



Exposure to Violence and its
Relationship to Mental Health
among University Students in
West Bank/ Palestine

2024

Background

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This research paper discusses the mental health of Palestinian university students, investigating the unique challenges and struggles that these young people face (including exposure to violence, restriction of movement, arrest, detention, relocation, lack of resources, etc.) and that increase the risk of negative mental health outcomes (including depression, anxiety, PTSD, hopelessness, addiction, radicalism, etc.).

The research did not use any psychological assessment tools but rather used the impact of dramatic life events that was designed to predict the dramatic life events that Palestinian in general and university students in particular especial with intensive conflict not only in Gaza, but also in the West Bank. The West Bank experience nightly military raids, arrests, and killing in many camps and cities, particularly in the North part of the East Bank. Whereby, the total arrests so far reached a total of almost 7,500 pensioners and the killing of around 500 persons since the event of October 7th. The research sample is from students from Al- Najah university who are mostly from Nablus, Jenin, Tulkam and the surrounding areas the site of the most force army activities.

Context

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines mental health as “a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community”¹;

The Mental health of Palestinians has been described as among the lowest in the world, with over half of Palestinian adults meeting the diagnostic threshold for depressive symptoms and a significant portion of Palestinians experiencing mental distress and anxiety. Human insecurity due to the political conflict, chronic economic constraints, and prolonged exposure to violence were positively associated with depressive symptoms, high depression, and suicidal ideation among Palestinian adults². In addition, low levels of quality of life were found to be associated with feelings of hopelessness and depressive symptoms among Palestinians in the West Bank.

Moreover, for Palestinians’ mental health is expected to be negatively affected due to more than 74 years of military violence. The overall population are still experiencing several traumatic in a

¹ World Health Organization (2001). Strengthening mental health promotion. Fact sheet No. 220. Geneva: World Health Organization

² Qouta S, El-Sarraj E (2004) Prevalence of PTSD among Palestinian children in Gaza Strip. ArabPsyNet Journal 2:8–15

war-torn environment characterized by military invasions, detentions, land confiscations, house evictions, and demolitions, being physically injured, loss of loved ones, exposure to an immediate risk of life, and injury of a family member or friend³.

Under the justification of protecting Israelis from Palestinian violence, a massive wall is being constructed between Israel and the West Bank, incorporating areas of the West Bank into Israel. Hundreds of Israeli military checkpoints have been established, accompanied by curfews, invasions, detentions, lethal force against civilians, land confiscations, and house demolitions, all of which have made ordinary life almost impossible. These events entail the systematic collective punishment of the Palestinian population living in the occupied Palestinian territory⁴.

Palestinian university students experience several challenges and difficulties, mainly characterized by environmental stressors (e.g., militarization, poverty, lack of employment opportunities, cultural pressures, future insecurity etc.) and fewer positive social outlets due to the restrictions on movement between communities, lack of recreational facilities, destruction of social networks, and cultural⁵. Violation of justice and equality, territorial fragmentation, building restrictions, cultural pressures, and future insecurity compromise the Palestinians' mental health. Destruction of social networks, fewer positive social outlets due to the restrictions on movement between communities, and lack of recreational facilities are additional burdens for the Palestinian population

Exposure to violence is a significant risk factor for the development of psychopathology in children and youth as it has been found to be related to aggression, academic difficulties and symptoms of post-traumatic stress, anxiety and depression⁶. Protracted exposure to violence may lead young people to feel as though their safety and that of family and friends is constantly jeopardized⁷. Violence exposure can take the form of personal victimization, as a witness to

³ Bryant RA, Edwards B, Creamer M, O'Donnell M, Forbes D, Felmingham.KL, Van Hooff M (2018) The effect of post-traumatic stress disorder on refugees' parenting and their children's mental health: A cohort study. *The Lancet Public Health*. 3(5):e249–e258

⁴ Giacaman, R., Khatib, R., Shabaneh, L., Ramlawi, A., Sabri, B., Sabatinelli, G., ... Laurance, T. (2009). Health status and health services in the occupied Palestinian territory. *The Lancet*, 373(9666), 837–849. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736\(09\)60107-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736(09)60107-0)

⁵ Mahamid, F. A., & Bdier, D. (2021). Aggressiveness and life satisfaction as predictors for video game addiction among Palestinian adolescents. *Journal of Concurrent Disorders*,3(2),

