

Report D2.3 and D2.4 from the Periscope project

Exploring mental health inequalities associated with the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe

The Pan-European Response to the Impacts of COVID-19 and future Pandemics and Epidemics (PERISCOPE) project has been investigating the broader socioeconomic and behavioural impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, with the intention of making Europe more resilient and prepared for future large-scale crises.

From the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, and throughout the pandemic, health professionals, policymakers and the public voiced concerns regarding a possible increase in mental distress and mental illness. The fear was that the infection itself, its lingering effects, and the impact of the containment measures on the economy and daily life could increase the incidence and prevalence of mental illness in the population. The aim of these two reports, written in parallel, was to study how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the mental health of the populations overall (Report D2.3.) and how it has affected the mental health of specific vulnerable groups (Report D2.4.)

Regarding mental health overall in Europe, the report (D2.3.) has not found support for the idea that the COVID-19 pandemic has altered the overall occurrence of common mental disorders (such as depression and anxiety) in Europe, despite small increases and decreases in specific countries. Regarding containment measures, only school restrictions were found to be associated with small increases in mild common mental disorders. These findings are contrary to previous findings of increased mental illness in Europe after the economic crisis in 2008.

Regarding the direct and indirect impacts of COVID-19 on the mental health of specific vulnerable groups, the report (D2.4.) presents how these populations have experienced negative mental health effects because of the pandemic and the aim of the report is to facilitate the connection between the results of scientific research and suggestions for enhancing preparedness in the face of upcoming pandemics. From this discussion, a need emerged to adopt a more comprehensive and integrated approach to mental health issues in public policies. Based on these premises and the collected evidence, the report presents some recommendations to policymakers, generated through a collaborative exercise with both partners of the project as well as with external experts.

The reports offer a broader picture of the mental health consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, both in regard to the broader populations as well as for more vulnerable populations. From different perspectives, and using different tools and disciplines, both reports gain insights and offer potential pathways for the development of evidence-based policies and initiatives.