

Youth and Covid-19 in Thailand: Socioeconomic impact of the crisis

Summary brief

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As the Covid-19 crisis unfolded, the United Nations sub-group on young people conducted a series of six online surveys to assess the impact of the crisis on young people in Thailand. The study generated convenience samples of 6771 general youth interviewed between 28 March and 10 April 2020, 818 general youth interviewed between 11 June and 12 July, 1005 ethnic minority or stateless youth interviewed between 4 May and 1 June, 90 teenage mothers interviewed between 11 June and 12 July, 215 youth from Thailand's three southernmost provinces interviewed between 11 June and 4 July and 186 youth with disabilities interviewed between 12 June and 24 July.

Young people had various concerns regarding the Covid-19 crisis. The risk of Covid-19 infection, access to health care, and the impact of the nationwide lockdown on their education and financial situation were among the top concerns of general youth interviewed between 28 March and 10 April, young people from Thailand's three southernmost provinces, teenage mothers and ethnic minority or stateless youth.

Despite the rise of online learning as a result of the temporary closure of educational institutions, young people spent relatively little time studying and not all students were prepared to engage in online learning. Among general youth interviewed between 28 March and 10 April, more than half reported that they had more than five hours of additional free time while staying at home during the pandemic, but only 19% stated that studying was the activity they spent most of their free time. Many young people in Thailand who belong to ethnic minorities or are stateless were limited in their ability to engage in online learning by slow internet connections (53%) and did not have a personal computer in their household (90%). A large number of young students with disabilities faced a lack of barrier-free online learning courses that are specially designed for their particular needs (41%).

Among working youth, many lost their employment during the nationwide lockdown. The general youth, youth with disabilities and youth from Thailand's three southernmost experienced a substantial increase in unemployment during the height of the Covid-19 crisis, with the strongest rise among daily wage workers, freelancers, one-person businesses and employees of private companies. Unemployment decreased close to pre-crisis levels among the general youth and youth with disabilities by the latter stages of the lockdown and post-lockdown period. However, it remained much higher than before the crisis among youth from Thailand's three southernmost provinces. Teenage mothers also reported substantially higher unemployment during the latter stages of the lockdown and post-lockdown period than before the crisis.

The Covid-19 pandemic affected young people's mental health. Feelings of nervousness and anxiety were the most common symptoms of mental distress experienced by youth. Among youth from Thailand's three southernmost provinces, 28% experienced these problems almost every day during the pandemic. Among teenage mothers (17%) and ethnic minority or stateless youth (16%), the prevalence was lower. Other symptoms, including depression, loneliness and physical reactions were less frequent. Mental health issues, such as stress, boredom, lack of motivation and frustration were also mentioned as an effect of the lockdown by 75% of general youth interviewed between 28 March and 10 April.

There were disparities in young people's access to regular social support and emergency support during the Covid-19 crisis. While most youth with disabilities, youth from Thailand's three southernmost provinces and teenage mothers receive regular social support, more than 80% of ethnic minority or stateless youth receive no regular social support. In terms of emergency measures during the crisis, a considerable share of youth or their families from all five groups benefitted from the 5,000 Baht-scheme or reduced fees for utilities. A large proportion of youth with disabilities also received additional support through a special 1,000 Baht-scheme. However, 36% of ethnic minority or stateless youth reported that they had not received any emergency support.

Access to general healthcare services was difficult for some young people. Among teenage mothers, a considerable percentage reported to have no health insurance coverage for themselves (30%) or their children (30%). Almost half of teenage mothers had frequent difficulties to access general healthcare services for themselves or their children. The share of respondents without health insurance was also relatively high among ethnic minority or stateless youth (34%) and young people from Thailand's three southernmost provinces (24%).

Young people struggled to access sexual and reproductive health services and practiced unprotected sex during the Covid-19 crisis. About half of general youth aged 18 years and older had sex during the pandemic. Among those who had sex during the Covid-19 pandemic, 52% of LGBT youth and 35% of heterosexual youth stated that accessing sexual and reproductive health services became more difficult during the pandemic. Regular condom use was reported by less than half of those who had sex during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Internet and social media were the main sources of information among youth, followed by news obtained through TV and radio programs or newspapers. However, government websites were accessed by many teenage mothers and other sources of information, which may include schools and caretakers, were popular among youth with disabilities, who also frequently relied on their parents and guardians as a direct source of information.

Young people in Thailand's three southernmost provinces adapted their religious practices during the pandemic and used it as a resource to cope with the situation. Among those who regularly participate in religious activities, more than half attended fewer religious events during the Covid-19 crisis and about 42% prayed alone instead of in groups. The way religious prayer

served as a mental coping strategy for some is illustrated by the fact that around 10% of respondents reported to having prayed for an end of the pandemic.

Youth with disabilities faced various difficulties during the nationwide lockdown. Difficulties in accessing physical stores and going out in general were particularly frequent among youth with visual impairments (52% and 43%) and other disabilities, which include intellectual impairments, autism, learning disabilities and mental or behavioral disabilities (39% and 52%). A high share of youth with visual impairments also reported that they experienced problems in accessing public services, which may include physical facilities as well as emergency-related websites and smartphone applications (43%).

Overall, the variety of problems faced by youth calls for a multidimensional response which spans public health as well as education and social protection. Going forward, we need to (i) ensure that all young people in the country are aware of and practically able to access the health care they need, (ii) provide full access to sexual and reproductive health services to young people even in a time when Covid-19 prevention is the top public health priority, (iii) enable all young people, including those who are disadvantaged for whatever reason, to participate in modern ways of learning, and (iv) give those young people who have not yet benefited from the starting recovery of the economy the support they need.

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