

COVID-19: psychosocial impact and mental health in Latin America

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Abstractt

The COVID-19 pandemic has not only had health, economic, and political impacts, but also significant psychosocial and mental health consequences worldwide. In this article, different documentation and studies on mental health were analyzed, with the aim of identifying the various problems detected during the pandemic. Methodologically, a narrative and integrative review of the scientific literature was carried out. In Latin America, the most recent studies have documented and made patent effects on the various vulnerized populations such as migrants, women, children, the elderly, people living with significant disabilities, people experiencing marked housing and food insecurity, and temporary workers laboring in what has been referred to as the informal economy. In light of this, it is proposed that addressing these issues should involve the coordination of transnational policies and the definition of an agenda of critical priorities to focus and address. For this to come about, it is important that the empirical evidence generated by regional epidemiological studies contribute to the design of public policies on mental health of the Latin American population, so that they reduce the negative effects as well as prevent the future consequences of a pandemic that is not yet over.

Keywords: Covid-19; Latin America; mental health; psychosocial; revision.

COVID-19: impacto psicosocial y salud mental en América Latina

Resumen

La pandemia por el COVID-19 no sólo ha generado diversos impactos en materia de salud, economía y política, sino también importantes consecuencias psicosociales y de salud mental en el mundo. En este trabajo, se analizaron diferentes documentaciones y estudios sobre salud mental, con el objetivo de recuperar las diversas problemáticas detectadas durante la pandemia. Metodológicamente se realizó una revisión narrativa e integrativa de la literatura científica. En América Latina los estudios más recientes comienzan a visualizar diferentes afectaciones sobre las diversas poblaciones vulnerizadas: migrantes, mujeres, niños, los ancianos, personas quienes viven con una discapacidad significativa, personas en situación de calle, trabajadores informales, etc. Frente a este panorama, se plantea que el abordaje de estas cuestiones deberá contar con la coordinación de políticas transnacionales y la definición de una agenda de prioridades críticas a focalizar y atender. Para esto resulta importante que la evidencia empírica generada por los estudios epidemiológicos regionales contribuya al diseño de las políticas públicas sobre salud mental de la población latinoamericana, de modo que las mismas logren reducir los efectos negativos como también puedan prevenir las consecuencias futuras de una pandemia que todavía no ha finalizado.

Palabras clave: COVID-19; América Latina; salud mental; psicosocial; revisión.

COVID-19: impactos na saúde mental e psicossociais na América Latina

Resumo

A pandemia da COVID-19 no mundo tem impactado a área da saúde, os setores da economia e da política e também tem gerado consequências psicossociais, repercutindo de forma significativa no campo da saúde mental. Este estudo de revisão sistemática analisou diversos documentos e pesquisas abordando saúde mental e COVID-19, bem como problemáticas geradas durante a pandemia. A metodologia de pesquisa envolveu revisão narrativa e integrativa da literatura científica. Na América Latina, os estudos mais recentes apresentam os inúmeros efeitos da COVID-19 em populações vulneráveis: imigrantes, mulheres, crianças, idosos, pessoas em situação de rua, trabalhadores informais, etc. Diante desse panorama, propõe-se que a abordagem dessas questões inclua a coordenação de políticas transnacionais e a definição de uma agenda de prioridades críticas a serem consideradas. Os resultados empíricos de estudos epidemiológicos realizados em âmbito regional contribuíram para o desenho de políticas públicas em saúde mental da população latino-americana com o objetivo de reduzir os efeitos negativos e prevenir riscos futuros de uma pandemia que ainda não terminou.

Palavras-chave: COVID-19; América Latina; saúde mental; psicossocial; revisão.

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Os dados completos dos autores encontram-se ao final do artigo.

Introduction

Since the health emergency generated by the worldwide pandemic associated with COVID-19, the impact has been felt not only on the economy, employment, pol-



itics and governments, but also through the different psychosocial and mental health consequences experienced by the population (GALLEGOS et al., 2020; MORENO et al., 2020; PULIDO-MARTÍNEZ; BURBANO-VALENTE, 2020; RODRÍGUEZ-BAILÓN, 2020).

In the health field, the World Health Organization has not only become the target of many criticisms, but has also shown several contradictions in its approach to the pandemic. Nonetheless, such inconsistencies do not justify withdrawing support at this moment (HORTON, 2020a). At the country level, it has been seen that very few national health systems were prepared to face a pandemic like the current one. Although health authorities and scientists around the world are working to find immediate solutions, the victims of COVID-19 continue to rise, and it seems that now is the turn of Latin America in terms of increasing the number of infections and deaths (ORGANIZACIÓN PANAMERICANA DE LA SALUD, 2021).

