

The Psychological Impact of War on Immigrants: Public Health Strategies for Support

Savaşın Göçmenler Üzerindeki Psikolojik Etkisi: Destek için Halk Sağlığı Stratejileri

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ÖZ

Silahlı çatışma, buna maruz kalan göçmenler üzerinde önemli psikolojik etkiler yaratmaktadır. Bu bireyler, depresyon, anksiyete ve travma sonrası stres bozukluğu (TSSB) gibi ruhsal sağlık sorunlarıyla karşılaşmakta olup, sosyal izolasyon, ayrımcılık ve dil engelleri gibi faktörlerle bu sorunlar daha da kötüleşmektedir. Uzun süreli şiddet ve askeri faaliyetler, bu psikolojik sorunların riskini daha da artırmaktadır. Bu çalışma, savaşın göçmenler üzerindeki psikolojik etkilerini incelemeyi ve ruh sağlığı desteği sağlamak için etkili stratejiler geliştirmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Çalışma, travma, ayrımcılık ve sosyal faktörlerin, göçmen nüfusları arasında depresyon, anksiyete ve TSSB gibi durumlara nasıl katkıda bulunduğuna odaklanmaktadır. Savaş mültecileri arasında depresyon ve anksiyete gibi ruhsal sağlık sorunlarının yaygınlığını değerlendirmek için mevcut literatür gözden geçirilmiştir. Savaş travması, ayrımcılık ve ekonomik zorluklar ile sosyal izolasyon gibi diğer katkı sağlayan faktörler arasındaki ilişki incelenerek, daha geniş psikolojik sonuçların anlaşılmasına yönelik bir analiz yapılmıştır. Savaş travması ve ayrımcılığa maruz kalmak, anksiyeteyi ve TSSB geliştirme olasılığını önemli ölçüde artırmaktadır, bu da bir bireyin uzun vadeli işlevselliğini ciddi şekilde etkileyebilir. Derleme, özellikle sosyal ve ekonomik zorluklarla karşılaşıldığında, göçmenlerin ruh sağlığını desteklemek için hedeflenmiş müdahalelere duyulan ihtiyacı vurgulamaktadır. Sosyal desteğin, savaşın olumsuz psikolojik etkilerini azaltmada etkili olduğu gösterilmiştir. Kültürel uyum, dini inançlar ve finansal güvenlik gibi faktörler, göçmenlerin ruh sağlığını iyileştirmek için de önemlidir. Bu alanda daha fazla araştırma yapılması, göçmenlerin savaş sonrası psikolojik ihtiyaçlarını karşılamak için etkili müdahale ve politikaların geliştirilmesi gerektiğini ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: anksiyete; depresyon; halk sağlığı; ruh sağlığı; TSSB

ABSTRACT

Armed conflict has significant psychological effects on migrants exposed to it. They often face mental health challenges such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which are worsened by factors like social isolation, discrimination, and language barriers. Prolonged violence and military activities further increase the risk of these psychological issues. This study aims to explore the psychological impact of war on migrants and identify effective strategies for providing mental health support. It focuses on how trauma, discrimination, and social factors contribute to conditions like depression, anxiety, and PTSD among migrant populations. A review of existing literature was conducted to assess the prevalence of mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety, among war refugees. The relationship between war trauma, discrimination, and other contributing factors like economic hardship and social isolation was analyzed to better understand the broader psychological consequences. Exposure to war trauma and discrimination significantly heightens anxiety and the likelihood of developing PTSD, which can severely affect an individual's long-term functioning. The review highlights the need for targeted interventions to support migrants' mental health, especially in the face of social and economic challenges. Social support has been shown to reduce the negative psychological effects of war. Factors such as cultural adaptation, religious beliefs, and financial stability are also crucial for improving migrants' mental well-being. Further research is needed to develop effective interventions and policies that address the mental health needs of migrants in conflict-affected areas.

Keywords: anxiety; depression; mental health; PTSD; public health

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the increasing wars and conflicts around the world have led to a rapid rise in the number of migrants and refugees. Major conflicts such as the Syrian civil war, the war in Ukraine, and Israel's occupation of Gaza have displaced millions of people and caused a major humanitarian crisis. Turkey, hosting 3.1 million Syrian refugees, has become the country with the largest number of refugees in the World.¹ Additionally, as a result of the conflict in Ukraine, the UN Refugee Agency assistance reached 4.32 million people in 2022 and 2.63 million people in 2023.² Refugees living in urban areas in Turkey face many barriers, such as language barriers, lack of information, stigma, security concerns, and financial difficulties.³ Despite this, studies show that the majority of refugees do not seek the psychological help they need.⁴

The existing literature provides indirect evidence of large-scale population movements resulting from conflicts and crises. For instance, Goniewicz suggests that the refugee crisis triggered by Russia's aggression against Ukraine may lead to significant population movements to Poland and other EU countries, driven by factors including war, famine, and climate change.⁵ Korkmaz asserts that, according to the Middle East Council of Churches, 150.000 Christians were forcibly displaced in Iraq between 1960 and 2000 as a result of war and state-sponsored persecution.⁶ These data highlight the impact of war on displaced populations, demonstrating that such conflicts can result in significant migration patterns. These references underscore the necessity of comprehensive data to understand migratory movements caused by armed conflict and to assess the scale of these movements.

