

Does money matter for mental health? Evidence from the Child Support Grants in Johannesburg, South Africa.

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ABSTRACT

Depression and anxiety are referred to as common mental disorders. More than ten percent of South Africans are likely to experience an episode of depression or anxiety in a given year. The poor and marginalised are consistently at greater risk of suffering from common mental disorders. Yet mental health has remained neglected in low and middle income countries. This study investigates whether an intervention which seeks to address poverty, can also reduce the burden of common mental disorders.

This study undertook quantitative, qualitative and policy research to explore whether child support grants (an example of a poverty reduction programme) are good for mental health in caregivers, and whether common mental disorders prevent children's caregivers from applying for the grants. The study analysed data from the Health, Environment and Development (HEAD) study conducted by the Environmental Health Unit of the MRC, which collected data in deprived areas of Johannesburg, reflecting a spectrum of living and housing conditions. Qualitative research was also conducted in three of the HEAD study areas, including a democratic era housing development, an apartheid era housing development and an informal settlement.

Both quantitative and qualitative research confirmed that receipt of the child support grants is associated with lower risk of common mental disorders. Reduced hunger, increased ability to provide for one's household and decreased vulnerability to debt are among the mechanisms explaining the relationship. Respondents' or others' perceived judgements regarding teenage pregnancies and misuse of the grants can reduce the positive impacts of the grants on mental health. The process of applying and collecting the grant has the potential to aggravate existing common mental disorder symptoms leading either to delayed or non-uptake, or reducing the positive impacts otherwise derived from the grants. Widespread access to information, reduced application times and streamlined procedures, flexible and safe arrangements for collecting the payments are vital to reducing the potential stress associated with the application process.

Policy interview findings contributed to the formulation of a number of recommendations for ways in which a mainstream programme such as the child support grant can engage with mental health.

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