

TECHNICAL REPORT

Contributing Factors To Psychological Distress, Coping Strategies, And Help-seeking Behaviours

**Among Adolescents Living
In The Klang Valley People's
Housing Project (PPR)**



TECHNICAL REPORT

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS TO
PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS,
COPING STRATEGIES, AND
HELP-SEEKING BEHAVIOURS

AMONG ADOLESCENTS LIVING IN THE KLANG VALLEY
PEOPLE'S HOUSING PROJECT (PPR)

A series of thin, light blue wavy lines that flow across the bottom half of the page, creating a sense of movement and depth.

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FOREWORDS

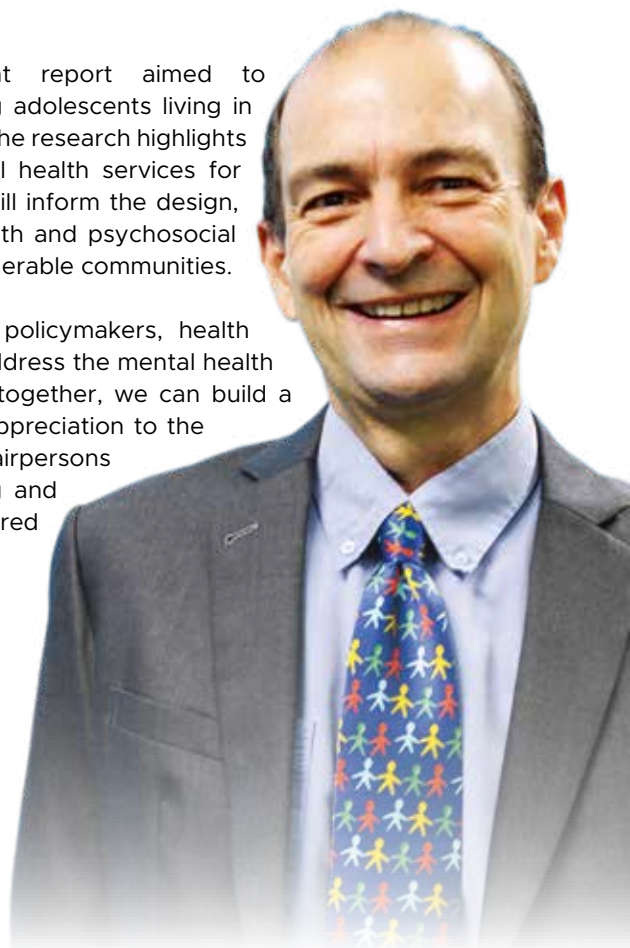
The COVID-19 pandemic has had far-reaching impacts on the mental health and well-being of people around the world, with young people being among the most affected. While Malaysia has transitioned from the pandemic to the endemic phase, the ongoing disruption of lives and communities continues, with many young people still struggling with the mental health fallout and implications of the pandemic. Addressing mental health issues among adolescents has become increasingly urgent.

Adolescents are susceptible to mental health issues due to the challenges and stressors of this critical period of development. However, adolescents living in low-cost housing are at even higher risk due to compounding factors such as poverty, limited education, inadequate healthcare access, social exclusion, and exposure to environmental hazards. These factors increase their vulnerability to shocks like pandemics, natural disasters, and economic downturns. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated their situation, as identified by UNICEF's 2021 Families on the Edge report.

Building on this influential piece of research, the current report aimed to determine the contributing factors for psychological distress among adolescents living in low-cost flat communities during the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia. The research highlights the urgent need to strengthen the delivery and support of mental health services for adolescents living in these communities. The findings of this study will inform the design, delivery, and evaluation of a targeted community-based mental health and psychosocial support intervention, which will contribute to supporting the most vulnerable communities.

We hope that this report will serve as a valuable resource for policymakers, health professionals, and relevant authorities and stakeholders working to address the mental health needs of adolescents living in low-cost housing areas. By working together, we can build a brighter future for all children and families. We extend our sincere appreciation to the researchers from Institute for Health Behavioural Research, the chairpersons of the low-cost flats, Kuala Lumpur City Hall, the Selangor Housing and Property Board and particularly the adolescents and families who shared their experiences and insights.