The psychological effects of war and trauma are evident among migrants from areas affected by armed conflict. Migrants may experience mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), as a result of exposure to war trauma and settlement stress. Furthermore, social isolation, discrimination, and language barriers experienced by immigrants may also serve to exacerbate existing mental health difficulties.⁷

The migration process is replete with complex stressors that can give rise to long-term mental health issues for refugees and migrants alike.⁸ The trauma associated with exposure to war violence can lead to persistent mental and emotional challenges for migrants, further impacting their well-being. The legal status of migrants is also a significant determinant of mental health outcomes. Legal insecurity has been linked to increased stress, anxiety, depression, and trauma.⁹ Factors such as exposure to violence, family loss, and long-term stress can precipitate the development of serious mental health conditions, including PTSD in individuals who have been affected by war.¹⁰ The mental health of refugee and migrant families may be compromised by the adversities associated with war, displacement, and other stressors.¹¹ A number of studies have demonstrated that experiences related to war continue to have an impact on the mental health of refugees and internally displaced persons. Moreover, the transmission of intergenerational trauma within migrant families represents a crucial area of investigation with regard to the long-term effects observed at various stages of the migration process.

This review aims to assess the psychological effects of war and trauma on migrants from a public health perspective, focusing on how these experiences affect mental health, considering variations based on different factors. It also identifies areas needing further investigation. The review explores the prevalence, symptoms, and lasting effects of psychological conditions such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD, while examining the role of social support, economic hardship, cultural adaptation, and environmental factors. Ultimately, the goal is to inform the development of effective interventions to improve migrant mental health through evidence-based public health policies and practices.

Psychological Impacts of War and Trauma

Depression

Individuals who have been exposed to war and other forms of conflict face numerous stressors, including violence, prolonged stress, and physical assault. These experiences often lead to adverse health and mental health outcomes, particularly anxiety, depression, and

trauma-related symptoms.¹⁰ Research has shown that the accumulation of traumatic experiences during migration is a significant factor contributing to the prevalence of anxiety and depression among migrants.¹² Additionally, perceived discrimination in the host country is associated with worse mental health outcomes, including depressive symptoms.¹³ Stringent immigration policies and the stressors linked to the pandemic further increase the prevalence of depression among certain migrant groups, such as Latino immigrant parents.¹⁴ Social support is also recognized as an important protective factor, mitigating the negative effects of accumulated stress on depression.¹⁵

The risk of developing depression and anxiety is also notably high among individuals exposed to civil war violence, emphasizing the long-term psychological consequences of conflict. Studies investigating various migrant groups, such as refugees, undocumented migrants, and internally displaced persons, have provided valuable insights into the prevalence of depressive symptoms among war refugees. For instance, Verhulsdonk et al. found that traumatic experiences, especially torture, contribute significantly to the development of depression among refugees and migrants.¹⁶ Similarly, Þórðardóttir et al. documented a heightened risk of psychiatric illness among those who have experienced war and displacement.¹⁷ Other studies, such as those by Voglino et al., have observed high rates of anxiety and depression among African immigrants.¹⁸ Adhikary et al. found a strong link between low income and depression among both non-migrants and return migrants in Nepal.¹⁹ Furthermore, Poudel et al. highlighted the increased depressive and anxiety symptoms among migrant workers during the pre-movement phase.²⁰ These findings underscore the elevated risk of depression in individuals displaced by conflict and the compounded effects of trauma and migration stress.

