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Research Article

Challenges, Coping, and Personal Strengths during COVID-19: Lessons from the Experiences of at-Risk Young Adults in Israel

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The COVID-19 pandemic significantly endangers the development of at-risk young adults across various life domains, with potential enduring consequences. Despite prior reporting on the pandemic's adverse effects on these individuals, there is a lack of the empirical literature regarding their resilience. Building upon the stress process model (Pearlin, 1978), we explored the challenges of 20 at-risk young adults (aged 18–25 years) and the strategies and resources they employed to cope with these challenges during this period. Thematic analysis revealed that these young adults struggled with worsened family relationships, loneliness, mental health issues, and setbacks in their quest for independence and autonomy. However, resources and character strengths that facilitated coping strategies during this period also emerged, specifically the motivation to become a role model within their family, personal abilities, and the use of formal and informal support. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

1. Introduction

Emerging adulthood is considered to be a period during which individuals make choices for themselves and determine their life paths, as it offers the most opportunity for identity exploration in the areas of love, work, and worldviews [1]. During this time, individuals begin to develop the characteristic qualities necessary for becoming self-sufficient; engage in mature, committed relationships; assume more adult roles and responsibilities; and obtain a level of education and training that sets the foundation of work during the adult years [2]. At-risk young adults, however, generally face the challenges of emerging adulthood without family backing and with low personal and social resources. In many cases, they suffer from a history of abuse and neglect [3]. This reality places them under a myriad of stressors and risks during this critical period.

The global COVID-19 pandemic–which has generated multiple challenges for societies, increasing economic and psychosocial problems [4]—could have a particularly strong effect on the lives of at-risk young adults' vulnerability due to its short- and long-term implications. However, the consequences of COVID-19 for the life course of these vulnerable young adults as they navigate toward adult life are hardly documented. Most of the studies that explored the impact of COVID-19 on young adults focused on the general population rather than on at-risk young adults and showed that the pandemic had negative implications for their status in both instrumental and intangible life areas. For example, some studies reported implications of the pandemic on concrete life areas such as unemployment and higher financial strain, while others focused on emotional and social aspects, including higher anxiety and depression symptoms, and high levels of loneliness [5–7]. It was also found that, on average, participants showed increased levels of perceived stress and anger during the pandemic compared to before. Studies also pointed to the vulnerability of this specific age group of young adults. For example, Glowacz and Schmits [8], examining psychological distress during COVID-19 lockdown among different age groups, found that compared

with older participants, young adults reported higher anxiety, depression, and uncertainty; and lower levels of living space, occupational activity, and social contact.

Against this background, researchers in this field concluded that the pandemic have led to higher stress levels and more concerns regarding their mental well-being, careers and studies, and economic situations [9]. These aspects probably have a long-term implication for the lives of at-risk young adults. As such, it is important to delve into their experiences during this period.

Although the multiple negative implications of the pandemic for young adults have been reported in the literature, very few studies have indicated that the at-risk young adults' cohort has also demonstrated resilience in terms of making efforts to promote their own well-being and the safety of others [10, 11]. Resilience consists of one's positive adaptation to adversity [12] and one's ability to recover from challenges and adapt to change [13], and it appears to be a crucial ingredient in coping with the implications of the pandemic [14]. Given that the COVID-19 pandemic seems to have put at-risk young people at even greater risk, it offers an opportunity to learn more about the coping abilities and resources that this group has, or has developed, to contend with our new and challenging world. Therefore, in this study, we lean on the stress process model [15, 16] as a theoretical framework. According to this theory [16], a model of the social stress process includes the merging of three major conceptual domains: (1) sources of stress, (2) mediators of stress, and (3) manifestations of stress. We focus on COVID-19 implications as the main source of stress and explore its manifestations in the lives of at-risk young adults. Also, according to Pearlin et al. [15], in the face of adversity, there are mediating resources that help to buffer the impact of stressors. Therefore, in the current study, we also aim to broaden our understanding regarding the unique mediators of stress and the coping mechanisms during this period that can help to buffer the impact of COVID-19 as stressors. These insights could add to the wide literature on resilience and coping among at-risk young people in the face of crisis and adversity and could contribute to the design of strength-based interventions.

