

Youth Mental Health and Social Well Being

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Abstract

Youth mental health and social well-being are increasingly recognized as critical global public health concerns, particularly in societies undergoing rapid social change, digitalization, and economic uncertainty. The age range of 15-30 years represents a pivotal developmental period marked by identity formation, expanding social roles, and heightened exposure to psychosocial stressors. This study examines the relationship between youth mental health and social well-being, with a specific focus on social connectedness, interpersonal support systems, and digital social environments. A mixed-methods research design was employed to capture both quantitative patterns and qualitative insights. Quantitative data were collected using standardized and validated instruments that assessed mental health outcomes and social well-being among youth aged 15-30 years from diverse social and cultural contexts. Qualitative data were collected through focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews, which explored participants' perceptions of social relationships, emotional well-being, and social participation. Data analysis involved inferential statistical techniques for quantitative data and thematic analysis for qualitative data. The findings reveal a significant positive association between social well-being and mental health outcomes. Youth reporting strong social support, a sense of belonging, and meaningful engagement within family, peer, and community networks demonstrated lower levels of anxiety, depression, and psychological distress. Conversely, social isolation, stigma, interpersonal conflict, and negative digital interactions were associated with poorer mental health outcomes. The study highlights the dual role of digital platforms as both facilitators of social connection and sources of psychosocial risk. The study concludes that youth mental health is deeply embedded within social environments. Effective mental health promotion requires integrated interventions that strengthen social support systems, foster inclusive social environments, and encourage healthy digital engagement among young people.

Keywords: Youth Mental Health; Social Well-being; Social Connectedness; Digital Media; and Psychosocial Factors

Introduction

Youth mental health is increasingly recognized as a critical developmental and public health concern. Individuals aged 15–30 years’ experience a key stage of life marked by identity exploration, emotional growth, and increasing social responsibilities (Arnett, 2015:9). During this period, young people navigate the challenges of defining themselves, gaining independence, and forming complex social relationships, which shape their long-term psychological well-being and social functioning. Mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression are common among youth and can affect academic performance, relationships, and overall quality of life (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021:2).

Youth are particularly vulnerable due to ongoing developmental changes and exposure to stressors such as peer pressure, family conflict, and economic uncertainty. Contemporary social environments, including digital media and changing family structures, provide opportunities for connection but also risks, including social comparison and cyberbullying. Recognizing youth mental health as both a developmental and public health issue highlights the need for early, preventive, and socially responsive interventions that strengthen family support, foster peer relationships, and promote inclusive social and digital environments.

Youth Mental Health as a Developmental and Public Health Concern

Youth mental health is increasingly recognized as a major developmental and public health concern across global contexts. Youth, commonly defined as individuals aged 15–30 years, represents a critical life stage characterized by identity exploration, emotional development, and increasing social responsibilities (Arnett, 2015:9). Experiences during this period play a significant role in shaping long-term psychological well-being and social functioning. From a public health perspective, mental health challenges among youth constitute a substantial proportion of the global disease burden.

According to the World Health Organization (2021:2), mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety are among the leading causes of disability among adolescents and young adults worldwide. These conditions are often exacerbated by structural and social factors, including poverty, unemployment, academic pressure, and social inequality, which disproportionately affect youth populations. Developmentally, youth are particularly vulnerable to psychosocial stressors due to ongoing neurological, emotional, and identity-related changes. Erikson's psychosocial development theory identifies identity versus role confusion as the central crisis of adolescence and early adulthood, noting that unresolved identity struggles can lead to emotional instability and psychological distress (Erikson, 1968:128). The absence of adequate social and emotional support during this stage further increases the risk of mental health difficulties.

Recent research by Kaur (2025) highlights the profound influence of digital footprints on the psychological development of urban youth, suggesting that social media engagement is a primary determinant of modern social well-being. Reddy (2025) argues that the school system is a vital environment for intervention, advocating for the formal integration of mental health literacy into the Indian curriculum to foster long-term social well-being. Current scholarship emphasizes a two-pronged approach to youth development: understanding the external pressures of digital life and building internal resilience through structured educational reform.

Contemporary social transformations have intensified these vulnerabilities. Rapid digitalization, changing family structures, and economic uncertainty have disrupted traditional transitions into adulthood, contributing to heightened stress and uncertainty among young people (Arnett, 2015:216). While these changes provide new opportunities for social interaction and self-expression, they also introduce emerging stressors such as social comparison and performance pressure. Recognizing youth mental health as both a developmental and public health issue highlights the need for early, preventive, and socially responsive interventions. Effective responses must extend beyond individual-level treatment to include strategies that strengthen social environments, reduce structural inequalities, and promote supportive relationships (Patel et al., 2018:1555). Framing youth mental health within this dual perspective provides a foundation for understanding the social determinants that influence mental well-being during this critical life stage.

