

Young Adults' Protest Participation and Mental Health



JUST SIX
QUESTIONS
RESEARCH
SUMMARY

“In order to break the vicious cycle of poor psychosocial status, appropriate support services should be available for young protesters... [to] help relieve the emotional and psychological pressures caused by political unrest. Given its sensitive nature, social workers of this kind of service should not only be experienced in dealing with emotional crises but also be politically sensitive... Besides short-term remedial measures, society at large should promote a healthy psychosocial environment for young adults” (p. 275).

1. WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

Emotional engagement is critical for social action, and the solidarity achieved through social movements can enable young people to facilitate connections and express views that they may not otherwise feel will be received by decision-makers. In this way, however, social movement work can also unite a group of people in their experience of difficult emotions, such as anger, frustration, and disappointment.

Although not all protest movements involve violence, and not all outcomes of collective actions are negative, the exposure to political unrest can result in negative psychological effects for young people engaged in protest. Research has explored the causes of social movements from a *psychosocial* (considering social, cultural, and environmental influences) perspective, but not necessarily the psychosocial consequences caused by social movements, or the role of social workers – and other frontline practitioners – in addressing these challenges.

This research explores the mental health issues facing young protestors, specifically the psychosocial consequences on young adults from participating in street protests, and what services and supports may be most impactful for these youth.

2. WHERE DID THE RESEARCH TAKE PLACE?

This research took place in Hong Kong. In 2019-2020, many young people were engaged in a movement against the Hong Kong government's introduction of a bill that would amend the city's extradition laws. Actions included peaceful protests and demonstrations that resulted in confrontations between protesters and police, particularly due to escalating police force. Among the 8,981 people arrested during demonstrations, 5,640 were between the ages of 18 and 30.

3. WHO IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research is about the experiences of 25 young adults, between the ages of 18 and 30, who reported that they had participated in the protests. Thirteen participants identified as female and 12 identified as male. Ten participants were working, five were recent university graduates, eight were post-secondary students, and two were secondary school students.

4. HOW WAS THE RESEARCH DONE?

The researcher recruited young protesters through *snowball sampling* (whereby research participants recruit other possible participants). To be included in the study, youth needed to perceive themselves as participants in the social movement and to have taken part in at least one protest in 2019. Each participant was engaged in a 60-minute, **individual, in-depth, semi-structured interview**; 19 of these interviews were conducted in-person, and six were conducted online due to the third wave of COVID-19 in Hong Kong.

Thirteen teachers and 12 social workers who served young adults in their work were also recruited through professional groups and the researcher's professional network to share their perspectives. Four 90-minute **focus groups** were facilitated with groups of six or seven participants. All the focus groups were conducted online due to COVID-19.

Transcripts of interviews and focus groups were **recorded** and **transcribed** (written out word-for-word), and an *inductive thematic analysis* (allowing themes to emerge from the data) was used to generate findings from the 25 interviews and four focus groups.

5. WHAT ARE THE KEY FINDINGS?

Four main themes emerged relating to the psychosocial challenges for young protestors:

i) Deterioration of mental health.

Youth shared a variety of symptoms, ranging from a fast heartbeat and insomnia to a compulsion to continually check protest-related news, resulting in upsetting emotions. Social workers saw young protestors presenting with symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and teachers noticed that experiences of emotional disturbance among students correlated with their level of involvement in the protests.

ii) Tension in family relations.

Relationship breakdowns could be triggered within families due to different political stances, especially when the young protestor had a police officer in the family. Youth distanced themselves from family members to avoid conflicts or reprimands, either shutting down communication or engaging in direct conflict when their differences seemed irreconcilable. Some youth who were driven away from home or family felt encouraged to continue their involvement in the movement to seek solidarity and support.

iii) Problems in peer relations.

A difference in political stance became a common reason for divisions within peer groups, and some youth chose to bond only with those who had a similar political stance. Teachers saw political arguments break out in classrooms and across grade levels. Youth with family members in the police force felt particularly conflicted between their family and their peers.

iv) Decreasing trust in teachers and social workers.

Due to perceived differences in political stance and the assumptions about the power held by teachers and social workers, young people worried about confidentiality, making the discussion of political issues, and their involvement in the movement, 'taboo'.

Due to the development of these hostile relationships, often the result of an entrenchment in opposing ideologies and perspectives, young protestors may have experienced deteriorating support networks, which are essential in navigating mental health challenges, and a strained psychosocial environment, which was exacerbated by ongoing political turbulence.

6. WHY DOES THIS RESEARCH MATTER FOR YOUTH WORK?

Youth who participate in social movements and in social actions, including demonstrations and protests, should be able to **access appropriate social support services**. Due to the social fragmentation and isolation that can be experienced by young protestors, practitioners should be able to assess mental health challenges and suicide risk.

The researcher suggests the development of specialized teams to “reach potential service users and help relieve the emotional and psychosocial pressures caused by political unrest” (p. 275). Team members would **need to be experienced in dealing with emotional crises and politically sensitive, aware of their dual responsibilities** to clients and to institutions, and **able to establish trust** without imposing their own political ideologies.

Youth workers who support young protestors and other youth activists should strive to support and promote a healthy psychosocial environment, facilitating social reconciliation in the community when possible; this could include *perspective-taking* (the ability to reason about ideological values, both of oneself and of others) through storytelling – the sharing of perspectives and experiences in a safe, respectful, and facilitated setting.

🔍 Kwan, C. K. (2023). Young adults' protest participation and mental health. *Journal of Social Work, 23*(2), 265-279.