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► The effect of the COVID-19 crisis on the mental health of students in vocational schools

The past year has been overshadowed by the coronavirus pandemic. Alongside far-reaching health and economic consequences, the pandemic also has significant psychological consequences for young people, and it is important to investigate these. This study attempts to assess the scope of the changes that have taken place in the past year in regard to suicidal behaviour, mental distress, and risk behaviours in at-risk adolescents studying at schools under the auspices of the Vocational Training Department. A longitudinal study was carried out for this purpose. This entailed the use of self-reporting questionnaires to investigate the frequency of suicidal thoughts, suicide attempts, depression, anxiety, and alcohol use in 6,500 students during the COVID-19 crisis in addition to a comparison with the data gathered in the previous year. The data comparison indicates a significant increase in the frequency of mental distress indicators and risk behaviours and in particular a dramatic increase in suicidal behaviour and depression indicators. This article describes the key points of the immediate intervention programme set up by the Vocational Training Department/Youth Department in the current academic year in light of the present data.

Introduction

Vocational Schools

Managed by the Vocational Training Department, Vocational Training in Israel is a high school study programme which provides Vocational Training to students aged between 14 and 18. The system is based on the dual model which combines studies with practical paid work in the profession being studied.

The school programme lasts four years: 9th grade – general, 10th grade – specialised, and 11th and 12th grades – studies alongside paid practical work. Approximately 11,000 students study in 62 vocational schools.

The youth Vocational Education system is an excellent and thriving system which addresses the students' various needs while giving them space for expression, creation, and learning, thereby offering them an opportunity for personal development and self-fulfilment.

Graduates are awarded a professional certificate which is relevant to the changing world of work. The schools supervised by the Vocational Training Department are unique in that they provide practical training in the workplace as well as theoretical knowledge. The school is responsible for placing the student in a workplace and assisting them with the acclimatisation and integration process. The schools have students who wish to acquire vocational knowledge during their high school years as well as students who have problems in school and are at risk of dropping out of the normal study framework.

The treatment system in the Youth Department

Most young people at the vocational schools are defined as being at risk of suffering from significant emotional, social, and family distress. The treatment system is responsible for treating the students who are in distress, increasing their mental resilience, and improving the educational environment in order to help them succeed in their studies, acquire a profession, do their military service, and take their place in Israeli society.

The structure of the treatment system:

Approximately 110 counsellors are deployed nationwide, and they receive in-work training throughout the year.

Key services supplied by an external provider:

- A. Psychological intervention services in emergency student situations.
- B. Training services for the counsellors and educational team.

Moreover, every year there are additional projects such as drug and alcohol use prevention programmes; training gatekeepers in the prevention of suicidal behaviour; system work, etc.

The ultra-Orthodox boarding schools have teams of social workers to respond to specific student anxieties. In recent years, the Vocational Training Department's treatment system is considered Israel's leading vocational setup for dealing with the mental distress of young people, and it is a leader in the development of treatment and research solutions in this field. In this context, the treatment programme in Israel is spearheading the implementation of the recommendations of the EU's SEYLE programme which is designed to tackle and prevent anxiety in general and suicidal risk among young people in particular. The programme has been launched in 11 leading European countries and it comprises three key components: 1. Use of questionnaires to find at-risk students in general and suicidal behaviour and thoughts in particular. 2. Assimilation of the school psychotherapeutic model in which each school has a clinical or educational psychologist who treats students known to be at risk, gives guidance to parents, and assists the educational team; 3. Gatekeeper training.

