

Original Article

Inequalities in mental health in the working population of Spain: a National Health Survey-based study

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ABSTRACT

Objective: In the working population, poor mental health is a significant problem whose prevalence rates and associated factors could differ by gender, especially in a period of socioeconomic changes. The aims of this study were: a) to determine the prevalence of poor mental health in the working population of Spain in 2011; b) to identify the association of this prevalence with socioeconomic and work-related variables for men and women separately; c) to determine if the patterns differ by gender.

Methods: A cross-sectional study was conducted with data from the National Health Survey of Spain (2011). Of the 21,007 participants in the survey, we selected 7396 whose employment status was described as “working”. The General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) was used as a screening tool to detect poor mental health. Prevalences were calculated and bivariate and multivariate logistic regression models were fitted to verify the association between variables.

Results: The prevalence of poor mental health was higher among women (19.9%) than men (13.9%), the overall prevalence being 16.8%. The variables associated with a higher prevalence were type of contract and work-related variables in men, and age and socioeconomic variables in women.

Conclusions: This study shows that, in the working population of Spain, the prevalence of poor mental health and its related factors differ by gender. Poor mental health is mainly related to socioeconomic variables in women but is mostly associated with work-related variables in men.

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Desigualdades en salud mental en población trabajadora de España: un estudio basado en la Encuesta Nacional de Salud

RESUMEN

Palabras clave:

Salud mental

Salud laboral

Sexo

Factores socioeconómicos

Encuestas de salud

Objetivo: En población trabajadora, los problemas de salud mental son un problema significativo cuya prevalencia y factores asociados pueden diferir según el sexo, en especial durante un período de cambios socioeconómicos. Los objetivos de este estudio son: a) conocer la prevalencia de problemas de salud mental en población trabajadora de España en 2011; b) evaluar la asociación de esta prevalencia con variables socioeconómicas y laborales para hombres y mujeres por separado; c) determinar si los patrones difieren por sexos.

Métodos: Estudio transversal con datos de la Encuesta Nacional de Salud de España (2011). De los 21.007 participantes en la encuesta, se seleccionaron 7396 cuya situación laboral era «trabajando». Se utilizó el General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) como herramienta de cribado para detectar problemas de salud mental. Se calcularon las prevalencias y se realizaron modelos bivariados y multivariados de regresión logística para comprobar la asociación entre variables.

Resultados: La prevalencia de problemas de salud mental fue mayor entre las mujeres (19,9%) que entre los hombres (13,9%), con una prevalencia global del 16,8%. Las variables asociadas a una mayor prevalencia fueron el tipo de contrato y las relacionadas con el empleo remunerado entre hombres, y la edad y las variables socioeconómicas en las mujeres.

Conclusiones: En población trabajadora de España, la prevalencia de problemas de salud mental y sus factores relacionados difieren en función del sexo. Mientras en las mujeres la prevalencia podría estar más relacionada con factores socioeconómicos, en los hombres podría estarlo más con variables relacionadas con el empleo remunerado.

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Introduction

Mental health problems are currently considered a major public health issue worldwide, constituting an important source of disability, dependency and decreased quality of life, as well as high economic costs for health systems.^{1–3}

Several studies have been previously conducted to estimate the prevalence of mental health problems and the related factors in the European and Spanish general population,^{4–10} finding in them differences over time and depending on the country under study. These facts show the need of both a specific assessment for each country or geographic area, and periodic assessment of it. Regarding the temporal evolution of this prevalence in Spain, is important consider the economic crisis that began in 2009, especially the first years of this period, due to the socioeconomic and labor changes that occurred. As proposed by Barbaglia et al.¹¹ negative socioeconomic changes, especially those that happen in a short time lapse such as the beginning of this period, could significantly increase the incidence of mental health problems.

Besides, it has been observed in general population, a lower prevalence of mental health problems among men than among women regardless of their employment status. The same results have been found among people that are working, so gender and employment status could be considered as key factors when determining the prevalence of mental health problems in a population,^{12–14} in line with the intersectionality concept^{15,16} which considers these factors as axes of social inequalities that in addition to interact between them, could influence mental health inequalities.