1.1. Risk and Resilience during Times of Crisis and Disaster.
The COVID-19 pandemic likely caused a variety of human "injuries"—psychological, physical, social, and spiritual—and certainly led to a worldwide disaster and major stressors [17]. Stress involves one of the following experiences: exposure to novelty, unpredictability, threats to the ego, or weak control [18, 19]. *Weak control* is the feeling that the individual has little or no control over the situation. *Unpredictability* is the individual's experience of unexpected events or the inability to know what to expect. *Novelty* is the individual's expectation of something new happening that has never been experienced before. Lastly, *ego threat* refers to a situation that poses a perceived direct threat to one's ego [20]. These aspects strongly contribute to the development of aversive responses to environmental stimuli. In terms of COVID-19 and at-risk young adults, there is a good reason

to be concerned, as the majority of these vulnerable young people were already struggling, pre-COVID, with the risks and developmental harms associated with many previous stressors including poverty, neglect, food insecurity, housing instability, lower social support, and mental health problems. The pandemic contributed to greater isolation, family stress, and lower socioeconomic status [21, 22]. Recent studies have highlighted at-risk young adults' need for extraordinary support from the state, communities, and nonprofit agencies to meet the acute challenges of a pandemic in the context of chronic adversity and deprivation [10, 11].

Although disaster and disaster responses can obviously have negative effects, they can also have positive effects [23]. Earlier studies have indicated that some optimal level of life stress may actually be beneficial to the individual [24]. This notion in part corresponds with the vast literature on resilience as it holds aspects of risk, coping, and potential thriving. Originating in developmental psychology, resilience has come to represent a capacity that enables individuals to overcome adversity and to adapt successfully to threatening disturbances of development [25].

In accordance with this perspective, resilient individuals are capable of demonstrating sustained competence under stress. Resilience has also been conceptualized as a performance outcome of positive adaptation despite risk status, of recovery from trauma, or of overcoming negative *multiple* environmental threats and stressful experiences [26–29]. As the theoretical and empirical discourse has developed, resilience has been portrayed as a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation. This process includes both exposure to adversity and achievement of positive adaptation despite major assaults on the developmental process [30].

Theoretical resilience assumptions focus on categories of risk and protective factors and the nature and dynamics of resilience mechanisms. The main theoretical assumptions that have evolved assume that the nature of resilience mechanisms is dynamic and nonlinear and that resilience mechanisms are sensitive to changes in social and physical ecologies [31]. In addition, both the risk and protective mechanisms involved in these mechanisms are multilevel and interact across the youths' ecological systems [32].

1.2. Theoretical Framework.
In our current study, we employ Pearlin's stress process model [15] as the foundational framework for exploring the challenges and coping strategies of young adults facing risks. This model delves into the impact of stress on overall mental well-being and posits that stressors, such as economic hardships and feelings of isolation, and represents demanding life circumstances that can undermine an individual's psychological health [16, 33]. According to this theory, prolonged strain, especially overextended periods, increases the likelihood of encountering stress-inducing factors such as resource scarcity, limited opportunities, and reduced access to privileges and security. The theory further suggests that stressors rarely exist in isolation; instead, one stressor often triggers

a cascade of others. For instance, financial difficulties can lead to secondary stressors related to family conflicts and withdrawal from social engagements—stressors that independently exert lasting effects on mental health even after the initial stressor has subsided [34].

Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, the conditions brought about by the crisis likely intensified pre-existing family tensions and contributed to diminished mental well-being, as earlier studies have already indicated [5, 22]. Consequently, it is plausible that the pandemic's repercussions might persist beyond its resolution, exerting a lasting impact. Therefore, within this study, we hypothesize that while the stress linked to the pandemic amplified adverse experiences and outcomes for many, its effects were notably more detrimental for groups that faced additional stressors in the aftermath of the crisis, such as at-risk young adults.

The stress process model also underscores the reality that several psychological resources (e.g., coping strategies and sense of mastery) and social resources (social support) can have a moderating influence that intervenes and mitigates the adverse impact of stress on distress, although they do not serve as factors that prevent the occurrence of stressors initially. Building on these foundational principles [15, 33], our objective is to examine the obstacles and challenges encountered by at-risk young adults in the wake of the pandemic, as well as their coping strategies and resilience resources that may alleviate the negative short- and long-term consequences of the pandemic.

