

The HERStory series

COVID-19 and socio-economic mental health stressors in the lives of South African adolescent girls and young women

SUMMARY

- Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) in South Africa already faced a range of socio-economic, structural and environmental mental health stressors.
- COVID-19 has increased household financial strain and food insecurity, which have in turn contributed to increased depression, anxiety and mental health issues.
- Poorer communities in South Africa have borne the brunt of the burden of lockdowns, with restrictions disproportionately affecting those families and individuals already living in poverty, increasing unemployment and food insecurity.
- Interventions responsive to pandemic context are needed to support psychological and emotional wellbeing of AGYW, and bolster their coping mechanisms.
- A multi-sectoral and coordinated response is needed to address unemployment and food insecurity, and reduce key drivers of poor mental health.

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These research briefs were developed by scientists at the South African Medical Research Council's Health Systems Research Unit to share findings from studies conducted by the organisation.

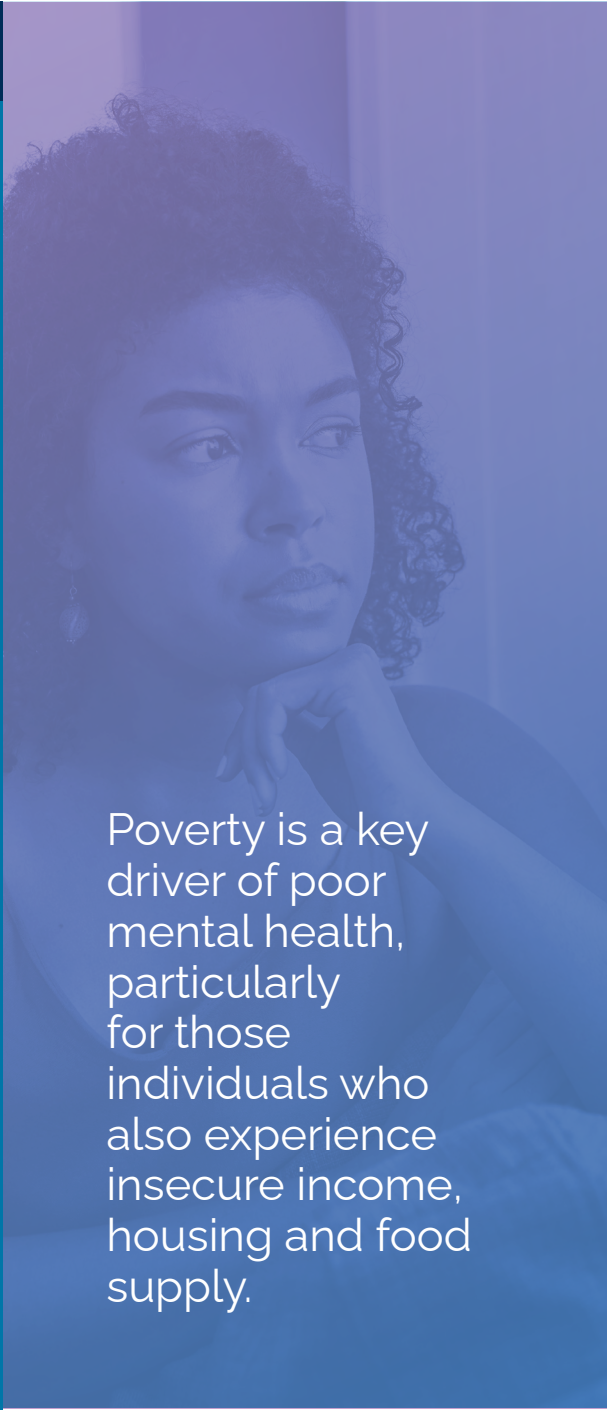
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THE ISSUE / CONTEXT / SCOPE OF PROBLEM

- The inability to fulfil basic needs, having sufficient food in particular, is associated with poor mental health
- There is an association between hunger and food insecurity in adolescents and internalising behaviour problems such as depression and anxiety
- COVID-19 restrictions, have disproportionately affected the poorest, most marginalised and vulnerable in society due to socioeconomic realities such as inequality, poverty, violence, and rising unemployment
- Due to lockdown physical, social, and economic restrictions, South Africans with and without existing mental health issues faced heightened levels of loneliness, depression, harmful substance use, and suicidal behaviour
- South African adolescents and young people are experiencing increased levels of insecurity and anxiety
- Prior to COVID-19 there was already a gap in mental health service provision and constrained access to mental health care services. South Africa's public health system, already under-resourced and overburdened by infectious and chronic diseases, prior to the pandemic, has been further strained.
- COVID-19 restrictions have added to the burden of mental health in the country. Major depressive disorder and anxiety disorders have drastically increased during the pandemic.
- Poverty is a key driver of poor mental health, particularly for those individuals who also experience insecure income, housing and food supply. In South Africa, the majority of the population already face unemployment and poverty. The COVID-19 crisis has worsened the situation, increasing unemployment and food security for the poorest households.
- Adolescents and young people growing up in households where unemployment, lack of secure access to income and food, experience even greater stress and anxiety. In addition to this, adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) in the poorest communities in South Africa face additional challenges for their mental health, including a lack of social support, financial insecurity, and vulnerabilities related to their gender.



