

Mental health of women, young adults and parents worst hit by pandemic

21 July 2020, by Mike Addelman

The COVID-19 lockdown is hitting the mental health of women, young people and parents of children under five the hardest according to a study led by researchers at The University of Manchester, King's College London and the National Centre for Social Research and the National Centre for Social Research.

The study provides the first high quality information on [mental health](#) during the pandemic, drawing on 17,452 participants in the UK's largest longitudinal study, Understanding Society.

In April, around a third of people in the UK were experiencing clinically significant levels of psychological distress, compared with around one fifth before the pandemic.

Increases were greater in some groups than others: 33% of women, 32% of parents with young children and 37% of [young people](#) were experiencing this level of distress under lockdown say the team whose study is published in *The Lancet Psychiatry*.

The analysis reflected the UK situation one month into lockdown, although the team argues that as the economic recession bites and mortgage holidays time out, the impact on mental health inequalities may deepen.

Established pre-pandemic inequalities in people with pre-existing [health conditions](#), [low-income homes](#) and Asian ethnicity in mental health were maintained, but did not significantly widen by the end of the first month of lockdown.

And the team did not find significant deterioration in mental health in men and the over- 45s, although they acknowledge that many men will be suffering the effects of low income or having young children at home.

Future studies, they say, should examine ways that

men may express distress for example through addictions—perhaps drinking excessively, taking drugs or gambling.

The authors took account of trends in mental health in the five years leading up to the pandemic allowing them to investigate changes in mental health before and after pandemic.

It covered people's difficulties with sleep, concentration, problems in decision making, strain and feeling overwhelmed.

Dr. Matthias Pierce is from the Centre for Women's Mental Health at The University of Manchester and lead author on the study.

He said "This pandemic appears to be having a very detrimental effect on young people, and young women in particular.

"This group had already been experiencing worsening mental health in the years prior to lockdown and this is being exacerbated by the pandemic.

"We estimate as many as 44 percent of young women are experiencing clinically significant levels of mental distress compared with 32 percent before the pandemic"

He added: "COVID-19 presents the greatest physical risk to older people, men, ethnic minorities and those with underlying health conditions.

"But it appears to be the mental health of the young and of women that is disproportionately affected by COVID- this may flow from the governments' pandemic response and strategies to mitigate transmission of the disease .

"The higher mental distress in women widens established mental health inequalities and highlights how important it is that providers make

sure to maintain people's access to services for domestic violence, sexual and reproductive health. Availability of childcare is also urgently needed."

Professor Kathryn Abel from The University of Manchester added "This is a unique study of mental distress in the UK in the weeks following lockdown and shows significant increases for some, but not all.

"Established health inequalities persist with rates of mental distress remaining particularly high in those with pre-existing conditions, living in low income homes and of Asian ethnicity.

But new inequalities in mental distress have also emerged: those living with young children and those in employment at the start of the [pandemic](#) now at risk of larger increases in mental distress."

Professor Tamsin Ford from the University of Cambridge said: "Young people are least at risk from acute infection but are bearing the brunt of the lockdown. The poorer mental health of young people in this sample is deeply concerning as it occurs in addition to mounting evidence of both deteriorating mental health and worse outcomes for those with childhood mental [health](#) conditions. However, we need similar data on younger teenagers and children who may be at even higher risk."

More information: Matthias Pierce et al, Mental health before and during the COVID-19 pandemic: a longitudinal probability sample survey of the UK population, *The Lancet Psychiatry* (2020). DOI: 10.1016/S2215-0366(20)30308-4

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