

Mental Health and Substance Abuse in the Aftermath of Oil Spill Disasters

¹Wisen, William; ²Barker, Chikira H. MA

¹LSUHSC School of Public Health, ²LSUHSC Department of Psychiatry

Background

While not a common occurrence, oil spills are tremendous disasters leading to lasting effects on the individuals, families, and the community. Of the current research, much of it has focused on marine food, health symptoms, air quality, and environmental contamination¹. Some studies focusing on mental health have found significant effects in the aftermath of these disasters, however the extent to which mental health, particularly substance abuse, has been investigated post-oil spill disasters is unknown. The purpose of this scoping review is to examine the existing literature on substance abuse following oil spill disasters.

Description

This systematic review was completed using Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews guidelines². EBSCO, PubMed, CINAHL Ultimate, and Embase databases were searched using Boolean terms “oil spill” and “mental health OR psych for articles published between 1967 and 2024. Data presented here are a subset of a larger scoping review.

Findings

Studies Included

- Substance Use n=5
- Alcohol Use n=9

Sample Size

- Total n=50,229
- Average per study n=5,581

Average Age

- All studies 18+ or 18-64
- Average Age: 47.89

Discussion

The data from study illustrates the increasing need for research on the topic of mental health and substance abuse in the aftermath of those who survived oil spill disasters. Rates of anxiety, PTSD, depression, alcohol use, and substance use were seen to be increased in these individuals. Substance abuse and alcohol are known to act synergistically to worsen individuals' mental health. Improving the physical and social health of these individuals needs to involve addressing both of these factors.

Future Steps

Planning ahead for future potential disasters, the response for supporting communities following oil spills disasters must involve attention to mental health and support for recovery from substance misuse. More research is needed on the communities effected by prior oil spill disasters and looking at the longitudinal mental health effects. The longest study in this review only consisted of 4.5 years after the disaster, but the effects on community members likely lasts much longer.

References

Acknowledgement

- Thank you to the Department of Psychiatry sourcing all of the articles for this scoping review.