

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](https://www.sciencedirect.com)

The Lancet Regional Health - Americas

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/lana

Letter

Mental health in Colombia: Amid a global virus, tear gases and rifle shots



Jairo M. Gonzalez-Diaz^{1,2,3,*}, Rodrigo Córdoba¹, Diana C. Zamora⁴

¹ UR Center for Mental Health – CERSAME, School of Medicine and Health Sciences, Universidad del Rosario, Bogotá, Colombia

² Barcelona Clinic Schizophrenia Unit, Neurosciences Institute, Institution: Hospital Clínic - Universidad de Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain

³ Clínica Nuestra Señora de la Paz, Bogotá, Colombia

⁴ School of Medicine and Health Sciences, Universidad del Rosario, Bogotá, Colombia

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 10 June 2021

Revised 4 August 2021

Accepted 4 August 2021

Available online 21 August 2021

Amid the most intense peak of COVID-19 cases, the spark of two unsuccessful tax and healthcare system reforms fueled a national mobilization unprecedented in Colombia's recent history. Since its beginning on April 28th, the government's response has led to an escalation of violent clashes between protesters and both police and military forces. Multilateral non-governmental organizations have spoken out against the violent repression that has led to the death of at least 18 people and numerous complaints of censorship, disappearances, and physical and sexual assaults [1,2]. One of those with the most significant impact has been the suicide of a 17-year-old girl who alleged being sexually abused by police officers [3].

Demonstrations and conflicts between protesters and state forces have been concentrated in marginalized areas of Cali, the third most populous city in the country. As a result, the entire population, especially those in the most critical areas, have been exposed to very intense unease and uncertainty, giving rise to sadness, helplessness, hopelessness, and anguish. As the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) recently reported, police and military members have also been affected by this confrontation. Some of them have died victims of firebombs while staying inside police stations [4]. The challenges and stress both the general population and public force members are experiencing could trigger mental health problems, which, in turn, could exceed the consequences of the pandemic itself.

The fact that protests themselves can negatively impact people's mental health is well known, especially in their epicenter, with

outcomes similar to those described in natural disasters, terrorist attacks, or armed conflict [5]. In addition, due to the strong impact generated by the pandemic in 2020, the Ministry of Health defined mental health as a priority, and efforts around it were intensified [6]. Unfortunately, however, Colombia is not fully prepared to cope with the mental health consequences of the pandemic, being previously affected by a long-lasting armed conflict and chronic inequality [7].

A 2001 study estimated a total of 855 psychiatrists in Colombia [8]. Still, nowadays, it is suggested that there are approximately 1200 psychiatrists across the country: 2.5 psychiatrists for every 100000 inhabitants, far less than the minimum proportion recommended by WHO. Historically, this chronic lack of mental health professionals in a highly fragmented health system [9] has fallen short when meeting the population's demands. During the last weeks of protests, vulnerable communities have been exposed to aggression, human rights violations, physical injuries, and arrests [4], either directly, through social networks, or listening to close testimonies. Given the expected high impact on the mental health of the general population, enabling access to diagnosis and treatment, ensuring continuity of care for mental health service users, and paying attention to new cases of mental disorders in high-risk individuals [10] should become a public health priority in the public agenda.

Considering the aforementioned, health professionals must attend to the immediate consequences and be attentive to the mental health results in the medium and long term. Joint work with government entities is then required, seeking the comprehensiveness of the mental health system and the preparation of long-term strategies to mitigate the psychosocial effects that this situation is generating. Public health policies must head towards a more com-

* Corresponding Author. Tel: (+57) 322 277 64 50; Carrera 69 N° 12 - 75.

E-mail addresses: jairom.gonzalez@urosario.edu.co (J.M. Gonzalez-Diaz), rodrinel@yahoo.com (R. Córdoba), dianac.zamora@urosario.edu.co (D.C. Zamora).

prehensive and integrative mental health system, as programs for promoting, protecting, and improving mental health in both communities and specialized care centers are still scarce and difficult to access.

Contributors

J.G. conceived the main idea and wrote the first draft. After consecutive discussions, J.G., R.C. and D.Z. contributed to the writing of the final manuscript equally.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interests related to this work.

Funding

None.

References

- [1] Daniels JP. UN condemns violent repression of Colombia protests after at least 18 die. *The Guardian* 2021 May 21 [Internet][cited 2021 May 11]; Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/may/04/colombia-protests-violence-deaths-missing-un>.
- [2] Tucker D. Colombia: Concerning reports of disappearances and sexual violence against protesters. *Amnesty International* 2021 May 7 [Internet][cited 2021 May 11]; Available from: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/05/colombia-preocupan-las-denuncias-de-desapariciones-y-violencia-sexual-contra-manifestantes/>.
- [3] Alsema A. Teenage suicide sparks deadly uprising in southwest Colombia. *Colombia reports* 2021 [Internet]May 15th [cited 2021 July 18th]; Available from: <https://colombiareports.com/teenage-suicide-sparks-deadly-uprising-in-southwest-colombia/>.
- [4] Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR)Observaciones y recomendaciones: Visita de trabajo a Colombia. *Organización de los Estados Americanos* [Internet]. 2021 Jun 1 [cited 2021 Jul 18]; Available from: http://www.oas.org/es/cidh/informes/pdfs/ObservacionesVisita_CIDH_Colombia_SPA.pdf.
- [5] Ni MY, Kim Y, McDowell I, Wong S, Qiu H, Wong IOL, et al. Mental health during and after protests, riots and revolutions: A systematic review. *Aust N Z J Psychiatry* 2020 Mar 1;54(3):232–43 [Internet][cited 2021 May 11].
- [6] MinsaludMinsalud ratifica su compromiso con la salud mental de los colombianos. *Ministerio de salud y protección social* 2020 Oct 10 [Internet][cited 2021 Jun 5]; Available from: <https://www.minsalud.gov.co/Paginas/Minsalud-ratifica-su-compromiso-con-la-salud-mental-de-los-colombianos.aspx>.
- [7] Gonzalez-Diaz JM, Lozano-Lesmes L, Campo-Arias A. Comment on "Mental health: why it still matters in the midst of a pandemic". *Braz J Psychiatry* 2020;42:451.
- [8] Rosselli D, Otero A, Heller D, Calderón C, Moreno S, Pérez A. Estimación de la oferta de médicos especialistas en Colombia con el método de captura-recaptura. *Revista panamericana de salud pública* 2001;9:393–8.
- [9] Inter-American Development Bank. Comparative Review of Health System Integration in Selected Countries in Latin America. [Internet]. 2014 January 1st [cited 2021 July 17th]; Available from: <https://publications.iadb.org/publications/english/document/Comparative-Review-of-Health-System-Integration-in-Selected-Countries-in-Latin-America.pdf>.
- [10] Moreno C, Wykes T, Galderisi S, Nordentoft M, Crossley N, Jones N, et al. How mental health care should change as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Lancet Psychiatry* Sep 2020;7(9):813–24 [Internet].