1.3. Study's Goal. To provide further insights into coping and resilience during and after a crisis, the aim of this study was to investigate the challenges faced by at-risk young adults during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the perceived resources and strengths that empowered them to navigate their concerns and difficulties. Exploring the assets and capabilities that contribute to effective coping mechanisms during moments of crisis holds the potential to enrich the existing body of knowledge surrounding the progression into adulthood amidst challenging circumstances such as crises and disasters.

Furthermore, the insights gleaned from this study could offer valuable guidance to policymakers and service providers, enhancing their comprehension of optimal approaches to bolster the well-being of susceptible young individuals. By strengthening their resilience and trajectories despite the adverse repercussions of the pandemic, these findings could contribute to improved outcomes for them as they mature into adults.

2. Methods

The sample included 20 at-risk young adults between 18–29 years. About half of the participants (55%) were young adult women and the other 45% were young adult men. Most of the participants (85%) were born in Israel, two participants were young adult Israeli-Arabs, and one was an immigrant from Ethiopia. Study participants were in different frameworks (e.g., military service, employed, and in

school) and in different residential situations at the time of the interviews. About 55% (11) of the participants were employed, including those who were working and studying simultaneously. The other 45% were unemployed, in school (10%), or performing their mandatory military service (25%) (in Israel, military service is compulsory at the age of 18, with some exceptions). In terms of housing, the majority of the participants lived in their parents' homes (55%), and 25% lived with partners or lived alone.

2.1. Procedure. After obtaining approval from the Ethics Committee of the researchers' universities and the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, and Social Services, the research staff received contact information from social workers who work with young adults in social welfare service agencies throughout the country. Only young adults who agreed to take part in the study (i.e., who were referred by their social workers) were included. The researchers then randomly selected a convenience sample of young adults between 18 and 25 years who were approached over the phone, given an explanation of the study's goals, and asked for their written consent to participate in the study. In order to include a variety of young adults in the study, the selection criteria were as follows: young adults in their emerging adulthood (i.e., aged 18–25 years), from a variety of frameworks (i.e., in school, in training, in the army, employed, and unemployed), and in different housing arrangements (living independently or with roommates and living with their families). A semistructured interview protocol was developed, consisting of open-ended questions, and all interviews were recorded and transcribed (participants were interviewed individually via Zoom due to COVID-19 restrictions). Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes, during which participants were asked to describe themselves (background, occupation, age, and so on). They were also asked about their current life status and the challenges and barriers they faced in their daily lives in light of COVID-19, as well as their available resources and assets in coping with their challenges. Although the interview guide included a list of questions that provided a structure for interviewers, research staffs were given the freedom to go off-script and explore issues that were identified as important to the young people during the interview.

2.2. Data Analysis. The methods used to analyze the interviews were grounded theory analysis [35, 36] and theoretical thematic analysis [37], which is often used to identify patterns and themes within qualitative data. The aim of grounded theory is to help us understand phenomena holistically by examining individual perceptions and meanings and their relations with broader interpersonal and social processes and environmental contexts [36]. In addition, theoretical thematic analysis allows for the use of pre-existing theoretical frameworks, such as Arnett's emerging adulthood theory [1].

Analysis was performed by three readers (the two interviewers and the leading researcher) who interpreted the themes, which expressed participants' perceptions and

experiences regarding their challenges, coping skills, and resilience in the shadow of COVID-19. The readers employed an incident-by-incident coding technique in which every portion of the interview transcript was read and coded for important themes. This phase was followed by a focused coding process, during which the incident codes were reread and analyzed in order to identify larger themes. During these phases, the readers analyzed the interviews and then met to discuss the themes and resolve any discrepancies. Finally, after the codes had evolved, the readers once again sifted through all the data, using a focused coding process [36]. The ensuing coding created four main categories with various related subcategories in relation to challenges and three main categories in relation to coping skills and resilience. Finally, to further check the validity of the findings, a summary report was provided to the participants via email, and their feedback was integrated into the final data analysis.

3. Findings

Several themes emerged from participants' descriptions of the barriers and difficulties alongside their coping strategies and resilience resources. We organized the findings according to the stress process model, as illustrated in Figure 1 and in Table 1.

Regarding the barriers and risks, the analysis revealed four main themes: (1) tense relationships with biological families, which grew worse during the pandemic; (2) fears that were raised during the pandemic and triggered mental health issues; (3) difficulties in attaining independence and autonomy; (4) loneliness and isolation.

