A nationwide survey of psychological distress among Chinese people in the COVID-19 epidemic: implications and policy recommendations

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ABSTRACT

The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) epidemic emerged in Wuhan, China, spread nationwide and then onto half a dozen other countries between December 2019 and early 2020. The implementation of unprecedented strict quarantine measures in China has kept a large number of people in isolation and affected many aspects of people’s lives. It has also triggered a wide variety of psychological problems, such as panic disorder, anxiety and depression. This study is the first nationwide large-scale survey of psychological distress in the general population of China during the COVID-19 epidemic.

The COVID-19 epidemic has caused serious threats to people’s physical health and lives. It has also triggered a wide variety of psychological problems, such as panic disorder, anxiety and depression. The main purpose of this study is to measure the prevalence and severity of this psychological distress, gauge the current mental health burden on society, and therefore provide a concrete basis for tailoring and implementing relevant mental health intervention policies to cope with this challenge efficiently and effectively.

This study is the first nationwide large-scale survey of psychological distress in the general population of China during the tumultuous time of the COVID-19 epidemic. A self-report questionnaire was designed to survey peritraumatic psychological distress during the epidemic. Data collection began on 31 January 2020, the day when the WHO announced the Novel Coronavirus Pneumonia of China as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC). Leveraging the Siuvo Intelligent Psychological Assessment Platform, we presented QR codes of the questionnaire online openly accessible to the general public nationwide. The questionnaire incorporated relevant diagnostic guidelines for specific phobias and stress disorders specified in the International Classification of Diseases, 11th Revision and expert opinions from psychiatrists. In addition to demographic data (i.e., province, gender, age, education and occupation), the COVID-19 Peritraumatic Distress Index (CPDI) inquired about the frequency of anxiety, depression, specific phobias, cognitive change, avoidance and compulsive behaviour, physical symptoms and loss of social functioning in the past week, ranging from 0 to 100. A score between 28 and 51 indicates mild to moderate distress. A score ≥52 indicates severe distress. Psychiatrists from the Shanghai Mental Health Center verified the content validity of the CPDI. The Cronbach’s alpha of CPDI is 0.95 (p<0.001).

This study received a total of 52 730 valid responses from 36 provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities, as well as from Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan by 10 February 2020. Among all the respondents, 18 599 were males (35.27%) and 34 131 were females (64.73%). The mean (SD) CPDI score of the sample was 23.65 (15.45). Almost 35% of the respondents experienced psychological distress (29.29% of the respondents’ scores were between 28 and 51, and 5.14% of the respondents’ scores were ≥52). Multinomial logistic regression analyses showed that one’s CPDI score was associated with their
People under 18 years had the lowest CPDI scores (mean (SD)=7.24 (7.51)), while the elderly, women and migrant workers; (2) accessibility to medical resources and the public health service system should be further strengthened and improved, particularly after reviewing the initial coping and management of the COVID-19 epidemic; (3) nationwide strategic planning and coordination for psychological first aid during major disasters, potentially delivered through telemedicine, should be established and (4) a comprehensive crisis prevention and intervention system including epidemiological monitoring, screening, referral and targeted intervention should be built to reduce psychological distress and prevent further mental health problems.

Findings of this study suggest the following recommendations for future interventions: (1) more attention needs to be paid to vulnerable groups such as the young, the elderly, women and migrant workers; (2) accessibility to medical resources and the public health service system should be further strengthened and improved, particularly after reviewing the initial coping and management of the COVID-19 epidemic; (3) nationwide strategic planning and coordination for psychological first aid during major disasters, potentially delivered through telemedicine, should be established and (4) a comprehensive crisis prevention and intervention system including epidemiological monitoring, screening, referral and targeted intervention should be built to reduce psychological distress and prevent further mental health problems.

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Dr Jianyin Qiu obtained a bachelor’s degree of psychology from East China Normal University in 1990, a Master’s degree of Medicine from Shanghai Second Medical University in China in 1999, and a Doctorate in Medicine from Jiao Tong University School of Medicine in 2007. She is now working as a Director of the Department of Psychological Counseling & Psychotherapy and the Department of Psychotherapy Research at the Shanghai Mental Health Center, and the Deputy Director of the Department of Medical Psychology, Division of Mental Health at the Shanghai Jiao Tong University School of Medicine. In addition, JQ is also the deputy director of the Psychosomatic Medicine & Clinical Psychology Committee, Chinese Women’s Medical Association, director of the Shanghai Mental Health Association, vice-director of the Psychoanalytic Committee and Psychological Counseling & Psychotherapy Committee of the Chinese Mental Health Association, and vice director of the Women’s Mental Health Group in the Chinese Society of Psychiatry. JQ specializes in women’s mental health, in particular post-partum depression. She has conducted epidemiological studies and psychological interventions for women with postnatal depression, menopausal depression, depressive women with breast cancer, teenagers and young adult women with mood disorders. For nearly 20 years, she has been committed to the clinical practice, teaching and research of psychotherapy. The department she is in charge of is the largest center for psychotherapy teaching and practice in China.
Correction: A nationwide survey of psychological distress among Chinese people in the COVID-19 epidemic: implications and policy recommendations


In the acknowledgments section, Fei Wu was originally listed as being affiliated with UCLA. The authors would like to make readers aware that Fei Wu is now affiliated with the Chief Executive Office from Los Angeles County.

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