Regarding the prevalence of mental health problems among working population, there have been several studies to try to determine it both in Europe and in Spain,^{17–20} being some of them focused on a specific pathology and not in mental health problems in general, and finding among those focused in general mental health, differences in the results obtained possibly due, among other factors, to population differences and the instruments used to determine the prevalence.

Moreover, some studies about the relationship between work and mental health have focused on examining the effect that variables such as the working day length, type of contract or job stress among others. Relative to this,^{19,21–23} different results have been shown for men and women, highlighting the significant effect that these factors have on the workers mental health, omitting some of these studies variables that might be relevant to explain these differences. Also, there has been carried out several studies that show the relationship between factors such as job insecurity and unemployment and possible mental health problems.^{18,19} These factors, were increased abruptly during the beginning of the current period of economic recession and could have increased the inequalities between men and women in mental health, being convenient the assessment during these years of the mental health status in order to determine if these inequalities are higher than the previous period.

In addition to this, there have been studies focused on explaining gender differences in health across different variables such as social class and family roles,^{13,20,24–26} its results point to a possible sexual division of work, showing that socioeconomic and related to domestic and family environment variables might have more weight on women's mental health, and those variables related to paid work of men's mental health. Therefore, taking into account the diversity of these factors from an integrative perspective would provide a wider vision of gender differences in mental health among the working population.

In the described framework, the objectives of this study are: a) determining the prevalence of poor mental health in the working population of Spain in 2011, both total as for men and women

separately, and b) determining the relationship between mental health problems and job and socioeconomic variables, c) in order to examine if the patterns differ depending on gender.

Methods

Study population and design

A cross-sectional design based on data from the 2011 Spanish National Health Survey (ENSE-2011) has been used.²⁷ The participants in the ENSE-2011 were 21,007 people representative of the non-institutionalized Spanish population, from which has been selected the 7396 aged between 16 and 65, and whose employment status was working. The sample of the ENSE-2011 was selected using a stratified multi-stage sampling being representative at national level.²⁸ The effective total sample represents the 89% of the theoretical sample, of which 61% are headline households and the remaining 28% reserve households to replace incidents in the headlines. Afterwards, from the total effective sample the people who were working have been selected, constituting the final sample to make the analyses, excluding those individuals under 16 and over 65 years.

Data from the Adults and Home questionnaires of the ENSE-2011 has been used because its content incorporate different socioeconomic and occupational variables, including mental health, that has been assessed using the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12), included for the first time in the 2006 edition of the Spanish National Health Survey (ENSE-2006). Data was collected by trained interviewers in the participant households between July 2011 and June 2012.

Variables

1) Main outcome

- Mental health: it has been measured with the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12), a screening instrument for mental health, used to identify possible cases of mental disorder in non-psychiatric patients and in general population, adapted and validated for the Spanish population.²⁹ It is formed by 12 Likert-type items with a score scale of 4 points, and a 2-point scoring method has been used, assigning 0 points to answers 0 and 1, and 1 point to answers 2 and 3, and then adding the points of the 12 items obtaining a total score between 0 and 12. It has been considered poor mental health or positive in the screening, a score 3 or greater.

2) Socioeconomic variables

- Marital status: single, married, widowed, divorced or legally separated.
- Education and training: no education, primary school, secondary school or high school; university studies.
- Occupational social class: obtained from the current or past occupation of the reference person, and based on the nine categories proposed by the Determinants Working Group of Spanish Society of Epidemiology (SEE). These categories have been classified into six groups for the ENSE-2011: Class I (Directors and managers of establishments with 10 or more employees and university degrees), Class II (Directors and managers of establishments with fewer than 10 employees and university diplomas), Class III (Intermediate occupations and self-employed people), Class IV (Supervisors and workers in skilled technical occupations), Class V (Skilled workers in the primary sector and other semi-skilled workers) and Class VI (Unskilled workers).³⁰
- Age: in years, taken as a quantitative variable.

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