



# PIDE

## COVID-19 BLOG

No. 8

### Young- The Inadvertent Agents for Spreading COVID-19

So far, the health message has been clear - the older you are, the more at risk you are from coronavirus. But the World Health Organization (WHO) has warned young people not to view themselves as "invincible".

Special Advisor to the Prime Minister (SAPM), Dr. Zafar Mirza, said on Thursday March 26 that 24 percent of the confirmed corona patients in Pakistan are between the ages of 21-30 years. The statistics reveal that the pattern of COVID-19 is quite different in Pakistan from the other countries, including China and Italy where most of the infected cases are the elderly. Early reports that only the elderly, i.e. 65 and above, are vulnerable are also being controverted by new evidence coming from the United States and Europe. Recent figures show that young adults are catching the virus too. The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported that though fatality rate is the highest among older adults i.e. 85 and above, "COVID-19 can result in hospitalization and admission to an intensive care unit for a range of ages". According to CDC 20% of the people who are hospitalized are between the ages of 20-44 and another 18% are between 45-54 years. Of those admitted to intensive care, 12% were aged 20-44 years.

#### What does it mean for Pakistan?

Pakistan is a young country with around 65% of our population below the age of 30 and 29% between the ages of 15-29. With the current rate of COVID-19 spread, the number of cases are likely to go up. Number of infections can possibly go much higher in Pakistan than many other countries. However, looking at the fatality statistics (see the table below), death rate would probably be lower in Pakistan because of the young population base.

Pakistan is the 5<sup>th</sup> most populated country in the world. Most of the major cities of Pakistan have high population density. Housing conditions too are highly crowded. The average number of persons per room is much higher than recommended by UN habitable index. According to Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey 2017-18 the average household size is 6.8 in rural areas and 6.3 in urban centers. The habitation density level is around three persons per room in Pakistan which is significantly higher than the crowding level recommended by the United Nation (1.4 to 2.0 persons per habitable room). The high population density in major cities of Pakistan along with crowded housing conditions and higher average social circle can trigger the spread of virus.

### COVID-19 Fatality Rate by Age

AGE	DEATH RATE all cases
80+ years old	14.8%
70-79 years old	8.0%
60-69 years old	3.6%
50-59 years old	1.3%
40-49 years old	0.4%
30-39 years old	0.2%
20-29 years old	0.2%
10-19 years old	0.2%
0-9 years old	No fatality

Source: [www.worldometer.info](http://www.worldometer.info).

Population density seems to have a connection with COVID-19. Ali Raza<sup>1</sup> in his article looked at how the rise of coronavirus cases in Germany and Italy looks as if it occurred because their population densities are similar to that of Wuhan's with similar circumstances. He concluded that after the cases of COVID-19 reaches a certain threshold than it was evident that the higher the population density, faster the spread of virus. Crowding appears to be responsible for the spread in most places. A very high population density in Karachi and Lahore can set in motion the spread of virus in a very short span of time<sup>1</sup>.

What do all these statistics imply for the current pandemic and Pakistan's age structure? We have seen, a lot of people are out on the streets despite the government-imposed restrictions, many among them are young people. Taken in by the initial reports that the COVID-19 mainly affects the elderly, young adults feel they will not contract any serious Coronavirus illness. However, what we like to stress here is that while the younger people might be less likely to develop serious illness, as compared to the elderly, **they could easily become the potential carriers of the virus**, even when they have no, or very mild, symptoms. Experts estimate that each coronavirus infected person can pass it on to between two to three other people, on average. Those two or three people can then infect another two or three more, and so on. This is how a small number of infected people turns into hundreds and thousands of infected people so quickly. Therefore, **young people may be inadvertent agents of the spread of COVID-19**.

With 24% of the COVID-19 cases reported in the young people in Pakistan, I am afraid our health infrastructure might collapse as the number of infections goes up. With one of the lowest public health expenditure as % of GDP in the world, Pakistan has only 0.6 beds per 1000 people (China and South Korea have between 4 to 5 beds per 1000).

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<sup>1</sup> Coronavirus: What's at stake for developing countries? Preliminary data analysis for the estimation of risks to Pakistan in the wake of rising number of infections.

As the required numbers of testing kits are in short supply, there is a possibility of underreported number of cases. In addition, the lack of health facilities as well as of doctors indicates that the reality might already be worse than being reported. Only social distancing breaks the chain of transmission which is hard to implement under our social system. While it is true that younger people are less likely to die from the illness, they could still require the ventilators and ICU beds that are again in short supply. ***There is a need to emphasize in all public announcements that the young are part of the problem.***

It is never too late to do the right thing. It is time we start propagating in Pakistan that the young need to take equal precautions and restrict their movement, not just for their own good but also to stop the spread that they may cause. A massive awareness campaign is required to make the population realise what and who is causing the virus to spread, and what they should do to contain the outbreak. More importantly, people need to take their individual and social responsibilities seriously.

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