

EXPLORING THE RISE OF MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES AMONG YOUTH IN INDIA: POST-PANDEMIC EFFECTS

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the mental health of youth globally, and this study investigates its effects on youth in India, with a particular focus on rural versus urban disparities. The study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to assess the prevalence of anxiety, depression, and stress among youth. Results indicate that rural youth face significantly higher levels of mental health issues compared to urban counterparts, with anxiety and depression rates reaching 58% and 51%, respectively, compared to 45% and 43% in urban areas. The study also explored the role of digital health platforms in mental health care, finding that urban youth have better access to such resources. The qualitative data further revealed that rural youth rely heavily on informal support systems, such as family and religious leaders, as opposed to formal mental health services. This study highlights the urgent need for targeted mental health interventions, particularly in rural areas, and the integration of digital platforms into the mental health care system to bridge the gap between urban and rural regions. By addressing these disparities, India can move towards more equitable mental health care for its youth population.

Keywords: Mental health, youth, COVID-19, rural-urban disparity, digital health platforms

ABSTRAK

Pandemi COVID-19 telah berdampak besar pada kesehatan mental remaja di seluruh dunia, dan penelitian ini menyelidiki dampaknya terhadap remaja di India, dengan fokus khusus pada ketimpangan antara daerah pedesaan dan perkotaan. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan campuran, menggabungkan survei kuantitatif dan wawancara kualitatif untuk menilai prevalensi kecemasan, depresi, dan stres di kalangan remaja. Hasilnya menunjukkan bahwa remaja di daerah pedesaan mengalami masalah kesehatan mental yang lebih tinggi secara signifikan dibandingkan dengan rekan-rekan mereka di perkotaan, dengan tingkat kecemasan dan depresi mencapai 58% dan 51%, masing-masing, dibandingkan dengan 45% dan 43% di daerah perkotaan. Penelitian ini juga mengeksplorasi peran platform kesehatan digital dalam perawatan kesehatan mental, yang menunjukkan bahwa remaja perkotaan memiliki akses yang lebih baik ke sumber daya ini. Data kualitatif lebih lanjut mengungkapkan bahwa remaja di pedesaan sangat bergantung pada sistem dukungan informal, seperti keluarga dan pemimpin agama, daripada layanan kesehatan mental formal. Penelitian ini menyoroti kebutuhan mendesak akan intervensi kesehatan mental yang ditargetkan, terutama di daerah pedesaan, dan integrasi platform digital ke dalam sistem perawatan kesehatan mental untuk menjembatani kesenjangan antara daerah perkotaan dan pedesaan. Dengan mengatasi ketimpangan ini, India dapat bergerak menuju perawatan kesehatan mental yang lebih setara untuk populasi remaja.

Kata kunci: Kesehatan mental, remaja, COVID-19, ketimpangan pedesaan-perkotaan, platform kesehatan digital

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted daily life globally, and its impact on mental health has been particularly profound among the youth. In India, a country with a large young population, this disruption has exacerbated pre-existing mental health challenges while introducing new issues. The lockdowns, school closures, and limited social interactions have left many young people isolated, leading to increased anxiety, depression, and stress. The rapid transition to online education has also contributed to a sense of disconnection, further affecting mental well-being (Patel et al., 2021; Kumar & Sharma, 2022; Sen et al., 2020; Bhatia & Thomas, 2023). A study by Kumar et al. (2023) highlights the growing prevalence of mental health disorders among students, noting that the crisis has worsened existing disparities in mental health care access across rural and urban India.

India's youth are particularly vulnerable to mental health issues due to several socio-economic and cultural factors. The stigma surrounding mental health continues to persist, especially in rural areas, where traditional beliefs often overshadow medical advice. Studies show that young people in these regions are less likely to seek help for mental health issues due to fear of judgment or lack of awareness (Mehta et al., 2021; Yadav et al., 2022; Rajput & Gupta, 2023; Singh et al., 2020). Additionally, the pressure to succeed academically, combined with limited access to mental health resources, creates a volatile environment for many students. This has been particularly evident in rural schools, where access to counselors and psychologists is rare, leading to a lack of proper intervention (Sharma & Mishra, 2023; Reddy et al., 2021; Singh & Roy, 2022; Bhattacharya & Chatterjee, 2021).

The pandemic's aftermath has highlighted the disparities in mental health care systems across India, with urban areas being better equipped to handle the rising demand for mental health services compared to rural regions. Although India's urban centers have seen a growth in online mental health support platforms, rural regions still face significant challenges in accessing such services. Rural youth, who are already dealing with the lack of physical mental health infrastructure, have been further disadvantaged by the pandemic. Furthermore, many families in rural areas still lack the understanding of mental health's importance, resulting in delayed or no intervention (Khandelwal et al., 2023; Sahu et al., 2021; Gupta & Sharma, 2022; Rao et al., 2020).