Literature review: the effect of the COVID-19 crisis on the mental health of adolescents

Data collected by the Central Bureau of Statistics during the COVID-19 crisis reveal that approximately 25 percent of parents reported a deterioration in the emotional well-being of their children as well as a sharp rise in calls to mental health services (CBS 2020). Most of these calls had a background of sadness, isolation, and anxiety. A study of at-risk adolescents revealed a significant rise in mental distress experienced by adolescents expressed in percentages of anxiety and distress at least three times higher than in the previous year (ELEM ISRAEL 2021). In line with the increase in mental distress, there was also a rise in self-harm attempts (1.5 times higher than in 2019). A study carried out by the Ministry of Health of mental health clinics for children and adolescents revealed that there was a significant to extreme rise in new calls for help during the second wave of COVID-19 (BUDOVSKY/SASAR 2020). An especially significant rise was reported in calls with suicidal content. The clinic directors reported that long-term patients experienced a worsening of their anxiety, mood disorders, eating disorders, and behavioural disorders.

Global findings present data similar to the Israeli findings. In Australia, for example, adolescents experienced a significant rise in symptoms of depression and tension and a decline in general life satisfaction (MAGSON et al. 2021). In Sweden too, a study of adolescents found that during the COVID-19 crisis, there was a rise in suicidal behaviour, alcohol use, feelings of sadness, isolation, pressure, many conflicts with parents, and decline in social contact (KAPETANOVIC et al. 2020). An additional study of data from the United States and Europe found that the COVID-19 crisis resulted in a significant rise in reports of suicidal behaviour among adolescents (57 percent) (MANZAR et al. 2021).

This study

Participants

Approximately 6,500 students aged between 15 and 18 from schools throughout the country participated in the study of the Vocational Training Department. All the students filled in a set of questionnaires – generated for each student – regarding many mental distress factors, the main ones being suicidal behaviour, depression, and anxiety. Professional recommendations for continued treatment are attached to the diagnostic report. Seven days after the questionnaires are filled in, the full diagnostic report is sent to the school psychologist who acts in accordance with its recommendations and continues to build a treatment programme for the students.

The students filled in the questionnaires at two different times of year: September–December 2019 (before the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis) and September–December 2020 (at the height of the COVID-19 crisis). 78 percent of the participants were boys and 22 percent were girls. 42 percent of the students were from the Jewish sector, 53 percent from the Arab sector, and 5 percent from the ultra-Orthodox sector.

Key findings

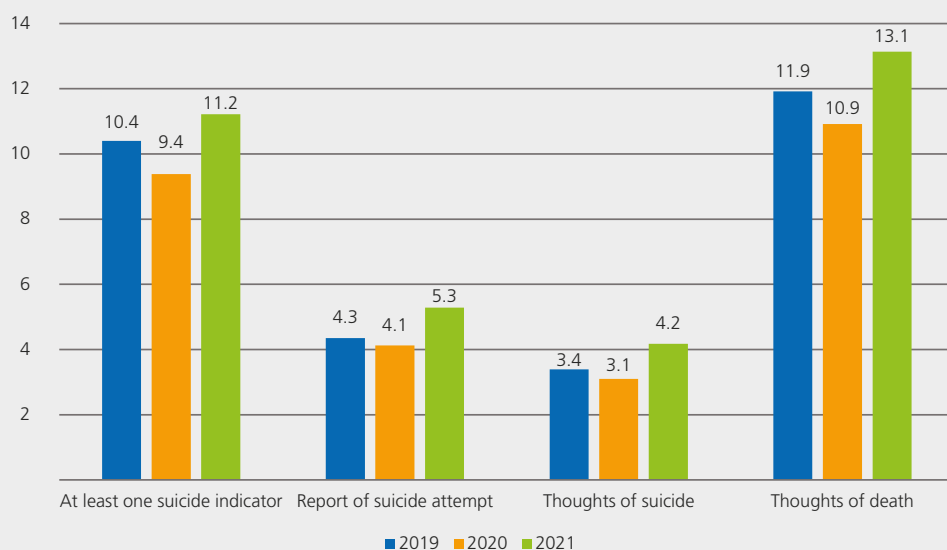
Suicidal behaviour

On a national level, it is clear that this year there has been a significant increase, averaging 25 percent, in all suicide indicators in comparison with previous years. Approximately 900 students reported suicidal distress. The most worrying finding is evident in a rise of more than 30 percent in the number of students who have reported suicide attempts in recent months.

