

Mental Health Effects of Civilians Caused by War-Related Trauma

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I have selected to investigate the relationship between war and the mental health of civilians. This social science issue is significant because understanding the mental health effects of civilians who witness war will lead to improved resources for those civilians. Mental health is important to achieve a good quality of life which does not include mental disorders. Wars greatly impact mental health due to the fact they impact a person's job, family, and environment. Most of these impacts are long-term, lasting years and even through generations.

All of my social science resources share information about studies completed on the mental health effects of civilians who experience war. The differences of the resources are their specifics (some resources study the long-term effects and/or short-term, some provide an overview of the effects, while others focus on one conflict). One source I used was "Mental Health Consequences of War: a Brief Review of Research Findings" which is an article from the World Psychiatry Journal. I found this source when doing a broad search of my research topic. I included this resource because it summarizes the mental health effects on civilians from 12 different countries. This source is different than the others because it compares the effects of war on civilians from all over the world and describes their coping mechanisms. Another source I utilized was "Association of the World War II Finnish Evacuation of Children With Psychiatric Hospitalization in the Next Generation" is from the JAMA Psychiatry Journal. I found this article when searching "effects of war on civilians". This is the only source I used which describes the effects of war on civilians throughout generations. Knowing the effects of civilians can pass down through generations is important. The information tells me the effects of war are long-term and multigenerational. Along with the other sources, I used "Long-term Psychological Distress of Bosnian War Survivors; an 11-year Follow-up of Former Displaced Persons, Returnees, and Stayers" is a journal article from BMC Psychiatry. I found this article when

searching “ effects of war on civilians”. The source provides information on the long-term and short-term effects war has on civilian’s mental health. This source compared the mental health effects between stayers, returnees, and displaced civilians. The sources I found all contribute to my research topic in a unique way.

The social science principles which apply to the relationship between war and the mental health of civilians are social norms, social institutions, social roles, and beliefs and values. Social norms are influenced and changed by war because civilians live in areas where shootings and explosions occur. According to a study, children are greatly impacted by war due to trauma exposure: “...the most prevalent types of trauma exposure for children were witnessing funerals (95%), witness to shooting (83%), seeing injured or dead strangers (67%), and family member injured or killed (62%)” (Murthy, 2006). Considering the trauma exposures children experience, mental health issues present themselves. A common mental health issue children obtain is PTSD: “Among children living in the area of bombardments, 54% suffered from severe, 33.5% from moderate and 11% from mild or doubtful levels of PTSD” (Murthy, 2006). Another example of how social norms are impacted by war is the fact people are forced to leave their homes. Pasic, a Bosnian civilian during the Bosnian War, had to leave his home in Bosnia due to the Serbian army. He said, “‘We were forced to leave our village and run for our lives. It was unpredictable and horrifying for us’...” (Nasa, 2019). Others, typically those who do not leave their homes, tend to live in areas with people who have guns. Another study concluded 39.8% of participants said they lived alongside members of armed groups and 46.8% had low mood (Bell, 2012). The way social norms change during war causes mental health disorders such as PTSD and depression. Frounfelker found 17.3% of participants who were civilians in a region of war had a lifetime prevalence of major depressive disorder (Frounfelker, 2018). War has the ability to

normalize violence and death to citizens exposed to it. The social institutions which effect the mental health of civilians due to war are government, family, economy, religion, and education. Government is responsible for deciding to engage in war, providing resources to their citizens, and keeping its citizens safe; this institution may collapse during war. Lebanon, for example, has been in conflict for decades and the government has not provided sufficient resources: “It is estimated that in 2006 no more than 50 psychiatrists were practicing in Lebanon in the private and nongovernmental sector. A regional bias toward Beirut and Mount Lebanon was also noted” (El-Khoury, 2019). The mental health effects of war also impact the entire family in various ways. Specifically, the mental health of a mother effects the mental health of their child: “The level of depressive symptomatology in the mother was found to be the best predictor of her child's reported morbidity” (Murthy, 2006). Furthermore, war has the ability to impact families throughout generations. Torsten’s study found that, “A childhood exposure that increased the risk of psychiatric illness in adulthood was also associated with increased risk of psychiatric illness in the next generation” (Torsten, 2018). Family members are also lost due to war. Pasic experienced loss of family members during the Bosnian War: “...Serb forces instructed villagers to form three lines and lay down in the mud... soldiers instructed women and children to get up... He never saw his father or uncle again, and their bodies were never recovered” (Nasa, 2019). The economy is impacted during war and impacts a civilian’s financial situation. People who are displaced during wars or leave their country entirely effect their countries’ economy. The number of displaced people has increased due to conflicts, “The World Bank estimates that over 1 billion people worldwide live in regions affected by armed conflict [[1]], while the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that 60 million civilians were forcibly displaced from their homes due to war and political violence as of 2015...” (Frounfelker, 2018).

