

The silent struggle: The Psychosocial Impact of Unemployment on Youth

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Artikel submit	060925
Artikel review	MMDDYY
Artikel accepted	073025

Abstract

Youth unemployment represents a significant global challenge, manifesting in profound psychological and social consequences such as diminished mental well-being, reduced self-esteem, and social marginalization. This study, grounded in theoretical constructs including Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory and Jahoda's Latent Deprivation Model, investigates the effects of unemployment on individuals' emotional states and their integration into society. Furthermore, the research examines the enduring repercussions of youth unemployment on future job prospects and economic prosperity, while also considering adaptive mechanisms, policy responses, and networks of social support. Mitigating youth unemployment is imperative for fostering economic vitality and cultivating a generation characterized by psychological resilience and active social engagement. The findings are derived from a comprehensive review and analysis of existing scholarly literature

Keywords: Youth; Unemployment; Psychosocial; Mental Health; Impact

INTRODUCTION

Youth unemployment has serious consequences not only for the economy but also for young people's mental and social well-being. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2023), young people continue to face higher unemployment rates compared to adults and experience major difficulties in finding stable jobs. While economic impacts—such as reduced national productivity and increased reliance on welfare—have been widely studied, the psychosocial effects have received less attention. This paper aims to fill that gap by discussing the emotional distress, social isolation, and identity issues experienced by unemployed youth. The negative impacts of youth unemployment are not limited to individuals but also affect families, communities, and society as a whole (ILO, 2021; Onyemaechi, Okere, Chukwuemeka, & Ifeoma, 2017). Unemployed youth are more likely to suffer from mental health problems such as depression and anxiety, due to financial insecurity and social stigma (Blustein, Kenny, Di Fabio, & Guichard, 2019). Unemployment can also disrupt identity formation, leaving many young people feeling hopeless and disconnected from their social environment. This study highlights these issues and suggests potential solutions to reduce the harm caused by youth unemployment.

Youth unemployment refers to the condition when individuals aged 15 to 35 are actively seeking but unable to find work (ILO, 2023). It can take several forms, including frictional unemployment (short-term transitions between jobs), structural unemployment (a mismatch between skills and job requirements), and cyclical unemployment (caused by economic downturns). In developing countries, youth unemployment is worsened by a shortage of job opportunities, economic instability, and limited access to quality vocational training (Bell & Blanchflower, 2019; Abayasekara & Gunasekara, 2019; Ali, Ahmad, & Hussain, 2022).

Globally, youth unemployment rates are consistently higher than those of older age groups. For example, in sub-Saharan Africa, the rate stood at 8.9% in 2023, only slightly better than the 9.5% rate recorded before the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019 (ILO, 2024). Meanwhile, in parts of Europe, youth unemployment rates have exceeded 20% (World Bank, 2022). The pandemic worsened this situation, as many businesses stopped hiring, which particularly affected young job seekers (OECD, 2021). Prolonged unemployment among youth can lead to long-term consequences, often referred to as "scarring effects," such as reduced chances of future employment, lower lifetime earnings, and continued financial insecurity—even after they find work. (Kahn, 2010; Dlamini, Hlope, & Mohammed, 2019).

GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF THE COMMUNITY, PROBLEMS AND TARGET SOLUTIONS

General description

Youth unemployment is a big issue in many parts of the world. It is often much higher than unemployment rates for older people. For example, in sub-Saharan Africa, youth unemployment is around 14%, while in some European countries, it's over 20% (World Bank, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic made things worse, causing many job losses and fewer hiring opportunities, especially for young workers (OECD, 2021). Being unemployed for a long time also causes what experts call "scarring effects," meaning young people end up with fewer job chances, lower earnings, and more financial problems even after they find work (Kahn, 2010; Ali et al., 2019). Globally, youth unemployment (ages 15–35) was about 13.5% in 2023. While this is better than during the pandemic, it's still worse than before COVID-19 (ILO, 2023; Dlamini, Hlope, & Mohammed, 2019). Young people today also face issues like rising prices, automation, and slow job growth. Around 21.7% of youth fall under the NEET group—Not in Education, Employment, or Training—with young women most affected (ILO, 2023).

