



Policy Brief

Effect of Covid-19 on Mental Health of Adolescents in Malawi

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Background

COVID-19 has profoundly affected life as COVID-19 measures requiring social isolation, movement restrictions, and economic shutdowns change the psychosocial environment worldwide. These measures can significantly threaten the mental health of children and adolescents, especially as the closure of schools meant minimal social contact and out-of-home leisure activities for adolescents. School routines are essential coping mechanisms for young people with mental health issues. When schools are closed, they lose an anchor in life, and their symptoms could relapse. Although others turned to home school with the support of their parents, the challenge was that parents were also required to work from home.

The COVID-19 mitigating measures mean the absence of external support by other family members, and social support systems have fallen away. Besides worry and anxiety related to COVID-19, the economic situation has worsened with high and rising levels of unemployment worldwide. These factors have put much pressure on children, adolescents and their families, resulting in distress, mental health problems and violence¹. For some children with depression, there will be considerable difficulties adjusting to everyday life when school resumes². (Lancet, 2020).

The *Covid-19 and Mental Health in Malawi* project conducted a study to assess the effects of Covid-19 on adolescents' mental health in the country. Specifically, the study looked at Covid-19-related depression, anxiety and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The study used quantitative and qualitative methods. It collected quantitative data through a survey (n=320) and qualitative data through focus group discussions

¹ Fegert, M. J., Vitiello, B., Plener, L. P., Clemens, V. (2020). Challenges and burden of Covid-19 pandemic for child and adolescent mental health: a narrative review to highlight clinical and research needs in the acute phase and the long return to normality. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13034-020-00329-3>

² Lancet (2020, April 14). Mental health effects of school closures during COVID-19. Retrieved from [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanchi/article/PIIS2352-4642\(20\)30109-7/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanchi/article/PIIS2352-4642(20)30109-7/fulltext)

(n=4), and key informant interviews (n=12) with guardians and caregivers of adolescents in Malawi. The data were collected from four districts: Blantyre, Mangochi, Lilongwe and Karonga.

Results

The study found that Covid-19 had effects on the mental health of adolescents. Overall, 22%, 21% and 23% of the respondents were depressed, had anxiety and had post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), respectively (see **figure 1**). However, there were no significant differences in depression, anxiety and PTSD among adolescents from cities and towns.

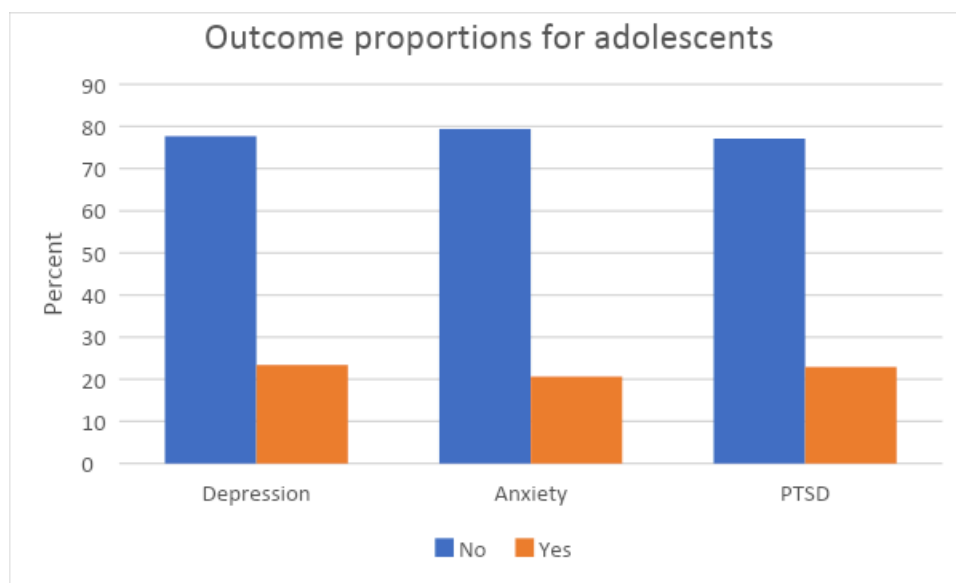


Figure 3: Depression, anxiety and PTSD outcomes for Adolescents

The study found that adolescents faced mental health problems due to disruption of academic life and social issues due to Covid-19 mitigating measures. The adolescents reported persistent feelings of discomfort, fear, sadness, hopelessness, worry and uncertainty regarding the pandemic. Participants believed that lack of accurate information, social media information overload, and Covid-19 contributed to their fears. The adolescents also reported that their beliefs and thoughts regarding Covid-19 caused them significant discomfort, worry and panic since they did not know if they would survive if they contracted the virus. Students failed to concentrate like they used to; some girls dropped out of school due to pregnancies; some were informed that the world was ending and lost interest in education. One of the adolescents said the following about the effects of staying out of school for too long: *"As for me, while the schools were closed for seven months, I got pregnant, and I am now having a baby, and I dropped out of school."* FGD Karonga.

Another cause of adolescents' mental fragility was social problems emanating from Covid-19 responses. Most adolescents expressed concern about the preventive measures, for instance, social distance and banning social gatherings, which resulted in a lack of social interactions with peers and social connection in general. *"There are other times I spent sleepless nights thinking of the Coronavirus. When I went to sleep, I would start thinking about how my day went and all the people I interacted with. This would be worse if I noticed that I coughed at any point."* (FGD Lilongwe).

Conclusion

Although the Covid-19 death toll was high among adults and not adolescents, this study has shown that adolescents have also felt the effect of the pandemic as the pandemic disturbed their social lives, mainly due to Covid-19 mitigating measures. The findings show that mental health among adolescents should be prioritised as the world has learned to manage and cope with Covid-19. The study further indicates that unhappy and dysfunctional homes can cause mental health problems among adolescents; this is why the loss of income by parents due to the pandemic impacted the adolescents' mental health.

Recommendations

- The Ministry of Health should prioritise adolescents' mental health as the country is emerging from the traumatic experience of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Ministry of Health, Ministry of Information, and Civil Society Organisations must ensure enough information about mental health among adolescents.
- Ministry of Education, through schools and communities, should ensure safe environments where the adolescents meet, interact and discuss issues affecting them and their mental health.
- Ministry of Health, NGOs and Civil Society Organisations must initiate child-friendly mental health facilities, including helplines, to mitigate the problem.

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