⁶ Trickett PK, Durán L, Horn JL. Community violence as it affects child development: issues of definition. *Clin Child Fam Psychol Rev*. 2003 Dec;6(4):223–36. PMID:14719635

⁷ Dubow EF, Boxer P, Huesmann LR, Shikaki K, Landau S, Gvirsman SD, et al. Exposure to conflict and violence across contexts: relations to adjustment among Palestinian children. *J Clin Child Adolesc Psychol*. 2010;39(1):103–16. doi:10.1080/15374410903401153

violence, or vicariously hearing about violence from others. In a study of nearly 2000 14–17-year-olds in the West Bank and Gaza, children with greater exposure to conflict-related violence had greater post-traumatic distress and more somatic complaints, with girls having more somatic complaints than boys⁸.

Methodology

The study aimed at exploring the effect of the ongoing protected conflict on the mental health of University students. Qualitative methods was used to access personal accounts, capturing how individuals talk about a lived experience, The use of conduct a series of individual in-depth interviews, seeking participants' views on topics of their life experience and exposure to Israeli violence and their mental health. TO assess the type of exposure to traumatic events they experience, 9 traumatic events checklist was prepared and data was collected form all participants. The interview was to explore the relation between their traumatic experience and the state of their mental health.

Participants

The study was conducted in Nablus, West Bank with Al-Najah University Students, The study was conducted during a challenging period of political conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, and the genocidal war going in Gaza since October 7th. Participants in the study were 60 including 25 males and 35 females. The majority, 68.9%, of participants was from urban regions, 19.3 percent were from rural regions, and 11.8 per cent were from Palestinian refugee camps. The Participants aged between 18-23 years.

Results and Discussion

Exposure to Traumatic Events

⁸ Abdeen Z, Qasrawi R, Nabil S, Shaheen M. Psychological reactions to Israeli occupation: Findings from the national study of school-based screening in Palestine. *Int J Behavioral Development*. 2008 Jul;32(4):290–7. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0165025408092220>

| Traumatic Events | No. | % |
|---|-----|------|
| Watching the genocidal war on Gaza | 60 | 100 |
| Witnessing bombardment of people and houses nearby where you live | 40 | 66.7 |
| Witnessing the demolition of your house | 5 | 8.0 |
| Witnessing the demolition of a friend//neighbor house | 11 | 18.3 |
| Inhalation of Tear Gas | 49 | 81.7 |
| Hearing of a friend/relative being shot | 28 | 46.7 |
| Witnessing the shooting of a friend/relative | 17 | 28 |
| Hearing of a killing of a friend/relative | 10 | 16.6 |
| Witnessing the Killing of a friend/relative | 8 | 13 |
| Witnessing the arrest of a friend/family member | 55 | 91.6 |
| Being shot at by rubber or real bullets | 15 | 25 |

These are the most dramatic life event experienced by students not only after October 7th, but since it's a proctors conflict. Some of the students experienced at some point in their life. Which caused a lifetime of stress and depression and many mental health problems the least is post dramatic stress (PTDS).

It is worth to mention in the context, that the sample showed a marked gender difference of the impact of the drama. Women were focal in expressing their feeling and the stress they suffered. This is a feminine character. On the other hand, men were more reserved in expressing their distress. This can be due to the social stigma that people with mental health problems, face in traditional society as the case with Palestine. More importantly, being masculine men means that you do not show any variability. This led to a destructive behavior towards one self like the abuse of drugs or towards other like violent behavior especially against family members.

According to the data, the most traumatic experience for student was watching the events of the war unfolding in Gaza. War characterized by genocidal attempts by the Israeli forces to kill all Palestinians or forced displacement of all Palestinians. When asked, how that made they feel. One male students said

“Watching what is happening in Gaza make me frustrated and angry at the whole world for watching unmoved by the mass killing of children, babies, mothers and elderly. It makes me depressed”

Another male student said

“I feel guilty, very guilty for just living. Feel helpless for not being able to do anything to help the Palestinians in Gaza”

A third female student said

“I can’t sleep or eat or go out with my friends, all the time images of starving kids, babies, mothers and all the people hunts me”

A fourth female student was more vocal and stressed

“I have nightmares, every time a close my eyes I start to hear warplanes flying above our house. Immediately I run to my parents’ room and get into bed with them. I am so scared that I will lose my parents due to bombing. I keep telling myself that is happening in Gaza far from us, but I can’t feel safe because it’s happening here near my house in Jenin, Tulkarm and Nablus camps”.