Table 1: Suicidal behaviour data

	2020	2021	Change percentage	Test significance χ^2
Thoughts of death	9.4%	11.2%	20%	$p < .001$
Thoughts of suicide	4.1%	5.3%	29%	$p < .001$
Report of a suicide attempt	3.1%	4.2%	31%	$p < .05$
At least one suicide indicator	10.9%	13.1%	20%	$p < .001$

Figure 1: Suicidal behaviour data at the national level (in %)



Source: own representation

Severe psychological distress

Approximately 2,380 students reported severe psychological distress, approximately 38 percent of the total number of students. This is an increase of approximately 11 percent compared with the previous year in which 34 percent of students reported severe distress.

It is evident that the rise in severe distress at the national level stems primarily from a significant increase in reports of: depression (increase of 65 percent), somatisation (anxiety) (increase of 34 percent), and interpersonal difficulties (increase of 26 percent).

Table 2: Psychological distress data				
	2020	2021	Change percentage	Test significance X ²
Severe psychological distress	34%	37.7%	11%	p<.05
Depression	17.3%	28.2%	65%	p<.001
Somatisation (anxiety)	15.9%	21.1%	34%	p<.001
Interpersonal difficulties	21.7%	26.9%	26%	p<.01

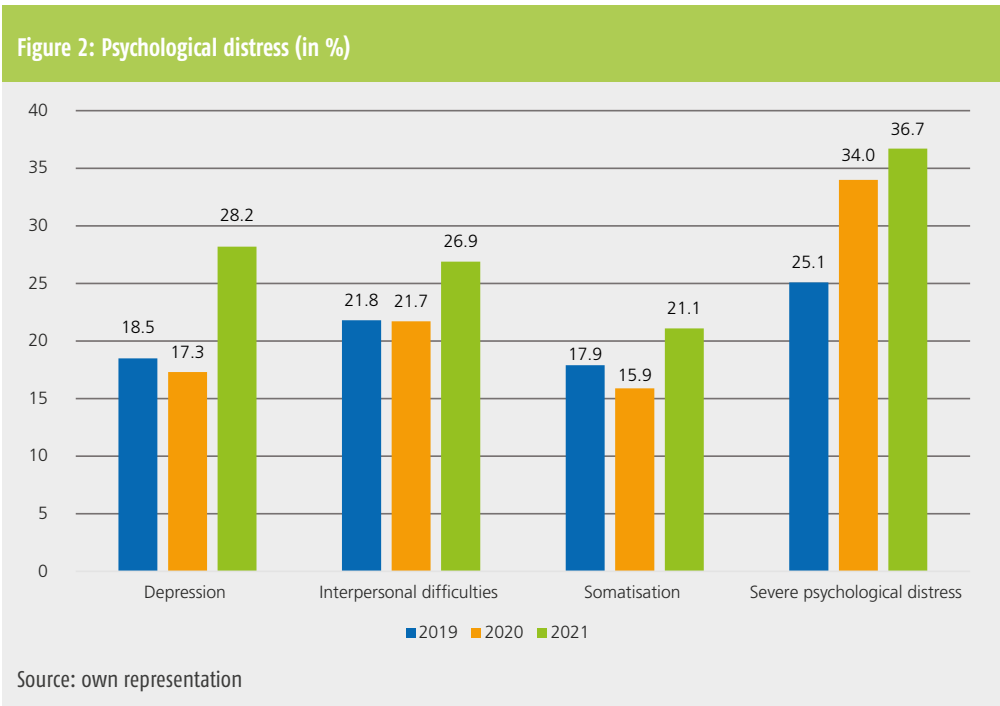
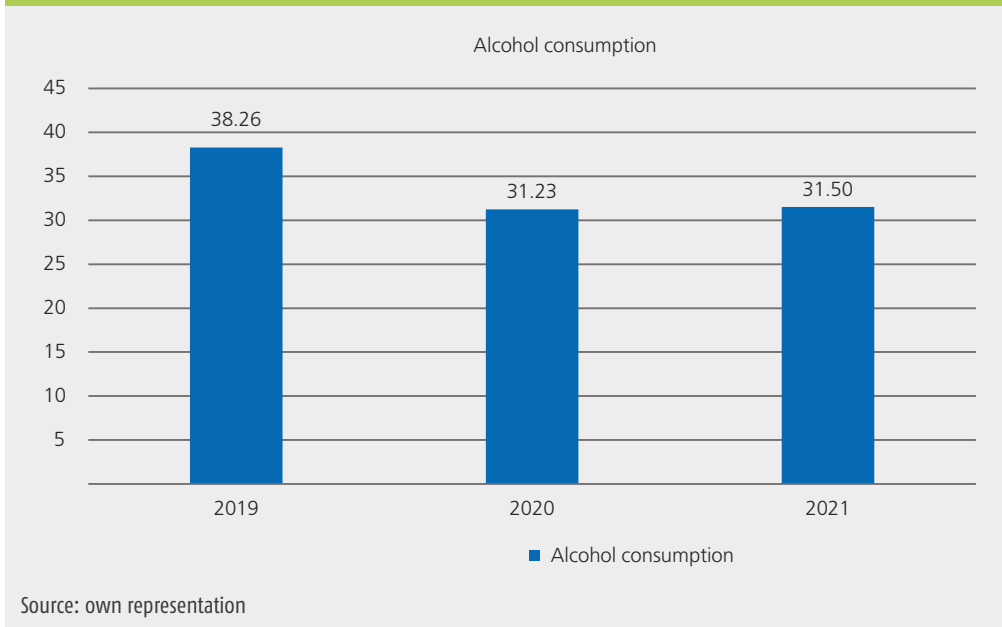


