

## **R060: Impact of COVID-19 on mental health in Northern Ireland- QUB**

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted greatly on day-to-day life affecting employment, work-life balance, friend and family interactions and health service delivery. It is predicted these changes, along with the threat of infection and effects of the virus itself, will have a major impact on population mental health. Increased isolation, unemployment and financial concerns are known to be associated with an increased risk of poor mental health. Couple that with anxiety, work adjustments, increased home schooling and changes to the delivery of health and mental services and the impact on the mental health of the Northern Ireland population could be catastrophic.

This project aims to explore the impact of the pandemic and subsequent “lockdown” on mental health using administrative data.

Uptake of psychotropic medications, presentations to Emergency Departments with self-harm or suicide ideation and admissions to psychiatric hospital will be used as proxy indicators of mental ill health. Expected trends for 2020 (based on the previous 3 years) will be compared to actual observed trends as the pandemic broke in Northern Ireland and lockdown began right through to medium and longer term outcomes.

A range of demographic and socio-economic factors will be explored to determine if the effects of COVID-19 are felt more greatly amongst certain sub-groups of the population. Of special interest is the effect on those with pre-existing mental ill-health.

Findings from this study will help quantify the mental health impact of the pandemic, identify those most at risk, aid in the generation targeted interventions and inform policy responses.

The overarching aim of the project is to carry out the first population-wide cohort study to estimate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on population mental health in Northern Ireland. More specifically to:

- (i) Identify changes in the prescribing of psychotropic medications, before and after the pandemic
- (ii) Examine the impact of the pandemic on numbers of psychiatric inpatient admissions
- (iii) Examine the impact of the pandemic on presentations to ED for self harm / suicide ideation
- (iv) Determine if the mental health impacts of the pandemic have varied according to demographic and socio-economic characteristics
- (v) Determine if any increase in psychiatric morbidity has been due to a resurgence amongst those with a prior history of poor mental health or to new cases

Data on all of these outcomes are collected routinely in the delivery of services and by linking them to population wide GP registration data we can easily explore many significant aspects of population mental health trends during and in the immediate aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. This rich HSC information is easily accessible and can provide a detailed picture of population mental health in order to inform policy and services.