MENTAL HEALTH IN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

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COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND MENTAL HEALTH

- COVID-19 pandemic is a traumatic event: Has the potential to cause physical, emotional, and/or psychological harm
- Policies created to prevent virus spread → new life stressors and disrupted daily living for most people in the US
  - Unemployment has reached record highs
- Mental health is sensitive to traumatic events and their social and economic consequences
- Individuals and communities already struggling with economic and/or social adversity are especially vulnerable to mental health repercussions
PREVALENCE OF MENTAL/BEHAVIORAL HEALTH PROBLEMS IN U.S., JUNE 2020

Especially vulnerable groups:
- Hispanic and non-Hispanic Black individuals
- Essential workers
- Caregivers
- Young people
- People already being treated for mental health problems

Especially vulnerable groups:

- People with household incomes < $20,000
- People with savings < $5000
- People with high COVID-19-related stress (lost a job, death of someone close to them from COVID, having financial problems)
Hispanics reporting serious psychological distress:
- Before pandemic: 4.4%
- During pandemic: 18.3%

We don’t know how this varies by occupation, immigration status, geographic location, SES, etc.

WHAT’S HAPPENING IN THE SJV?

The CLIMA study:

Research study on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Latino immigrant families in rural/agricultural regions of California

- 21 in-depth interviews with Latino(a) immigrants in rural areas of Merced, Tulare, and Imperial Counties
- Examining how finances, employment, access to basic needs have changed during the pandemic and how these have shaped physical and mental health
- Led by Prof. Maria-Elena Young at UC Merced (collaborators: myself and Prof. Denise Payan)
RURAL LATINO(A) IMMIGRANTS IN SJV

- Already a very vulnerable population
  - 1/3 live below poverty limit
  - Limited economic opportunities
  - Limited access to transportation, healthy food, healthcare, information

- Pandemic increased their vulnerability
  - Job and income loss – having to choose between safety and paycheck
  - Employers do not provide PPE so families are forced to pay out of pocket
  - New expenses: broadband Internet, utility & food costs increased, childcare
DEPRESSION ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

Over the last 2 weeks...

“How often have you had little interest or pleasure in doing things?”

Not at all: 62%
Several days: 24%
More than half the days: 9%
Nearly every day: 5%

“How often have you been feeling down, depressed, or hopeless?”

Not at all: 48%
Several days: 38%
More than half the days: 5%
Nearly every day: 9%
ANXIETY ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

“How often have you been feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge?”

- Nearly every day: 19%
- More than half the days: 5%
- Several days: 38%
- Not at all: 38%

“How often have you not been able to stop or control worrying?”

- Nearly every day: 10%
- More than half the days: 5%
- Several days: 33%
- Not at all: 52%
PARTICIPANT COMMENTS ON MENTAL HEALTH

“I felt that my mental health for sure was affected because before the pandemic...I wouldn’t procrastinate. I had a whole routine. But then once the pandemic started... I couldn’t do anything...I felt no motivation whatsoever.” – Miriam, Merced County

“My husband, he is a person who is very patient and very reserved, very peaceful, but he experienced several days that his head hurt a lot...he went to the doctor and the doctor told him he was experiencing a lot of stress... all that stress accumulated until he ended up in the emergency room. It was anxiety, his stress was turning into anxiety due to so much thinking.” – Maria, Tulare County

“In my husband’s case, he has lost sleep. He goes through sleepless nights. So my son tries to let his dad sleep on the rides [to/from work]...they work with dangerous machinery, saws, those kinds of machines. He had to start taking sleeping pills, so he could fall asleep. Everything goes hand in hand... The stress of thinking ‘...the money is already running out and we don’t have a job.’” – Adriana, Merced County
“I developed something called vertigo of Meniere and I was sick for five days... All day long I wanted to try to be asleep because everything around me was spinning, and it made me nauseous, it made me vomit. So, it was five very, very hard days, and my husband said, ‘Do we take you to the hospital?’ ... they tell me that it was because of the stress that the lockdown gave me.” – Adriana, Merced County

“I used to cry because I was worried that my husband wouldn’t sanitize his hands... I would be like, ‘Oh, you’re trying to kills us’, all paranoid, you know... I was really, really scared, just paranoid about germs and stuff... And I even tell [my husband], ‘Are you depressed?’ And he’s like, “No, there’s no such thing as depression.” But then he gets home and he’s, like, asleep for the rest of the afternoon. I tell him, ‘I think you’re a little depressed.’” – Claudia, Imperial County
STRATEGIES FOR SUPPORTING MENTAL HEALTH IN VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

- Mental health care
  - Telepsychiatry
  - Counseling (social worker, faith leader, nurse…)
  - National Alliance on Mental Health 24-hour helpline: 800-950-6264
  - Crisis Text Line: Text HOME to 741741
- Self-care, exercise, set a routine, do art/music
- Mask wearing & other precautionary measures
- Social support from friends & family – virtual is better than none!

These individual-level solutions do not address the policy failures of government and private sector, whose consequences disproportionately affect vulnerable populations.
POTENTIAL POLICY SOLUTIONS FOR COVID-19 MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS

- Provide income replacement, with eligibility for non-citizens
- Support employment security measures and enforce OSHA regulations on employee safety
- Ensure basic needs are met by protecting housing, utilities, and food access
- Expand access to free broadband and PPE
- Expand access to tele-mental health care
More results and policy recommendations coming soon!

~ Thank you ~