

The Impact of Early Life War Exposure on Late Life Mental Health in a Vietnamese Population

Reference:

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Abstract:

Most individuals living in Vietnam during the years of the Vietnam War (1965-75) were exposed to war and violence. These exposures can leave a lasting negative impact throughout a person's life. The current study analyzes extensive survey data collected among Vietnamese older adults in the Vietnam Health and Aging Study in order to examine the various war traumas that were experienced during war time and their association with late life mental health problems, in particular psychological distress and suicidal ideation. We use logistic and ordered logistic regression analyses to analyze the relationship between wartime stress exposure and mental health. We attend to five types of stressors: war-related loss of family and friends; witnessing death during war; malevolent wartime living conditions; life threat and personal endangerment in war; and moral injury related to wartime death or injury. Our findings point to enduring mental health impacts of war among survivors, even years later and even among noncombatants. More so than experience of personal endangerment in combat or morally injurious proximity to war violence, Vietnamese elders in our study are especially prone to distress and suicide ideation when they have lost family members, witnessed death, or experienced malevolent living conditions during war. The psychological distress observed among our study participants suggests that treatment for psychological suffering would aid many elders in the Vietnamese population. In order to further understand mental health risk factors, future research should examine the role of gender in moderating the relationships among wartime stress exposure and psychological distress.