Peer Review Report

Review Report on Depressive symptoms among higher education students in Germany – a systematic review and meta-analysis
Systematic Review, Public Health Rev

EVALUATION

Q 1   Please summarize the main theme of the review.

Depressive symptoms among higher education students in Germany – a systematic review and meta-analysis

This study addresses an important topic – the prevalence of depressive symptoms among young people, particularly during COVID-19 pandemic. The knowledge about the magnitude of this problem can be used to develop prevention strategies and to prepare healthcare services focused in promoting the mental health among students

Q 2   Please highlight the limitations and strengths.

Strengths: Authors presented a comprehensive review. They complied with PRISMA guidelines. They used adequate approach.
Limitation: The comparison of prevalence rates before and after COVID-19 was based on different studies with different sample characteristics and procedures. This issue should be discussed. The authors should be cautious when drawing conclusions about the effect of COVID-19 on prevalence of depressive symptoms.

Q 3   Please provide your detailed review report to the authors, structured in major and minor comments.

This study addresses an important topic – the prevalence of depressive symptoms among young people, particularly during COVID-19 pandemic. The knowledge about the magnitude of this problem can be used to develop prevention strategies and to prepare healthcare services focused in promoting the mental health among students

Authors presented a clear research question.
They conducted a comprehensive systematic review complemented with meta-analysis
The study was registered on PROSPERO.
Also, they complied with PRISMA statement guidelines.
Abstract conveys the main results and conclusions of the manuscript.
Methodological approach was explained in detail. Authors provided a comprehensive search strategy, explained criteria for inclusion and exclusion of studies and assessed adequately their quality.
The manuscript is clear and well written.
Although there are some reviews about this topic, the authors presented a comprehensive fucused on mental health of Germany students
There are few comments/questions for authors: The following are the comments/questions:

Methods
Authors wrote: "information on depressive symptoms as outcome is provided, including diagnosis of affective disorders (International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (ICD) codes F30-F39), prevalence rates or mean values of instruments assessing depressive symptoms.". Authors should make

clear here that they also considered prevalence rates based on cutoff of instruments assessing depressive symptoms. Did authors considered any instruments assessing depressive symptoms?

Results
1- Authors found high heterogeneity between studies. However, they presented a forest plot summarizing results from 56 studies. In my opinion they should present forest plots (or tables) with stratified results according to the main factors of heterogeneity (gender, pre versus post Covid-19, or instrument for assessing depressive symptoms). Although the authors described these results throughout the text, forest-plots or tables with stratified results would improve readbility of these results. Also, the heterogeneity between studies within the same group should be provided.
2- Authors found differences in prevalence rates when studies conducted before and after COVID-19 pandemic were compared. Of course, these differences could be explained based on particular circunstances of COVID-19 context (the authors described adequately these circumstances). However, these differences could also be due to the differences between samples (for example proportion of women) or intruments used in the studies conducted before and after COVID-19.
It would be interesting to conduct subgroup analyses for obtaining pooled prevalences before and after COVID-19 but stratified by sample charateristics. If the number of studies is enough, authors could conduct metaregression analysis. With no such analysis, the authors can not draw accurate conclusion about the effect of COVID-19 on prevalence of depressive symptoms. At least, they should discuss this issue.

Discussion/Conclusion
1- The comparison of prevalence rates before and after COVID-19 was based on different studies with different sample characteristics and procedures. This issue should be discussed. The authors should be cautious when drawing conclusions about the effect of COVID-19 on prevalence of depressive symptoms.

PLEASE COMMENT

Q 4   **Is the title appropriate, concise, attractive?**

Yes

Q 5   **Are the keywords appropriate?**

yes

Q 6   **Is the English language of sufficient quality?**

Yes

Q 7   **Is the quality of the figures and tables satisfactory?**

Yes.

Q 8   **Does the reference list cover the relevant literature adequately and in an unbiased manner?**

yes

Q 9   **Does this manuscript refer only to published data? (unpublished data is not allowed for Reviews)**

Yes.

Q 10 Does the manuscript cover the issue in an objective and analytical manner

Yes.

Q 11 Was a review on the issue published in the past 12 months?

Yes.

Q 12 Does the review have international or global implications?

The review has national implications. This review was focused on German students.

QUALITY ASSESSMENT

Q 13 Quality of generalization and summary

Q 14 Significance to the field

Q 15 Interest to a general audience

Q 16 Quality of the writing

REVISION LEVEL

Q 17 Please take a decision based on your comments:

Minor revisions.