

Assessing the impact of COVID-19 on the health of college students in Kashmir division of Jammu and Kashmir, India

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Abstract: COVID-19 pandemic has affected the health of everyone, be it physical, social or mental. Due to its rapid spread and no controlling factors in the form of drugs, human health is at a high risk. At present the number of COVID-19 positive cases has crossed one lakh mark in Jammu and Kashmir. The present study was carried out in order to assess the impact of COVID-19 on the overall health of college going students of Kashmir division of the UT of Jammu and Kashmir, India. A structured questionnaire was used in order to collect information from college going students through various online modes. Various parameters were selected in order to assess the impacts of COVID-19 on the physical and mental health of students. The study revealed that due to lockdown and lack of outdoor activities, students were facing higher levels of anxiety. A statistical analysis of the collected data was also carried out and the results revealed that due to the pandemic the anxiety, fear and depression levels in students have witnessed a significant increase which can lead to certain psychological issues if not intervened at proper time.

Key Words: COVID-19, Kashmir, College, Mental health, Statistical analysis.

1. INTRODUCTION:

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), corona viruses are a family of viruses that cause illnesses ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and the Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS). As of November 03, 2021, more than 5 million people have died of COVID-19 worldwide. Countries around the world are jostling to stop the spread of the coronavirus pandemic (Jacob, et al. 2020). Due to the rapid spread of COVID-19, there is not only the risk of death but also psychological pressure. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have been highly heterogeneous (Aucejo, et. al. 2020). The effects of COVID-19 outbreak have affected almost all sectors of the society with education as no exception. COVID-19 pandemic has affected the health of everyone, be it physical, social or mental. Due to its rapid spread and no controlling factors in the form of drugs, human health is at a high risk. Total number of COVID-19 positive cases as on June 23, 2021 in Jammu and Kashmir were 3,12,584. The pandemic has the potential to affect college students physically, academically, financially and psychologically. In order to prevent widespread transmission of the COVID-19 virus, higher educational institutions rapidly switched from in-person to online learning (Gewin, 2020). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is tracking the impact of the pandemic on education. The 2019-20 coronavirus pandemic has affected educational systems worldwide (Jacob, et al. 2020). Students are a population group that has experienced dramatic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and therefore huge changes to their everyday lives and, perhaps even more alarmingly, to their prospects for their immediate and distant future. Physically closing educational institutions proved to be an efficient way of minimising the spread of the virus, yet it has led to many challenges (Owusu-Fordjour, et al. 2020 and Aslam, 2020) for both students and teachers (Aristovnik, et al. 2020). Students face an increasingly uncertain environment with the transition to online learning which may have affected their academic performance, educational plans and expectations about future employment (Aucejo, et. al. 2020).

The pandemic has had a great impact on higher education students practices regarding academic work and life, and social life (Aristovnik, et al. 2020). The switch to online learning, particularly in courses that were not originally designed for on-line delivery likely has increased stress among students. Courses designed to include high levels of interaction and hands-on experiences such as practicals and labs have a clear disadvantage in regards to the evaluation of students (Sahu, 2020). The mental health of college students has been a rising concern with a significant number of students experiencing psychological distress (ACHA, 2020). Mental health issues can affect their academic performance and social interactions. The rapid spread of COVID-19 and social distancing measures imposed are expected to further affect the mental health of the population including college students (Kecojevic, et al. 2020). The lockdowns affected the lifestyles and social bondings which increased levels of anxiety.

1.1. OBJECTIVE:

The aim of the study is to assess the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on student life of college students in Kashmir division of Jammu and Kashmir, India and to suggest some ways out. It also attempts to assess the levels of mental health burden among the college students due to the outbreak of COVID-19 and presents some recommendations concerning how students can be supported during this crisis.

1.2. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY:

In light of growing concerns related to the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of vulnerable groups (Holmes, et. al. 2020) there is an urgent need for research to address mental health burden of the COVID-19 pandemic on college students. The study sought to determine the levels of mental health distress among undergraduate college students and to examine whether factors such as knowledge, sources of information, academic and everyday difficulties are associated with mental health distress among college students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS:

In order to understand the impact of COVID-19 pandemic, various parameters were selected in order to assess the impacts of COVID-19 on the physical and mental health of students. Sampling of college students was carried out using random sampling. The target population comprised higher education students who were at least 18 years old. A total of 400 students were covered during the survey. Through the designed questionnaire, students were asked about their experiences and expectations in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. It collected data on students' demographics and family background, their experiences and their future expectations. The online questionnaire was designed with selected elements that allowed to understand in detail additional personal and financial circumstances as well as the perception and changes in behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic. The questionnaire composed of questions covering socio-demographic and other characteristics as well as different aspects of higher education student life, such as academic online work and life, social life, emotional life, personal circumstances, change in habits, the roles and measures of institutions, as well as personal reflections on COVID-19. The information collected through the survey included demographic information, knowledge related to COVID-19, sources of information on COVID-19, hardships experienced during the pandemic, mental health burden.

3. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS:

The study shows that while all subgroups of the population have experienced negative effects due to the outbreak, the size of the effects are heterogeneous. The COVID-19 outbreak also had large negative effects on students and it may have a lasting impact on the educational achievement of current students. Statistical analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences, SPSS. Descriptive analysis examined the distribution of all variables of interest. Data regarding certain demographic, social and economic parameters included information regarding internet facilities, practices of involving oneself in indoor sports activities, impact of lockdown on daily study hours and behavior, awareness about Covid-19, precautions taken, concern regarding COVID-19, source of updates regarding COVID-19, difficulties in online learning and academics, affects on family income and stress levels, etc.