From the reaction of the students, it was apparent that these students are stressed and depressed watching the atrocious war in Gaza. They feel unsafe, guilty stress and some even have nightmares because of continuously being bombarded with cruel images of the people in Gaza. War and structural violence also contribute to overall traumatic reality in which Palestinians are trying ti adapted to life threating social environment in general

The second most stressful life experience is witnessing the arrest of a relative or a friend, when asked about their reaction or feeling toward this experience, female students show a high rate of stress and outrage. One female student summed up the fear, the helplessness, and the loss of security and safety most students feel at their own home as she remarked, after witnessing the arrest of her brother from home,

“The Israeli army came to our house in the middle of the night; they forced open the front door and came in in full force armed as if they are in a battle field. We are asleep waken up by this massive sound to find out soldiers standing in our bedroom hovering over us with their machine guns, I was very scared I looked around looking for my father. He was standing their surrounded by soldiers with machines guns pointed at him. He looked helpless and ashamed because he could not protect us. Since that night, I cannot sleep well, several times at night I would wake up, scared, sweeting and shaking. No one should feel scared in his own house”

Many other students echoed these remakes, especially those who had firsthand experience of seeing a friend/relative being arrested, while all shared nightly fear, anxiety and not feeling safe, others expressed their fear of night fall, they expressed that they prefer daytime over nighttime. Nights for many brings with it the humiliation of family, the taken away some family member, and all the insecurity and loss of safety all caused by the invasions of sanctity and safety of their home by the army of the occupying power. They felt powerless and pervasive sense of inability to

control own space can trigger depressive thoughts and anxiety. Moreover, the sense of insecurity as indicated above; significantly affect the students psychological functioning and mental health. Negative effects are associated with the traumatic experience that creases the stress that student experienced which increases mental distress and individual suffering in conditions characterized by ongoing social trauma.

Witnessing or hearing of a shooting of a relative or a friend, was a life-changing event for many-experienced high level of distress and stress. Some experienced feeling of guilt, feeling guilty for living where their friend/relative lost their lives in a split of second. One male student who witnessed his friend shot while they were walking home.

“ Me and Ahamd have been a lifelong friends, we grew up together went to the same school, and when I went to University he had to get a job to help taking care of his family, His father was sick and unable to work. That night we met for coffee, after that we were walking home talking and laughing, when an army jeep came out of nowhere, the guys in the neighborhood started to throw stones at the army/ the army reaction was to start shooting at everything and at everyone. A stray bullet hit Ahamd and one minute we were walking and talking and a scorned later he was laying there lifeless dronish in his blood. At that very moment, I wished it were me who was laying there; he did not deserve that to happen to him, I feel so guilty and ashamed that I let him die like that. I lost my best friend but his family lost not only their beloved son but their only Breadwinner”

Trauma is widespread among Palestinians youths, this peculiarity of the complex violence and armed conflict, effecting the trauma experienced by Palestinians, is marked by the chronic of ‘post’ conditions. In fact, Palestinian youths are enmeshed in distressing reality where the trauma is ongoing, multiple, multigenerational and historical. Hence, this Chronic violence and direct exposure to Israeli army brutality which creates a sense of pervasive insecurity feeling of existential anxiety.

CONCLUSION

This short research study, as many previous studies conducted with university students, indicate a high prevalence of mental health problems among university students generally. Young adults entering university have to face and adapt to a new and challenging social dynamics, which makes them vulnerable to developing mental health problems. However, the case of Palestinian university students is more complicated, since they face ongoing traumatic life events resulting from the occupation that can lead to depression, anxiety, and PTSD. Under military rule, Palestinian university students have endured chronic exposure to political violence, oppression, subjugation, and lack of freedom. Generations of these students have suffered human rights violations, including arbitrary arrest,

displacement, restricted movement between areas .Further research is required to continue to better understand mental health issues and their associated factors among Palestinian university students, the difficulties and challenges they face, and the sources of resiliency, well-being and other personality factors that may help them to deal.

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ii This research was supervised by Dr. Jamileh Abu-Duhou and conducted by four nursing students from Al-Najah University. Namely, Khalid Al awarda; Ayyash Aleqrah, Loui Sawada and Hussam beni Odeha