Figure 3: Alcohol consumption (in %)



Alcohol consumption

In 2021, there has been a significant increase in students' reports of alcohol consumption compared with 2020 ($p < .01$).

Description of the intervention programme

In light of the findings indicating a dramatic increase in mental distress in general, and suicidal behaviour and depression among young people during the COVID-19 crisis in particular, the Youth Department of the Vocational Training Department has initiated and led an urgent, immediate treatment intervention programme. Launched in January 2021, the programme includes the following components:

1. *Reinforcing the psychologist system in red schools with a high percentage of students in suicidal distress.* Considering the significant increase in the number of young people reporting suicidal distress, it was decided to reinforce the psychologist system in schools in which the number of students reporting suicidal behaviour has risen sharply to enable treatment for all students reporting suicidal distress.
2. *Gatekeeper training.* In all schools, gatekeepers have been trained to help educational treatment teams find students in distress and initiate primary intervention.

3. *System work*. Every school received a data report on the educational environment, and a team of instructors led an intervention programme with the school director and the educational teams in order to improve the educational environment.
4. *Strengthening links with the welfare teams* and treatment at the national level in order to create treatment sequences between the treatment setup in school and the treatment set-up in the community.
5. *Psychiatric centre*. The treatment teams have been instructed to consult with the special psychiatric centre set up by the Ministry of Health to assist the treatment teams in the schools as part of the national programme for prevention of suicidal behaviour. [sic]
6. *Parent resilience programme*. Many schools have put in place a parent resilience programme which is designed to strengthen cooperation and a feeling of empowerment in parents for the benefit of the students' mental well-being

This intervention programme has received much praise from the Ministry of Health and the National Council for the Prevention of Suicidal Behaviour in Israel, which emphasised the importance of the immediate, professional, and data-based action taken in light of the sharp rise in general mental distress indicators and suicidal behaviour in particular. The current situation shows that the programme has provided a treatment solution for approximately 2,400 students in distress and enabled them to successfully continue their studies, acquire professions, and increase their mental resilience.

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