Against this backdrop, the measures implemented by governments to stop the spread of contagion and avoid a major crisis, measures that have included confinement, restrictions on people's mobility, national border closures, social distancing, wearing face masks, among others, have had important unintended consequences. Specifically, the measures have accentuated preexisting conditions, deepened psychosocial problems, and caused severe side effects on the mental health of the population.

Stress, fear, and worry are normal responses to situations that generate uncertainty or confront us with abrupt changes, such as the health crisis caused by COVID-19. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered alarming levels of psychological and emotional symptoms of distress in the general population worldwide. A review of different studies identified that fear of COVID-19 is strongly related to states of anxiety, traumatic stress, and anguish, as well as moderate levels of stress and depression (ŞİMŞİR et al., 2021).

A recent study carried out in seven Latin American countries (Argentina, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Mexico, Paraguay, and Uruguay), in which 4881 individuals participated, found that 31.4% of the total participants did not present symptoms of generalized anxiety, 43% presented mild anxiety, 17.2% moderate anxiety, and 8.3% severe anxiety. Regarding depressive symptoms, 41.3% presented minimal symptoms associated with depression, 31.2% mild depression, 15.2% moderate depression, 7.6% moderately severe depression, and 3.9% severe depression. The fear of COVID-19 significantly and positively predicted both anxiety and depression, having a greater impact on anxiety than on depression. The findings of the study supported the conclusion that as people get older, they are less afraid of COVID-19, anxiety, and depression. Women were, on average, more afraid of COVID-19 and depression, but exhibit the same level of anxiety as men (CAYCHO-RODRÍGUEZ et al., 2021a).

Although many of these manifestations can be considered common and understandable reactions to an event as massively disruptive as a pandemic, for a noticeable size of the population they can be prolonged and become more serious and disabling, and can even lead to an increase in mental disorders. In addition, the most vulnerez populations are the ones most likely to suffer the most harmful effects of a pandemic, not only because of the unfavorable conditions they live and toil in daily, but also because of systemic inequities such as markedly limited access to health care and disrespect of their human rights. Therefore, it is important to analyze the combination of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health and psychosocial well-being while taking into account the diverse populations of Latin America.

Method

In this study, sources that show a shared, international concern about the invisible consequences of the pandemic are identified and analyzed, with a particular focus on epidemiological data that underscore the psychosocial impact on the Latin American population. In order to identify these sources, the authors adhered closely to the methodological criteria specified in the narrative and integrative reviews articulated by Aguilera Eguía (2014), and therefore focused on the statements of international mental health organizations and the reports from relevant studies (GALLEGOS et al., 2020; SCHOLTEN et al., 2020).

Results and discussion

A call out for mental health

The various psychology and psychiatry associations as well as the different international mental health organizations have made an international emergency call for the different governments of the world to dedicate greater efforts in terms of public policies addressing the mental health of the population. Recently, the United Nations produced a report on a fairly neglected area: the needs that countries and their populations will be facing in the field of mental health during COVID-19 (UNITED NATIONS, 2020).

Depression is known to be the most important mental health condition globally with over 264 million people worldwide suffering from it. Moreover, people with severe mental disorders are more likely to die younger than the general population: on average, between 10 and 20 years shorter. Between 76% and 85% of people with mental disorders do not receive adequate psychological treatment in low- and middle-income countries. In global terms, approximately one mental health provider is found for every 10,000 people. Finally, violations of the human rights of people with serious mental health conditions are frequent in all countries of the world (UNITED NATIONS, 2020).

Due to this alarming epidemiological situation in mental health prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, attention has begun to be drawn to the possible non-visible effects of the pandemic on the mental health of the population in the world, and particularly in Latin America. The possi-

ble harmful effects on mental health are not only expected in the worsening of the different clinical symptoms, but also in the inability to give a satisfactory response from the health care services, particularly for the most vulnerable populations.

The UK Academy of Medical Sciences has proposed a multidisciplinary research priority agenda on population mental health, with special emphasis on different vulnerable groups facing COVID-19 (HOLMES et al., 2020). So far, there is no specific, concomitant agenda for Latin America, but there are multiple mitigation actions. For example, the *Sociedad Interamericana de Psicología* (known as SIP; Interamerican Society of Psychology) has raised the need to carry out a set of actions on mental health and has elaborated a series of recommendations to act in different critical situations (GALLEGOS et al., 2020).

