

COVID-19, mental health and use of health services. Switzerland as an empirical case

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The use of health services depends on both service characteristics—such as availability, accessibility, and acceptability—and population health-seeking behaviors. The COVID-19 pandemic posed major challenges to health systems globally, including in Switzerland, where it disrupted healthcare delivery and increased mental health needs. These disruptions varied across regions, affecting access, availability, and delivery of care. Mental health impacts were unevenly distributed, with young women, frail individuals, minorities, and those with lower socioeconomic or educational status most affected. Children and adolescents also experienced notable declines in psychological wellbeing. Four years on, persistent mental health needs highlight the urgency of coordinated responses addressing pre-existing inequalities and inefficiencies in mental health services.

To inform evidence-based recommendations, this PhD research investigated how the pandemic affected both population mental health and healthcare use in Switzerland. The first study analyzed data from the Corona Immunitas Ticino project to explore the relationship between confirmed SARS-CoV-2 infection and psychological distress in adults. Using validated tools measuring depression, anxiety, and stress, and applying robust longitudinal analyses, the study provided new evidence on the long-term psychological effects of the pandemic. The findings underscored the need to integrate preventive mental health components into pandemic preparedness strategies. Further, a systematic review and meta-analysis quantified access to and use of both mental and non-mental health services among individuals experiencing psychological distress or mental disorders during the pandemic. This research clarified how mental health challenges influenced service utilization and contributed valuable data for modeling population health outcomes and guiding future policy. Within the Swiss Learning Health System (SLHS), the student developed a Policy Brief summarizing the pandemic's effects on mental health and service use. The brief provided evidence-informed recommendations to strengthen mental health prevention, promotion, and service delivery in Switzerland. It emphasized the importance of embedding mental health into national preparedness plans to ensure timely support during future crises, especially for vulnerable groups. Additionally, the student led a stakeholder dialogue in southern Switzerland to identify post-pandemic mental health priorities and service gaps. Grounded in participatory research principles, this dialogue gathered insights from healthcare professionals, enabling the co-production of locally relevant recommendations. The process revealed how the health system adapted to the pandemic and generated actionable guidance for improving access to care and reinforcing prevention efforts. Overall, this research highlights the pandemic as a catalyst for rethinking and reorganizing mental health services toward more equitable, needs-centered models. Switzerland's experience, as a high-income country with an advanced healthcare system, offers valuable lessons for international policymakers aiming to strengthen health system resilience and better integrate mental health into future public health responses.