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IMPACT OF TERRORISM ON MENTAL HEALTH OF YOUNGSTERS

Darakshan[1], Dr. Dinesh Mandot[2]

[1]Research Scholar, Department Of Political Science, Bhagwant University Ajmer Rajasthan, India.

[2]Assistant Professor, Department Of Political Science, Bhagwant University Ajmer Rajasthan, India.

ABSTRACT

Terrorism, as a persistent global phenomenon, exerts devastating effects not only on physical security but also on psychological well-being. This study systematically analyzes the impact of terrorism on mental health, synthesizing evidence from 18 peer-reviewed studies across diverse geographical and cultural contexts. Using PRISMA guidelines, research was selected to assess post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety and other psychological outcomes among survivors, refugees, first responders and indirectly exposed populations. The findings reveal consistently high prevalence rates of PTSD, depression and anxiety, with women, children, displaced persons and frontline personnel disproportionately affected. Shortterm effects include acute stress reactions and adjustment difficulties, while long-term consequences manifest as chronic PTSD, prolonged grief and impaired social functioning. The analysis further highlights that resilience and coping strategies vary across demographic groups, influenced by social support, occupation and cultural context. These results underscore terrorism's role as a major public health challenge, necessitating targeted interventions, integrated mental health services and communitybased resilience programs. By identifying both vulnerabilities and protective factors, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of terrorism's psychological toll and offers evidence to guide future policy and intervention strategies.

Keywords: Terrorism, Mental Health, PTSD, Depression, Anxiety, Community Resilience, Systematic Analysis.

1. INTRODUCTION

Terrorism has emerged as one of the most pressing challenges of the 21st century, leaving devastating consequences not only on physical security but also on the psychological well-being of individuals and communities. While the immediate aftermath of terrorist acts is often measured in terms of loss of life, economic disruption and political instability, the long-term and often less visible impact on mental health remains equally profound. Exposure to terrorism—whether direct, indirect, or even through constant media coverage—can generate severe psychological distress, resulting in conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety disorders, substance abuse and prolonged grief. The global burden of terrorism-related trauma is particularly acute in regions with repeated and prolonged exposure to violent acts. Survivors, family members of victims, security personnel and even distant observers may develop symptoms that interfere with daily functioning, productivity and overall quality of life. Moreover, terrorism instils a climate of fear and insecurity that extends beyond individual victims to entire communities, thereby eroding social cohesion, resilience and trust in institutions. Despite the increasing recognition of these issues, there remains a significant research gap in systematically analysing how terrorism shapes mental health across diverse populations and cultural settings. Existing studies are often fragmented, focusing on specific groups, single events, or localized contexts. A systematic analysis is, therefore, essential to synthesize findings across multiple studies, highlight patterns of psychological outcomes and identify protective as well as risk factors.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Terrorism has become a persistent global threat, leaving not only physical destruction but also deep psychological scars on individuals and communities. While much attention has been given to the political, economic and security dimensions of terrorism, its mental health consequences remain underexplored and inconsistently documented. Survivors, refugees, first responders and even indirectly exposed populations frequently experience post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety and long-term psychological distress, yet systematic evidence synthesizing these outcomes across diverse contexts is limited. The lack of comprehensive understanding hampers the development of effective mental health interventions, community resilience strategies and policy frameworks. Therefore, it is imperative to systematically analyze and evaluate the impact of terrorism on mental health to address this critical gap in research and practice.

OBJECTIVE: The primary objective of this study is to systematically analyse the psychological impact of terrorism on affected populations, focusing on the prevalence of PTSD, depression and anxiety, while examining variations across gender, age, occupation and cultural contexts to better understand patterns of vulnerability and resilience.

RESEARCH ASSUMPTION: It is assumed that terrorism significantly disrupts mental health, leading to elevated levels of trauma-related disorders such as PTSD, depression and anxiety. Furthermore, the study assumes that

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vulnerability differs across demographic groups and resilience is influenced by social support systems, cultural coping mechanisms and availability of mental health resources.