With regard to coping strategies and resilience resources, three main themes emerged from the analysis: (1) a desire to be different from their biological families and become a role model; (2) Personal strengths and abilities; (3) Leaning on formal and informal support figures.

3.1. Barriers and Difficulties

3.1.1. Tense Relationships with Biological Families. Many of the participants said that the pandemic had negative influence on their relationships with the family members with whom they lived. For some of the participants, the relationships as described had already been tense and conflictual; however, the forced proximity made these relationships even worse. The national lockdown created a lack of employment, and schools and other frameworks were closed, leading to tense environments typified by fighting, yelling, and threats, as can be seen in the following examples:

> "Listen, when we were in lockdown, my brother didn't go to school and there was a time they told me not to come to the army as well, and that was really difficult because the fights at home just got worse, yelling all the time. It became better when my brother went to school, and I was in the army. My mom doesn't work. But now that I have been discharged from the army, we went back to fighting a lot. These fights make me feel bad and pull me backwards."

Participants also described being forced to take on certain unwanted responsibilities with regard to family members: "It took me a long time to get used to living with my father in the first place, and then suddenly COVID arrived, and I needed to be with him all day long and help him with all his medicine. It was hard to be on lockdown. My father's caregiver couldn't arrive, so I had to help him, and it's not nice to say but I really didn't want to do it."

3.1.2. Fears That Triggered Mental Health Issues. Participants talked about the fears that were raised during the pandemic, which triggered physical and mental health issues. The fears that arose due to COVID-19 included medical fears (becoming ill and/or getting vaccinated) and fears of returning to all of the draconian restrictions that had been put in place previously, as one young man said:

> "When I watch the news and hear that there is an increase in the number of COVID-positive people, I see a lockdown again, and my head goes right back to that place. It was very hard for me. I am still afraid. I think the fear got stuck in me. Every time I hear the word "lockdown" it brings me back to the bad feelings I had before."

It became clear in interviews that participants' fears during the pandemic led to an increase in mental health issues. Some talked about their depression, anxiety, and eating disorders. For example:

"I've always had to cope with food and self-image issues. I would tell myself: "Just lose 2 kilos and it will be fine." It had been like this for me during school. And then, when the pandemic started, we were doing our studies on Zoom, and I was scared. The story of food was taking me over again, and I lost a lot of weight." The increase in mental health issues highlights the negative outcomes of the pandemic's restrictions. Although such restrictions may have helped curb the spread of the disease, it led to increases in other health problems for these at-risk young adults.

3.1.3. Loneliness and Isolation. Most participants said that one of their difficulties was the sense of loneliness and isolation they experienced. Such feelings were caused by a lack of relationship with family members; the physical distance one had to maintain during the pandemic; a lack of friendly encounters; and/or the occurrence of painful turning points in life, such as the end of a romantic relationship. All of the participants who had experienced loneliness and isolation described how hard it was for them: "I think that if I had had a stable family, it would have been helpful. I am not in touch with my father; just the occasional phone call. It is the thing I miss the most and it makes me feel alone, and if I have a hard time, there is no one I can talk to." Another participant noted the physical isolation created by the pandemic: "COVID-19 created social isolation. I wish the pandemic would end. It is important to have hugs and love. Some people need attention and need hugs. . . and even if they don't, they made too big a deal out of COVID. . . there are a lot of other difficult diseases. I think giving love and affection is
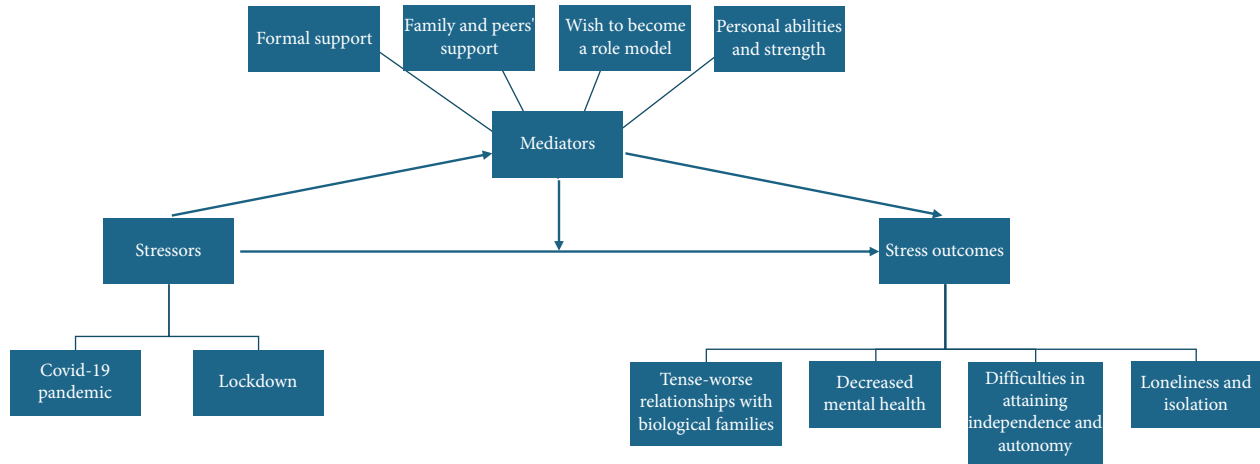
FIGURE 1: A stress process model, a theoretical framework, adopted from Pearline et al. [15].

