



JOB INSECURITY AFFECTING MENTAL HEALTH DURING COVID 19 PANDEMIC

Community Medicine

- Dr Anjana Verma*** Associate Professor, department of Community Medicine, Geetanjali Medical College, Udaipur, Rajasthan. *Corresponding Author
- Dr. Ashish Patyal** Clinical Fellow Neuro Anaesthesia, Walton Centre NHS Foundation Trust, Liverpool, United Kingdom.
- Dr. Medha Mathur** Assistant Professor, department of Community Medicine, Geetanjali Medical College, Udaipur, Rajasthan.

ABSTRACT

COVID-19 pandemic has caused an unprecedented crisis in all industries around the world. Millions of people have lost their jobs and many people who are currently employed fear losing their jobs, because of the economic fallout caused by pandemic. Studies show that job insecurity has adverse effects on mental health. Job insecurity can become especially widespread in times of recession or a global crisis. Although the effects are initially felt by the employees or workers, the health consequences of each individual extend to their families, organizations and to societies.

KEYWORDS

COVID 19, job insecurity, mental health

INTRODUCTION:

The term job insecurity is defined as the perceived and unwanted probability of losing the present job in the future and worries related to it. Job insecurity is a social psychological phenomenon. It is a subjective feeling about employment and unemployment and contemplates the uncertainties that arise when an individual doesn't have assurances about stability of job.^[1,2] Job insecurity can be differentiated into cognitive and affective job insecurity. The first one refers the cognitive probability of losing one's work and the latter refers to the fear/worry of losing one's job. Another way to differentiate is quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative insecurity refers to worrying about the loss of job itself, whereas qualitative refers to worrying about losing other important aspects of job, such as, salary, social life and health insurance etc.^[3] It is said that job insecurity is one of the most stressful facets of the process leading to unemployment and has worse effect on employees than unemployment itself.^[4] The feeling of job insecurity among employees might be justified or not, but it does have detrimental effects on their health, because of various reasons. The economic reason is high probability of job loss indicating a period of unemployment and decreased income in the future. Since income is related to health, one could therefore expect the loss of expected income that derives from insecurity, leads to impaired health.^[5]

Since economic recession of 2008, it can be said that the number of insecure jobs has increased considerably over a decade.^[6] With the declaration of novel corona virus (COVID 19) as pandemic on March 20, 2020 countries all over the world are struggling to halt the disruption of economy and life. This pandemic is unprecedented in its global reach and impact, posing formidable challenges to developing countries, which are substantially constrained in their ability to respond to this crisis.

Job insecurity and mental health

Watson B et al estimated the effects of job insecurity on mental health using a standardized psychological distress index. After applying a person-specific fixed-effects estimator, results indicated that for both male and females of age group 25–64, job insecurity, regardless of how it was measured (objectively or subjectively) was associated with an increase in psychological distress. Moreover, results regarding unemployment were not as conclusive, implying that it is not so much the actual occurrence of unemployment but the threat of losing job that is associated with higher psychological distress.^[7] Studies have reported that employees at risk of losing their jobs demonstrated higher levels of stress, anxiety and depressive symptoms.^[8,9] A study done in Greece by Nella D et al, also reported that 97% and 86% of the people at risk of losing their job were classified as clinical cases of anxiety and depression, respectively.^[10]

A meta-analysis done by László KD et al determined the association between job insecurity and health (self-rated) in sixteen European countries. They also investigated whether the relationship differs by

country or individual's characteristics. In fully adjusted logistic regression models, job insecurity was found to be significantly associated with an increased risk of poor health in nine countries, with odds ratios ranging from 1.3 to 2.0. It was also reported that this association did not differ significantly by age, gender, education and marital status.^[11]

Job insecurity affecting mental health during Pandemic:

