

A Scoping Study and Stakeholder Consultation on Mental Health Determinants among Arab Immigrants and Refugees in North America

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Abstract : Suboptimal mental health is a considerable global public health challenge that leads to considerable inequalities worldwide. Newcomers are at elevated risk for developing mental health issues as a result of social exclusion, stigmatization, racism, unequal employment opportunities, and discrimination. The problem can be especially serious amongst Arabic-speaking immigrants and refugees (ASIR) whose mental wellness may have already been affected by exposure to political violence, persecution, hunger or war in their countries of origin. A scoping review was conducted to investigate pre- and post-migration mental health determinants amongst ASIR in North America (the U.S. and Canada), who are a rapidly growing population in both regions. Pertinent peer-reviewed papers and grey literature were located through a systematic search of five electronic databases (Medline, Embase, PsycINFO, Anthropology Plus, and Sociology Database). A stakeholder consultation was implemented to validate the analyzed findings of the included 44 studies. About 80% of the studies were carried out in the US, underscoring a lack of Canadian ASIR-mental health research. A gap in qualitative, mixed-method, and longitudinal research was detected, where approximately two-thirds of the studies adopted a cross-sectional method. Pre-migration determinants of mental health were related to the political unrest, violence and armed conflict in the Arab world, increasing post-traumatic stress disorder and psychological distress levels among ASIR. English language illiteracy and generational variations in acculturation patterns were major post-migration mental health triggering factors. Exposure to domestic violence, stigmatization, poverty, racialization, and harassment were significant post-migration mental health determinants that stem from social inequalities, triggering depression, and distress amongst ASIR. Family conflicts linked to child-rearing and gendered norms were considered as both pre- and post-migration mental health triggering factors. Most post-migration mental health protective factors were socio-culturally related and included the maintenance of positive ethnic identity, faith, family support, and community cohesion. Individual resilience, articulated as self-esteem and hope, was a significant negative predictor of depression and psychological distress among ASIR. Community-engaged, mixed-methods, and longitudinal studies are required to address the current gap in mental health research among ASIR in North America. A more thorough determination of potential mental health triggers and protective factors would help inform the development of mental wellness and resilience-promoting programs that are culturally sensitive to ASIR. On the policy level, the Health in All Policies framework of the World Health Organization can be potentially useful for addressing social and health inequalities among ASIR, reducing mental health challenges.

Keywords : depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, psychological distress, resilience

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