the most important thing since without them people become upset." One young woman described the difficulties that emerged as a result of the lack of support and loneliness: *"I found myself alone, I broke up with my girlfriend, I had no money or support, nothing. I don't have anybody who can show me what is right or wrong, who will listen to me. Believe me, if my parents would have accepted me, it would have been way easier."*

3.1.4. Difficulties in Attaining Independence and Autonomy.

Participants' desire to move forward financially and in terms of their careers was greatly hindered by the pandemic. Most of the participants expressed difficulties in finding a job, for example: *"I'm not working these days. I used to work at a computer company, a year ago, but they laid off workers and today I don't have a job. It's hard to find one. I need a lot of energy to look again."* Moreover, the participants expressed their desire to become independent, in accordance with their life stage, as one young adult said: *"My main challenge today in life is to create for myself as much independence as possible. You know, these are the challenges of a 21-year-old young adult woman (...) I'm still looking for success. I'm dealing with everything related to independence. I may want to stay and live in the north, I want to study and buy a car."* The participant descriptions show that the young adults' desire for independence was stunted by financial and occupational difficulties that grew worse due to the pandemic's implications for the labor market. This aspect was evident from the interview of one 22-year-old young woman: *"It's hard to develop in Sderot [a city on Israel's periphery, in the south of the country]. It is hard to find a regular job even for a limited time. And even if you find one aa, you will get minimally paid. I'm looking to work, earn money, travel. I don't know... I want to study and I'm stuck because there aren't any jobs and I can't save money for my studies."*

3.2. Coping Strategies and Resources.

After asking study participants about the challenges and difficulties they encountered during the pandemic, we wished to understand their coping strategies and resources. They were, therefore,

asked to describe the things that may have assisted them during the pandemic: namely, the resources and assets at their disposal. Three main themes emerged from the data analysis: a wish to be different from biological family members and to become a role model; personal strengths and abilities; and leaning on formal and informal services.

3.2.1. Being Different from Biological Family Members and Becoming a Role Model.

The wish to be different from their biological family members emerged from the interviews as a source of resilience that helped participants attain independence and autonomy. For example, a 20-year-old young man said during the interview: *"Today I started the process of volunteering in the army. I passed the first level, submitted my papers, and I have another final meeting in a month. It is really important to me. I wish to fix the past; very few of my family members were in the army. My volunteering might be a good example for my brother, showing him something."* As can be seen in this quote, the young man's desire to be different from his family members has driven him to join the army. Army enlistment is mandatory for all Israeli Jews and has an important impact on the life of young adults (it should be noted that some individuals are exempt, and if this particular young man was in a position to volunteer, the implication is that he had been exempted from mandatory duty). Moreover, it seems that one of the main reasons he chose to enlist was in order to become a role model for his younger brother. A 21-year-old woman also described her desire to attain independence as being driven by the wish to be a role model for her brother: *"The thing I want most is to show my brother that things can be different. I want to show him that I am succeeding in doing something in my life, that I have a life and a future. I don't want to end up like my mother, I don't want my brother to think that's the only way life can be, I want him to see me in a different and better place."*

3.2.2. Personal Strengths and Abilities.

Most of the participants described their own personal strengths and abilities as a main resource they could rely on when facing

TABLE 1: Risk and coping strategies—subthemes and exemplary quotes.

