

Virginia Tech professors publish research on post-traumatic stress

August 3 2011

In the months after the April 16, 2007, shootings at Virginia Tech, two professors administered a survey to assess posttraumatic stress among students. The findings have been published in the July 18, 2011 issue of the *Journal of Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, published by the American Psychological Association.

According to researchers Michael Hughes, professor of sociology in the College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences, and Russell T. Jones, professor of psychology in the College of Science, 15.4 percent of Virginia Tech students experienced high levels of posttraumatic stress three to four months following the shootings in which 49 students and faculty members at the university were shot, 32 of whom were killed.

These findings were from a web-based survey of students that was conducted during the summer and fall after the shootings. A total of 4,639 students from the population of 23,214 (20 percent) agreed to complete the survey, which included questions about exposure to the shootings and other trauma-related [stressors](#).

Prevalence of posttraumatic stress was significantly higher among women (23.2 percent) than men (9.9 percent). "The research suggests that higher female-than-male posttraumatic stress was primarily due to greater female losses in secondary networks," Jones said. "These losses were in the form of deaths, injuries, and close calls of individuals who were not considered close friends or relatives. These findings could also be a function of other losses characterized by perceived danger or harm

in the absence of information or extended periods of worry."

Exposure to trauma-related stressors varied greatly, from 4.6 percent who reported being in close proximity to the first shooting incident in Ambler-Johnston Hall to 64.5 percent unable to confirm the safety of friends. The stress exposures that were most strongly related to symptoms of posttraumatic stress were the death or injury of someone close and the inability to confirm the safety of friends during the two hours after the Norris Hall shootings. "It appears that the stressors most responsible for posttraumatic stress among Virginia Tech students had to do with social relationships – deaths and injuries involving friends and anxiety about the safety of friends," said Hughes.

Because exposure to stressors was widespread among students on campus, the experience of symptoms of posttraumatic stress was also widespread, reaching well beyond those who had direct exposure to the actual shooting incidents. These findings have important implications for planning mental health treatment outreach. Widespread symptom prevalence made it difficult to target a small, highly exposed segment of students for mental health outreach. This low concentration of probable posttraumatic stress disorder will likely be a common feature of future mass trauma incidents, requiring broad-based outreach to find students needing [mental health](#) treatment intervention.

Provided by Virginia Tech

Citation: Virginia Tech professors publish research on post-traumatic stress (2011, August 3) retrieved 6 May 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2011-08-virginia-tech-professors-publish-post-traumatic.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--