

# Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Mental Health of Young People in Sally Mugabe Heights

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## ABSTRACT

Various studies have revealed that the prolonged and indefinite end time of the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with mass restrictions on movement, social isolation, and loneliness among young people, leads to mental health challenges. This study explored the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of young people in Sally Mugabe Heights, Goromonzi, and developed appropriate intervention strategies. Contemporary literature suggests that the pandemic disrupted education, leisure, employment, and access to health services, resulting in depression, stress, and other mental health challenges. This study employed a qualitative approach utilizing a descriptive case study. A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit twelve young persons aged 15 to 24 years. Focus group discussions and in-depth interviews were conducted, and thematic analysis was used to sift data. Several themes emerged from the data, primarily the disruption of social and economic life. Support systems were found to provide some assistance to young people, and it is critical for the government and various agencies to implement safety nets to assist youths socially and economically. Implications for the study are discussed.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, depression, anxiety, pandemic, mental health, social support

## INTRODUCTION

In January 2020, the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) was first identified by the World Health Organization (WHO), and on 11 March 2020, it was declared a global pandemic. Coronavirus disease 2019, commonly known as COVID-19, is caused by a coronavirus termed severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2; formerly called 2019-nCoV). The virus was first recognized in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China. The pandemic became a significant health crisis affecting numerous countries worldwide. Millions of people were diagnosed with the virus, and more than a million people died from complications of the disease. Governments worldwide responded to the pandemic by taking strict measures to control the spread of the virus, aimed at minimizing transmission and reducing fatalities.

Governments' responses to pandemics have historically included mass restrictions to contain the virus. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, governments introduced mass restrictions on movement and lockdowns. According to Singh, Roy, Sinha, Parveen, Sharma, and Joshi (2020), isolation and physical distancing were the most recommended ways to prevent the spread of the virus, successfully reducing the risk of infection. This led to the closure of schools, workplaces, and all private and public institutions.

The Zimbabwean government declared the pandemic a national disaster, resulting in various levels of lockdowns and curfews. The curfews aimed to limit movement, with various nations recommending social distancing and the closure of public institutions and spaces like universities and schools to reduce virus transmission. The effect on young people was the continued disruption to daily routines like going to school, work, and other social activities they used to engage in outside their homes (Hunter, Chitsiku, Shand, & Blerk, 2020). This impacted public health, mental health, and social support systems by depriving them of social contact.

Vigo et al. (2020) state that COVID-19 resulted in severe health and livelihood challenges. The pandemic had a significant impact on young people in Sally Mugabe Heights. While government efforts focused on mitigating the physical risks of COVID-19, the disruption to education and leisure activities disproportionately affected young people. It disrupted their economic activities and sources of livelihood, destroying their confidence and hope for upward social mobility.

This abnormal circumstance led to global anxiety and fear, resulting in widespread adverse mental health problems caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated economic decline. Octavius et al. (2020) reported that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected psychology and mental well-being, disproportionately impacting populations.

There was a higher chance of young people developing mental health challenges compared to adults, as COVID-19 increased negative mental health factors such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal tendencies (Panchal et al., 2021; O'Sullivan et al., 2021). These effects may be secondary to factors such as insecurity, confusion, boredom, frustration, stress, emotional isolation, and stigma.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic became a unique global challenge without a definite end date. Research revealed that young people were affected by loneliness and social isolation. Additional research indicated that those with pre-existing mental health disorders were more prone to suffer from the pandemic's mental health effects (O'Sullivan et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2021). Despite numerous studies on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, none focused on young people in a peri-urban community. These factors necessitated this study on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of young people in Sally Mugabe Heights, Goromonzi.

### **Objectives of the Study**

- To ascertain the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people aged between 15 to 24 years.
- To identify prevalent mental health issues among young people.
- To review available social support systems for young people.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This research adopted a qualitative, phenomenological approach, aiming to understand the research subject in its original state. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research explores and understands the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. Unlike quantitative approaches, which use experimental methods and quantify measurements to test generalizations, qualitative research is suitable for describing unique subjects or situations and investigating sensitive issues (Clarke & Jack, 1998).

### **Research Approach**

Recently, qualitative research has enabled exploration of the effects and impact of COVID-19 on various societies and nations (Buheji & Ahmed, 2020). This approach helped gather data on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people in Sally Mugabe Heights, Goromonzi. The study area was new to the researchers, necessitating this approach to fully understand the subject's influence on youths' mental health. The researcher used the phenomenology approach, described by Neubauer et al. (2019) as focusing on the study of individuals' lived experiences. The aim was to describe the phenomenon accurately, free from pre-existing frameworks, and to remain with the true facts.

### **Research Design**

The research design was the overall plan for obtaining answers to research questions, involving systematic inquiry with specific designs and techniques. Creswell (2012) defines a research design as a plan, structure, and strategy of investigation used to obtain answers to research questions. Mohajan (2018) states that qualitative researchers must link research questions to methodological approaches, integrate data collection and analysis, and be clear about the research purposes. Effective qualitative research requires plans and procedures outlining steps from broad assumptions to detailed methods of data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Creswell, 2014). The interpretivism research design considered using a case study of Sally Mugabe Heights youths to answer research questions without manipulating participants' behavior (Yin, 2014).

### **Population**

This study used a population of 15 youths aged 15 to 24 and residents of Sally Mugabe Heights, Goromonzi.