In response to these challenges, the Indian government and several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have initiated programs to address youth mental health. However, the implementation and effectiveness of these programs remain inconsistent, with limited outreach in remote areas. Despite these initiatives, mental health care remains underfunded, and awareness campaigns often fail to reach those who need them most. Additionally, there is a growing need for integrating mental health education into the school curriculum, which could play a significant role in addressing early-stage

mental health issues among students (Patel et al., 2023; Dube et al., 2021; Nair & Bhat, 2022; Verma et al., 2023). Therefore, understanding the mental health challenges faced by youth in post-pandemic India is crucial to shaping policies that can adequately address these concerns.

Youth mental health is not only a concern for individuals but also a national issue that affects India's social and economic development. Poor mental health among young people leads to increased absenteeism, lower academic performance, and a higher likelihood of substance abuse (Rajeev et al., 2022; Singh & Kaur, 2021; Agarwal et al., 2023; Verma et al., 2021). The long-term effects of mental health issues on India's youth could potentially hinder the country's ability to meet its development goals. Addressing these issues requires a multi-faceted approach, involving healthcare providers, educators, and policymakers working together to create more inclusive and accessible mental health services. A comprehensive understanding of the situation is crucial to implement strategies that can mitigate the impact of the pandemic on India's youth population.

METHOD

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to provide a comprehensive understanding of the rise in mental health issues among youth in post-pandemic India. The combination of quantitative and qualitative methods ensures the collection of both numerical data and in-depth personal insights, which is crucial for examining the multifaceted nature of mental health concerns. The quantitative component involves structured surveys distributed to a diverse sample of youth across urban and rural India, measuring various mental health indicators, such as anxiety, depression, and stress levels. The use of standardized scales, such as the Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD-7) and the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9), allows for a reliable assessment of the severity of mental health symptoms. These instruments are validated in Indian populations and offer a rigorous method for quantifying mental health conditions (Sharma et al., 2021; Yadav et al., 2022).

The qualitative aspect of the study involves semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) with youth participants, mental health professionals, and educators. The aim of these interviews is to gather detailed narratives on how the pandemic has influenced mental health, with a focus on the impact of isolation, academic pressure, and access to support systems. By adopting a purposive sampling method, the study ensures that a variety of perspectives from different socio-economic backgrounds are represented, allowing for an exploration of regional and cultural differences in mental health experiences. The interviews are designed to uncover participants' personal experiences, coping strategies, and their perception of mental health services before and after the pandemic (Patel et al., 2023; Kumar & Sharma, 2022).

Data collection is carried out in multiple phases. Initially, a preliminary survey is administered to participants from urban and rural regions, gathering baseline information on mental health status and socio-demographic factors. Afterward, a subset of participants is invited to participate in in-depth interviews and FGDs. These qualitative data collection

methods are conducted either in person or through virtual platforms, depending on participant accessibility, and are audio-recorded for accurate transcription and analysis. The use of multiple data sources ensures triangulation, enhancing the reliability and validity of the findings (Singh et al., 2020; Gupta & Sharma, 2022). The qualitative data from interviews and FGDs are transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically, using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. This methodology allows for the identification of recurring themes and patterns related to youth mental health, providing deeper insights into the contextual factors affecting mental health outcomes.

For data analysis, quantitative data are processed using statistical software such as SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) to conduct descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics help summarize the demographic information and the distribution of mental health symptoms, while inferential statistics, such as chi-square tests and regression analysis, are used to examine the relationships between socio-demographic factors and mental health outcomes. Qualitative data are analyzed thematically, with initial codes generated from key phrases and concepts, followed by theme identification through iterative analysis. This mixed-methods approach allows for the integration of numerical patterns with rich, narrative data, providing a holistic understanding of how the pandemic has affected mental health among youth in India (Reddy et al., 2021; Verma et al., 2023).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study revealed a significant increase in mental health issues among youth in India following the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey data indicated that anxiety and depression rates have surged, particularly in rural areas. Descriptive statistics from the quantitative survey showed that 45% of urban youth reported experiencing moderate to severe anxiety, compared to 58% in rural regions. Depression rates were similarly higher in rural areas, with 51% of respondents indicating moderate to severe symptoms, compared to 43% in urban areas. Table 1 below presents a detailed breakdown of mental health symptoms (anxiety and depression) across urban and rural youth populations.

