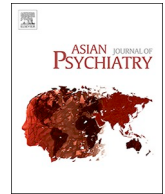




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Letter to the Editor

Potential changes to the *hikikomori* phenomenon in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Hikikomori
Social Withdrawal behaviour
Youth unemployment

Various forms of preventive public health measures, such as quarantine, social distancing, and school closures, have been implemented in an attempt to suppress the transmission of the COVID-19 virus in many countries (Tandon, 2020a). The social and economic consequences of such measures have led to business closures, job losses, and debt-related family violence (Tandon, 2020b).

Learning from previous recessions, like the 2008 Financial Tsunami, it is known that young people are much more likely to suffer from effects such as unemployment than those in other age groups during the post recession period (International Labor Organization, 2020). Young people who are out of the job market and the education system for a period of time are more likely to experience marginalization, dependence, loneliness, increased drug use, and self-harm or suicidal behaviour (Wong et al., 2015).

The term *hikikomori* was coined in Japan to describe young people who, through being neither employed nor in education, are socially withdrawn from others over a prolonged period (Wong et al., 2017). The emergence of *hikikomori* has been explained in terms of two broad perspectives. The first, or clinical, perspective suggests that *hikikomori* co-exists with a variety of psychiatric conditions, such as adjustment disorders, anxiety-related disorders, and major depressive disorder (Kato et al., 2019). The second, non-clinical, perspective proposes that increasing globalization has resulted in intense competition for educational and employment opportunities amongst young people, requiring accelerated learning development in childhood, and consequent social withdrawal (Borovoy, 2008).

The pandemic may have four possible effects globally on *hikikomori* or the phenomenon of prolonged social withdrawal. First, social distancing and quarantine can lead to post-traumatic stress symptoms, confusion, and anger triggered by fears, frustration, or boredom (Brooks et al., 2020). Many months of school closure may impact negatively on the psychological health of students and it is a concern that rates of truancy or drop-out may increase. Second, a worldwide increase in unemployment is expected. Young people who were already vulnerable within the workforce prior to the pandemic, and those who are graduating from school, will thus have more difficulty finding employment, resulting in isolation and the further development of social withdrawal behaviors. Third, the rise in unemployment due to COVID-19 impacts not only on young people but also on other family members. The negative effect of newly unemployed parents on

vulnerable young people is unknown. Fourth, and more positively, since many people have experienced months of social distancing, they may have an increased understanding of the *hikikomori* phenomenon and be able to empathize more with socially withdrawn young people. This may be beneficial for the future development of *hikikomori* work within the community.

Epidemics, such as COVID-19, expose issues of avoidable health inequalities, bringing the 'slow burn of injustice' to light (Marmot, 2020). Specific groups, already experiencing inequalities before the outbreak, are likely to become more vulnerable (Holmes et al., 2020). The potential costs of societal and health services, introduced to assist vulnerable young people with their re-integration into society, are likely to be substantial. Governments thus need to anticipate and prepare for the advent of this emerging situation and intervene at an early stage to prevent the loss of skills and resources that young people can contribute to the world.

In the context of Hong Kong's social unrest since June 2019, a deterioration in the mental health of Hong Kong people has already been documented, with increased prevalence rates of suspected depression and post-traumatic stress disorder at 11.2 % and 12.8 %, respectively (Ni et al., 2020). Events such as the social unrest, and COVID-19, have impacted severely on the young people of Hong Kong, in particular those who were arrested, have poor family relationships for political reasons, and those who have special learning or health needs.

In such challenging times, investment in youth mental health may prove most cost-effective in the long run. It is suggested that (i) more paid or unpaid job opportunities should be created to keep young people engaged in society; (ii) any youth advocacy efforts should involve young people themselves, and they should be financially compensated for their efforts; (iii) the efficacy of individual interventions for young people can be increased by including their parents and partners in any efforts at providing social supports; and (iv) every government should take heed of the creativity, innovation and initiative of young people as it looks to create a "new normal" way of life in the wake of the pandemic.

Financial statement

N.A.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajp.2020.102288>

Received 2 June 2020; Received in revised form 2 July 2020; Accepted 3 July 2020

Available online 11 July 2020

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Declaration of Competing Interest

Nothing to declare.

Acknowledgment

N.A.

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