A person who was displaced may also continue to have mental health issues: “Over time, psychological symptom levels decreased in persons who had stayed in the war zone, persisted in former internally displaced persons, and increased in former refugees” (Comtesse, 2019). The civilian will have mental health issues if their financial situation is difficult. The economy decreasing potentially causes civilians to become unemployed, and this added strain may cause individuals to seek ways to cope. People who experience the trauma of war may seek religion or strengthen their connection with their existing religion. An individual’s connection with religion may benefit or harm their mental health. For some people, religion helps them cope with their trauma: “Studies are consistent in showing the value of both physical support and psychological support in minimizing the effects of war-related traumas, as well as the role of religion and cultural practices as ways of coping with the conflict situations” (Murthy, 2006) For others, religion may make their mental health worse: People who increased their religiosity after being held hostage in Lebanon also exhibited PTSD or other mental health disorders more often than others. (Murthy, 2006). Education is impacted due to children having to continue to learn while living in war zones. “Children living in these zones and exposed to the war discourse can also exhibit anxiety symptoms with impact on schooling and social functioning (El-Khoury, 2019). Mental health issues in children is linked to negative behavior and worse grades. Parents in Palestine, for example, “... reported aggressive behaviour among their children, 38% noted bad school results...” (Murthy, 2006). Others turn to education as a way to cope with their trauma. However, education does not always have a positive effect. People who turned to years of education after being held hostage in Lebanon also exhibited PTSD or other mental health disorders more often than others. (Murthy, 2006). Social roles are influenced by war because societies structures change. In Cambodia, war caused communities to change. “Traditional

healers (monks, mediums, traditional birth attendants) who played an important role in maintaining the mental health of communities in the past, have lost their designated positions in the community following the conflict” (Murthy, 2006). Gender roles also can change due to war. In Sri Lanka, “The breakdown of the Tamil society led to women taking on more responsibilities, which in turn made them more vulnerable to stress” (Murthy, 2006). An individual’s beliefs and values may change due to war. Some civilians may have feelings of anger and hatred toward certain groups of people who they may consider the enemy of their war. During the Bosnian War, Bosnians feelings towards Serbs changed. When surveying Bosnians, “Men (89%) and women (90%) expressed strong feelings of hatred towards the Serbs, with 44% of men and 33% of women stating that they would act on these feelings” (Murthy, 2006). People who lose loved ones during war tend to value respect for those who lost their lives. Pasic lost his Uncle and Father in the Bosnian War. Pasic explained, “‘As human beings, as witnesses and survivors, we deserve to bury our loved ones,’... ‘We ask for nothing more than to be able to bury them with dignity and respect’” (Nasa, 2019). There are numerous factors that influence the mental health of civilians who experience war-related trauma.

The audience who would be interested in my issue would be medical personnel, politicians, international aid workers, military, psychologists, and countries’ governments who are currently dealing with conflicts. My audience would be interested because in an article, which advocates for refugee resources, the best team would consist of “...doctors, lawyers, social workers, case managers, advocates, community leaders, cultural brokers, therapists, and refugee clients...” (Aten, 2021). When talking to my audience, I will use anecdotes to help the audience connect to the civilians going through mental issues from war. It may be difficult for the audience to connect with people who are living or have lived in war zones. One example of

an anecdote I would use is the story about Pasic. Pasic describes how his village was attacked by the Bosnian Serb Army. His father and uncle, along with other men from his village, were murdered. He testified against General Ratko Mladic who was responsible for the 1995 genocide of 7,000 Muslim men and boys in Srebrenica (Nasa, 2019). I do not believe my topic has confusing terminology, so I shouldn't need to define or simplify my wording. Although, my topic does contain many statistics which explain the percentages of the participants in the study had certain mental health issues. In the article, "Long-term Psychological Distress of Bosnian War Survivors: an 11-year Follow-up of Former Displaced Persons, Returnees, and Stayers", the study concluded 22% of Bosnians had mood disorders and 35% had PTSD 11 years after the Yugoslav wars. After 3 years, 43% of Bosnians had depression (Comtesse, 2019). Considering my topic explores wars and their impacts on civilians, I will be providing some historic information to put my findings into context. For example, when talking about Lebanon, I will explain how Lebanon has been at war since its independence in 1943. There was a civil war during 1975 and 1990. In 2006, Hezbollah operatives captured Israeli soldiers while attempting to exchange for Arab prisoners, this event caused Israeli retaliation and war started (El-Khoury, 2019). Lastly, I will use visuals to connect everything together. I will show pictures of civilians in the areas of conflict. By utilizing anecdotes, simplifying statistics, explaining history, and showing visuals, I will be able to connect with my audience on my social science issue.

A research question related to my issue would be which resources are the most beneficial to civilians who experience war? Resources through organizations, therapy, family, and/or community support, etc.? There is a list of North American resources (Refugee Mental Resource Network), international resources (World Health Organization), and cultural and language-specific resources (Community Interpreter Services) (Aten, 2021). However, studies need to be

conducted in order to discover which resources are the most beneficial to refugees. If a social scientists were to continue researching my question, they could provide a list of resources for refugees and conduct a study to conclude which resources were the most helpful. A psychologist could study which type of therapy is most beneficial to helping a civilian. A sociologist could consider different cultures and which resources are most beneficial to certain cultures. An anthropologist can study which resources were used throughout time and how they have evolved. They can also study if a resource used centuries ago would be helpful today. More investigation into the issue is needed in order to provide the most valuable resources for civilians in need.

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