

The mental health of young adults is being ravaged by the pandemic—the suffering needs to stop

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Since the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, medical experts have predicted that the resulting social isolation and economic stress would negatively impact mental health. Many months into the pandemic, with a surge in COVID-19 cases affecting virtually every US state as a result of the murderous “herd immunity” strategy pursued by the ruling elite, a new study shows that there is a veritable tsunami of depression flooding over the nation’s young adult population.

This age group, part of Gen Z, have seen their lives implode in 2020. They have missed high school and college graduations, had their schools shut down or been forced into dangerous conditions in them, have been isolated from their friends and robbed of social interaction. They have lost jobs, had their pay cut, or been forced to work in unsafe conditions in restaurants, retail, the service industry and factories.

Many of those living with their parents before the pandemic are even less likely now to be able to move out. Those living on their own have seen the excitement of having their own place for the first time turn into numbing isolation. American families are facing devastating poverty due to lost jobs and hours, translating into hunger, poverty and eviction.

Parents with young children, or those living with grandparents, must live in fear of passing the deadly contagion on to them. Like all of the population, they have seen relatives and friends suffer through COVID-19 illness and even death. Contrary to the lies spread by the Trump administration and quack scientists, young people can and do contract the coronavirus and face horrible consequences and death. If they do survive, they may suffer long-term health consequences.

The nationwide survey of young Americans, ages 18-24, examined depressive symptoms among these young adults, including thoughts of suicide, generalized anxiety and disruption in sleep. It was conducted and authored by

researchers from Northeastern University, Harvard University/Harvard Medical School, Rutgers University and Northwestern University and published by the COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public’s Policy Preferences Across States.

Overall, across four national waves (in late May, late June, late August and mid-October), researchers found alarming rates of depression, with nearly half of this young adult population—47.3 percent—showing at least moderate depressive symptoms in October, the highest level since June. This is close to 10 times the pre-pandemic rate.

The survey also examined the proportion of respondents who described at least occasional thoughts of being better off dead, or of harming themselves during the two weeks prior to taking the survey. As with depression, such suicidal and self-harm symptoms have skyrocketed among young adults, reaching 32.2 percent in May, and 36.9 percent in October, a more than tenfold increase over an epidemiologic study from 2013-2014, which found 3.4 percent reporting such thoughts.

These staggering figures show that an entire generation of young people are being emotionally ravaged by a pandemic which has unnecessarily claimed the lives of nearly a quarter-million Americans and threatens to become even more deadly in the coming months. Government authorities at all levels have pursued a policy of criminal neglect of the physical and mental health of the population.

In October, survey respondents were asked to identify particular consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic that might have impacted them or their households. The most commonly reported consequence was closure of school or university (51 percent), followed by working from home (41 percent), a pay cut (27 percent), losing employment (26 percent), inability to make rent/mortgage payments (16 percent), and stopping/reducing work to take care of children (15 percent).

The survey findings show the comparative effects of these

consequences of the pandemic on mental health. They show that social isolation, economic pressures and the stress on parents while working from home and tending to their children's remote learning have been key factors in the explosion of mental health problems among young adults.

The largest increase in depressive symptoms was observed among those whose homes were or potentially were impacted (inability to pay rent or mortgage, eviction), with more than 60 percent of these respondents reporting moderate rates of depression. Close to 50 percent of this group also reported suicidal thoughts. Close to 70 percent of those facing eviction reported either suicidal thoughts or generalized anxiety symptoms.

Although there are slight variations among demographic groups, no geographical region, gender, ethnicity, or education level has been spared in this mental health crisis among 18- to 24-year-olds.

Interestingly, although there were disparities in moderate depressive symptoms among young adults by region in June, by October the symptoms were similar in the US Northeast, South and West. This is an indication that all regions of the country are facing similar challenges as the pandemic surges.

Young women showed slightly higher levels of depressive symptoms than men, with higher levels of generalized anxiety, mild and moderate depression and disrupted sleep. Young Asians saw the highest levels of generalized anxiety, mild and moderate anxiety and suicidality compared to whites, blacks and Latinos.

While those without college reported slightly higher levels of mental health symptoms compared with those with some college, the difference was not significant.

The mental health impact of the pandemic on not only young adults, but the population as a whole, has been disregarded by both the Trump administration and President-elect Joe Biden. Neither Trump nor Biden has provided any roadmap for confronting any health aspect of the pandemic.

Among younger children, state and local authorities are pushing the reopening of schools so their parents can get back to work. At the university level, they are working to keep campuses open and to maintain the operation of the lucrative college sports industry.

The Trump administration, along with many governors—both Democratic and Republican—have pushed for opening schools and keeping them open with the justification that this is in the best interests of the mental health of youth. Such arguments should be rejected with contempt.

The pandemic has imposed tremendous social and economic hardships on the American population, but much of these effects could be alleviated or lessened with an

infusion of government funds and programs. Mental health services have been slashed to the bone under both Democratic and Republican administrations. At a time when these services are needed more than ever, there is no proposal to revive them to provide the mental health care so desperately needed.

Non-profit suicide and mental health hotlines are inadequate substitutes for a comprehensive social program to fund mental health services to assist families that are struggling with educating their children at home, paying their rent and utilities, and buying groceries.

While a virulent virus will inevitably create physical and mental health challenges, the ruling elite in America has allowed it to run rampant as it seeks to keep schools open while forcing workers into dangerously unsafe factories.

In their young lives, 18- to 24-year-olds have seen an unending explosion military aggression of US imperialism—from the wars in Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq to Syria and Yemen, to name just a few. Now they are seeing at home how an invisible virus is being allowed to unleash its wrath under conditions where the scientific and social resources are available to fight it, but the profit-drive of the ruling class demands that the population suffer.

The mental health crisis created by the malign neglect and homicidal policies of the ruling elite can only be confronted by the organization of the working class, independent of the two big business parties and the trade unions that defend and accept their murderous back-to-school and back-to-work policies. Along with developing a vaccine and treatments for the coronavirus, the scientific advances in treating mental health must be marshaled, under the guidance of the working class, to assist those suffering under the weight of the pandemic.



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