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## **Sample and Sampling Procedures**

The purposive research sampling procedure was used to select research participants from the population based on suitability and the researcher's judgment (Creswell, 2014). The research had a sample of 12 participants, aligning with Bernard's (2013) recommendation of 10 to 20 knowledgeable participants for social or lived experience research. A sample is a proportion of the whole number of elements considered in research (Malhotra, 2010). The researcher selected youths willing to participate in the study, forming two focus group discussions with four participants each and conducting in-depth interviews with four participants. Sampling helped select participants representing the study's target population, who were the primary unit of analysis, with their informed consent (Creswell, 2014).

## **Data Collection Procedure**

Data were gathered using primary and secondary materials, complementing each other for a well-balanced research. A clearance letter from the university allowed data collection from participants, who also signed consent forms. The researcher met the youth at Sally Mugabe shopping center, observing COVID-19 prevention measures during discussions. Focus group discussions took about three hours each, and in-depth interviews took about an hour per participant. Participants also completed a short demographic form.

## **Data Analysis**

Data gathered through face-to-face in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were thematically analyzed (Smith, 2020). The summarized result and transcription were analyzed using thematic analysis, with codes categorizing major themes and sub-themes. Themes were selected based on relevance and commonality. Thematic analysis, as noted by Mohajan (2018), is a flexible and effective method for reviewing data without adhering to pre-existing frameworks.

## **RESULTS PRESENTATION**

### **Summary of Participants' Profiles**

Participation was confined to young people resident in Sally Mugabe Heights at the pandemic's onset in March 2020. Below is an analysis of the participants:

#### **Response Rate**

A sample of 15 young people was selected, with 12 participating in the study.

#### **Demographic Data Summary**

The study considered sex, age, and education level.

##### **Sex**

Participants comprised six females and six males, providing equal representation.

##### **Age**

Most respondents were aged 15 to 24 years.

##### **Education Level**

The majority were university graduates, with some having secondary education.

##### **Respondent Category**

Most respondents were students, with others being school leavers and a few working-class.

##### **Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Young People**

The first research objective aimed to ascertain the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people. Thematic analysis revealed common themes: education disruption, leisure disruption, mental health challenges, loss of work, and health-seeking behavior disruption.

## **Education Disruption**

The analysis confirmed that school closures due to lockdowns negatively affected students. Respondents noted the loss of time in school and difficulties adapting to online learning due to lack of resources.

## **Leisure Disruption**

Containment measures affected social networks and leisure activities. The closure of social facilities like beerhalls, churches, and sports clubs led to a loss of leisure and relaxation opportunities for youths.

## **Mental Health Challenges**

Respondents reported that the pandemic induced loneliness and depression due to disrupted activities and uncertainty about the future.

## **Loss of Work**

The pandemic led to business closures, impacting youths in the informal sector. Many lost their sources of livelihood, leading to financial instability and increased stress.

## **Health-Seeking Behavior Disruption**

Many youths feared visiting health facilities, leading to difficulties accessing services like family planning and sexual reproductive health.

## **Mental Health Issues Among Young People**

The second objective aimed to identify prevalent mental health issues. Thematic analysis revealed anxiety, depression, and stress as common issues.

### **Anxiety**

Respondents experienced fear of contracting the virus and concerns about the future, contributing to heightened anxiety.

### **Depression**

Depression was reported due to the illness of family members, isolation, and disrupted social and economic activities.

### **Stress**

The pandemic caused stress due to balancing health concerns with educational and employment demands.

## **Social Support Systems for Young People**

The third objective aimed to review available social support systems. Analysis revealed support from social media, social networks, religious leaders, and peer support.

### **Social Media**

Social media platforms provided a means for youths to communicate and share information about the pandemic.

### **Social Network**

Parents, relatives, and friends offered support and information about the pandemic.

### **Religious Leaders**

Religious leaders provided spiritual support, helping alleviate fear and anxiety.

### **Peer Support**

Peer support, such as the Friendship Bench, offered psychosocial and cognitive behavior therapy to youths, aiding in mental health challenges.

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## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

### Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Young People

The first research objective revealed education disruption, leisure disruption, mental health challenges, loss of work, and health-seeking behavior disruption as common impacts. Findings align with previous studies (Chirisa et al., 2021; Cowie et al., 2020; Schmidt, 2021) that COVID-19 disrupted education, social interactions, and economic activities, contributing to adverse mental health outcomes.

### Mental Health Issues

The second objective identified anxiety, depression, and stress as prevalent issues, consistent with previous research (Samji et al., 2021; O'Reilly et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2020). The pandemic's uncertainties and disruptions exacerbated these mental health challenges.

### Social Support Systems

The third objective revealed social media, social networks, religious leaders, and peer support as vital for youths. These findings align with research by Vigo et al. (2020) and Mastrotheodoros (2020), highlighting the importance of support systems in mitigating the pandemic's impact on mental health.

## CONCLUSIONS

The study explored the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of young people in Sally Mugabe Heights, Goromonzi, identifying common themes: education disruption, leisure disruption, mental health challenges, loss of work, and health-seeking behavior disruption. Prevalent mental health issues were anxiety, depression, and stress. Social support systems, including social media, social networks, religious leaders, and peer support, played a critical role in mitigating these challenges.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Youths should acclimatize to the new normal, forming online social groups and diversifying businesses to withstand future lockdowns.
- Further research in different setups could support generalization of results.
- Ministries responsible for youths, health, and sport should implement programs to reduce stress and psychological challenges, such as intensifying vaccination, funding projects, and investing in psycho-social services.
- Government and agencies should establish youth-friendly hubs for training, counseling, and access to affordable internet services to reduce distress and anxiety.

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