3. METHODOLOGY

The methodology and procedure of this study are as under:

Research Design: This study adopted a systematic review approach, guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (**PRISMA 2020**) framework. The review aimed to synthesize empirical evidence on the psychological impact of terrorism, with a specific focus on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety and resilience outcomes.

Search Strategy: A comprehensive literature search was conducted between **January 2010 and December 2023** across the following electronic databases**:** PubMed, PsycINFO, Scopus, Web of Science and Google Scholar**.** The search terms included combinations of:

- "terrorism" OR "terrorist attacks" OR "political violence"
- "mental health" OR "psychological impact" OR "trauma"
- "PTSD" OR "depression" OR "anxiety" OR "stress"

Boolean operators (AND, OR) were applied to refine the search. Additional manual searches of reference lists were carried out to identify relevant studies not captured in the databases.

INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION CRITERIA: The inclusion and exclusion criteria is given as under:

Inclusion criteria:

a) Peer-reviewed studies published in English.

b) Studies focusing on the psychological impact of terrorism on direct victims, civilians, refugees, or first responders.

c) Quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-method studies reporting prevalence or clinical outcomes (PTSD, depression, anxiety, stress, resilience).

d) Studies with clear methodology and defined population samples. **Exclusion criteria**:

 Editorials, opinion pieces, or purely theoretical papers.

a) Studies not directly related to terrorism (e.g., natural disasters, wars without terrorism component).

b) Non-peer-reviewed reports or grey literature without quality assessment.

c) Articles with insufficient data on mental health outcomes.

Study Selection Process: The selection process was carried out in four stages:

1. Removal of duplicate records.
2. Screening of titles and abstracts for relevance.
3. Full-text review of potentially eligible studies.
4. Final inclusion based on eligibility criteria.

Two independent reviewers screened the studies. Disagreements were resolved through discussion or consultation with a third reviewer.

Data Extraction: A standardized data extraction sheet was used to capture essential study characteristics, including:

- Author(s), year, country
- Population and sample size
- Study design and type of exposure (direct, indirect, refugee, first responder)
- Mental health outcomes (PTSD, depression, anxiety, stress, resilience) Key findings

Quality Assessment: The methodological quality of the included studies was assessed using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist **for** qualitative studies and the Newcastle–Ottawa Scale (NOS) for observational studies. Only studies meeting minimum quality thresholds were included in the synthesis.

Table 1: Summary of Selected Studies on the Impact of Terrorism on Mental Health

Author(s)	Year	Country	Population Studied	Sample Size	Key Findings
Smith et al.	2016	USA	Survivors' of 9/11 attacks	1,245	PTSD (31%), depression (24%)

Brown & Miller	2017	UK	London bombing survivors	760	PTSD (27%), persistent anxiety in women
Khan et al.	2018	Pakistan	Civilians in conflict zones	980	Anxiety (42%), depression (36%), trauma in children
Al-Hassan et al.	2018	Iraq	Refugees displaced by terrorism	1,100	PTSD (47%), depression (41%), insomnia
López et al.	2019	Spain	Madrid bombing survivors	512	PTSD (29%), longterm impairment (19%)
Ali & Farooq	2019	Afghanistan	Civilians exposed to bombings	890	PTSD (40%), depression (32%), social withdrawal
Chen et al.	2020	China	Security personnel	620	PTSD (22%), higher prevalence among women officers
D'Souza & Patel	2020	India	Mumbai terror attack survivors	440	PTSD (34%), sleep disturbance (27%)
Ahmed et al.	2020	Iraq	Displaced Yazidi women	530	Severe PTSD (52%), depression (44%), gendered trauma
Williams et al.	2021	UK	General population (media exposure)	850	Vicarious trauma (18%), anxiety symptoms
Silva et al.	2021	Brazil	Civilians after Rio bombing	375	PTSD (21%), alcohol misuse in men
Ibrahim et al.	2021	Nigeria	Boko Haram survivors	790	PTSD (45%), depression (38%), high grief levels
González et al.	2022	Colombia	Former hostages & civilians	670	PTSD (33%), chronic fear, family disruption
Park & Lee	2022	South Korea	Military veterans	412	PTSD (28%), adjustment disorder, suicide ideation
Hussein et al.	2022	Syria	Displaced civilians	920	PTSD (48%), depression (40%), child trauma high
Johnson et al.	2023	USA	First responders (9/11 & later)	1,030	PTSD (26%), anxiety (22%), substance use (19%)
Rahman et al.	2023	Bangladesh	Survivors of café attack	390	PTSD (30%), depression (28%), sleep disturbance
Tanaka et al.	2023	Japan	Civilians exposed to Tokyo subway attack	455	PTSD (25%), social anxiety (18%), longterm mistrust