Barriers and risks		Coping strategies	
Themes	Quotes	Themes	Quotes
Tense relationships with biological family	"It took me a long time to get used to living with my father in the first place, and then suddenly COVID arrived, and I needed to be with him all day long and help him with all his medicine. It was hard to be on lockdown…"	A desire to be different from their biological families and become a role model	"The thing I want most is to show my brother that things can be different. I want to show him that I am succeeding in doing something in my life, that I have a life and a future. I don't want to end up like my mother…"
Fears that triggered mental health issues	"I've always had to cope with food and self-image issues. I would tell myself: Just lose 2 kilos and it will be fine… and then, when the pandemic started, we were doing our studies on zoom, and I was scared. The story of food was taking me over again, and I lost a lot of weight"	Personal strengths and abilities	"I have high emotional intelligence and general intelligence that allows me to communicate and understand people well. I think I have passion and energies that are mine and that were always there inside me"
Difficulties in attaining independence and autonomy	"It's hard to develop in Sderot [a city on Israel's periphery]. It is hard to find a regular job even for a limited time…I'm looking to work, earn money, travel… I want to study, and I'm stuck because there aren't any jobs and I can't save money for my studies"	Leaning on formal and informal support figures	"I think that today my therapist is meaningful to me. I was missing someone to talk to about everything and to share with. I couldn't do it with my father; he is sick, and he doesn't have the patience…"
Loneliness and isolation	"I found myself alone, I broke up with my girlfriend, I had no money or support, nothing. I don't have anybody who can show me what is right or wrong, who will listen to me. Believe me, if my parents would have accepted me, it would have been way easier"		"My sister is very helpful. I adore her. We talk a lot, every day. She supports me"

N = 20.

COVID-19-related barriers and difficulties. For example, one young adult woman spoke about one of her personal strengths: *"I have learned about myself that I am capable, that I have the power to start and finish something, in a good way. I have been in a lot of different frameworks, and I have always tried to do my best and I think it shows that I am stubborn and never give up."*

In another interview, emphasis was put on how the participant's intelligence (a personal ability) helped him to cope with difficulties: *"I have high emotional intelligence and general intelligence that allows me to communicate and understand people well. I think I have passion and energies that are mine and that were always there inside me."* In addition, a 25-year-old young woman described her ability to function under stress as being helpful in difficult situations: *"I have always managed to adapt and function. One time my sister was involved in a car accident. When I got there I saw my mother and sisters crying, but I was able to function well. I'm just like that: I am able to function during hard times. Thanks to this ability, I understand that there is nothing I can't do. Lots of times I want to prove my abilities."*

In the realm of personal abilities, the majority of participants stated that it was their dreams that motivated them to move forward and overcome financial and job-related difficulties: *"In 10 years I will have of course a house of my own, a husband, kid, and career. I want to write and publish books and I'll find a way to earn a lot of money."* Another participant, a young woman, suggested that her big dream was to sing, and that she was willing to put a lot of hard work toward realizing this dream: *"I have a really big dream, to sing, to become a singer. Even though it is a hard profession, I still do it [sing in various venues] all the time. You get a lot of no's, and it is really hard, but I keep on doing it."*

3.2.3. Leaning on Formal and Informal Support. Analysis of the data indicated that formal services and informal support figures helped participants to overcome the loneliness and isolation they felt during the pandemic. Formal services included social workers, social work interns, therapists, nonprofit organizations, and welfare agencies. Informal services included friends and family. The main and crucial support derived from these services was listening, empathy, guidance, and compassion that participants received from them.

Formal services represented a place where participants could talk, pour their hearts out, and be listened to/heard. Such services even acted as a substitute for poor relationships participants had with their biological families: *"I think that today my therapist is meaningful to me. I was missing someone to talk to about everything and to share with. I couldn't do it with my father; he is sick, and he doesn't have the patience. He also doesn't understand that I need someone to listen to me."* Another participant talked about her significant relationship with the social work intern: *"My meaningful relationship was with Danielle, I could pour my heart out to her, and she didn't judge me. It helped, and I felt she was helping me to find myself."*

Regarding informal services, family and friends acted as main sources for listening. Siblings were also described as meaningful supportive figures, especially in light of the intense time spent together at home due to the COVID-19 situation:

"My sister is very helpful. I adore her. We talk a lot, every day. She supports me."

