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## NAVIGATING CITY LIFE: URBAN CHALLENGES AND MENTAL WELL-BEING AMONG EMERGING ADULTS IN INDIA

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### Abstract

India's fast-growing urbanization has changed the way young people live, work, and experience life. Emerging adulthood, usually between the ages of 18 and 29 years, is an important stage when individuals explore their identity, become more independent, and prepare for adult responsibilities. Although cities provide opportunities for higher education, employment, and personal development, they also create various challenges. Young adults often face pressure from academic competition, job insecurity, financial difficulties, social isolation, traffic-related stress, and increasing social expectations. This paper examines how these urban pressures affect the psychological well-being of emerging adults in India using a qualitative approach. Based on findings from previous qualitative and mixed-method studies, it explores themes such as career stress, identity-related struggles, family expectations, feelings of loneliness, social comparison, and coping mechanisms. The findings indicate that urban pressures can negatively impact mental health; however, some young adults develop resilience and effective coping skills in response to these challenges. The paper emphasizes the importance of culturally



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appropriate mental health support and urban policies that help improve the psychological well-being of India's growing youth population.

**Keywords:** Emerging adulthood, urban pressure, psychological well-being, mental health, India, qualitative research, urbanization.

## Introduction

India is rapidly urbanizing, and cities offer many opportunities for education, jobs, technology, and personal growth. However, urban life also brings challenges such as academic pressure, job insecurity, crowded living conditions, social isolation, and stress. These difficulties are especially important for young people aged 18 to 29, a stage of life known as emerging adulthood.

Jeffrey Jensen Arnett conceptualized emerging adulthood as a unique phase of development marked by active identity exploration, frequent life changes, increased self-focus, a sense of being neither an adolescent nor a fully mature adult, and a hopeful outlook toward the future. Within the Indian context, this stage is influenced by collectivistic cultural values, strong family expectations, educational demands, economic changes, and evolving societal norms. Studies indicate that many emerging adults face challenges in balancing their individual goals and ambitions with their obligations toward family and societal expectations. (Arnett, J. J. (2000). Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American Psychologist*, 55(5), 469–480.)

The pressures of emerging adulthood are further intensified in urban contexts, where individuals face academic competition, job insecurity, escalating costs of living, and continuous social comparison through social media. Empirical studies have consistently shown that urban populations report higher rates of psychological distress compared to their rural counterparts. (. (Poddar, P., Banavaram, A.A., Ramanaiik, S. et al. *How city living affects mental health-a qualitative exploration of urban stressors among adults in a megacity in India. BMC Public Health* 25,1597 (2025). The present paper explores how urban pressures influence psychological well-being among emerging adults in India through a qualitative lens.

## Review of Literature



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## **Emerging Adulthood in India**

In the Indian context, emerging adulthood is increasingly acknowledged as a unique stage of development characterized by significant life transitions. According to Mitra and Arnett (2021), emerging adults in India often focus on balancing family responsibilities, educational attainment, career aspirations, financial security, and personal autonomy while adapting to prevailing societal and cultural norms. These challenges and responsibilities have a substantial impact on their overall well-being. (Mitra, D., & Arnett, J. J. (2021). *Life choices of emerging adults in India*. *Emerging Adulthood*, 9(3), 229–239.)

Research exploring the transitional experiences of Indian emerging adults highlighted key issues such as educational and career-related ambiguity, changing family dynamics, romantic involvement, the negotiation of autonomy within a collectivist cultural framework, and strategies for managing stress. Despite experiencing substantial psychological and emotional pressures, participants demonstrated notable resilience and reported positive personal growth throughout the transition process. (Shinde, F., & Marathe, A. (2026). *Emerging adulthood in India: A qualitative study on life transitions and identity formation*. In *Psychological Frontiers: Emerging Trends and Applications* (pp. 150–166). Wisdom Leaf Press.)

## **Urbanization and Mental Health**

Urbanization has increasingly been linked to heightened levels of psychological distress across the globe. A recent qualitative investigation carried out in a large Indian metropolitan city revealed five key urban factors that negatively influence mental well-being:

- Challenges related to housing,
- Difficulties in transportation and traffic congestion,
- Unfavourable neighbourhood conditions,
- Increasing living expenses, and
- Work-related pressures.

Participants reported that these ongoing urban challenges contributed to feelings of anxiety, frustration, stress, and emotional fatigue, significantly affecting their overall psychological health. (Poddar, P., Banavaram, A. A., Ramanaik, S., Jayabalan, M., & Vismaya, S. (2025). How city living affects mental health: A qualitative exploration of urban stressors among adults in a megacity in



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India. BMC Public Health, 25, Article 1597.) The study highlights how everyday urban experiences contribute to psychological strain and reduce overall well-being.

## **Psychological Distress among Urban Emerging Adults**

Research on urban Indian emerging adults indicates that problems with regulating emotions are closely linked to greater psychological distress and poorer well-being. The study highlighted that when individuals struggle to manage their emotional experiences effectively, they are more likely to experience anxiety, depression, and declines in psychological adjustment and overall mental health. (Kakollu, S., Haroon, A. P., & Joseph, S. D. (2026). Cross sectional analysis of emotion regulation, psychological distress and well-being of emerging adult students in Urban India post COVID 19. Scientific Reports, 16, Article 6017.)

Recent reports reveal that many urban college students suppress their emotions because of social expectations and stigma surrounding mental health. This pattern of emotional restraint is associated with higher levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms. (Jaiswal, A. (2026, March 17). *Urban youth battling hidden stress, 42% report emotional suppression*. The Times of India.)