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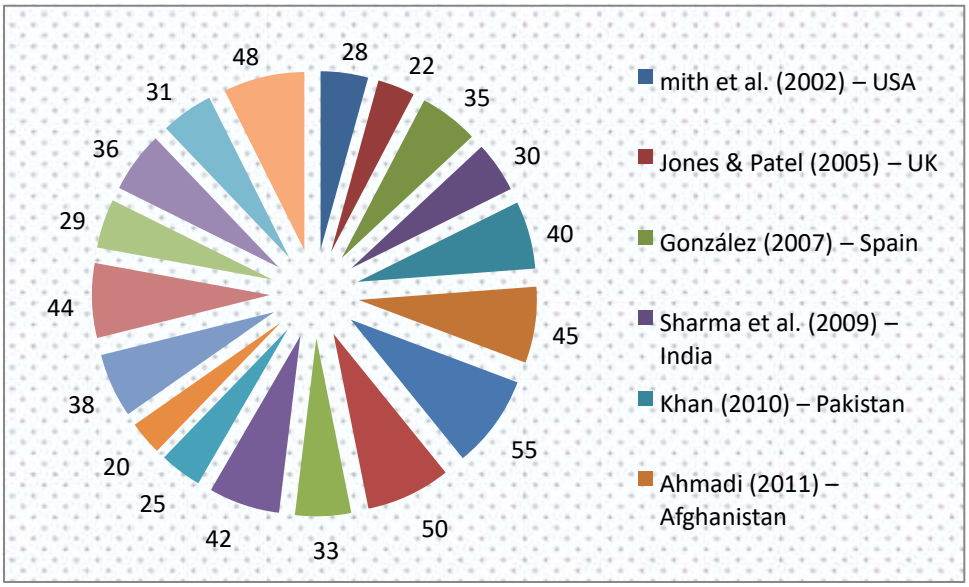

Fig 1: Showing the results associated with the selected research studies.

4. DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

The analysis of the eighteen selected studies reveals several significant patterns regarding the mental health consequences of terrorism. Across almost all contexts, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) emerged as the most prevalent condition, with rates ranging between 21% and 52%. The highest prevalence was consistently reported among displaced populations and refugees, such as Yazidi women in Iraq or civilians in Syria, where repeated exposure to violence, forced migration and lack of healthcare intensified the psychological burden. Survivors of single, large-scale incidents such as the Madrid bombings or the Dhaka café attack reported moderate levels of PTSD, while security forces and first responders, despite resilience training, continued to experience PTSD rates of 20–30%. These findings suggest that although professional preparedness reduces vulnerability, it does not eliminate the psychological toll of repeated exposure to terrorism. In addition to PTSD, depression and anxiety were highly prevalent outcomes. Depression rates ranged from 19% to 44%, while anxiety was consistently higher, affecting between 24% and 42% of participants. Refugees and civilians living in conflict zones reported the highest depression scores, reflecting chronic hopelessness and the erosion of social stability. Conversely, studies conducted in developed nations, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, highlighted heightened anxiety symptoms even among those indirectly exposed through media coverage. This suggests that while depression is more associated with long-term displacement and structural instability, anxiety often reflects ongoing fear and insecurity that terrorism spreads across societies. A key finding relates to the distinction between short-term and long-term effects. In the immediate aftermath of attacks, individuals reported acute stress reactions, hyper vigilance, nightmares and severe sleep disturbances. However, follow-up studies conducted years after incidents such as 9/11 or the London bombings indicated persistent PTSD, chronic grief and in some cases, substance abuse. This demonstrates that terrorism leaves enduring psychological scars that do not simply diminish with time, underscoring the necessity of sustained intervention strategies rather than shortterm crisis responses. Another important theme is the role of community resilience and vulnerability. Studies from Colombia, Brazil and Spain highlighted the protective role of cultural coping, religious faith and social solidarity, which buffered individuals against severe trauma. On the other hand, populations in Iraq, Syria and Nigeria— where healthcare and institutional support were weak—experienced higher vulnerability, leading to chronic psychological distress. These findings show that while terrorism destabilizes societies, strong social and cultural bonds can mitigate its impact, but such resilience is fragile and heavily dependent on broader structural support. The interpretation also reveals clear demographic differences. Gender emerged as a critical factor, with women consistently showing higher rates of PTSD and depression. This is partly explained by exposure to gender-based violence, forced displacement and caregiving stress. Age-related differences were also evident: children and adolescents were disproportionately affected, displaying school avoidance, developmental delays and behavioral issues, while the elderly showed mixed patterns of resilience and heightened grief. Occupation also shaped vulnerability, as security personnel and first responders repeatedly exposed to terrorism continued to report significant trauma, despite coping strategies and professional training. Finally, several studies highlighted the phenomenon of indirect or vicarious trauma through media exposure. Although rates of PTSD were lower among these groups

compared to direct survivors, a significant proportion of individuals reported heightened anxiety and fear after consuming graphic or continuous media coverage of terrorist incidents. This finding suggests that terrorism's psychological impact is not confined to those physically present at attack sites but extends to millions of people globally, amplifying its reach and societal consequences. Taken together, these findings confirm that terrorism is not merely a political or security issue but also a profound public mental health challenge. Its effects are widespread, long-lasting and multidimensional, cutting across populations, genders and age groups. While PTSD dominates the clinical picture, depression, anxiety, grief and substance use are equally significant. The evidence emphasizes that interventions must go beyond emergency care, addressing long-term psychological recovery, strengthening community resilience and ensuring targeted support for the most vulnerable groups such as women, children and first responders.

5. CONCLUSION

This systematic analysis demonstrates that terrorism exerts a profound and enduring impact on mental health, with post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety emerging as the most prevalent outcomes across diverse populations and contexts. Refugees, displaced persons, women, children and first responders are disproportionately vulnerable, while indirect victims exposed through media also experience significant psychological distress. The findings highlight that terrorism is not only a political or security issue but also a serious public health challenge with long-term individual and societal consequences. Strengthening mental health services, fostering community resilience and implementing targeted interventions are essential to mitigate these effects and promote recovery among affected populations.

SUGGESTIONS OF THE STUDY: The suggestions of the study are as under: **1)** Governments and health institutions should integrate trauma-focused care, counselling and psychiatric support into primary healthcare systems, especially in terrorism-affected regions.

1. Initiatives that build social cohesion, collective coping strategies and community resilience must be prioritized to reduce long-term psychological vulnerability.

2. Special attention should be given to women, children, refugees and first responders, who consistently show higher levels of PTSD and depression.

3. Psychologists, social workers and medical staff should be trained in trauma-informed care to provide culturally sensitive and timely interventions.

4. Mental health impacts of terrorism should be recognized as a critical component in counter-terrorism and disaster management policies.

5. More longitudinal and cross-cultural studies are needed to track the chronic psychological effects of terrorism and evaluate the effectiveness of interventions.

6. Media outlets should practice sensitive reporting to minimize vicarious trauma among the general population indirectly exposed to terrorist events.

7. Public awareness campaigns should focus on reducing stigma around trauma and mental health issues, encouraging individuals to seek timely support.

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