

The impact of COVID-19 on mental health in a fragile and conflict-affected setting in Colombia.

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Abstract

Background: Recent studies have reported indirect effects of COVID-19 pandemic on mental health, but this has been understudied among vulnerable and marginalized populations, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected settings. The current study investigates changes in mental health and parenting stress among Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) and families exposed to violence in Colombia.

Method: We study 1,245 caregivers with children aged 2-5 across two sequential cohorts. Three dimensions of mental health are measured: anxiety, depression and parental stress, using an adapted version of the Symptoms Checklist-90-Revised (SCL-90-R) and the Parenting Stress Index (PSI). Comparing end line outcomes between pre and post-pandemic cohorts, we estimate the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown using lagged dependent variable models.

Findings: Results show that the likelihood of reporting symptoms above the risk threshold increased by 14 percentage points for anxiety, 5 percentage points for depression, and 10 percentage points for parental stress for participants assessed post-pandemic, relative to those assessed pre-pandemic. Impact is stronger for Internally displaced people (IDP), those with lower education and those with lower mental health at baseline. Food insecurity, job and income loss, and death of a relative or friend increase the likelihood of experiencing at-risk levels of mental health.

Interpretation: Findings indicate that mental health significantly worsened throughout the COVID-19 among these vulnerable populations. Policies in fragile and conflict-affected settings targeting IDP and other vulnerable families will be important to mitigate further mental health and socioeconomic consequences for these populations.

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