Meanwhile, national psychological associations and mental health organizations of the different countries of Latin America have developed diverse action plans in the form of assistance, containment, and psychological support. The initial reports from different regional investigations are quite conclusive with respect to the general increase in symptoms such as stress, distress, anxiety, and depression in large swaths of the population (CAYCHO-RODRÍGUEZ et al., 2021b; GALLEGOS et al., 2020). In general, the difficulties experienced by the population expressed in diagnosable conditions coincide with the international ones: the problems are not limited to COVID-19 but also expressed as mental disorders.

According to the most recent data, mental and neurological disorders, as well as substance use and suicide, constitute a group of problems of great disability for the population of the Americas. Among them, depressive disorders are the leading cause of disability, followed by anxiety disorders. In addition, there is serious lack of investment in mental health that results in a markedly limited readiness of care (ORGANIZACIÓN PANAMERICANA DE LA SALUD, 2018). In fact, the pandemic has revealed the inability to respond effectively to health demands by national health systems, and in particular, mental health systems, which disproportionately affects the most vulnerable groups and their social contexts.

The public health crisis generated by the pandemic urges us to consider future scenarios with markedly negative consequences on the mental health of the population in Latin America. Those scenarios will require joint and more forceful efforts on the planning of care and improvement of mental health in the region. So far, most of the reports from international organizations and different scientific societies in the field of mental health have warned about the impact that this pandemic will have on the mental health of the population in different countries and regions of the world.

Faced with this set of circumstances, it is important to underscore the efforts that scientific and professional psychology organizations have carried out during the pandemic, so that they serve as an assessment of the current situation, as well as possible future care and preven-

tion actions on the effects of a pandemic on the mental health of the population. In this regard, recent studies have documented the response of psychology to the pandemic at international levels (ALMONDES et al., 2021) and in Latin America (CANET-JURIC; CRESTANI CALEGARO, 2021; GALLEGOS et al., 2022, in press; INFANTE PEDREIRA; GRAU ÁBALO, 2020; PORTILLO et al., 2022, in press; LUNA-SÁNCHEZ et al., 2020). The analysis of all this information can be very useful in decision-making at the government level and the development of public mental health policies.

Psychosocial problems in Latin America

Before the pandemic, Latin America already had major psychosocial needs that went unmet and expressed themselves in mental problems, difficulties, and disorders that could be readily traced to deep social inequalities, and the markedly limited economic capacity from governments to address their respective situations. The pandemic, which started as a disease among the more affluent classes that travelled overseas, mostly by planes, or who had family living overseas and came back to visit, is now affecting the most *vulnerable* populations, those who live in precarious, crowded quarters without access to sanitary resources, unable to engage in social distancing, labor in direct service delivery, and rely in public health care services (EGEDE; RUGGIERO; FRUEH, 2020).

How are the most vulnerable populations to COVID-19 defined? So far, different populations at higher risk have been identified from a medical viewpoint such as the elderly, the immunocompromised, and patients with preexisting conditions including heart disease, diabetes. However, the importance of rethinking the vulnerability category has already been recognized (REDEFINING..., 2020), given that there have been countless situations of vulnerability that do not correspond to strictly medical issues, nor are they fully explained economically, but they are certainly connected.

We refer to the millions of migrants and forcibly displaced populations, indigenous populations, women victims/survivors of multiple sources of violence and abuse, exposed children and adolescents, the incarcerated and the institutionalized people in hospices and nursing homes, homeless, temporary workers laboring in what is referred to as the gig economy, gender and sexual minoritized populations, people living with mental illnesses and other forms of disabilities. We do not yet have a real dimension of the impact and possible consequences that this pandemic will bring, but we do know that *vulnerable* groups will bear the brunt of this situation (KELLEY et al., 2020).

Some of these particularly vulnerable groups have been identified in prison populations (FOVET et al., 2020), indigenous populations (GONÇALVES JÚNIOR et al., 2020a), migrants and refugees (GONÇALVES JÚNIOR et al., 2020b), older adults (BANERJEE, 2020; FLINT; KATHLEEN; IABONI, 2020), children and adolescents (FEGERT et al., 2020; LOADES et al., 2020), sexual minorities (FLENTJE et al., 2020; SILLIMAN; BOSK, 2020), people with disabilities (PAZ-MALDO-

NADO; FLORES-GIRÓN, 2021, in press; WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION, 2020) and people with suicidal ideation (BANERJEE; KOSAGISHARAF; RAO, 2021; GUNNELL et al., 2020; THAKUR; JAIN, 2020), among others. In general, the studies tend to highlight an increase in various psychological disorders and a decrease in the psychosocial well-being of the general population, but also a greater risk to the mental health of different populations considered markedly vulnerable (GALLEGOS et al., 2020; KOLA et al., 2021; SCHOLTEN et al., 2020).

