
Conducting research on disaster mental health in developing countries: a proposed model

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The psychological consequences of disasters are known to be significant, but research efforts in developing countries have been sporadic. This paper reports a successful collaborative project conducted in Armero, Colombia, and in Ecuador. It outlines its origins, summarizes its findings, and identifies the essential ingredients that were responsible for its positive outcome. It is recommended that these guidelines be adhered to for the development of similar projects elsewhere, to ensure a significant impact on advancing the field, policy-making, delivering appropriate mental health care, and training of providers.

INTRODUCTION

The psychosocial consequences of disasters have gained increasing recognition as a result of clinical observations (Kinston and Rosser, 1974) and research findings (McFarlane, 1984), which have been partially translated into health policy and planning, response strategy, and training of health workers in affected communities. Most of the work in disaster mental health research, however, has taken place in developed countries, where the emotional consequences of major disasters have been studied with sophisticated research methodologies and standardized instruments (Bromet and Schulberg, 1987). In developing countries, similar accomplishments have lagged behind, and most observations have been impressionistic or clinical

(Cohen, 1987). To our knowledge, only isolated efforts have been made to collect standardized and comparable research data that could have a significant impact on the making of policy for mental health care delivery and training of staff (Infantes *et al.*, 1970).

This paper reports the collaborative project which we developed in Latin America following the Armero tragedy in Colombia (1985) and the Ecuador earthquakes (1987), and which has produced systematically-collected empirical data with clear implications for service delivery. This report summarizes the origins of the project, its main findings and its essential strategies, as guidelines for the design and implementation of similar projects elsewhere.