"The relationship I have with my siblings is the main source of support for me. We grew up in this madness and we are very close. My sister especially. She is also there for me when I need her."

Friendships with peers were also described by participants as an important resource, helping them to cope with their challenges. A 23-year-old young man said: *"Guy is my best friends and my roommate. He is so meaningful to me. He is the only person in the world who understands me because we share a similar history, both of us left the religious community of our families. I feel that we are making this journey together and learning how to cope."*

4. Discussion and Implications for Practice

The goal of the present study was to investigate concerns and challenges experienced by at-risk young adults during the COVID-19 pandemic and the perceived resources and strengths that enabled them to cope with these concerns and challenges. This period of social uncertainty (i.e., the pandemic) provides a unique opportunity to learn more about risk and resilience among at-risk emerging adults.

The study findings show that the pandemic has had a profound impact on the lives of at-risk young adults. Existing adversities, in particular, complex relationships with the family and social loneliness, were accentuated. In addition, many of the young adults experienced increased mental health problems, including depression and anxiety. These findings are in line with findings from recent studies among similar at-risk populations highlighting the negative impact of the pandemic on their lives in many areas including economic status, higher sense of loneliness, and social isolation [5, 38]. These findings highlight these young adults' vulnerability and demonstrate the areas in which their needs have grown and must be addressed in order to prevent deterioration in their functioning and outcomes. In this sense, the COVID-19 crisis has allowed us to learn more about "weak areas" in young adults' lives and point to the need for provision of further support during times of crisis.

According to conservation of resources (COR)'s theory [39], the gain or loss of resources is fundamental to well-being and to motivation for change. That is, the gain or loss of resources has a fundamental significance for quality of life and for how people function [40, 41]. From young adults' descriptions in this study, it is evident that the loss of resources during COVID-19 negatively affected their lives, their motivation, and their ability to pursue their plans. Furthermore, the COR theory states that when one or more of the resource categories—objects (e.g., socioeconomic

status); conditions (e.g., secure employment); psychological characteristics (e.g., sense of mastery); and energy (e.g., knowledge)—are lacking, individuals may be unable to cope with environmental threats and may experience increased stress. Indeed, the reports of young adults in this study demonstrate the way in which the damage that occurred in one area affected other areas and eventually affected their mental state and well-being in general. In terms of preparation and prevention, these findings point to the elements that need to be included in interventions among at-risk young adults even in ordinary times.

Although the implications of the crisis for at-risk young adults' financial and social status were already discussed in a recent study, the current study's findings add more information regarding the effect of these implications for the lives of these young people as emerging adults (i.e., the way the crisis impacted their transition to adulthood). Specifically, the current study sheds light on the difficulties they had in attaining independence and autonomy during this once-in-a-lifetime global health crisis. Emerging adulthood is likely the first time that young people encounter a developmental stage where they have sufficient autonomy to direct their future life paths [42]. Research has indicated that success in completing the developmental tasks of emerging adulthood—such as career preparation and sustaining support—is predictive of better outcomes later on [43]. Similarly, risky behavior in emerging adulthood has been found to be predictive of failure to prepare adequately for challenges of adulthood [44]. As such, emerging adulthood represents a key juncture in the life course [1, 45]. This notion strengthens the understanding that the impact of COVID-19 for the future lives of at-risk young adults could be crucial. Interventions and services must address this population's immediate and future needs in order to support their transition to adulthood and minimize the crisis's possible negative implications. Specifically, the study's findings support the conclusions of earlier studies suggesting that at-risk young people during disaster need empowering support and packages of individualized services. Such services include practical provision, enhanced financial assistance, and appropriate mental health support, as well as consistent formal support [10, 46].

