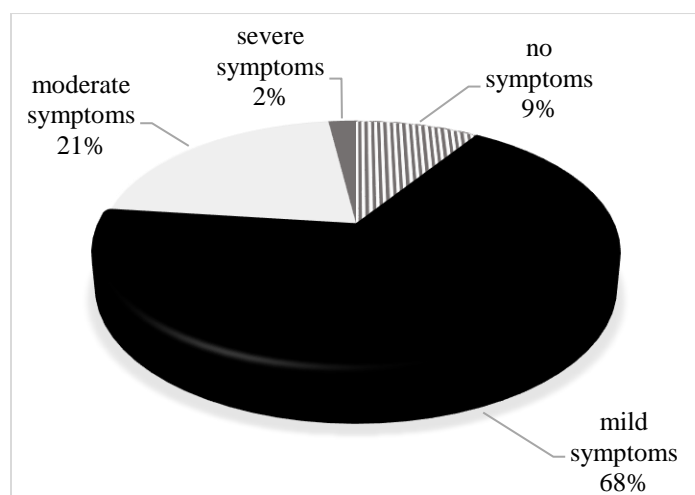
Pie 3 presents the results on the question “Would you say the pandemic is affecting your mental health in a negative way?”



Pie 3. Would you say the pandemic is affecting your mental health in a negative way?

From the total of the positive answers, 41% confirmed that their mental health was disturbed very much, and in 50% it appeared to have changed moderately, while only 9% answered that only minimal problems were registered in their mental functioning.

Regarding personal experiences with the infection, 63% of young people confirmed being infected, 15,7% reported no infection, and 22% lacked information about possible infections. The clinical manifestations of infected young individuals are presented in Pie 4.



Pie 4. If you were infected with corona virus, what kind of symptoms you had?

On the question “During the last month, how often have you felt lonely?” 56% of the examinees felt lonely, 33% didn’t and 11% did not have any opinion about loneliness.

The pandemic and the educational process

Out of the pupils and students in this group of subjects, all were attending online schooling. Those who had a good internet connection were 83% of the examinees, while 17% confirmed some problems with internet connections. In 73% were not satisfied that had to do online schooling and 27% were satisfied that they didn’t have to go in person to the schools. Majority of the pupils/students or 65% were not satisfied with the quality of the online teaching while 69% were satisfied that they could pass the exams much easier due to the less control in this way of the schooling.

Social interaction in the pandemic

Concerning the social life, 55% of the examinees answered that most of their friendships were practically stopped during the pandemic, 38% confirmed not having any problems with their friends, while 7% answered that they were not sure about the quality of actual friendships. Surprisingly, 45% answered that they gained some new friendships during this pandemic via social media.

In 91% of the examinees, social media helped to remain in contact with friends, and for 9% social media were not used for contacting friends.

Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on individuals worldwide, and young people are no exception. The unprecedented disruption to daily life, isolation measures, and uncertainties about the future have significantly affected the mental health of youth.

This discussion explores the challenges faced by young people during the pandemic, the impact on their mental well-being, and the importance of fostering resilience to mitigate the adverse effects:

1. **Increased Prevalence of Mental Health Issues:** The pandemic has exacerbated existing mental health challenges among youth and contributed to the emergence of new ones. The stressors associated with social isolation, disrupted routines, remote learning, financial strain, and fear of contracting the virus have led to a rise in anxiety, depression, loneliness, and other mental health disorders. It is crucial to recognize the scale of the problem and address it effectively to prevent long-term consequences [3].
2. **Limited Access to Mental Health Services:** The pandemic has disrupted access to mental health services for many young people. Social distancing measures, overwhelmed healthcare systems, and limited resources have hindered their ability to seek help. Furthermore, the shift to virtual platforms for mental health support may not be accessible or suitable for everyone, particularly those with limited internet access or technological literacy. Ensuring equitable access to mental health services is essential to support youth during this challenging time [4].
3. **Impact on Education and Future Prospects:** The pandemic has significantly disrupted education systems worldwide, with schools transitioning to remote learning or experiencing frequent closures. These disruptions have led to increased stress, decreased motivation, and concerns about the impact on academic performance. Furthermore, the uncertainties surrounding the job market and future prospects have added an additional layer of anxiety and apprehension among young people. It is crucial to provide adequate support and guidance to help youth navigate these challenges [5].
4. **Importance of Resilience and Coping Mechanisms:** Despite the numerous challenges, many young people have demonstrated remarkable resilience during the pandemic. Encouraging the development of coping mechanisms and resilience-building skills is vital to support their mental well-being. This can include promoting self-care practices, fostering social connections through virtual means, and providing access to reliable information and resources. Empowering young people to adapt and bounce back from adversity will contribute to their long-term mental health [6].
5. **Addressing Stigma and Raising Awareness:** Stigma surrounding mental health remains a significant barrier for youth seeking help. Education campaigns and initiatives that promote open discussions about mental health can play a crucial role in reducing stigma and encouraging young people to seek support. By raising awareness about the importance of mental health and destigmatizing mental illness, we can create a more supportive environment for youth during and beyond the pandemic [7].