## **Social Comparison and Digital Pressures**

Urban emerging adults devote a considerable amount of their time to social media use. While digital platforms provide avenues for communication and social interaction, they also contribute to increased social comparison, fear of missing out (FOMO), and heightened concerns about personal value and identity. Studies suggest that frequent exposure to carefully curated and idealized representations of others' lives can undermine self-esteem and adversely affect the mental health of young adults. (Itisha Nagar, I., & Rukhsana Virk, R. (2017). The struggle between the real and ideal: Impact of acute media exposure on body image of young Indian women. SAGE Open, 7(1).)

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Stress and Coping Theory**

The present study is grounded in the Stress and Coping Theory developed by Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman. According to this framework, stress occurs when environmental demands



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exceed an individual's perceived coping resources. (Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal, and coping*. Springer.

Urban pressures such as academic competition, financial instability, and social expectations are appraised as stressors. Emerging adults employ various coping mechanisms, including:

- Problem-focused coping
- Emotion-focused coping
- Seeking social support
- Avoidance coping

The effectiveness of these coping strategies significantly influences psychological well-being.

## **Psychological Well-being Framework**

The concept of psychological well-being proposed by Carol Ryff includes six dimensions:

1. Self-acceptance
2. Positive relations with others
3. Autonomy
4. Environmental mastery
5. Purpose in life
6. Personal growth

Urban pressures can challenge each of these dimensions while also creating opportunities for growth and resilience.( Ryff, C. D. (1989). Happiness is everything, or is it? Explorations on the meaning of psychological well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 57(6), 1069–1081.)

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

A qualitative research design is proposed to understand the lived experiences of emerging adults facing urban pressures.



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## Participants

- Age range: 18–29 years
- Residence: Metropolitan and urban cities in India
- Sample size: 15–20 participants
- Sampling method: Purposive sampling

## Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews may be conducted focusing on:

- Daily urban experiences
- Academic and career challenges
- Financial concerns
- Social relationships
- Mental health experiences
- Coping strategies

## Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis as proposed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke can be used to identify recurring themes. (Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. Sage.)

## Findings and Discussion

### Theme 1: Career and Academic Pressure

Participants commonly report intense competition for educational and employment opportunities. Many describe persistent anxiety regarding career uncertainty and financial independence.

#### Illustrative Experience

"I constantly feel that I am falling behind compared to my peers."



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Such concerns align with findings that career and educational decisions are central developmental challenges among Indian emerging adults. (Mitra, D., & Arnett, J. J. (2021). Life choices of emerging adults in India. *Emerging Adulthood*, 9(3), 229–239.)

## **Theme 2: Financial Strain and Cost of Living**

Rising urban living expenses create pressure to achieve financial stability quickly.

Participants frequently report:

- High rent costs
- Educational loans
- Limited savings
- Job insecurity

Research has identified cost of living as a major urban stressor influencing mental health. (Poddar, P., Banavaram, A.A., Ramanaik, S. et al. How city living affects mental health-a qualitative exploration of urban stressors among adults in a megacity in India. *BMC Public Health* 25,1597 (2025). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-025-22817>)

## **Theme 3: Family Expectations and Identity Conflict**

Indian emerging adults often experience conflict between individual aspirations and family expectations.

Common tensions include:

- Career choices
- Marriage expectations
- Living arrangements
- Family responsibilities

Such conflicts contribute to identity struggles and emotional stress. (Shinde, F., & Marathe, A. (2026). Emerging adulthood in India: A qualitative study on life transitions and identity formation. In *Psychological Frontiers: Emerging Trends and Applications* (pp. 150–166). Wisdom Leaf Press.)



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## **Theme 4: Loneliness Amidst Urban Crowds**

Despite living in densely populated environments, many participants report feelings of loneliness and social disconnection.

Factors include:

- Migration away from family
- Weak neighbourhood relationships
- Competitive social environments
- Digital rather than face-to-face interactions

Urban anonymity often reduces perceived social support.

## **Theme 5: Social Comparison and Digital Stress**

Participants describe comparing themselves with peers on social media regarding:

- Career achievements
- Relationships
- Lifestyle
- Physical appearance

These comparisons often generate feelings of inadequacy and reduced self-esteem. (Itisha Nagar, I., & Rukhsana Virk, R. (2017). The struggle between the real and ideal: Impact of acute media exposure on body image of young Indian women. *SAGE Open*, 7)

## **Theme 6: Coping and Resilience**

Despite substantial stress, many emerging adults demonstrate adaptive coping strategies, including:

- Mindfulness practices
- Physical exercise
- Social support networks
- Career planning



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- Counseling services

Participants frequently describe personal growth arising from urban challenges.

## **Implications**

### **Psychological Implications**

- A higher chance of depression and anxiety
- Confusion over identity
- Emotional tiredness and burnout
- A lower level of life satisfaction

### **Practical Implications**

Universities and workplaces should:

- Offer mental health counselling
- Implement stress reduction initiatives
- Encourage a healthy work-life balance
- Create programs for peer assistance

### **Policy Implications**

Urban planning should consider:

- Low-cost housing  
Spaces for public enjoyment
- Mental health therapies that are easily accessible
- Community programs aimed at young people

## **Conclusion**

For developing adults in India, urban living poses a dilemma. Cities provide chances for learning, work, and personal development, but they can cause significant psychological strain.



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According to the qualitative data, psychological well-being is strongly impacted by social comparison, loneliness, familial expectations, financial distress, and academic competitiveness. However, many developing individuals show resilience through personal development and adaptive coping. Strengthening mental health support networks and developing urban settings that promote psychological well-being should be the main goals of future efforts.

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