The Impact of COVID-19 and SES on Latinx Experiences of Anxiety, Depression, and Trauma Symptoms

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BACKGROUND

Natural disasters and public health emergencies, like the coronavirus pandemic, can have a detrimental effect on the mental health of impacted communities.

- In March 2020, a sample from India showed 71.8% of individuals were more worried and 24.7% were more depressed; 69.6% were concerned about their financial losses during the COVID-19 lockdown (Chakraborthy & Chatterjee, 2020).
- Among Italians, factors associated with higher levels of depression included having lower education, a history of medical issues and stressful experiences, being unemployed, and knowing someone diagnosed with COVID-19 (Mazza et al., 2020).
- In Australia, those with no work and lower incomes showed increased levels of anxiety and a decreased quality of life during COVID-19 compared to before COVID-19 (Pieh et al., 2020).
- Researchers speculate that the loss of life, uncertainties, and negative emotions, such as anger, anxiety, and fear associated with the coronavirus will lead to an increase in PTSD across the globe (Dutheil et al., 2020).

Purpose: Examine how COVID-19 affects low SES Latinx individuals compared to their higher SES counterparts.

Hypothesis: Latinx individuals with lower SES (i.e., who are unemployed, have lower education, and lower annual income), will be more likely to report symptoms of depression, anxiety, and trauma compared to their higher SES counterparts.

METHOD

Participants: Individuals who participated in this study were Latinx adults residing in the U.S.

Procedures: Data were collected via an online anonymous survey available in English and Spanish.

Measures:
- Generalized Anxiety Disorder 7-item scale (GAD-7; Spitzer et al., 2005)
- Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9; Kroenke et al., 2001)
- PTSD Checklist for DSM-5 (PCL-5; Weathers et al., 2013)
- Epidemic-Pandemic Impacts Inventory (EPII; Grasso et al., 2020)

Analyses: Data were analyzed one-way ANOVAs (with post-hoc analyses for education) and Chi-square tests.

RESULTS

Anxiety: There were significant differences on GAD-7 scores based on education [F(2,241) = 3.08, p = 0.047]. See Figures 2, 3, and 4.

Trauma: There were significant group differences on PCL-5 scores based on education [F(2,239) = 4.26, p = 0.015] and employment [F(1,240) = 5.75, p = 0.17]. See Figures 2, 3, and 4.

Depression: There were significant group differences on PHQ-9 scores based on education [F(1,234) = 7.09, p = 0.001], income [F(1,234) = 8.55, p = 0.004], and employment [F(1,242) = 7.22, p = 0.008]. See Figures 2, 3, and 4.

Ability to pay utilities: There was a significant association between the ability to pay bills and income (X²(1) = 7.84, p = 0.005), education (X²(1) = 8.26, p = 0.016), and employment (X²(1) = 6.156, p = 0.013). A greater proportion of those unemployed (23.2%) reported being unable to pay utilities compared to those who were employed (11.3%).

Ability to buy enough food: There was a significant association between inability to buy enough food and income (X²(1) = 5.39, p = 0.020). A greater proportion of people with low income (21.1%) reported being unable to buy enough food compared to those with high incomes (9.8%).

Job loss: There was a significant association between job loss and education (X²(1) = 6.36, p = 0.042). A greater proportion of people with low (31.6%) and medium education (28.4%) reported losing their jobs due to COVID-19 than those with higher education (11.6%).

DISCUSSION

- The more education participants had, the less likely they were to report psychological distress. For example, individuals with PhD’s and Master’s reported the least amount of depression, anxiety, and PTSD symptoms in comparison to Latinx individuals with less education (college or high school degree).
- Furthermore, Latinx individuals with a high annual income and who were employed had lower levels of depression compared to their low-income and unemployed counterparts.
- Low SES Latinx are experiencing mental health problems that are likely exacerbated by loss of their job, reduction of work hours, inability to pay bills, and food insecurity. These additional stressors may be increasing their levels of psychological distress during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Limitations: Generalizability of our results may be limited to colleges students and recent graduates in the Rio Grande Valley. Additionally, our sample was relatively educated and young (mostly college students) and may not be representative of the general Latinx community.

Future Directions: Future studies can examine factors of one’s educational experience that may be helpful in mitigating the impact of mental health problems during a pandemic (e.g. literacy levels, critical thinking skills, self-care habits, etc.). In addition, examining what types of jobs people lost during the pandemic can help us identify who is most vulnerable during a public health crisis.