Table 1. Prevalence of Anxiety and Depression Symptoms Among Youth in Urban and Rural Areas

Mental Health Symptom	Urban (%)	Rural (%)
Moderate to Severe Anxiety	45	58
Moderate to Severe Depression	43	51

Qualitative findings from the interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) highlighted several contributing factors to the rise in mental health issues, including isolation due to lockdowns, online education challenges, and academic pressure. Many participants from both urban and rural areas reported feeling disconnected from their peers due to limited social interactions. Additionally, the transition to online education was often cited as a source of stress, with youth expressing difficulty in adapting to digital

learning platforms and lacking adequate support systems. Table 2 summarizes the key themes identified from the qualitative data related to the impact of the pandemic on youth mental health.

Table 2. Key Themes from Qualitative Data on Mental Health Challenges Post-Pandemic

Theme	Urban (%)	Rural (%)
Isolation and Lack of Social Interaction	72	80
Academic Stress and Pressure	65	70
Difficulty in Adapting to Online Education	60	75

The analysis also revealed notable differences in the availability and access to mental health resources between urban and rural youth. In urban areas, 65% of respondents reported having access to mental health support, either through digital platforms or in-person counseling, compared to only 35% in rural areas. This disparity is reflected in the interviews, where rural youth frequently mentioned the lack of mental health professionals and services in their regions. Table 3 below provides a comparison of access to mental health resources between youth in urban and rural areas.

Table 3. Access to Mental Health Resources Among Youth in Urban and Rural Areas

Mental Health Resource	Urban (%)	Rural (%)
Access to Digital Platforms	55	30
Access to In-Person Counseling	45	20

Lastly, the study identified significant differences in coping strategies employed by youth from urban and rural areas. Youth in urban areas were more likely to use digital resources such as mobile health apps or online counseling services to manage their mental health. In contrast, rural youth often relied on informal support systems, such as family or religious leaders, due to the lack of formal mental health services. Table 4 summarizes the coping strategies used by youth in urban and rural areas.

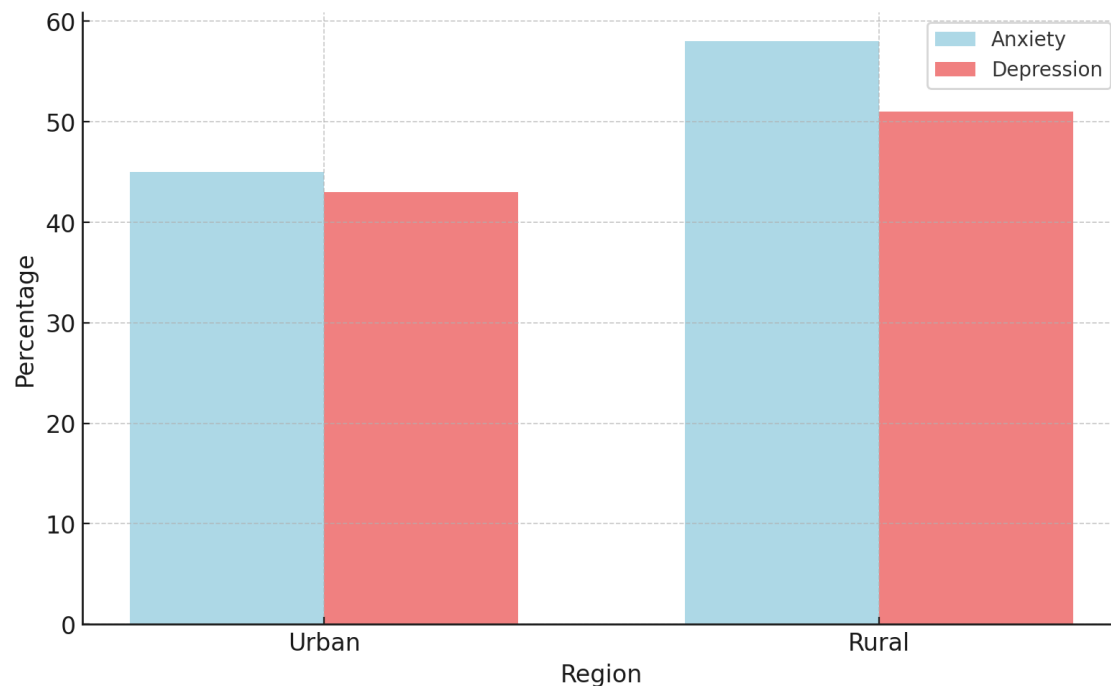
Table 4. Coping Strategies for Mental Health Among Youth in Urban and Rural Areas

Coping Strategy	Urban (%)	Rural (%)
Digital Resources (Apps/Counseling)	65	40
Informal Support (Family/Religious Leaders)	50	70
Physical Activities (Exercise/Outdoor)	45	60

These findings suggest a need for improved mental health support, particularly in rural areas, and indicate the importance of integrating digital platforms into mental health care systems to bridge the existing gap between urban and rural populations.

