

Global Crises and Mental Health Inequality:
How Resources, Education, and
Social Support Shape Psychological Outcomes

Colin Ryu
The Lawrenceville School (NJ, USA)

Abstract

Global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, and economic crises do not affect mental health uniformly across populations. This paper examines how global events amplify existing social inequalities, transforming advantages into resilience while converting disadvantages into heightened anxiety and psychological distress. Psychological responses to global events are heavily dependent on three critical factors: resource availability, educational background, and social support systems.

Findings reveal that individuals with higher incomes, stable employment, and secure living conditions develop greater resilience during crises, while those with limited resources experience disproportionate increases in depression, anxiety, and long-term psychological disorders. Educational disparities, particularly in health and media literacy, further exacerbate these inequalities by affecting individuals' ability to process information, assess risks, and make informed decisions. Social support networks serve as crucial protective factors, with well-connected individuals maintaining better psychological well-being compared to those in marginalized communities.

These results highlight the inadequacy of traditional approaches that assume uniform psychological responses to global events. Instead of focusing solely on individual resilience, interventions must address the structural inequalities that determine vulnerability. Policy implications include strengthening social safety nets, improving access to mental healthcare, and developing targeted support for disadvantaged populations to break cycles of crisis-induced anxiety.

Studies about psychological impact of a global event reveal a troubling pattern between different social classes. When COVID-19 pandemic struck in 2020, while anxiety and depression rates skyrocketed globally by 25 (World Health Organization, 2022), the burden was not shared equally across society. Evidence from South Korea during the pandemic, illustrates this disparity more clearly: individuals earning less than 2,000 USD per month experienced sharp increases in depression, while individuals with high-income were shielded from the effects leading to a great reduction in depression levels (Jeong et al. 2020). Furthermore, individuals working from the comforts of their home experienced different psychological impacts than essential workers who risked their health in hospitals and family-run businesses serving local communities. The broader phenomenon of a global event having profound impact on mental health extends beyond pandemics to include climate change, and economic crises. Climate change, for one, creates a myriad of harmful impacts, such as direct experiences of extreme weathers and indirect distress caused by excessive worrying. Traditional approaches tend to assume uniform psychological responses to global events, which fails to recognize that existing inequalities in resources, education, and social capital all play into whether people develop anxiety or resilience during global events. Simply put, global events do not affect everyone's mental health equally. Instead, these crises amplify existing social inequalities, causing those with fewer resources, less education, and weaker social connections to experience heightened anxiety, while those with greater advantages are more likely to develop resilience.

Resource disparities play a central role in shaping mental health outcomes during global crises. For example, both employment security and income stability are protective factors that reduce the impact of stress. A study by Frاسquilho et al. (2016) suggests that unemployment strongly correlates with depression, substance use, and suicide rates. The crisis widened inequalities in working conditions because lower-income workers faced risks

of job loss, while higher-income individuals benefited from both financial stability and physical safety. During the COVID-19 pandemic, studies found that “lower income, female gender, and younger age have all been associated with worse psychopathology” (Wanberg et al., 2020). Beyond income, disparities in access to safe living environments further increased vulnerability. According to Cunsolo & Ellis, 2022, climate-related phenomena such as extreme weather, rising temperatures, and water insecurity worsened such stressors: “The disruptive influence of rising global temperatures and extreme weather events... compounds existing stressors experienced by individuals and communities.” These stressors were exacerbated by the unequal access to resources, with communities often experiencing flooding, heats, or unsafe water, having fewer options for relocation. While wealthier groups adapt to these impacts with the help of medical support and insurance, other groups are left with fewer opportunities, where anxiety often escalates into long-term psychological disorders.

Along with the resource disparities, education and information access also plays a crucial role in creating the unequal outcomes of global events. Health literacy has a direct impact on how individuals assess risks and adapt to uncertainty. During COVID-19, the system designed to protect people, mental health services, broke down under pressure. While a study by the World Health Organization showed great increases in anxiety and depression during the pandemic’s first year, these increases were not shown equally across educational levels. People with higher education had the ability to process health information, evaluate risks accurately, and make decisions about protective behaviors; however, those with a weaker education failed to do so, leading to a proliferation of stress. Furthermore, media literacy, the ability to access and evaluate media, further affects the health outcomes during the pandemic. According to Ferreira Caceres et al. (2022), the spread of misinformation in social media caused confusion and harmful health behaviors. The study found that

misinformation regarding the incidence rate, prevalence, and spread of the virus has contributed significantly towards the complacent attitude of people to this crisis. Additionally, the emergency use authorization of various COVID vaccines resurfaced the general public's mistrust in science, which, combined with the rampant spread of falsified information, made vaccine hesitancy a parallel pandemic. Those with a strong educational background were able to critically analyze conflicting information while those with a weaker background had difficulties. It is clear that misinformation disproportionately harms populations with lower media literacy. The analytical ability to distinguish between reliable information and sensationalized media reports not only provides psychological stability during uncertain times but also reduced unnecessary anxiety while promoting appropriate caution against false information. This illustrates how global events amplify social inequalities, as those with lower media literacy experienced greater anxiety and confusion, while others developed resilience and adaptability.

