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Mental Health among College Students during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Longitudinal Study

Jillian Meyer
DePauw University

Lizzie Bell
DePauw University

Michael E. Roberts PhD
DePauw University, michaelroberts@depauw.edu

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Mental Health among College Students during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Longitudinal Study.

Jillian Meyer, Lizzie Bell, Dr. Michael Roberts

Intro:

- College students faced extreme changes during the 2020-2021 academic year.
- We examined the impact of college students' living situations, class experiences, perceived risk of COVID, and other factors between the Fall 2020 and Spring 2021 semesters. The PHQ-8, GAD-7, and PSS respectively measured symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress.

Hypotheses:

- Females will score higher on the mental health scales than males
- Time spent on social and news media will positively correlate with scores on the mental health scales
- Those living off campus will have higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression compared to those living on campus
- Participants will feel a greater sense of belonging to their class communities for in person classes compared to fully online classes

Methods:

- Two online surveys with 283 participants in the Fall and 400 participants in the Spring. (Prolific, 2020; Google Forms LLC, 2020)
- Recorded gender, race, age, living situation, college class experiences, perceived risk of COVID, and more
- PSS scale measured perceived stress
- GAD-7 scale measured generalized anxiety
- PHQ-8 scale measured depression levels
- When comparing gender reportings, those who identified as non-binary were excluded from the analysis due to low numbers (n=10 for Fall, n=4 for Spring).



Major Findings:

- Stress, anxiety, and depression symptoms were near clinical thresholds for college participants. These symptoms were especially high for female students both during the Fall and Spring data collection.
- Between groups ANOVAs showed no significant difference in anxiety, depression, or perceived stress based on whether students were living on-campus or off-campus. However, students' low satisfaction with their living situation was associated with more perceived stress and more symptoms of anxiety and depression.



Results

- Independent samples t-tests in the Fall indicate that female college students (n = 135) scored significantly higher than male students (n = 115) on measures of depression ($t(248) = 2.97, p = .003, d = 0.38$), anxiety ($t(248) = 4.74, p < .001, d = .60$), and stress ($t(248) = 3.53, p < .001, d = 0.45$). These scores were near clinical thresholds. Significantly higher scores among female college students compared to male students continued in the Spring on measures of depression ($t(372)=3.63, p=.009, d=.27$), anxiety ($t(372)=3.67, p=.002, d=.38$), and stress ($t(372)=2.95, p=.003, d=.31$).
- In the Fall, the amount of time spent on social media had significant positive correlations with depression ($r(259) = 0.19$), anxiety ($r(259) = 0.28$), and perceived stress ($r(259) = 0.24$). The Fall amount of time spent on news media also had significant positive correlations with depression ($r(259) = 0.16$) and anxiety ($r(259) = 0.13$) but not with perceived stress ($r(259) = 0.08$). The amount of time spent on social media continued to have a significant positive correlations in the Spring with depression ($r(378)=.170$) and anxiety ($r(378)=.170$). However, there was no significant correlation with perceived stress ($r(378)=.091$). There was no significant relationship between amount of time spent on the news media and depression, anxiety, and stress.
- For living situation in both the Fall and Spring, between groups ANOVAs showed that students' living situations – on-campus, off-campus within commuting distance, and off-campus beyond commuting distance – did not correspond to any significant differences in anxiety, depression, or perceived stress.
- Respondents answered their sense of belonging for each class format they encountered in the Fall (fully online: n = 250, M = 1.87; hybrid: n = 130, M = 2.28; in-person: n = 106, M = 2.74).

Future Research:

- Impact of private vs public colleges and their responses to the pandemic.
- More representative sample