

# Persons displaced by war at increased risk of posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety

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Residents of Sri Lanka who were internally displaced during the civil conflict that occurred in their country from 1983 to 2009 have a higher prevalence of war-related mental health conditions that include depression, anxiety and posttraumatic stress disorder, according to a study in the August 3 issue of *JAMA*, a theme issue on violence and human rights.

Armed conflicts may result in displacement of persons seeking refuge in neighboring countries or secure areas of their own country (internal displacement). "Nearly 2.7 million individuals worldwide are internally displaced annually by armed conflict. The Sri Lankan conflict resulted in approximately 100,000 deaths and displacement of 800,000 people during the 26-year war," according to background information in the article. In the Jaffna District of Sri Lanka, a peninsula in the far north of the country, it has been estimated that 23 percent of the population had been internally displaced by July 2009. "Although overall patterns of psychiatric morbidity among conflict-affected populations have been documented, less is known about the psychological effect of forced displacement among individuals who remain within their national borders."

Farah Husain, D.M.D., M.P.H., of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, and colleagues conducted a health survey among residents of Jaffna District to assess the association between

displacement status and the prevalence of common war-related [mental health conditions](#). The survey was conducted between July and September 2009 among 1,517 Jaffna District households, including 2 internally displaced persons camps. The response rate was 92 percent (1,448 respondents, 1,409 eligible respondents). Two percent of participants (n = 80) were currently displaced, 29.5 percent (n = 539) were recently resettled, and 68.5 percent (n = 790) were long-term residents. A total of 376 (31.8 percent) participants experienced no trauma events; 578 (44.0 percent) reported experiencing 1 to 4 events; 336 (20.2 percent) experienced 5 to 9 events; and 72 (4.0 percent) experienced 10 or more events.

The overall prevalences of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression symptoms were 7.0 percent, 32.6 percent, and 22.2 percent, respectively. After adjusting for variables, the researchers found that the odds of having symptoms of depression, anxiety, and PTSD were significantly higher among displaced camp-based individuals compared with long-term residents and that the odds of reporting PTSD symptoms among recently resettled participants was higher than that of long-term residents. Female respondents were more likely to report symptoms of anxiety and depression. Older age was associated with PTSD, anxiety, and depression symptoms. The authors also found that displacement was no longer associated with [mental health](#) symptoms after controlling for trauma exposure.

"Although the association between displacement status and symptoms of PTSD, depression, and anxiety was no longer significant after adjusting for trauma exposure in this study, the act of being displaced and the daily stressors associated with it may be considered traumatic in themselves and may be an indicator or proxy for recent trauma as well. Therefore, the relationship between displacement status and mental health symptoms may be driven by the underlying trauma events displaced persons have experienced, events that likely caused them to

leave their homes," they write.

The researchers suggest that interventions in Sri Lanka should target the most vulnerable populations, especially those living in displacement camps. "Internally displaced persons outnumber refugees globally and initiatives addressing mental health needs, such as those developed by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, should be considered. In Jaffna District, interventions should include support from family, friends, religious leaders, and traditional counselors. Finally, a longitudinal study of displaced populations would help determine how the intensity of events, the time since events, and other factors, such as coping skills, affect mental health symptoms. In this way, stakeholders could begin to understand the short- and long-term mental health implications of armed conflict and traumatic events associated with displacement."

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