PTSD Among Civilians in the US Mexico Border Region

Mark Lusk

University of Texas at El Paso
Background & Significance

Intra-Country Violence

- Diminished quality of life
- Increased burden of disease
- Chronic disability
- Poor mental health
- Affects hundreds of thousands annually

Contributes to human suffering

Eisenman, Gelberg, Liu, & Shapiro, 2003; Fortuna, Porche, & Alegria, 2008; Pedersen, Tremblay, Errazuriz, & Gmarra, 2008; Walker & Barnett, 2007
Drug-Related Violence
Experiences associated with Intra-Country Violence

• Witnessing or experiencing:
  – Threat to life or limb
  – Severe physical harm
  – Torture
  – Loss of a loved one
  – Forced disappearance
  – Forced separation from family

Eisenman et al., 2003; Steel, Silove, Bird, McGorry, & Mohan, 1999
Drug-Related Violence
Drug-Related Violence
Contributing Factors to Refugee Mental Health

• Pre-migration
  – Loss of loved one
  – The degree of choice to leave
  – The ability to plan a move
  – The ability to return to see family
  – Forced separation from family
  – Trauma exposure
  – Imprisonment

  – Eisenman et al., 2003; Fortuna et al., 2008; Steel et al., 1999; Steel et al., 2009; Steel & Silove, 2000
Contributing Factors to Refugee Mental Health

• Peri-Migration
  – Loss of social status & support
  – Deprivation of food, water, & shelter
  – Exploitation
  – Sexual assault
  – Imprisonment

– Fortuna et. al., 2008; Steel et al., 2009
Contributing Factors to Refugee Mental Health

• Post-migration
  – Discrimination
  – Poverty
  – Social isolation
  – Homelessness
  – Lack of health care access
  – Fear of deportation
  – Fear for family left at home

  Eisenman et al., 2003; Maldonado et al., 2002; Miller et al., 2002; Silove, Momartin, Marnane, Steel, & Manicavasagar, 2010; Steel et al., 2009
Mental Health Sequelae

- Depression
  - Dose-response effects
- Anxiety
- Post Traumatic Stress
  - Number of traumatic exposures
- High rates of disability, chronic pain, mortality, and perceived quality of life

Eisenman, et al., 2003; Green et al., 2000; Kaltman et al., 2010; Lie, 2002; Lindert, von Ehrenstein, Priebe, Mielck, & Braehler, 2009; Marshal, Schell, Elliott, Berthold, & Chun, 2005; Mollica et al., 1998; Mollica et al., 1999; Pedersen et al., 2008
Variance in Mental Health Sequelæ

• Depression
  – Cambodian refugees – 68%
  – Bosnian refugees – 39%

• Anxiety
  – Sierra Leone refugees-80%
  – Vietnamese refugees – 5%

• Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
  – Cambodian refugees – 37%
  – Sierra Leone refugees – 86%

  Fenta, Hyman & Noh, 2007; Mollica et al., 1993; Mollica et al., 1999; Mollica et al., 2001; Silove, Steel, Bauman, Chey, & Cowell, 2007; Steel et al., 2006.
Mexico Drug War

• Declared in December 2006 by Felipe Calderon
• Over 50,000 soldiers and thousands of policemen
• 2,862 killed in 2006; 15,273 killed in 2010
• Total lives lost: Over 35,000
• Victims: Women, children, government officials, uninvolved citizens; US citizens

Campbell, 2009; Goodman, 2011; Ramos, 2010;
Widespread Corruption

• Only 2% of detainees brought to trial
• 1,100 discarded guns traced to Texas in 2007
• Two-thirds of all homicides concentrated in 5 of 32 States.
• Mexican journalists no longer report on violence: 66 killed and 12 disappeared since 2005
• In 2009 in Juarez, 2,763 murders led to 30 arrests

Bowden, 2011; Goodman, 2011: Mexican Drug War, 2009
Ciudad Juarez

- 2,763 killed in 2009: Over 3,111 killed in 2010
- 11,000 soldiers and police in Juarez
- As number of military increased, so have killings
- An estimated 125,000 refugees from Juarez in El Paso
- An estimated 7 of 10 businesses closed
- Anecdotal reports from Mental Health Professionals

Abandonan Ciudad Juarez, 2010; Bowden, 2011; Campbell, 2009; Goodman, 2011
Ciudad Juarez

• By differing measures, Juarez ranks as the most violent city in Mexico, most violent in the Western Hemisphere, or even the most violent in the world, the local newspaper El Diario reported earlier this month (link in Spanish). Juarez, with a current population of 1.3 million, has lost more than 230,000 residents in an "exodus" from the daily barrage of drug-related killings, kidnappings and extortion operations.
Significance

• Experiences of Mexican refugees fleeing violence are understudied and unknown
• Mental Health sequelæ are unknown
• Research question: What are the subjective experiences and mental health sequelæ of Mexican refugees fleeing violence in Mexico?
Research Design

• Mixed methods design
  – Beck’s Depression Inventory
  – Harvard Trauma Questionnaire
  – In-depth Qualitative Interview
• ~ 30 Mexican Nationals seeking refuge and mental health services in El Paso
Preliminary Findings: Pre & Peri-Migration Experiences

• Currently 20 participants completed interviews and questionnaires
• All participants experienced or witnessed multiple pre-migration traumas
• All participants moved for fear for their safety
• Most participants had family/friends in El Paso to assist with housing & transportation
Post-Migration Stressors