Social Well-Being and Mental Health: Conceptual Linkages

Social well-being is a core component of overall mental health, particularly during youth, when social relationships and societal integration play a central role in psychological development. Social well-being refers to individuals' evaluation of their functioning within society, including feelings of belonging, social acceptance, and perceived contribution to the social world (Keyes, 1998:122). For youth, social well-being reflects the quality of interactions with family, peers, and broader community structures. Mental health and social well-being are conceptually and empirically interconnected. Positive social well-being provides emotional security, reinforces identity development, and enhances coping capacity, thereby promoting positive mental health outcomes (Keyes, 2002:209). Youth who perceive themselves as socially integrated and valued are more likely to experience higher self-esteem and lower levels of psychological distress.

Conversely, impaired social well-being is associated with adverse mental health outcomes. Experiences of social exclusion, marginalization, and poor relationship quality undermine emotional stability and increase vulnerability to anxiety and depressive symptoms (Helliwell & Putnam, 2004:1436). Youth who lack meaningful social connections often report loneliness and reduced life satisfaction, which negatively affect mental health. The social ecological perspective further highlights that youth mental health is shaped by multiple layers of social influence, ranging from close interpersonal relationships to broader societal structures (Bronfenbrenner, 1979:21).

This perspective underscores that mental health cannot be understood in isolation from the social contexts in which youth live and interact. Supportive social environments enhance resilience, whereas hostile or fragmented social settings heighten psychological risk. Understanding the conceptual linkages between social well-being and mental health is essential for developing holistic interventions. Addressing youth mental health requires strategies that strengthen social integration, promote inclusive relationships, and enhance opportunities for meaningful participation in social life (Keyes, 2002:210). Such an approach recognizes social well-being not merely as an outcome but as a foundational determinant of youth mental health.

Social Connectedness and Interpersonal Support Systems

Social connectedness is a critical determinant of youth mental health, reflecting the extent to which young people experience meaningful relationships, belonging, and emotional closeness within their social environments. Social connectedness enhances psychological security and provides a sense of identity affirmation during youth, a period marked by heightened sensitivity to social feedback (Jose et al., 2012:236). Youth who feel connected to others are more likely to demonstrate emotional stability and positive mental health outcomes. Interpersonal support systems, particularly family and peer relationships, play a central role in promoting youth mental well-being. Family support provides emotional reassurance, guidance, and practical resources that help youth cope with stress and developmental challenges (Thoits, 2011:146). Supportive family environments are associated with lower levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms, while family conflict and neglect increase psychological vulnerability.

Peer relationships become increasingly influential during youth, serving as sources of companionship, validation, and shared experience. Positive peer support has been shown to buffer the effects of stress and reduce feelings of loneliness and emotional distress among young people (Rueger et al., 2016:542). Conversely, peer rejection, interpersonal conflict, and lack of friendship networks are linked to poorer mental health outcomes, including depression and low self-esteem.

Social Support Theory provides a useful framework for understanding the protective role of interpersonal relationships in youth mental health. The theory posits that emotional, informational, and instrumental support function as buffers against the negative effects of stress by enhancing coping capacity and perceived control (Cohen & Wills, 1985:312). For youth, access to consistent and responsive support systems strengthens resilience and reduces susceptibility to psychosocial distress. Social connectedness and interpersonal support systems serve as foundational protective factors for youth mental health. Strengthening family relationships, fostering positive peer interactions, and building supportive community networks are essential strategies for promoting psychological well-being during this critical developmental stage (Thoits, 2011:147).

Community Participation, Inclusion, and Social Capital

Community participation is a significant social determinant of youth mental health, as it provides opportunities for meaningful engagement, social recognition, and the development of a sense of

purpose. Youth involvement in community, cultural, civic, and faith-based activities enhance feelings of belonging and social value, which are essential components of social well-being (Putnam, 2000:19). Active participation in community life has been linked to improved psychological well-being and reduced emotional distress among young people.

Social inclusion within community settings fosters social capital, defined as the networks, norms, and trust that facilitate cooperation and mutual support (Putnam, 2000:21). For youth, access to social capital strengthens resilience by expanding supportive relationships beyond the family and peer group. Inclusive communities provide youth with opportunities to develop social competencies, leadership skills, and a sense of collective identity, all of which contribute positively to mental health. Conversely, social exclusion and marginalization undermine youth mental well-being. Experiences of discrimination, stigma, and exclusion from community participation are associated with increased levels of stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms (Kawachi & Berkman, 2001:461). Youth who perceive themselves as socially excluded often experience diminished self-worth and reduced trust in social institutions, which negatively affects psychological functioning.