Even in April 2020, the World Health Organisation has warned that "isolation, physical distancing, the closure of schools and workplaces are challenges that affect us, and it is natural to feel stress, anxiety, fear and loneliness at this time" [8].

One study in Australia provides an in-depth examination of the impact of COVID-19 on Australian youth. Findings outline that young people are experiencing high levels of depression, anxiety and loneliness, and report negative impacts of the pandemic on their mental health, wellbeing and functioning.

A diverse range of impacts across both positive and negative domains were found, with context playing a key role in shaping different response trajectories. Whilst many young people will remain resilient to these impacts and may recover without professional support, the high rates of distress and nature of the impacts highlight the value of ensuring that early intervention services are readily accessible, particularly to young people in areas with more restricted lockdown responses [9].

Conclusion

Understanding the mental health impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and coping strategies is crucial, particularly for young people in their developmental stage. Lockdowns and quarantines have led to various mental health issues such as depression, loneliness, anxiety, panic attacks, hopelessness, frustration, insomnia, eating problems, sadness, and emotional exhaustion.

Reduced social interactions through online communication have contributed to this decline in social connections. To mitigate these negative effects, it is recommended that families allocate adequate time for bonding, including children and adolescents, and engage in physical activities or sports while adhering to safety measures. Both traditional and virtual forms of social engagement should be considered to prevent the spread of infection.

Accessible information about mental health and practical suggestions for managing risks should be made available to everyone. For those more severely affected, seeking professional assistance is highly recommended.

References

1. <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>
2. Roe, D., & Zane, D. (2021). COVID-19 + injury connections: A literature review. Unpublished manuscript available from: https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.safestates.org/resource/resmgr/covid/COVID-19_Injury_Literature_R.pdf
3. Xiong J, Lipsitz O, Nasri F, et al. Mental health outcomes during the COVID-19 pandemic: A systematic review of population-based studies, *Psychiatry Research*, August 2020 doi: 10.1016/j.psychres.2020.113486.
4. Goyal K, Chauhan P, Chhikara K, et al. The impact of COVID-19 pandemic on mental health of people in the United States: A systematic review and meta-analysis, *Journal of Postgraduate Medicine* Publication Date: October-December 2020 DOI: 10.4103/jpgm.JPGM_632_20
5. Devereux PJ, et al. The Impact of COVID-19 on Education: Insights from Education Economics Published in: *Economics of Education Review*, August 2020 DOI: 10.1016/j.econedurev.2020.101986
6. Cénat JM, et al. Resilience in the Face of the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Review of the Literature on Coping with Stress, *Psychiatry Research* Publication Date: November 2020 doi: 10.1016/j.psychres.2020.113118
7. Purtle J, et al. Addressing mental health stigma in the age of the COVID-19 pandemic, *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) Psychiatry*, July 2020 doi: 10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2020.1711
8. Elena Sanchez Nicolas: WHO warning: on lockdown Mental Health. *Euobserver* 2020. <https://euobserver.com/coronavirus/147903>
9. Bell I. et al. The impact of COVID-19 on youth mental health: A mixed methods survey, *Psychiatry Res.* 2023 Mar; 321: 115082. Published online 2023 Jan 28. doi: 10.1016/j.psychres.2023.115082