

Does conflict-related violence affect people's mental health?

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In principle, the answer to this question might seem an obvious “yes”. Conflict harms not only physical but also mental health. Violence due to conflict can directly affect mental health by increasing stress and anxiety levels, or indirectly by encouraging substance abuse, such as harmful alcohol consumption. This might be especially true in long-running conflicts. However, robust research examining these relationships to provide a clear-cut answer to this question is scarce, so our work aimed to fill this gap. Our research explored the Colombian case which, after six decades of civil conflict, signed a decisive peace agreement with its Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC) in December 2016. We wanted to generate robust evidence on how conflict violence affected people's mental health and better understand two critical hypotheses. First,

that people exposed to conflict-related violence may abuse alcohol consumption as a coping mechanism, which in turn is likely to impact their mental health. Second, that after conflict de-escalation, mental health may not necessarily improve and can perhaps even deteriorate, given the new social and economic conditions that affect people's day-to-day lives.

Studying these propositions is challenging because the experience of conflict is, naturally, not random across individuals. This makes it difficult to analyse with certainty the impact of conflict on mental health as many other factors may also have an influence. Also, collecting or accessing data before or during confrontations can be an obstacle to undertaking good research. To address these challenges, we collected retrospective data from 2014 and 2018 (before and after the peace agreement) from the same respondent. We also combined different econometric approaches to isolate the causal effect of conflict violence exposure on mental health by excluding other potential influences and exploring the role of harmful alcohol consumption.

Our results indicated no evidence of conflict-violence affecting people's mental health two years after the peace accord, although we found more generally that mental health had deteriorated over time among the Colombian population. We also did not find that alcohol consumption was a pathway explaining this relationship. However, we found that some social and economic factors play a protective role against developing mental health disorders. Particularly, we find suggestive evidence that being married helps to guard against such conditions.

Our research fills significant gaps in this literature and leads to two key recommendations for mental health policy in Colombia. First, mental health care should be given more policy attention, especially at the regional level. Second, improvement of people's socioeconomic conditions should be considered when designing and introducing policies to reduce the health burden of the victims of conflict. Rebuilding state institutions and reinstating the provision of effective public services, including health care, should be a core part of the implementation of ceasefires and peace agreements in conflict settings.

Read the full paper in [SSM-Population Health](#).

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