

UK Muslims face persistent mental health decline post-pandemic, INSEAD study shows

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While most of the population recovered to pre-pandemic mental health levels, young, Muslim and lower-income groups in the UK continued to struggle years after, finds new research from INSEAD which highlights a continuing decline in their mental health following the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study, conducted by Professor Mark Stabile from INSEAD, along with Professor Miqdad Asaria from the London School of Economics and Henrique Neves from the Institute for Fiscal Studies, used data from approximately 40,000 households to track the mental health of different groups before and during the pandemic.

Findings show that Muslims in the UK experienced a much larger and more prolonged mental health decline compared to non-Muslims. Pre-pandemic, Muslims and non-Muslims in the UK had similar mental health levels, but from April 2020, a significant gap emerged and was sustained at least until late 2021.

UK Muslims saw a nearly 3-point decline on a 36-point mental health scale, nearly three times the drop observed in non-Muslims. While non-Muslims' mental health mostly recovered by September 2021, Muslims' scores remained almost 2 points lower than pre-pandemic levels.

The research team discovered that two-thirds of the disparity was attributable to the fact that Muslims in the UK are generally younger and more likely to live in low-income households compared to other groups, both of which are associated with a higher vulnerability to mental health decline.

However, when the researchers compared poor, young Muslims with poor, young non-Muslims, the difference in mental health decline remained significant, suggesting additional factors.

Further comparisons between older, wealthier Muslims with older, wealthier non-Muslims, as well as mental health among different South Asian groups, further confirmed that a Muslim-non-Muslim mental health gap was consistent across different contexts. This suggests that the experience of being Muslim in the UK, including the impact of discrimination, contributes to a disparity.

“Being young, poor, or Muslim in the UK each acted as an independent risk factor for experiencing a more severe mental health decline during the pandemic,” said INSEAD’s Professor Mark Stabile, one of the study’s authors. “The overlap of these identities means that Muslims in the UK were particularly vulnerable, suffering a triple mental health penalty. The question remains – why has being Muslim in the UK led to poorer mental health?”

The researchers analysed data from the UK Household Longitudinal Study. Mental health was measured with the General Health Questionnaire, where higher scores indicated better health. The study controlled for variables like age, income, household structure, and geography.

The study’s findings highlight the unequal mental health impacts of the pandemic, that still have an impact today. The research suggests that targeted mental health interventions are urgently needed for

these various groups.

This research was published in the peer-reviewed journal Social Science & Medicine, in the summer of 2024.

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