

Study: Those confined to dorms had greater symptoms of stress

Timothy Goh

A new study has found that migrant workers here displayed increased symptoms of depression and stress while they were placed under movement curbs last year.

This was especially the case with workers who were confined to only the dormitories or their rooms compared with those who were allowed to access their dormitories, work sites and designated recreation centres.

“This suggests that while isolation of whole facilities may be expedient for limiting Covid-19 transmission, this comes at the cost of increased mental health burden,” said the team of researchers led by Assistant Professor Jean Liu, who teaches psychology at Yale-NUS’ Social Sciences Division.

Their report was published in the *Journal Of Migration And Health* on Aug 19.

The Government had gazetted two dormitories here as isolation areas on April 5 last year, with about 20,000 migrant workers quarantined in their rooms to curb the spread of Covid-19.

On April 21 last year, all migrant workers in dormitories were put under lockdown and not allowed to leave. At the time, 7,266 had tested positive for the virus.

Workers are still largely confined to the areas where their dormitories or work sites are located, and can go only to designated recreation centres on rest days.

The study involved surveys of 1,011 migrant workers employed in manual labour positions in Singapore between June and October last year, which were administered by a multilingual and multicultural research team.

The workers were given either online or physical questionnaires and had their symptoms measured using the 21-item Depres-

sion, Anxiety and Stress Scale.

Workers who were completely confined to the dormitories or their rooms reported a median score of 8 for stress and 6 for symptoms of depression.

Those who were allowed to move within their dormitories, work sites and designated recreation centres reported a median score of 2 for stress and 2 for depression.

Workers who were fearful about their health during the pandemic had more than double the median scores for depression, anxiety and stress compared with those who were not fearful.

Those who were more exposed to rumours about Covid-19 also had higher levels of depression, anxiety and stress symptoms than those who had lower exposure.

Prof Liu said that similar findings have been reported in other studies around the world.

“On the one hand, this may be because people share more rumours when they’re anxious. Alternatively, rumours are often associated with uncertainties, which can in turn fuel more anxiety,” she explained.

The researchers did not find evidence that migrant workers had a higher rate of mental health symptoms than the general population. Prof Liu said: “As a group, migrant workers are incredibly resilient. At the same time, it’s important that we talk about those who were struggling – workers confined strictly to their dorms, afraid of losing their jobs, afraid about their health, or diagnosed with Covid-19.”

The researchers proposed that other containment strategies should be prioritised, such as frequent swab tests and contact tracing. “In the longer run, efforts can also be taken to reduce the density of migrant workers’ work and living environments,” they added.

timgoh@sph.com.sg