An important factor that determines one's ability to withstand a global crisis is the presence of support. Social support theory, a theory explaining how support from others helps individuals adapt with their current situation, exemplifies this phenomenon. Emotional support reduces feelings of isolation and anxiety. Informational support helps people make informed decisions in uncertain situations, while practical support provides tangible assistance. During global crises, social networks and community support systems play a strong role in shaping mental health outcomes. During the pandemic, well-connected professionals could find new employment opportunities when their industries struggled, while workers in marginalized communities faced prolonged unemployment with limited prospects. These network advantages reduced financial stress and maintained psychological well-being for some while leaving others vulnerable to mounting anxiety. During the 2008 financial crisis, communities with strong social institutions showed better collective

resilience. According to Lindström and Giordano (2016), “Despite its apparent volatility...those individuals who managed to retain trust during times of uncertainty were protected against worsening psychological wellbeing.” However, marginalized communities often lack strong networks and community resources, leading to people being impacted by stressors strongly. Lacking this strong sense of unity in communities, individuals experience higher levels of anxiety during crises. This absence of support ultimately leads to the exacerbation of existing inequalities, where advantageous communities are better able to cope and build resilience, while the disadvantaged face anxiety and vulnerability.

Imagine a single mother of color working multiple minimum wage jobs in a flood-prone area. When climate disasters strike, she faces multiple stressors, including potential job loss, housing instability, childcare disruption, and social isolation. Waking up every day with the chance of losing everything with one small mistake may clearly heighten anxiety. Meanwhile, a rich family facing the same natural disaster might view it as an opportunity to move houses, relocate, and see the sky cleared up. Although the impact of a crisis is subjective, a pattern emerges: the more severe the economic disadvantage, the greater the negative effect on mental health. According to White et al. (2023), “Those most vulnerable to climate change are most likely to experience climate change-related mental health distress,” illustrating that vulnerable groups are most affected by climate-change-related stress. This shows that the effects of global crises are varied among individuals considering their given situation. Despite this, however, global events continue to widen existing inequalities. These effects not only affect the current generation but also transmit across them. Families with limited resources pass vulnerabilities to their children. As discussed earlier, when individuals are limited from opportunities in a global crisis, they have fewer resources to cope with stress.

Ultimately, global events worsen existing inequality in society, changing advantages into resilience and disadvantages into anxiety. Evidence during COVID-19, climate change,

and financial crises all show that psychological responses to global events depend heavily on resources, education, and social support systems. These events do not create equal challenges that build resilience as a whole but rather worsen the structural inequalities among different populations. This understanding has important implications for both policy and practice. Focusing only on individual resilience fails to recognize the effect on inequalities, instead interventions should understand and address the inequalities that determine who or which group of people might develop anxiety instead of resilience in certain situations. Solutions may include increasing mental healthcare or strengthening social safety nets. Future research should continue to track how inequality affects individuals from different social classes and identify the most effective approaches for breaking this cycle that leaves vulnerable populations trapped in anxiety. Every individual should be provided with appropriate resources and support system to break free from the cycles of distress to emerge stronger and more resilient as a society.

References

- Caceres, M. M. F. (2022). The impact of misinformation on the COVID-19 pandemic. *AIMS Public Health*, 9(2), 262–277. <https://doi.org/10.3934/publichealth.2022018>
- Frasquilho, D., Matos, M. G., Salonna, F., Guerreiro, D., Storti, C. C., Gaspar, T., & Caldas-de-Almeida, J. M. (2016). Mental health outcomes in times of economic recession: a systematic literature review. *BMC Public Health*, 16(1).
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-016-2720-y>
- Jeong, H., Park, S., Kim, J., Oh, K., & Yim, H. W. (2022). Mental health of Korean adults before and during the COVID-19 pandemic: a special report of the 2020 Korea National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey. *Epidemiology and health*, 44, e2022042. <https://doi.org/10.4178/epih.e2022042>. (n.d.)
- Lawrance, E. L., Thompson, R., Newberry Le Vay, J., Page, L., & Jennings, N. (2022). The Impact of Climate Change on Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing: A Narrative Review of Current Evidence, and its Implications. *International Review of Psychiatry*, 34(5), 443–498. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540261.2022.2128725>
- Lindström, M., & Giordano, G. N. (2016). The 2008 financial crisis: Changes in social capital and its association with psychological wellbeing in the United Kingdom – A panel study. *Social Science & Medicine*, 153, 71–80.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2016.02.008>
- Thomeer, M. B., Moody, M. D., & Yahirun, J. (2022). Racial and ethnic disparities in mental health and mental health care during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities*, 10(2), 961–976. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40615-022-01284-9>
- Wanberg, C. R., Csillag, B., Douglass, R. P., Zhou, L., & Pollard, M. S. (2020). Socioeconomic status and well-being during COVID-19: A resource-based

examination. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 105(12), 1382–1396.

<https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000831>

World Health Organization. (2022, March 2). *COVID-19 pandemic triggers 25% increase in prevalence of anxiety and depression worldwide*. World Health Organization; World Health Organization. <https://www.who.int/news/item/02-03-2022-covid-19-pandemic-triggers-25-increase-in-prevalence-of-anxiety-and-depression-worldwide>