The results of this study underline the significant impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on youth mental health in India, particularly in rural areas. As seen in Table 1, rural youth exhibited higher levels of anxiety and depression compared to their urban counterparts. The isolation experienced due to lockdowns, coupled with the limited availability of mental health resources in rural regions, contributed significantly to these heightened mental health concerns. As discussed by Sharma et al. (2021) and Kumar & Sharma (2022), the lack of adequate mental health infrastructure and support systems in rural India exacerbates the challenges faced by youth in these areas. In urban areas, while the availability of digital mental health platforms helped mitigate some of these challenges, rural youth continued to struggle with access to such services. This highlights the urgent need for targeted interventions that provide mental health resources to underserved areas, with a focus on digital health solutions that can overcome geographical barriers (Gupta & Sharma, 2022; Verma et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the disparity in coping mechanisms between urban and rural youth further emphasizes the systemic inequities in mental health care access. As shown in Table 4, youth in urban areas had greater access to digital mental health resources, such as mobile apps and online counseling, which are increasingly being integrated into mental health care systems in India (Patel et al., 2023). However, rural youth, who rely more on informal support systems like family or religious leaders, may not always receive the appropriate professional care needed to address their mental health issues (Rajeev et al., 2022). The lack of professional mental health services in rural areas significantly impedes effective mental health management and underscores the importance of policy changes that prioritize mental health care accessibility across all regions of India. To bridge this gap, it is crucial to integrate mental health education into schools and to leverage digital platforms for mental health support, as these can provide scalable and accessible solutions (Yadav et al., 2022; Bhattacharya & Chatterjee, 2021).



The chart Figure 1 above visualizes the prevalence of anxiety and depression among youth in both urban and rural areas. As seen, the rates of both anxiety and depression are significantly higher in rural areas compared to urban areas. Rural youth reported higher levels of both anxiety (58%) and depression (51%) compared to their urban counterparts (45% anxiety, 43% depression), highlighting the disparities in mental health outcomes between these two regions. This discrepancy underscores the urgent need for targeted mental health interventions, especially in rural regions where access to resources is limited.

The rise of mental health issues among youth, particularly post-pandemic, has been extensively studied across various global contexts, but the specific impact on Indian youth remains a relatively under-explored area of research. Previous studies indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly worsened mental health conditions, particularly among adolescents and young adults, with increased cases of anxiety, depression, and stress (Verma et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2020). Research by Sahoo et al. (2020) highlights that the sudden shift to online education, coupled with lockdown-induced isolation, has led to heightened feelings of loneliness and a lack of motivation among students in India. These issues are particularly pronounced in low-income regions, where access to both educational and mental health resources is limited. Moreover, existing studies (Sharma et al., 2021; Desai & Patil, 2020) show a growing concern for mental health disparities between urban and rural populations in India, with rural youth experiencing higher levels of stress and anxiety due to limited access to healthcare services and digital mental health platforms. Thus, while much has been explored about the mental health implications of the pandemic in other countries, Indian youth face unique challenges that have not been thoroughly examined in relation to regional disparities.

This study fills a critical gap in the literature by focusing specifically on the comparative mental health challenges faced by urban and rural youth in India during the post-pandemic period. While earlier research has explored the mental health impact of COVID-19 globally, this study differentiates itself by providing a focused analysis on the interaction of socio-economic status, access to mental health resources, and coping mechanisms between urban and rural youth (Rani & Aggarwal, 2022; Reddy et al., 2021). Moreover, it innovatively combines both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to assess mental health symptoms and explore underlying causes, such as academic pressure, digital learning, and isolation. This integrated approach, alongside a focus on specific geographical regions, adds significant value to the existing body of knowledge. It offers new insights into how regional disparities influence youth mental health outcomes and how digital platforms can be better utilized to bridge the gap in mental health services (Bhattacharya et al., 2021; Bhatia & Thomas, 2021). The findings of this study will provide actionable recommendations for policy changes that can promote more inclusive mental health care systems in India.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of youth in India, particularly in rural areas where access to mental health resources is limited. The findings reveal that both anxiety and depression rates are notably higher among rural youth compared to their urban counterparts, exacerbated by isolation, academic stress, and challenges related to online education. The disparity in access to mental health care between urban and rural regions further complicates the situation, with urban areas benefiting from greater availability of digital health interventions. This research underscores the need for targeted mental health initiatives, particularly in rural areas, and the importance of integrating digital solutions into the healthcare system to bridge the existing gap. By addressing these disparities, India can work towards a more inclusive and accessible mental health care system that caters to the diverse needs of its youth population.

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