The crisis in youth wellbeing – Is it due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

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The mental health and wellbeing of young people during the COVID-19 pandemic have been heavily discussed in the public domain. In the early phase of the pandemic the state of young people's mental health was portrayed in a particularly negative manner. Some researchers and practitioners suggested that young people are experiencing another pandemic, this time focused on mental health. Our research project examined whether these gloomy predictions have materialised, now that the pandemic is over. We assessed trends in wellbeing starting years before the pandemic to see whether young people's declining wellbeing during the pandemic was in fact part of a longer trend. We discuss our findings in the light of recent trends of various indicators of mental health.

The Covid Generation Project

As part of a larger funding scheme "NRP – 80 Covid-19 in Society" by the Swiss National Science Foundation, our research group has been tasked with understanding how the Covid-19 pandemic affected young people's wellbeing. To achieve this aim, we use data from the Swiss Household Panel, a large national survey of households – with over 10.000 participants, including

nearly 1500 people aged 14-25 years-old.

In our recently published study, we found that young people experienced a steady decline in wellbeing throughout the entire period of 2017-2022, as well as an increase in stress and psychosomatic symptoms. These trends were more adverse among young people than other age groups, with young women being particularly vulnerable. However, the trends were not universal across these indicators.

For instance, the declines in positive affect and life satisfaction (e.g., "In general, how satisfied are you with your life?") were relatively small but steady during the entire period of 2017-2022. The trend was much more varying for negative affect (e.g., "How frequently do you generally experience worry?"). Interestingly, there was a sharp increase as the pandemic went into its second year (between autumn 2020 and autumn 2021), followed by a steep decline when the pandemic ended (autumn 2022). However, the decrease in negative affect after the pandemic did not fully compensate for the prior increase.

Similar trends to those of negative affect were observed for feeling stressed and suffering from weakness and weariness. Among other psychosomatic symptoms, the proportion of young people reporting sleep problems increased throughout the entire period from 35% in 2017 to 44% in 2022, with most of this rise happening already before the pandemic. A stable proportion of participants reported headaches pre-pandemic but it increased afterwards, with nearly half of surveyed individuals having a such a problem by 2022.

How about demands for mental health support?

It is important to consider whether declining wellbeing coincides with a greater demand for mental health support, to better understand the implications for human functioning. This typically includes inpatient and outpatient care, medications and (tele)consultations, alongside alternative sources of help-seeking, such as self-help.

The information collected by the Swiss Health Observatory shows that psychiatric admissions have increased more drastically among younger people than other age groups, from 13.5 persons per 1000 inhabitants in 2018 to 15.7 in 2022 for those aged 18-35. During the pandemic, we saw a decline in inpatient admissions in an overall population, but a drastic increase among women under 20-years-old. There was also a shift from outpatient consultations to teleconsultations comparable across all ages. The former decreased by 23% and latter more than doubled during the first shutdown, although teleconsultations still remained relatively rare.

Even after lifting the restrictions, teleconsultations remained elevated. It remains to be seen, when more recent data is available, whether this form of mental health support goes back to pre-pandemic levels in Switzerland. The evidence from the US, another country relying on private health insurance, suggests a greater demand for mental health teleconsultations might constitute a permanent change.

Psychotropic medication claims increased during the pandemic, again

particularly for young people. Unfortunately, we are not aware of any evidence on longer pre- and post-pandemic trend on outpatient consultations and psychotropic medication, as these are typically not recorded in routinely collected surveillance data.

Wellbeing during the pandemic and “normal” times

Wellbeing of young people has been declining for at least a few years now. During the pandemic, young people faced turbulence, initially experiencing a sharp increase in negative emotions, stress and various psychosomatic symptoms. Yet, with time, they also demonstrated some adaptation. Young women, however, appear to have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic. Also, the nature of help-seeking changed during the pandemic – with teleconsultations becoming more common.

Wellbeing of young people was a hot topic during the COVID-19 pandemic. It seems, however, that the pandemic was more of magnifier, which drew the public’s attention to the problem, rather than an amplifier of already poor wellbeing. That is, if we consider the longer trend spanning before and after the pandemic, there appears to be a steady continuous decline in wellbeing. After the initial alarmist tone in the media, many recent scientific and media reports state that the impact of the pandemic was not as detrimental as expected, which may convey a message that “things are not that bad”. This has two potential dangers. First, it can underestimate the negative consequences of even a short-term drop in wellbeing during the pandemic, which may be associated with social and economic loss in the short and longer term. Second, such a narrative distracts from the longer negative trend that indicates the need for a wider systemic action going beyond short-term reactive crisis-oriented interventions.

In summary, it is not enough to pay attention to wellbeing of young people during a crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. We need to devise population-wide, systemic strategies which will help young people flourish and be better prepared to face the current and future challenges.

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