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Author/s:

King, TL

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Commentary

Young carers in the COVID-19 pandemic: risks for mental health

Tania L King*

Centre for Health Equity, Melbourne School of Population and Global Health, University of Melbourne, Victoria 3010, Australia

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted lives across the world, however for some groups, the disruption has been more keenly experienced - this includes young carers. Young carers are children, adolescents and young adults who provide informal care to someone else, typically a parent or other family member with a disability, long term health condition or who is elderly. In developed countries, it is estimated that 2-8% of those aged under 18 years are young carers [1]. The disadvantage and invisibility of young carers, already substantial prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, has been exacerbated during the pandemic, with likely implications for their ongoing mental health and well-being.

Prior to COVID-19, the mental health of young carers was known to be worse than that of non-caring peers [2,3]. The pandemic may amplify mental health inequalities between young carers and non-caring peers. Emerging evidence supports this, with young carers reporting increased stress and pressure related to COVID-19 [4,5]. There are some key stressors through which young carers may be differentially vulnerable to mental health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Disrupted formal and informal care services and support, lockdown induced school closures, and reduced social engagement, may act in concert to increase care demands, worries and stress, and the social isolation of young carers during COVID-19, with implications for their mental health.

Demands for informal care have increased due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with likely impacts on mental health. Across most countries and settings, COVID-19 has induced a cessation of, or dis-

ruption to, formal care services. For many young carers, services that they depended on to assist with their caring responsibilities have been suspended, meaning that they must shoulder a greater proportion of caring tasks. Incipient evidence indicates that young carers are providing substantially more care than prior to the pandemic [4]. Lockdowns and other strategies to reduce population mobility have also meant that many informal support arrangements, such as with family members and friends living elsewhere, have also been lost or curtailed. School closures mean that the siblings of many young carers have also had to remain at home, with young carers often required to support the needs of these siblings, in addition to others requiring care [5]. More intensive caring is known to be associated with increased risk of psychological distress [6], so heavier caring loads during the pandemic may lead to poorer mental health among young carers.

These increased care demands have been exacerbated by increased social isolation. Social isolation, known to be detrimentally associated with mental health [7], has increased due to COVID-19. Prior to COVID-19, young carers were one of the most hidden, marginalised groups in society, consistently under-identified and under-recognised by service providers and society more generally [8]. The closure of schools, universities and other educational settings has meant that many young carers have lost regular forms of contact with others [4], including teachers and peers, increasing the social isolation that is characteristic of the experiences of many young carers. This has also increased the invisibility of young carers, further removing them from public view, and reducing the potential buffers and support of others. Restrictions imposed on social engagement, and the suspension of extra-curricular activities, has compounded this isolation and experience of invisibility.

* Corresponding author. Centre for Health Equity, Melbourne School of Population and Global Health, University of Melbourne, Victoria 3010, Australia, +61 3 410 162 460

E-mail address: tking@unimelb.edu.au

In addition to these stressors, young carers are also reporting increased worries and concerns during COVID-19. For many young carers, the pandemic has led to consistent worries about their family's financial situation [9,10]. It is also the case that young carers ordinarily have ongoing and significant worries regarding the health and wellbeing of the person they are caring for [11]. This has been heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic, with added worries regarding the impact of COVID-19 infection on the person being cared for, the fear of transmitting the virus to them, and concerns regarding the future health and wellbeing of those they care for in a world with COVID-19 [10]. Given that worry is strongly tied to stress related mental health problems among adolescents [12], the increased experience of worry among young carers represents another risk for their mental health.

Adolescent mental health is strongly related to future mental health and wellbeing [13]; given this, identifying and supporting young carers is vital for optimising their mental health and wellbeing. Recognising the unique factors that place young carers at increased risk of experiencing mental health impacts related to COVID-19 is central to this. Seeking ways to reach and support young carers during lockdowns/confinements is crucial. To mitigate the social isolation of young carers during the pandemic, schools, councils and service providers should maintain ongoing contact with young carers. Where school is online, it is essential that young carers are adequately resourced, particularly in terms of technology. Given that many young carers carry out household tasks such as food shopping, assistance (logistical and financial) in accessing food and other essential provisions would be of benefit. Support could also include the prioritisation of respite provision where other supports have stopped due to COVID-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare many social inequalities and vulnerabilities that lie like fissures across society. Young carers are one group at particular risk of experiencing increased and ongoing disadvantage due to COVID-19, with important implications for their mental health. Acting to mitigate this mental health risk is vital for the future health and well-being of this under-recognised group.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The author declares no competing interests.

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