

The COVID-19 recession might increase discriminating attitudes toward LGBT people and mental health problems due to minority stress

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Dear Editor,

After the global financial crisis, several studies have investigated the impact of the economic downturn on physical and mental health (De Vogli et al., 2019; Martin-Carrasco et al., 2016; Mattei et al., 2019; Odone et al., 2018). Yet, less attention has been paid to the impact of economic downturns on discrimination toward lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people. In Italy, a possible reason for this is scarcity of data; the first survey on discrimination based on gender, sexual orientation and ethnicity was performed by the Italian National Institute of Statistics in 2011 (ISTAT, 2015) on a sample of about 8,000 individuals aged 18–74 years. 

LGBT people represent a heterogeneous group with specific health, personal and economic needs. Higher rates of depression, suicidality and substance use were reported in LGBT people who are still facing numerous mental health disparities. Notably, the levels of minority stressors positively predict mental health outcomes, therefore increased discriminating attitudes may lead to increased minority stress, favoring the incidence of mental health problems (Mongelli et al., 2019).

After the outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic, concerns arose with respect to its mental health outcomes, and to the consequences of lockdown measures adopted (Torales et al., 2020). The COVID-19 recession might cause psychic suffering and increased discriminating attitudes toward LGBT individuals. Due to lack of previous research on the topic, we cross-sectionally assessed the association between the unemployment rate and the results of the above-mentioned survey, disaggregated by macro-region: North-West, North-East, Central and Southern Italy. We used Pearson's coefficients to assess the correlation between macroregional unemployment and the results of the survey, made up of 22 items; respondents could choose among four answers (e.g. very acceptable, quite acceptable, poorly acceptable, unacceptable; completely agree, agree, disagree, completely disagree etc.). The questionnaire is available online (ISTAT, 2015). Results were deemed significant when the p -value was $<.05$.

Increased unemployment was associated with increased discrimination toward both homosexual and transgender individuals as shown by the following results: “Do you think it is acceptable to have a homosexual co-worker?” (very acceptable: $r = -0.96$, $p = .04$; quite acceptable: $r = 0.98$, $p = .02$; unacceptable: $r = 0.97$, $p = .03$), “Do you think it is acceptable to have a homosexual doctor?” (very acceptable: $r = -0.97$, $p = .03$) and “Do you think that workers who discriminate a co-worker because he/she is transgender are justified?” (very justified: $r = 0.98$, $p = .01$). The complete list of indicators used in the analysis is available upon request to the corresponding author.

Our findings suggest that economic downturns may increase discrimination of LGBT people, and of individuals traditionally depicted as belonging to vulnerable groups or minorities, for example, women, migrants, etc. The COVID-19 recession might increase discrimination of LGBT individuals and mental health problems in this population groups. Strict monitoring and specific policies are needed to tackle the risk of this occurrence. In addition, attention and advocacy exerted by all mental health professionals aware of their social responsibility are needed to reduce inequalities and discriminating attitudes within

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society (Bhugra et al., 2016; Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2014; Scasta & Bialer, 2013).

Availability of data and materials

All data used for this study are available upon request addressed to the corresponding author.

Conflict of interests

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