In Sub-Saharan Africa, youth unemployment is over 20%, the highest in the world (World Bank, 2023; Islam & Amanullah, 2024). Job growth can't keep up with the fast-growing youth population, forcing many into low-paying, informal jobs. There is hope through investment in new industries like digital work and agriculture. The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) also face a serious youth job crisis, with average unemployment at 25% (ILO, 2023). Girls are especially affected due to gender barriers, with youth unemployment for women over 40% in places like Tunisia and Jordan. Latin America and the Caribbean are seeing small improvements, but many youth still

work in informal or unstable jobs, especially in struggling economies like Argentina and Venezuela (ILO, 2023). South Asia has about 12% youth unemployment, but underemployment is common in places like India and Bangladesh. East Asia does better due to more factories and industries (Taylor & Evans, 2009). However, even in China, youth unemployment hit a record 21.3% in mid-2023, which caused the government to stop releasing the data (Reuters, 2023; Ali et al., 2019). Europe has reduced youth unemployment to around 14% with programs like the Youth Guarantee, which helps young people get training or a job quickly (European Commission, 2023). But Southern Europe still struggles, with youth unemployment around 25–30% in Spain and Greece. Green and tech jobs offer some hope, but many young people don't have the skills needed. In North America, youth unemployment is lower—8% in the US and 10% in Canada—thanks to stronger economies and more flexible job markets (ILO, 2023). Still, there are risks from student debt, insecure work, and the impact of automation. Africa's fast-growing youth population contrasts with aging populations in Europe and East Asia, creating different job pressures. Programs like the African Union's 1 Million Jobs Initiative and UN SDG 8.6 aim to boost youth employment through skills training and entrepreneurship. But experts say real change will need deep reforms, especially in developing countries (Abayasekara & Gunasekara, 2019). South Africa faces one of the world's toughest youth unemployment challenges. In 2023, 45.5% of youth aged 15–34 were unemployed (Statistics South Africa, 2023). More than 3.4 million young people were not working, studying, or in training. The root causes include a weak job market, poor education quality, and mismatches between school learning and job needs. Youth from rural and under-resourced areas are affected more due to limited access to quality education. Many industries in South Africa are capital-heavy, meaning machines do most of the work, leaving fewer jobs for people. Even sectors like retail and services are changing due to technology. Young people without higher education or job connections often find it hard to enter the workforce. Youth unemployment affects not just income, but mental and emotional well-being. Joblessness can lead to low self-worth, stress, depression, and anxiety. Long-term unemployment increases the chances of social withdrawal, crime, and drug use. It also puts pressure on families and mental health services. Aim of the Study To understand how unemployment affects young people's mental and social well-being, To explore how unemployment affects emotional health and social belonging in youth through theories and literature, To describe the long-term effects of youth unemployment on job chances and income, and to examine how support systems can help reduce these effects. Youth unemployment has been studied across many fields. It affects mental health, self-esteem, social relationships, and financial stability. Unemployed youth are more likely to suffer from depression, anxiety, and emotional stress (Paul & Moser, 2009; Blustein et al., 2019). Erikson's theory says work helps young adults build identity and confidence. Jahoda's theory adds that work provides not just income, but structure, meaning, and social interaction. Without work, young people often feel lost and alone. Some young people experience *learned helplessness*—they lose motivation after repeated job rejections (Brown, 2004; Sisk & Foster, 2004). They may also blame themselves for not finding work, which hurts their confidence (Squeglia & Gray, 2016; Gould, 2010). Studies in the UK found that long-term unemployment lowers self-belief and hope (Bäckman & Nilsson, 2016). Unemployment isolates young people from friends and communities (Sage, 2019). It also affects family life. Young people who rely on parents for money can create

tension and stress at home (Gore, 2022; Furlong, 2013; Buny & Philip, 2023). Unemployment early in life can hurt future job prospects and lifetime earnings (Kahn, 2010). Employers may view work gaps as a red flag. This "scarring" effect can cause long-term harm. Some young people may even turn to crime or drugs due to frustration and lack of opportunities (Fergusson et al., 2015). This is explained by Merton's Strain Theory—if people can't achieve goals the normal way, they may turn to illegal paths. Unemployment can make young people feel hopeless, stressed, and isolated (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005; Wanberg, 2012; Abayasekara & Gunasekara, 2019). As unemployment lasts longer, distress increases. This can even lead to physical symptoms like insomnia and high blood pressure (Wani & Ahmed, 2024). Many also lose motivation for school or work, starting a cycle of poverty (Arulampalam et al., 2001; Bell & Blanchflower, 2011; Shah et al., 2020). Despite the problems, research shows that support from family, friends, and community groups can help reduce stress (Blustein et al., 2019). Government programs for job training, mental health, and youth employment are important (OECD, 2021). According to Self-Efficacy Theory, gaining new skills or starting a business can rebuild confidence and motivation.

METHOD

In carrying out this community service activity, a desk research approach was employed to explore the psychosocial impacts of youth unemployment. This method involved gathering and analyzing secondary data from a wide range of reputable sources, including academic literature, statistical reports, and global policy documents. Rather than conducting field-based data collection, the activity focused on synthesizing existing information to build a strong theoretical and empirical understanding that could inform community-level insights and advocacy. The use of qualitative content analysis allowed for an in-depth interpretation of selected literature, identifying key themes such as the effects of unemployment on mental health, self-esteem, social exclusion, and youth coping strategies. Relevant psychological and sociological theories—particularly Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory and Jahoda's Latent Deprivation Model—were applied to contextualize and interpret the findings in a way that resonates with both academic understanding and community relevance.