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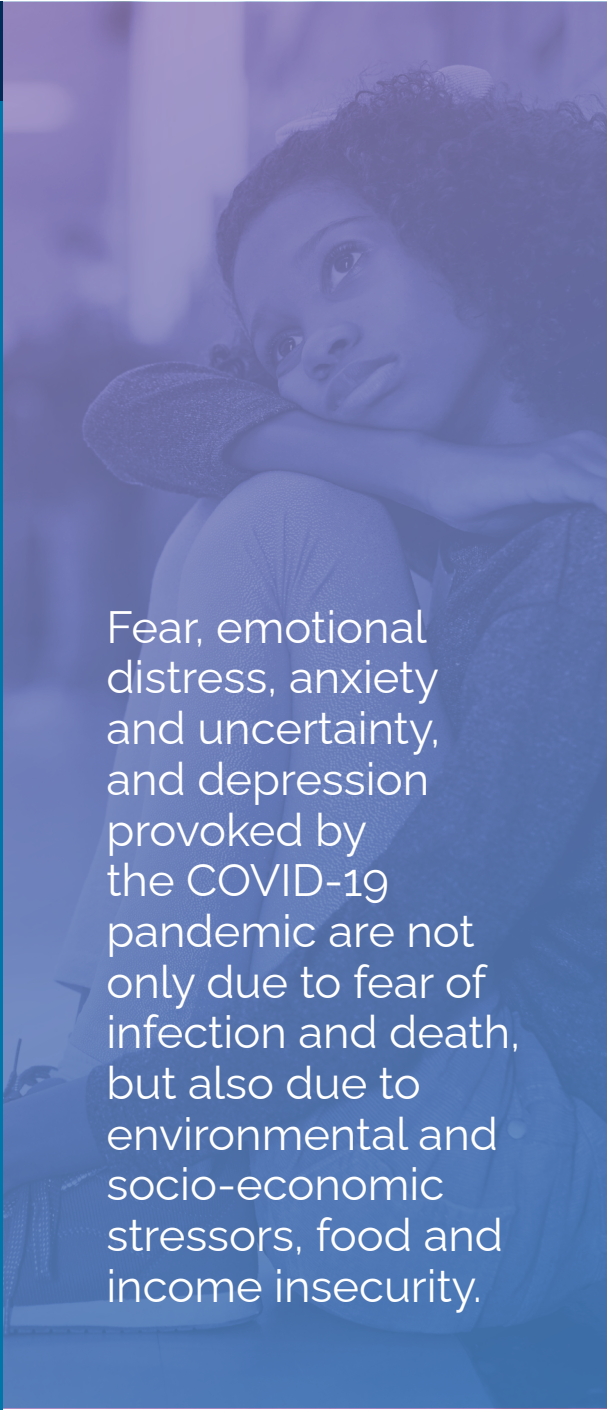
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RESEARCH OVERVIEW: THE HERSTORY² STUDY

Research activities took place in 6 districts in 6 South African provinces: Klipfontein, Cape Town (Western Cape), King Cetshwayo (KwaZulu Natal), Ehlanzeni (Mpumalanga), Bojanala (North West), Nelson Mandela Bay (Eastern Cape), and Thabo Mofutsanyana/DiHlabeng (Free State). All six districts are characterised by high HIV prevalence, and high rates of teenage pregnancy. Between November 2020 and March 2021 we conducted a cross-sectional telephone survey with 515 AGYW aged 15-24 years, and in-depth interviews (IDIs) with 50 AGYW.

WHAT WE FOUND

- COVID-19 pandemic lockdown restrictions have exacerbated social inequalities and underlying socio-structural vulnerabilities
- Prior to the pandemic, AGYW already faced socio-economic, structural and environmental mental health stressors, which have been further exacerbated by COVID-19
- COVID-19 has increased household financial strain and food insecurity – these in turn have resulted in increased stress, anxiety and feelings of desperation, worsening family relationships, and increased fear of domestic violence.
- Lockdown and economic strain have put families into an immediate state of distress, impacting negatively on relationships, and resulting in increased physical, sexual, emotional violence experienced by AGYW
- COVID-19 restrictions have disrupted normal day to day living, and have affected various aspects of young people's physical, mental and social health, further compounding existing mental health stressors, adding feelings of social isolation, loneliness, uncertainty, anxiety and depression
- Fear, emotional distress, anxiety and uncertainty, and depression provoked by the COVID-19 pandemic are not only due to fear of infection and death, but also due to environmental and socio-economic stressors, food and income insecurity



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IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Address structural drivers of poor mental health

- Key to mitigating mental health stressors is addressing structural drivers such as unemployment and food insecurity
 - Economic empowerment programmes for AGYW may help to reduce mental health stressors; combined with efforts to build resilience to maintain young people's confidence and motivation to persevere with education and employment opportunities

Promote resilience

- Interventions to promote resilience can be effective, and therefore opportunities to promote resilience should be harnessed
 - Social capital, psychosocial support, self-help interventions and "strength-based prevention programmes", may support resilience and coping skills among AGYW.

Strengthen and support existing community-based resources

- Community based support and mental health care could be harnessed by increasing support for civil society organisations who understand and can respond to needs of communities in which they operate.
- Address mental health treatment and care gap through building skills and capacity of lay mental health providers, and frontline workers including community health workers and teachers, and improving access to mental health literacy resources
- Interventions to provide parenting support and investments in family strengthening could fill additional gaps in mental health support for young people
- Schools and educational institutions can also play a critical role in identifying and assessing learners in need of support and care, making referrals to community-based workers and the Department of Social Development

Innovative solutions

- Other recommendations include the provision of accessible and data free Mobile health applications, digital technologies, virtual support solutions and online platforms to deliver brief evidence-based psychological interventions for young people with symptoms of depression and anxiety, and provide psycho-social support through online/digital and telephonic counselling services, and through community safe spaces to reduce isolation and address gaps in psycho-social support

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Paper that this brief is based on:

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