There is very little research about job insecurity and its implications during pandemics, because of rarity of such events. However, some studies have demonstrated the increased anxiety and depression symptoms associated with job insecurity during an epidemic. Taylor MR et al reported that during equine influenza (EI) outbreak in Australia, people whose source of income relied on horse related industry were more than twice likely to have mental distress as compared to other workers.^[12] In 2008, during SARS outbreak there was increased job loss and prevalence of psychological distress symptoms. Also, decrease in income during recovery period of SARS outbreak was reported to be the largest predictor for the development of a psychological disorder.^[13,14]

It is believed that due to exceptional circumstances and uncertainty in economic sector during COVID 19 pandemic, those who are employed may be experiencing greater job insecurity, which can be associated with poor mental health.^[15] Salary cuts were a very common response by employers this year. It was reported that nearly half of Americans saw this pandemic as a big threat to their finances and out of these about 57% reported experiencing medium to high levels of psychological distress symptoms.^[16,17] Evidence suggests that financial strain is associated with poor psychological health.^[18] It is quite evident that during this global crisis, there are higher unemployment rates, job insecurity and greater financial constraints.^[19] According to household survey in the United States (US), there are increased rates of anxiety and depression during the pandemic.^[20] In China, the overall prevalence of general anxiety disorder (GAD) and depressive symptoms were 35.1% and 20.1%, respectively. It was reported that young people reported a significantly higher prevalence of GAD and depressive symptoms than older people. Among the various occupational groups, healthcare workers were more likely to have poor sleep quality.^[21] In India, the prevalence of depressive symptoms among nurses was 10.3%.^[22] Out of the many factors responsible for this, one may be due to the impact of pandemic on economy and workforce. Due to highly contagious nature of COVID 19 virus, World Health Organization recommended guidelines for social distancing and curbs on travel, which led many countries to close various businesses and implement stay at home orders. In the US, many non-essential businesses were shut, leading to over 40 million American workers filing for unemployment within four months (February and May, 2020).^[23] In India, nationwide lockdown was implemented during early phase of pandemic and was able to control the infection and death rates. Lockdown led to shutting of schools, offices, factories and small businesses; people from lower socioeconomic status and migrant

workers were affected worst. It was estimated that lockdown will cost around USD 120 bn, eventually affecting all economic sectors and it is believed that Indian economy may face adverse impact in near future.^[24]

Given the unprecedented negative repercussions of the pandemic for the Indian economy, concerns about employment and financial issues emanating from the COVID-19 pandemic may have contributed to the increased rates of anxiety and depression due to job insecurity among employees. It is variable across various sectors, age groups and demographic variables. Tourism or other industries with a strong dependence on the exterior factors are the most affected. Women and young people with unstable employment relationships and those in temporary work or informal sectors are particularly vulnerable.^[15]

How the effects of job insecurity might be reduced

Given the evidence that job insecurity has significant effects on health, it is important for the policymakers to formulate proactive macroeconomic stabilization policies. Experts suggest that welfare policies that reduce the income loss from unemployment also decrease the economic risks. Adverse health effects of job insecurity can be counterbalanced within organizations by allowing full communication with affected employees and workers. This type of participation can enhance the sense of veracity and methodical justice among workers, and can be related to well-being, especially where industries or companies are downsizing. In addition to this, social support is a very crucial factor in improving the workers' well-being and mental health during this pandemic. Support can be psychological, hence coping with the threats to employees' sense of identity when faced with job insecurity. It might also be industrial relations or economic support. Research shows that both families and unions are potential sources of social support at times of insecurity.^[5]

CONCLUSION:

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to unprecedented economic implications and job loss. Due to the unpredicted nature of the pandemic, those who are currently employed may be experiencing job insecurity, and impacting their psychological health. An important aspect of job insecurity is the stress associated with the uncertainty. Studies done about psychological impact of job insecurity have emphasized that how it should be categorized as a significant cause of stress and anxiety. In addition to stress, other adverse effects have been hypothesized: such as, high levels of job insecurity can result in low motivation and compliance with safety protocol and can lead to higher workplace injuries/accidents. Given these results and in this time of pandemic, when job loss has increased, attention needs to be paid to the public health consequences of job insecurity.

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