I hope that you will find this report useful.



Robert Gass
Representative,
UNICEF Malaysia

FOREWORDS

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a huge toll on mental health. It has affected not only adults, but also adolescents, who have to adapt new ways of living, such as online learning, financial difficulties and social issues. WHO estimates that depression and anxiety have increased by more than 25% since the pandemic began.

The MOH views this matter seriously and has provided various mental health intervention services and initiatives to assist those who are affected. In addition, MOH via the National Institutes of Health, has carried out several studies to better understand mental health conditions of the population. This is one such study, focused on adolescents, completed with the support of UNICEF. The findings of this study have enabled MOH to cooperate with other agencies to understand and manage the mental health problems among adolescents better, and provide solutions for them to cope with their existing mental health problems.

Notwithstanding the efforts and initiatives taken by MOH and related NGOs and agencies, it is important for the individuals, and the public themselves, to have awareness on how to manage and cope with stress in these trying times, to maintain healthy lifestyles, to support each other and to seek the necessary professional help if required.

“Kita Jaga Kita”.



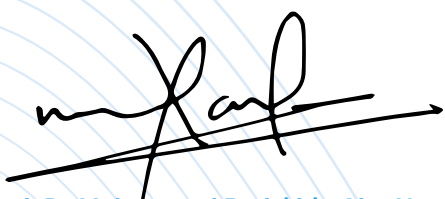
Tan Sri Dato' Seri Dr Noor Hisham bin Abdullah
Director General of Health
Ministry of Health Malaysia

FOREWORDS

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about unprecedented challenges and changes to our daily lives, and its effects have been felt all over the world. The pandemic has not only affected physical health but also the mental health of people, especially the most vulnerable in society. Adolescents living in low-cost housing in Malaysia are no exception, and the impact of the pandemic on their mental health needs to be studied and addressed.

This report highlights the importance of addressing the mental health needs of adolescents, who are the future of our society, and the need for increased support from the government and relevant organizations to ensure their wellbeing. The findings of this research will provide valuable insights into the mental health needs of these adolescents and inform the development of effective interventions to support them during this challenging time. By providing a comprehensive examination of the factors contributing to the mental health of this population, this report will contribute to the development of policies and interventions that can effectively support their needs. The findings of this research will serve as important evidence for policymakers and stakeholders, as they work to create a more supportive and inclusive environment for adolescents living in low-cost housing in Malaysia during these challenging times.

It is my hope that this report will raise awareness of the mental health status of adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic and encourage actions to improve their situation.



Datuk Dr Muhammad Radzi bin Abu Hassan

Deputy Director General of Health (Research and Technical Support)
Ministry of Health Malaysia



FOREWORDS

The emergence of the COVID-19 virus has transformed the Malaysian landscape and had a substantial impact on Malaysians, particularly on mental and physical health. The MOH has mobilized all of its resources to protect the health of Malaysians throughout the pandemic, including for research institutes responsible for conducting COVID-19 research, notably on the pandemic's impacts on mental health.

Significantly, the Institute for Health Behavioural Research (IHBR) is a research facility that primarily performs behavioural sciences research to promote population health through policy and intervention actions. IHBR contributed to research on vaccination acceptability, lifestyle behaviour, the new norm, and the impacts on mental health during the pandemic. This study of which involved 32 Kuala Lumpur PPRs and five Selangor PPRs, is particularly relevant. Based on the findings, we believed that behavioural insight strategies must be included in interventions to address the issue of mental health.

Ultimately, our heartfelt appreciation and gratitude go to UNICEF for supporting this study, as well as to everyone involved, notably the chairpersons of the PPRs, Kuala Lumpur City Hall, and the Selangor Housing and Property Board, and we look forward to sharing more journeys together.



Dr Manimaran a/l Krishnan

Director, Institute for Health Behavioural Research
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We would also like to thank all officers from the Ministry of Local Government Development (KPKT), Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL) and Selangor Housing and Property Board (LPHS) for the approval to conduct this study and facilitate access to all of the PPRs. In addition, our thank you to all of the Heads of Residents' Association of each PPR for their approval and assistance in enabling efficient data collection. We are grateful for their valuable contributions toward our national efforts in improving mental health among our adolescents.