The social integration perspective emphasizes that mental health is deeply embedded within social structures and communal relationships. Durkheim's foundational work on social integration highlights that weak social bonds and low levels of community attachment increase vulnerability to psychological distress (Durkheim, 1897/1951:210). Although originally applied to broader social phenomena, this perspective remains relevant for understanding youth mental health in contemporary community contexts. Promoting community participation and inclusion is therefore essential for enhancing youth mental health. Policies and programmes that create inclusive spaces for youth engagement, encourage civic involvement, and reduce structural barriers to participation can strengthen social capital and foster positive mental well-being (Kawachi & Berkman, 2001:462).

Digital Social Environments and Youth Mental Health

Digital social environments have become an integral part of youth social life, shaping patterns of communication, identity expression, and social interaction. Social media platforms and digital

networks provide young people with opportunities to maintain relationships, expand social connections, and access information related to mental health and well-being (Best et al., 2014:27). For many youths, especially those with limited offline support, digital platforms function as important spaces for social engagement and emotional expression. Positive digital engagement can enhance social connectedness and psychological well-being. Online interactions enable youth to sustain peer relationships cross geographical boundaries and participate in communities of shared interest, thereby fostering a sense of belonging (Best et al., 2014:30). Access to online support groups and mental health resources can also promote help-seeking behavior and reduce feelings of isolation among young people.

However, digital social environments also present significant psychosocial risks. Excessive social media use has been associated with increased exposure to social comparison, unrealistic self-presentation, and fear of missing out, which negatively affect self-esteem and emotional well-being (Orben, 2020:74). Youth who frequently compare themselves to idealized online images are more vulnerable to anxiety, depressive symptoms, and reduced life satisfaction. Cyberbullying, online harassment, and digital stigma further compound mental health risks in digital spaces.

Negative online interactions have been linked to heightened psychological distress, emotional dysregulation, and increased risk of depression among youth (Keles et al., 2020:85). Unlike offline interactions, digital harassment can be persistent and inescapable, intensifying its impact on mental health. The dual nature of digital media highlights the need for balanced and responsible engagement. While digital platforms offer valuable opportunities for connection and support, unmanaged or harmful use can undermine youth mental health. Promoting digital literacy, emotional regulation, and healthy online behaviors is therefore essential for maximizing the benefits of digital social environments while minimizing associated risks (Orben, 2020:76).

Implications for Socially Grounded Mental Health Promotion

The evidence linking youth mental health to social well-being highlights the need for mental health promotion strategies that are socially grounded and developmentally appropriate. Mental health interventions that focus solely on individual pathology overlook the broader social environments that shape youth experiences and psychological outcomes (Patel et al., 2018:55). A socially

grounded approach recognizes that strengthening relationships, communities, and social systems is essential for promoting sustainable youth mental well-being.

Families remain central to youth mental health promotion, as supportive family environments provide emotional security, guidance, and practical resources. Family-based interventions that enhance communication, emotional responsiveness, and conflict resolution have been shown to reduce psychological distress and improve mental health outcomes among young people (Reupert et al., 2015:27). Strengthening family functioning is therefore a critical component of effective mental health promotion. Educational institutions, faith-based organizations, and community groups also play a vital role in fostering inclusive and supportive environments for youth. Schools and community programmes that promote social connectedness, peer support, and participation contribute to positive mental health by enhancing belonging and resilience (Barry et al., 2019:3). Such settings provide structured opportunities for youth engagement and social integration.

Given the pervasive influence of digital media, mental health promotion must also address digital social environments. Promoting responsible digital engagement, digital literacy, and emotional regulation online can help youth navigate digital spaces in ways that support rather than undermine mental well-being (Orben, 2020:76). Interventions should aim to maximize the benefits of digital connection while minimizing risks such as cyberbullying and problematic use.

At the policy level, integrated and multisectoral approaches are essential for addressing the social determinants of youth mental health. Policies that reduce social inequality, expand access to education and employment, and promote inclusive youth participation contribute to improved mental health outcomes (Patel et al., 2018:56). Socially grounded mental health promotion therefore requires coordinated efforts across families, communities, institutions, and policy systems

Conclusion

Youth mental health is deeply connected to the social environments in which young people live and develop. Strong relationships with family and peers, active participation in community life, and supportive social networks all serve as protective factors that promote emotional stability,

resilience, and overall well-being. Conversely, social isolation, interpersonal conflict, marginalization, and negative experiences in digital spaces can increase vulnerability to psychological distress, anxiety, and depression. Promoting youth mental health requires a comprehensive, socially grounded approach that extends beyond individual treatment to include family, community, and societal interventions. Creating inclusive, supportive, and connected environments allows young people to build meaningful relationships, develop a positive sense of identity, and acquire coping skills that help them navigate the developmental, social, and digital challenges of contemporary life. By prioritizing social support, community engagement, and safe digital practices, families, educators, community leaders, and policymakers can enhance the mental health and overall well-being of youth, fostering a generation that is resilient, emotionally healthy, and socially integrated.

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