- Nearly all have no health care access
- Most have no social affiliations in US
- Overwhelmingly utilize public transportation
- All fear deportation
- All fear assassination
- All fear for family’s safety in Mexico
- All perceive a lower standard of living in the U.S.
Experiences Associated with Violence

• Forced to desecrate bodies
• Witnessed murder/violence
• Identified bodies
• Experienced extortion
• Kidnapped
• Forced separation from family
• Shot 4 times & son murdered
Subjective Experiences

- Tremendous sense of personal loss
- Numbness
- Anger at lack of justice
- Loss of faith in the Mexican Government
- Loss of empathy for others
Subjective Experiences (Cont’d)

• Diminished sense of functioning
• Feeling that no one understands
• Identity/Role confusion
• Increased sense of safety in the US
• Deportation anxiety
Reported Signs & Symptoms: BDI

• Physical complaints: Somatization
• Sleep pattern disturbances
• Changes in appetite
• Observed behaviors: Trembling, guarding, crying, agitation
• Perceive themselves as victims
• Scores indicate mild to severe depression
Reported Signs & Symptoms: HTQ

- Generalized anxiety, phobias, hyper-vigilance
- Sustained fear of capture
- Fear of assassination
- Depersonalization
Salient Themes

• Life in the Shadows
• Deportation Panic
• Suffering
• Human Rights
• Hope versus Despair
Life in the Shadows

• “It is a pity that people stop by my apartment with such sad stories about what is happening, about the persecution, fear of going outside, of living a normal life like any other human being who deserves dignity. In my own case I drive without a license since if I don’t drive I cannot work and my children won’t eat. We are working hidden in the shadows knowing that they could ask us for our documents. We always have that fear.”
Deportation Panic

• “That is the anguish I have. My only anguish. Is that they will deport me. That is my only fear right now. I always live with….I don’t want to think. I try not to think, because I say, “my God if they deport me, what am I going to do? That is my fear.”
Suffering

• “Testimonio de Eva” – Mark

• “Yes I have cried in the last two weeks because when I go give presentations, I realize things, that my parents are also suffering and that has hurt me. Realizing that in reality my parents suffered for the death of my brother and still suffer....they have always suffered because of my situation”
Suffering

“...They are very conflicting feelings, because besides the pain one is feeling for the loss of....someone, of a loved one, they are not only taking away a loved one, they are taking away your life, your home, your customs, of everything you have....not so much material things, but emotionally, they are affecting you too much, because you have to start all over, you have to face new and difficult things like, simply being in a new country, where it is not easy to start from the bottom....it is hate, resentment, it is sadness. Against whom? You don’t even know against whom, because you don’t know specifically who is causing you this pain.”
Human Rights

• “Llegamos a pie, subimos el puente, le dije perdone oficial donde puedo pedir un asilo..... me pusieron las esposas a mi y a mi hijo.....me arrepenti señores porque dije ay Dios mio ahora hasta en la carcel voy a estar despues de todo esto. Pues me pusieron como si fuera la peor de las criminales, cadenas asi en los pies, me subian a carros blindados, ay.”
Human Rights

• “Many of the people who are being arrested in the deserts or on the border are not given due process or fair treatment whatsoever. They are violating their human rights completely. No state, local or federal law should prevail over human rights. That is untouchable. Moreover, all the time they are passing new racists laws. Everyday they are trying to make our lives more difficult so that we are forced to leave this country.”
Hope versus Despair

• “I want to explain something, in reality, I have shelter, I have food, in other words, within all this bad, there is something good. It cannot be a punishment because I am well, I have life, I have food, and I have shelter.”
General Findings

• Massive psychological trauma
  “Left in a trunk” “Shot, son murdered, mother died”
  “Assaulted at gunpoint, raped, lost everything, rebuilding life and giving back to community”

• Cumulative stress
  “Held two weeks for ransom, tortured and brainwashed”
Remarkable Resilience Through the Mediating Effects of Mexican Culture

Factors:

• Familism
• Religiosity
• Fatalism
• Collectivism
• Personalism
• Dignity
Some concluding thoughts on Trauma

- Trauma disorders are tied to painful, fearful terrifying, or “toxic” memories

- We all experience traumas, but when the memory of trauma becomes encoded into significant long term memory events, it can become a trigger for a cluster of symptoms and signs – including panic, avoidance, & anxiety. The memory is tied to emotions and can be triggered by smells, sounds and sights.

- When the fear is no longer based in fact, it can become toxic. Most fearful reactions to traumatic memories diminish through the psychological process of extinction (unlearning).

- The encoding of fearful events into toxic memories can be reduced by lowering norepinephrine with beta blockers such as propalanol. This can be impractical.
Thus, the need for CBT – Especially Culturally Adapted CBT

• CBT concentrates on "a person's thoughts and beliefs, and how they influence a person's mood and actions"

• Patients learn to identify thoughts that make them upset, afraid, guilty, or angry and learn to cope with these thoughts by replacing them with positive, "more accurate, and less distressing thoughts"

• During the treatment process, the CBT therapist may use "exposure therapy" with the patient. This technique "works by helping a person confront a specific fear or memory while in a safe and supportive environment," and the treatment focuses on giving the patient the "tools" needed to cope with their "fears or traumatic memories" and teaching them that the anxiety they are experiencing decreases with time

• Since Culture mediates meaning, the CBT must be culturally relevant.
References

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