Moreover, depression significantly impacts migrants' daily lives, adaptation processes, family dynamics, and overall well-being. It is crucial to understand how depression affects migrants to create effective interventions. For instance, Alvarez advocates for trauma-focused, culturally tailored programs to address the depressive and

anxiety symptoms of Latina immigrant women.²¹ Sharma suggests that immigrant mothers are especially prone to depression due to post-migration adjustment difficulties, cultural losses, and challenges in finding employment.²² Calzada and Sales observed higher depression rates among immigrants who arrived in the U.S. at a young age, highlighting the complexity of the relationship between migration experiences and mental health.²³ Additionally, Metcalf notes that undocumented immigrants face significant stress adapting to new communities, particularly regarding economic, health, and social issues tied to their legal status.²⁴ Lee also reported that as immigrants remain in the host country for longer periods, they experience higher rates of depressive symptoms compared to the local population, suggesting a link between cultural adaptation and mental health outcomes.²⁵

Finally, studies on Syrian refugees in Turkey show the prevalence of mental health issues such as PTSD and depression. A study of 420 adult Syrians in Ankara revealed a PTSD rate of 36.5% and a depression rate of 47.7%. Female sex, physical illness, and a greater number of traumatic events were found to predict both PTSD and depression. PTSD was also predicted by a history of psychiatric illness, while depression was linked to lower economic status. Notably, lower economic status predicted depression in men but not in women.²⁶

The occurrence of childhood traumas (e.g., war experience) has been demonstrated to exert a long-term influence on mental health, thereby enhancing the probability of a depression diagnosis.²⁷ Migrant women, especially during the reproductive period, are at higher risk for depression, with symptoms being more prevalent during pregnancy and postpartum.²⁸ Research indicates that when migrants are satisfied with their resettlement decisions, depression prevalence decreases. For example, African immigrant women in Canada are particularly vulnerable to postpartum depression and anxiety, highlighting the need for targeted interventions.²⁹

Depression has a profound impact on migrants' daily lives, adjustment processes, family dynamics, cultural adaptation, employment status, and social integration. It is of the utmost importance to gain an understanding of

the challenges posed by depression in migrants in order to develop targeted interventions and support mechanisms that address their mental health needs. Further research and the implementation of adapted interventions are required in order to enhance the well-being of migrants and facilitate their resilience.

Anxiety

It is well documented that exposure to war and other forms of conflict is a significant risk factor for the development of anxiety disorders among migrants. It can be reasonably deduced that these stress factors related to war may serve to increase the prevalence of anxiety disorders among migrants. Furthermore, anti-migrant policies have been linked to increased anxiety in children, precipitating fears of separation from their parents.³⁰ This indicates that the socio-political environment and experiences of discrimination may exacerbate anxiety in migrants, particularly among children. Pfeiffer underscores the observation that trauma-related mental disorders, including anxiety, tend to manifest with greater prevalence in communities that have been affected by war.³¹ Hinchey et al. highlight that exposure to war trauma can result in an increase in anxiety symptoms over time, underscoring the long-term effects of this situation.³² The results of these studies indicate that trauma and discrimination-related stressors are associated with elevated anxiety levels among migrants. In light of these findings, it is imperative to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of war and trauma on anxiety, in order to inform the development of effective interventions and support systems that address the mental health needs of migrants.

The presentation of anxiety disorders in migrants may vary according to a number of factors, including the individual's migration experiences, cultural background, and socio-political context. Acharya et al. discovered that the advent of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic precipitated an increase in anxiety disorders among immigrants aged 25 years and older in South Korea. Such disorders may present with symptoms including excessive worry, fear, and restlessness.³³ Lindegaard et al. reported high levels of anxiety among Arabic-speaking immigrants in Sweden.³⁴ Flores et al. highlighted the existence of a robust correlation between the accumulation of trauma

related to the migration process and the emergence of heightened anxiety symptoms among undocumented Latino immigrants.³⁵ St-Pierre et al. underscored the prevalence of generalized anxiety and panic disorders among individuals with an immigrant background who have been subjected to ethnic discrimination.³⁶ Haro-Ramos and Rodríguez indicate that Latino day laborers in the United States exhibit heightened anxiety symptoms as a consequence of the precarity associated with immigration policy.³⁷

The symptoms of anxiety disorders include worry, fear, restlessness, and physical symptoms. It is of the utmost importance to comprehend and address these symptoms in order to facilitate the implementation of suitable interventions that will bolster the mental well-being of migrant communities.

Anxiety can have a significant impact on migrants' social cohesion and integration processes, which in turn affects their lives and well-being. As Weiss posits, the process of navigating immigration laws can serve to further complicate integration processes, thereby increasing the risk of social isolation and stigmatization.³⁸ Lemon posits that discriminatory immigration policies based on structural racism create barriers to social cohesion by increasing anxiety and depression in Latino families.¹³ Gillespie et al.³⁹ investigated the influence of adverse experiences during childhood on the mental health of immigrants by examining the relationship between social adjustment skills and mental health variables.⁴⁰ To comprehend the significant influence of anxiety on migrants' social adaptation and integration processes, it is essential to establish suitable support systems that facilitate migrants' adjustment to their new communities.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