We gratefully acknowledge the invaluable contributions by colleagues at the National Centre of Excellence for Mental Health, MOH and the Non-Communicable Diseases Section, Disease Control Division, MOH, the State Health Department of WP Kuala Lumpur & Putrajaya and State Health Department of Selangor. Additionally, we also thank our Family Medicine Specialists colleagues who provided counselling and follow-ups for the adolescents who were referred for further management.

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Lastly, we thank the Director General of Health Malaysia for his permission to publish this technical report.

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ABBREVIATIONS

BSSK	Health Status Screening Form (<i>Borang Saringan Status Kesihatan</i>)
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
DASS	Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale
DBKL	Kuala Lumpur City Hall (<i>Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur</i>)
GAD-7	Generalised Anxiety Disorder scale
IDI	In-depth Interview
IHBR	Institute for Health Behavioural Research, MOH
JKM	Department of Social Welfare (<i>Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat</i>)
KK	Health Clinic (<i>Klinik Kesihatan</i>)
KPKT	Ministry of Local Government Development (<i>Kementerian Pembangunan Kerajaan Tempatan</i>)
LINUS	Literacy and Numeracy Screening Program (<i>Program Saringan Literasi dan Numerasi</i>)
LPHS	Selangor Housing and Property Board (<i>Lembaga Perumahan dan Hartanah Selangor</i>)
LPPKN	National Population and Family Development Board (<i>Lembaga Penduduk dan Pembangunan Keluarga Negara</i>)
MCO	Movement Control Order
MOE	Ministry of Education
MOH	Ministry of Health, Malaysia
MREC	Malaysian Medical Research and Ethics Committee, MOH
NCEMH	National Centre of Excellence for Mental Health, MOH
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NHMS	National Health and Morbidity Survey
NIH	National Institutes of Health
NMRR	National Medical Research Register, MOH
PdPR	Home-based teaching and learning (<i>Pelaksanaan pengajaran dan pembelajaran di rumah</i>)
PHQ-9	Patient Health Questionnaire
PPR	People's Housing Project (<i>Projek Perumahan Rakyat</i>)
PT3	Form 3 Assessment (<i>Pentaksiran Tingkatan 3</i>)
PTSD	Post-traumatic Stress Disorder
RT	Research Team
SPM	Malaysian Certificate of Education (<i>Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia</i>)
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UKM	National University of Malaysia (<i>Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia</i>)
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WHO	World Health Organization

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The impact of COVID-19 on the population is widespread and the low socio-economic group had the worse impact. In Malaysia, this group includes those living in the People's Housing Project (PPR). Adolescents living in PPR communities are some of the most vulnerable populations of adolescents in the urban setting, as they were already experiencing pre-existing conditions of vulnerability. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis further aggravated these deprivations and low-income families in PPR communities are disproportionately affected. Understanding the adolescents' mental health status and coping strategies in dealing with the pandemic are crucial to comprehend the impacts of the pandemic on the mental health and wellbeing of adolescents and how the challenges in the context of families, psychosocial and housing conditions can influence their mental health and wellbeing.

The main objective of this study is to determine the mental health status of adolescents living in Klang Valley PPRs during the COVID-19 pandemic; with two specific objectives:

1. To determine the prevalence of psychological distress among adolescents living in the PPRs during the COVID-19 pandemic; and
2. To explore the source of psychological distress, coping strategies and their help-seeking behaviour in dealing with psychological distress among adolescents living in the PPRs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This was a mixed-methods study funded by UNICEF. The participants were adolescents aged 10 to 17 years living in selected PPRs in the Klang Valley. From the 37 PPRs, a total of 1,578 adolescents completed the questionnaire and 47 participated in the in-depth interviews (IDIs). Data collection commenced on 1 April 2022 and ended on 30 September 2022.