Honduras: estudiantes universitarios en situación de discapacidad durante la COVID-19

These are populations that not only have difficulties in accessing basic health resources to deal with COVID-19, but are also exposed to suffering all kinds of discrimination, stigmatization, inequality, and violence (ANDOH, 2020). Recent studies have vividly exposed these problematic social inequities, ones that ought to become the focus of governmental policies and specialized professional attention, during and beyond this pandemic (AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION, 2020; AMERIO et al., 2020; GONÇALVES JÚNIOR et al., 2020a, 2020b; MENESES-NAVARRO et al., 2020; ORCUTT et al., 2020).

It is not by chance that it has been proposed to speak conceptually of a syndemic instead of a pandemic. The application of the concept of syndemic to the current health crisis means that it cannot be thought outside of the multiple biological, social, cultural, political, and economic determinations that affect the health of the population (HORTON, 2020b). This implies, at the same time, that the response to the current crisis cannot be reduced exclusively to the knowledge of biomedical sciences such as medicine, virology, infectology, and the like, but requires all the social and humanistic disciplines, among them, psychology, anthropology, sociology, etc. (GALLEGOS et al., 2021, in press).

An important contribution was developed by the regional emergency response team in Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (SMAPS) of the Pan American Health Organization (ORGANIZACIÓN PANAMERICANA DE LA SALUD, 2020), in the form of a guidance document, and adapted to the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This model of intervention in mental health and psychosocial support, like other recommendation guides, provides the first tool to organize government action strategies and different professional practices. However, due to the sizable inequities that characterize the diverse populations of Latin American and the vertiginous confinement that occurred in most Latin American countries, the SMAPS model was quite limited.

Conclusion

COVID-19 represents a very serious threat to Latin America, mainly because it confronts the region with underlying and unresolved problems, their origins can be readily found equally in the distant and the immediate present. Specifically, social inequality expressed in inequities of access to health care, living arrangement, and financial resources, among others play a crucial role in the ultimate impact on public health in the region. Not only in terms of people's physical and mental health, but also regarding the excessive burden of psychosocial stress on communities and governments.

How should this pandemic be addressed in Latin America? Among the many possible answers, an urgent one is greater cooperation and coordinated, strategic actions between neighboring countries. Historical animosities among countries and differences in political orientations of neighboring countries may be significant challenges to bring about such urgent actions. Although it seems paradoxical, in the face of a global and interconnected problem, the responses have been, in our view, excessively national and with little regional coordination. But this that has been visible at the regional level, has also been observed at the international level. In fact, at the latter level, it seems particularly problematic the difficulties in arriving at coordinated efforts. It will not be possible to give an effective response if each country closes in on itself, in addition, this type of response can generate greater problems as it may result in the further spread of the virus.

But in addition to this coordinated perspective at the regional level, it will also be necessary to arrive at tangible actions that address forthrightly the numerous psychosocial problems. This psychosocial problems have *vulnerized* large segments of the Latin American populations, with direct impact on their mental health. COVID-19 in Latin America presents a unique opportunity to expose the large, underlying, yet readily visible injustices that characterizes life in Latin America. The comorbidity between psychosocial problems and mental health problems is a literally deadly combination worldwide and specially in Latin American societies.

It is no coincidence that the data provided by the research that has recently begun to be published demonstrates the high psychological and emotional impact that the pandemic has had on the mental health and psychosocial well-being of the Latin American population. It is crucial that the empirical evidence provided by regional epidemiological studies contributes to the design of public mental health policies in Latin America, both to lessen the negative effects and to prevent the future consequences of a pandemic that has not yet ended. It is also important to recover the psychological and community programs that have been implemented during the pandemic, be they face-to-face or virtual, to extract those experiences that have been beneficial in the mental health care of the Latin American populations, and can serve as guidance for future actions, in particular to address the needs of the most vulnerized populations.

Up to now, it seems fair to say that there have been sizable efforts worldwide to coordinate and advance global health. Although imperfect, it has served as a guide. However, it is conditioned by visions and concerns from other contexts that are not easily translated nor applied to the region. Therefore, it is now necessary to build a re-

gional coordination policy on the most relevant psychosocial problems to guide scientific research, public policy planning, and the professional response that will need to be assigned to and relied upon each sector.

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