97% of the respondents were having internet facility which helped them with the online classes while as 3% were not able to attend the classes due to the inaccessibility to internet facility. About 78.25% students were not involving themselves in any type of indoor sports which again could affect their mental and physical health. Majority of the students (71.5%) believe that the lockdown affected their study hours and about 57.5% students don't believe that the lockdown affected their behavior. 94.75% students were having basic information regarding COVID-19 and 86.75% students were following the required precautions for the prevention of COVID-19. About 46.75% students were having some family member or close relative who was COVID-19 positive. 74.5% students believed that the lockdown affected their health while as majority of students (91.75%) were concerned about the spread of COVID-19. For 78.25% students, social media was the source for information and updates regarding COVID-19 status. Students were asked about their attitudes to different online forms of teaching and learning. About 76% were facing difficulty to focus on academic work and 78% were facing problems with the online teaching process. 71.75% students supported online teaching process and 44.5% believe that online teaching system has increased the stress levels. About 66.5% students believe that the lockdown affected their social bonding with friends and 46.25% believe that the lockdown affected their family income.

The paper presents quantitative evidence showing the negative effects of the pandemic on students' outcomes and expectations. Results show large negative effects across many dimensions. Our findings on academic outcomes indicate that COVID-19 has led to a large number of students withdrawing from classes. Approximately 76 % of our sample reported a decrease in study hours. Students reported a decreased preference for online instruction as a result of their experiences. They are facing increased levels of depression and difficulty to focus on studies. Results

indicated that about 1.25% of the respondents were experiencing severe anxiety, 2.75% moderate anxiety, 10.75% mild anxiety and 85.25% no anxiety. Moreover, having relatives or acquaintances infected with COVID-19 was a risk factor for increasing the anxiety of college students. Results of correlation analysis indicated that economic effects and effects on daily life, as well as delays in academic activities, were positively associated with anxiety symptoms. The pandemic has led to the adoption of particular hygienic behaviors (e.g., wearing masks, washing hands) and discouraged certain daily practices (e.g., leaving home, shaking hands).

Table 1: Demographic, economic and social parameters

S.No.	Questions	Yes (%age)	No (%age)
1.	Do you have internet facility?	388 (97%)	12 (3%)
2.	During lockdown did you play any indoor sports?	87 (21.75%)	313 (78.25%)
3.	Has lockdown affected your study hours?	286 (71.5%)	114 (28.5%)
4.	Do you feel that the lockdown has affected your behavior?	170 (42.5%)	230 (57.5%)
5.	Do you have basic information regarding COVID-19	379 (94.75%)	21 (5.25%)
6.	Are you following the required precautions for the prevention of COVID-19?	347 (86.75%)	53 (13.25%)
7.	Are you having any family member or close relative who is COVID-19 positive?	187 (46.75%)	213 (53.25%)
8.	Has the lockdown affected your health in any way?	298 (74.5%)	102 (25.5%)
9.	Are you concerned about the spread of COVID-19?	367 (91.75%)	33 (8.25%)
10.	Is social media the source for updates regarding COVID-19 status?	313 (78.25%)	87 (21.75%)
11.	Are you facing difficulty to focus on your academic work?	304 (76%)	96 (24%)
12.	Are you facing any problems with the online teaching process?	312 (78%)	88 (22%)
13.	Are you in support of online teaching process?	287 (71.75%)	113 (28.25%)
14.	Has the online teaching system increased the stress levels?	178 (44.5%)	222 (55.5%)
15.	Has the lockdown affected your social bonding with your friends?	266 (66.5%)	134 (33.5%)
16.	Has the lockdown affected the family income?	185 (46.25%)	215 (53.75%)

4. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS:

Through the findings of the study it was concluded that a negative impact was witnessed on the students due to lack of social activities, lack of outdoor activities, longer duration of confinement, lack of required facilities for online classes and network issues. Students are having adequate knowledge and are concerned regarding the spread of COVID-19 and the main precautions to be taken. Students are less likely to opt for online instruction if given the choice between online and in-person instruction due to their experience with online instruction during the pandemic. Students from lower-income backgrounds experienced larger negative impacts for the academic outcomes. The magnitude of health impacts is not homogeneous across the student population. Due to lockdown and lack of outdoor activities, students were facing higher levels of anxiety. Having close relatives infected with COVID-19 was also a factor for increasing the anxiety among students. The lockdown of educational institutions as a result of COVID-19 pandemic caused interruption in students' learning, suspension of examination, cancellation of conferences and seminars, creating gap in teaching and learning, etc. The effects of the pandemic are highly heterogeneous. Students from remote and rural areas had problems with poor Internet connectivity or even lack of electricity. Poverty also holds a negative attitude to the online mode. As per study, the current COVID-19 pandemic is making a significant negative impact on mental health of college students. Participants generally had a very good knowledge of the main modes of COVID-19 transmission and common symptoms of the disease. Ability to focus on academic work and difficulties with online learning were the most commonly cited issues related to academics. It is suggested that the mental health of college students should be monitored during epidemics. The college health service providers and administrators need to consider proactive measures to support the mental health and well-being of students. Mental health interventions and professionally trained counselors could help students address academic and financial concerns, which may alleviate mental health burden of the COVID-19 pandemic. Proactive efforts to support the mental health and well-being of students are needed. The government, health professionals, higher education institutions, student organizations, and NGOs should all collaborate on the process of designing timely and efficient

psychological and financial support services for students. The government should immediately embark on the integration of all higher institutions into online education. By addressing the economic and health impacts imposed by COVID-19, policy makers may be able to prevent COVID-19 from widening existing gaps in higher education.

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