Overall, our study found that 12.3% of adolescents aged 10 to 17 years old living in PPRs have psychological distress. Of these, 10.7% have depression symptoms, and 7.2% with anxiety symptoms. In addition, 212 participants (13.4%) reported suicidal and self-harm thoughts.

Depression symptoms were found to be significantly higher among females, older age group (16-17 years old), owning electronic device, risky behaviour, living with single parent/guardian and with working



mothers. Anxiety symptoms were found to be significantly higher among females, older age group (16-17 years old), risky behaviour and longer duration living in PPRs.

Six main themes for factors of psychological distress were identified: (i) Challenges of online learning; (ii) Financial difficulties; (iii) Relationship issues; (iv) Impact of social isolation; (v) Pandemic-related stressors; and (vi) Living environment.

While we identified several adaptive coping strategies i.e., social support, spiritual support and tension reduction, we also found several maladaptive coping strategies i.e., avoidance, self-harm, vaping and smoking. Lastly, with regards to help-seeking behaviour, the respondents sought help from formal sources and informal sources. Several hindrances for help-seeking were identified, including lack of trust, perceived ineffectiveness of support and personality of the individual.

Based on the findings of the study, we would like to make the following recommendations to reduce the level of psychological distress, improve help-seeking behaviour and encourage more adaptive coping strategies:



Strengthen and expand mental health services for adolescents

- i. Expand the current scope of the PeKa B40 program to cater for adolescents for early screening for mental health.
- ii. Leverage on the existing MySejahtera application for the self-screening platform, and link with the Mental Health Services for further intervention.
- iii. Enhance and increase accessibility of community-based mental health services.
- iv. Promote safe and inclusive helpline services for every adolescent in Malaysia by emphasizing confidentiality of the callers and ability to choose the gender of their counsellor to ensure comfort and trust.



Create a community resilient in mental health and ensuring a focus on adolescents in low-income communities

- i. Improve mental health literacy among adolescents and their carers (parents, family members, guardians, and peers).
- ii. Use related health promotion models and nudges strategies to direct the development of future interventions.
- iii. Strengthen strategic collaboration between MOH, other government agencies such as MOE, academia and civil society, in regularly monitoring the communities' mental health condition, and developing suitable interventions based on the findings.
- iv. Expand positive support groups among adolescents in tackling social issues, especially on mental health through physical and virtual (online) platforms
- v. Identify barriers, attitudes of low trust, and seek solutions to improve help-seeking behaviour practice.



Create a comfortable and supportive living condition for PPR residents

- i. Strengthen social entrepreneurship programs in communities to raise income and enhance the financial well-being of the PPR community.

- ii. Provide family and individual counselling to the PPR community as needed. This counselling service can be a strategic partnership between the LPPKN, the Social Welfare Department (JKM), health care providers, and universities.
- iii. Encourage and provide platforms to PPR communities to increase mental health awareness and to remove mental health stigma through community programs such as leisure and recreational community services and social events.
- iv. Create safe, accessible and free spaces to be used by the adolescents living in the PPRs, focusing on the needs of the female adolescents.



Ensure online learning can be conducted effectively for all adolescents in preparation for possible future pandemics, when lockdowns may again be enforced

- i. Ministry of Education (MOE) to fully evaluate of the challenges faced by teachers, adolescents, and parents/guardians in the implementation of PdPR, and develop strategies to address all of the challenges identified.
- ii. Create, maintain and strengthen supportive infrastructure for conducive online learning.
- iii. Prepare teachers by providing training on how to manage online classes and utilizing technology.
- iv. Prepare students for a possible return to online learning by fostering a positive attitude towards learning.
- v. Establish a monitoring system during online classes to ensure that students are learning effectively and minimize absenteeism.



Invest in the young population by creating an opportunity for learning in vocational areas, and ensuring adolescents in PPR have opportunities to make better choices in education pathways

- i. Raise awareness among adolescents and parents/guardians on Technical and Vocational Education and Training. These programs may overcome issues among the PPR adolescents who are less interested to continue schooling or have dropped from schools.
- ii. Provide and strengthen career counselling starting in primary and secondary schools to help adolescents make early career plans for themselves and nudge them to make a better career choice.



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