Although the study's findings illustrate the way young adults suffered the consequences of the pandemic, they also demonstrate their active efforts to cope with their challenges and to ensure a good future for themselves. In this regard, various coping strategies emerged and highlighted the young adults' resourcefulness and willingness to handle their stress and to cope effectively in order to overcome this challenging period. This dynamic interaction between stressors and coping is also a central part of the period of emerging adulthood. More specifically, emerging adulthood is considered a particularly risky period for at-risk young adults as it requires coping with complex instrumental and developmental tasks with little or no parental guidance and monitoring. However, at the same time, it is also considered a period of hope and possibility during which young adults feel that they are more able to create their own future [1]. As such, scholars and practitioners suggest that this period may provide a window of opportunity for interventions that promote a positive change [47]. In addition, resilient researchers claim that there is a great deal of room for the exercise of agency and self-direction, which can promote resilience in young people who have faced great difficulties earlier in life [48]. In this regard, understanding the resources and strengths that facilitate coping strategies could add to the literature concerning the transition to adulthood both in times of crisis/disaster as well as in ordinary times. Indeed, young adults in this study used their own personal strengths and the support received from formal and informal sources as main resources to cope with their challenges. The strategies and resources described by study participants correspond with the stress process model which emphasizes the role of mediating factors of stress, specifically social support [34]. Some of these factors were mentioned in earlier studies among at-risk young adults and include individual qualities and personal attributes, meaningful relationships, and support received from family, peers, and professionals [49–51].

In relation to COVID-19 in the context of emerging adulthood, the research has shown that youth gradually gain knowledge about what to do in the face of challenges from many smaller challenges they have experienced during the normal course of life [52–54]. As such, in terms of intervention, it is important to learn about the coping strategies that at-risk people have used in their past and promote their use in current times. One important coping strategy that emerged from young adults' descriptions was their desire to become role models for their family members, especially their siblings. It has been found in earlier studies that at-risk young adults often use their family history as a motivator to pursue their future goals. For example, Sulimani Aidan [51] found that at-risk young adults' parents' struggles in life and low socioeconomic status were mentioned as reminders to them for their own need to seek a better future for themselves. This finding extends previous findings and adds to the exploration of this topic another interesting and less studied resource: the wish to become a role model as a motivation for coping with challenges. In terms of practice, this resource can be used as a motivator for persistence and change when building an intervention plan for at-risk young adults. This source of internal strength can be used as a catalyst for realizing future plans despite challenges.

5. Conclusion

The present study shed light on numerous integrative insights, thereby expanding our current knowledge base. These findings suggest that the core of the at-risk young adult experience encompasses a blend of challenges, concerns, and personal resources, notably character strengths and supportive relationships. These resources not only aid in coping with challenges and concerns but also contribute to envisioning a brighter future.

The study's findings enhance the existing literature by delving into the unique experiences of at-risk young adults during periods of crisis, thereby enriching the field of

emerging adulthood. Also, in this study we adopt a holistic perspective that encompasses both risk factors and coping mechanisms, thus contributing to the resilience literature. Beyond its theoretical contributions, the study's findings hold practical implications that can guide policy and interventions, particularly during times of crisis. It is said, this study has several limitations. First, the focus of the study was on a specific time frame in the lives of the young people during the pandemic. Further attention needs to be given to the longer-term impacts and any lingering effects of the pandemic on at-risk young adults. Second, the current convenience sample represents young people with specific characteristics from one country and investigation to different countries or systems may produce alternative findings. Third, when considering both challenges and coping strategies of participants, we did not differentiate between experiences of different groups in terms of their income, gender, or ethnicity. Such a distinction could add both to theory and to the design of more informed interventions. Therefore, future studies should include these aspects. Finally, although we broadened the understanding of the role played by possible resources in the lives of at-risk young adults, we relied solely on their self-report. Future investigations regarding additional coping skills and the way these resources operate and lead to positive outcomes could shed more light on resilience among this population. Longitudinal studies would be helpful in uncovering the role of at-risk young adults' resources and assets in promoting their positive adjustment during the transition to adulthood in times of crisis as well as in ordinary times. This information could be beneficial in developing appropriate immediate and longer-term responses and services [55–58].

Data Availability

The data used to support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

Additional Points

What Is Known about This Topic. (i) The global COVID-19 pandemic intensified at risk young adults' vulnerability, (ii) very few studies have indicated that this cohort has also demonstrated resilience in terms of making efforts to promote their own well-being and the safety of others, and (iii) COVID-19 pandemic offers an opportunity to learn more about coping abilities and resources that at-risk young adults have, or have developed, to contend with the new and challenging world. *What This Paper Adds.* (i) The pandemic has had a profound impact on existing adversities, particularly accentuating complex relationships with the family, social loneliness, and mental health problems, (ii) various coping strategies emerged, highlighting the resourcefulness and willingness of young adults to effectively handle their stress during this challenging period, and (iii) the desire to become a role model emerged as a motivation for coping with challenges, serving as an internal strength that can catalyze the realization of future plans despite difficulties.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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