PTSD is a common occurrence among migrants, frequently resulting from traumatic experiences, conflict, and displacement. It is postulated that war-related traumas and conflict-induced stress may contribute to the development of PTSD symptoms in migrants. The effects of war and trauma serve to increase the risk of PTSD in migrants, thereby underscoring the necessity of addressing mental health concerns and providing support for

migrants. It has been documented that individuals who experience forced displacement due to migration frequently manifest symptoms of PTSD, indicating a significant challenge in coping with the traumatic effects of war and displacement.²⁶

Fel et al. reported that the presence of children was associated with an increased risk of more severe PTSD among civilians involved in the conflict in Ukraine.⁴¹ Anjum et al. observed that women in Ukraine were more susceptible to developing PTSD and other mental health issues in contexts of conflict.⁴² Amone-P'Olak et al. demonstrated that traumatic events may precipitate an exacerbation of PTSD symptoms in war survivors.⁴³ Tinsae conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis, which indicated that the prevalence of PTSD is high among the Ethiopian population who have experienced the impact of war.⁴⁴ Hussein et al. found that exposure to war trauma in Baghdad had a detrimental impact on academic performance among adolescents, increasing the risk of developing PTSD in this age group.⁴⁵ Ainamani et al. reported that women residing in a war zone exhibited heightened PTSD symptoms as a consequence of exposure to traumatic events.⁴⁶ Vignaud et al. asserted that PTSD and major depressive disorder are prevalent among migrants, indicating a substantial prevalence of PTSD symptoms in individuals who have experienced trauma and displacement.⁴⁷

The long-term effects of PTSD can have a significant impact on individuals' mental health, general well-being, and daily functioning. Crosta et al. identified three primary predictors of elevated PTSD symptomatology: low perceived economic stability, high neuroticism, and fear of contagion. Prolonged untreated PTSD can result in significant impairments in social and occupational functioning.⁴⁸ Falasi et al. investigated the long-term psychological consequences of the pandemic on healthcare professionals, underscoring the necessity of comprehending and addressing these effects.⁴⁹ Levi and Moss demonstrated that the prevalence of PTSD and depression remained elevated five years after the Flint, Michigan water crisis. This indicates that environmental catastrophes have a sustained influence on mental health, resulting in the development of psychiatric disorders.⁵⁰

These studies underscore the significance of the long-term consequences of PTSD and highlight the imperative for the development of efficacious strategies for the identification, assessment, and management of these posttraumatic effects.

Limitations

It should be noted that this review is subject to several limitations. First and foremost, the reviewed studies employed disparate methodological approaches and utilized varying sample groups, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, the paucity of studies concentrating on particular regions and populations renders a comprehensive evaluation of the psychological consequences of war and trauma on migrants challenging. These limitations may result in an incomplete understanding of the results and the omission of pertinent variables. For instance, the considerable heterogeneity of migrants from diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds may not have been sufficiently addressed. Future studies may overcome these limitations by employing more homogeneous sample groups and longitudinal research designs. Moreover, an expansion in the number of studies on migrants from disparate regions and cultural backgrounds may facilitate the attainment of more comprehensive and generalizable results.

Conclusion

This review highlights the significant psychological consequences of war and trauma on migrants, with higher rates of depression, anxiety, and PTSD observed within this population. The experiences of violence, displacement, and forced migration contribute to these mental health challenges, with social support, economic hardship, cultural adaptation, and environmental factors further influencing the severity of these effects.

To address these challenges, it is crucial for public health policies to incorporate strategies aimed at supporting migrants' mental health. Key strategies include increasing access to mental health services, strengthening social integration, meeting basic needs, and enhancing social support systems. Additionally, public health initiatives must ensure that migrants have increased access to cultu-

rally appropriate, trauma-informed care and community-based resources.

It may also be beneficial for future research to explore the potential role of artificial intelligence and machine learning in improving the accessibility and effectiveness of mental health interventions for migrants. These technologies could be utilized to develop predictive models for early intervention and improve the personalization of care for migrant populations.

Future research should focus on specific areas, including the mental health of migrant children, second-generation migrants, and the long-term effects of anti-migrant policies. For example, research could investigate the impact of different forms of social support on the mental health of migrant children. Studies examining the challenges and protective factors for second-generation migrants could provide insight into their unique mental health needs. Longitudinal research on the intergenerational transmission of trauma would also enhance understanding of the long-term psychological effects of migration on families, supporting the development of targeted interventions for both parents and children.

Artificial intelligence-supported tools, including ChatGPT 3.5, have been used in the translation, grammatical corrections, and editing process of this study.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript.

Ethics Committee Permission

Since the study is a compilation, ethics committee permission is not required.

Authors' Contributions

Concept/Design: GD. Data Collection and/or Processing: GD. Data analysis and interpretation: GD. Literature Search: GD. Drafting manuscript: GD. Critical revision of manuscript: GD.

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