The literature selected for analysis came primarily from peer-reviewed journals and institutional publications accessed through academic databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, and ScienceDirect. In addition, statistical insights and labor trend data were sourced from trusted global organizations including the World Bank, the International Labour Organization (ILO), and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The review focused on literature published from 2008 to 2024 to ensure the information was recent and aligned with current global and regional challenges faced by youth. Keyword searches were strategically conducted using terms such as *"youth unemployment and mental health"*, *"social exclusion and unemployment"*, and *"employment status and self-esteem"*, which helped capture a broad yet targeted body of literature. Only studies with strong methodological foundations and empirical evidence were included. Opinion-based materials or sources lacking relevance to youth-specific issues were excluded to maintain the quality and focus of the analysis. This systematic and ethical approach not only ensured the validity, reliability, and objectivity of the findings but also provided a comprehensive view that integrates multiple perspectives—economic, psychological, and social.

To avoid bias and enhance depth, data comparisons were made across different socioeconomic settings, including between developed and developing countries. For instance, mental health trends found in Paul and Moser's (2009) meta-analysis were critically compared with labor statistics from the OECD (2021) to confirm consistency across contexts.

Ultimately, this desk-based method proved effective in consolidating diverse sources into a meaningful resource for community education. It provided accessible and evidence-based insights into the complex challenges of youth unemployment, offering a foundation for future interventions, discussions, and community empowerment initiatives.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This community service activity involved a literature review to understand the psychosocial impacts of youth unemployment. The findings revealed that unemployment affects not only the economic aspect of young people's lives but also has significant consequences on their mental health, identity, self-esteem, social relationships, and long-term economic prospects. Unemployed youth are more likely to experience depression, anxiety, helplessness, and social pressure due to uncertainty about the future and societal expectations. Based on Jahoda's Latent Deprivation Theory and Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory, employment is not just a source of income, but also provides time structure, purpose, identity, and social connection. Without work, many young people experience emotional emptiness and a decline in self-worth. International studies also show that long-term unemployment leads to social exclusion, dependency on family, and in some cases, involvement in risky behaviors such as substance abuse and crime. The so-called "scarring effect" explains how early unemployment can negatively affect lifetime job prospects and earnings. However, the literature also highlights several resilience strategies that help young people cope with these challenges. Emotional and social support from families, peer groups, and religious communities has been shown to reduce stress and promote mental well-being. In addition, skills training, entrepreneurship, and youth employment programs can help rebuild self-confidence and work readiness. A successful example is South Africa's Youth Employment Support (YES) program, which has helped thousands of young people gain work experience and restore their self-belief.

In conclusion, youth unemployment should be viewed as a multidimensional issue that requires cross-sectoral solutions. Comprehensive and context-specific approaches involving employment policy, mental health support, and community empowerment programs are essential to minimize negative impacts and help young people build a better future.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This activity has analyzed the psychosocial effects of unemployment among young people, resulting in important mental health effects, erosion of self-esteem, social exclusion, and long-term economic disadvantages. The studies, based on psychological and sociological accounts such as Jahoda's Latent Deprivation Theory, Erikson's Psychosocial Development Model, and Merton's Strain Theory, affirm that unemployment is not an economic problem but an individual, social, and complex problem that has implications for the self-concept, happiness, and future of

young people. One of the most significant findings is that the connection between unemployment and mental illness, including depression, anxiety, and chronic stress, is vastly high (Paul & Moser, 2009). Unemployment robs young people of the psychological gains associated with work, including purpose, structure, and a sense of belonging. Besides, the scarring impact (Kahn, 2010) indicates that early career unemployment results in long-term socioeconomic costs and decreased future employability and income levels. Social exclusion also widens the consequences of unemployment since young people with no experience of work are marred with stigma, social asset loss, and reliance on family or state welfare networks (Furlong, 2013; Putnam, 2000). Also, in most instances, prolonged unemployment raises the risk of risk-taking behavior like drug use and crime, as the Merton Strain Theory posits and empirical evidence (Fergusson et al., 2015) confirms. Nevertheless, while the psychosocial implications of unemployment are catastrophic, evidence also indicates that resilience measures in the form of social support networks, vocational skills training, and public policy can reverse such effects (Blustein et al., 2019; ILO, 2023). Such conclusions highlight the imperative of addressing youth unemployment using an integrated, multi-sectoral framework, encompassing the issue's economic and psychological aspects.

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