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Iraqi mental health study shows need for more care

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BAGHDAD: Nearly 70 percent of Iraqis who said they suffer from mental disorders have contemplated suicide but only a fraction have sought treatment, according to a nationwide study released Saturday.

Sponsored by the World Health Organization and the Iraqi government, the first nationwide mental health survey in Iraq since the war started highlighted the need for improved care for a population that has been hit by years of war and sanctions.

The findings showed that 16.56 percent of a random sample of 4,332 Iraqis over the age of 18 had suffered from a mental disorder in their lifetime, ranging from post-traumatic stress disorder to depression. Of those, 68.39 percent said they had seriously considered suicide.

The Iraq Mental Health Survey said 3.59 percent of the respondents were victims of post-traumatic stress disorder and 3.5 percent had reported severe depression.

Ronald Kessler, a health care policy professor at Harvard Medical School who was one of the directors of the study, said he was surprised the figure wasn't higher considering the recent years of brutal violence and past suffering in Iraq.

Participants reported exposure to shootings and bombings, internal displacement, being a witness to killing or accused of collaboration.

"You'd expect after the kinds of things that have happened to these people that it would be higher," Kessler said in a telephone interview. "So it looks like there is an enormous amount of resilience in this country."

He said many Iraqis have adapted to trauma as a way of life after nearly six years of war and previous suffering under Saddam Hussein.

He also noted that some 10 percent of the population is believed to have fled the country and was not represented.

"But among those who have mental illnesses in Iraq, they're pretty serious," he said. "The percent who are suicidally depressed is high."

Much has been documented about the mental effect of war on the U.S.-led forces in Iraq, but the study sought to cast attention on the plight of Iraqis.

The survey was carried out in 2006-2007 during a time of fierce sectarian fighting between majority Shiites and disaffected Sunnis as well as battles involving U.S.-led forces.

Out of the initial sample of 10,080 households, 370 were not visited due to security considerations. The overall response rate was 95.2 percent.

The overall rate of PTSD was 3.59 percent, but some researchers expressed concern that it appeared to be getting worse because it appeared increasingly common among young people.

PTSD which has been one of the main afflictions facing U.S. troops returning home from Iraq was reported by 3.7 percent of male respondents ages 18 to 34 and by 5.89 percent of those over 65. The figures were 2.1 percent and 6.08 percent, respectively, for women.

But Kessler said the elderly had lower rates at comparable ages.

The study noted that Iraq's problems have spanned generations, including the 1980-88 Iraq-Iran war, U.N. sanctions that followed Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, the 1991 Gulf War and the extreme insecurity that followed the March 2003 invasion.

"The most important finding here is the increasing prevalence of mental disorders, particularly PTSD, across the generations," said Mario Maj, the president of the World Psychiatric Association, who was not involved in the study. "This may be a function of the intergenerational increase in sectarian violence."

Iraq's mental health system, along with the rest of its infrastructure, has been devastated, with many health care professionals having fled the country to escape the violence that frequently targeted them.

The 105-page report includes recent data showing that there are 437 psychiatric and social workers nationwide in a country of nearly 30 million people.

Experts said it was important to bring the problem to the public's attention in a country where mental disorders are considered a stigma.

"Society should know that mental problems are important. They should know that they can be addressed," Maj said.

Correction:

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