



Research Week 2022

Childhood adverse experiences and PTSD symptoms among perinatal people during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Pope, K., Gustafsson, H., Sullivan, E., Orvis, J., Mackiewicz Seghete, K., Engel, A., Young, E., Graham, A.

popek@ohsu.edu
INSPIRE Research Lab

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic presents a unique global stressor, in which the development of mental illness may be more likely for some populations. Pregnancy and postpartum represent times of heightened vulnerability to stress due to biological changes, increased neural plasticity, and unique physical and emotional demands. The aim of this study was to evaluate how pre-existing factors, including childhood adversity, race, ethnicity, education, and prior experiences of trauma impact development of PTSD symptoms, in response to the stress of the COVID-19 pandemic among perinatal people. Pregnant or postpartum people (N=290) were recruited beginning in April of 2020 to complete a series of online surveys measuring presence and frequency of PTSD symptoms (questions adapted from the PTSD Checklist for DSM-5, or PCL-5), basic demographic information, childhood adversity (Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Questionnaire), and sociodemographic factors. The CDC has grouped the ACE Questionnaire into three categories - abuse experiences, neglect experiences, and household challenges. The ACE was scored as a summed total and by the number of different categories of childhood adverse experiences (ACE variety, 0-3). Two multiple regression analyses were run with either the ACE total or ACE variety, as well as race, education, pregnancy status (whether an individual was pregnant or postpartum), current treatment of mental health concerns, and weeks since the pandemic began regressed on mean PCL-5 symptoms. Higher education was significantly associated with lower PTSD symptoms, suggesting it served as a protective factor. In contrast, greater ACE variety and higher total ACE score were significantly associated with higher PTSD symptoms, indicating experiences of adversity during childhood served as a risk factor. Further analysis will focus on including longitudinal data, examining the relative contributions of childhood adversity versus traumatic experiences in adulthood, and examining which prior experiences interact with specific pandemic related stressors to predict emergence of PTSD symptoms over time.