

Do University Students Experience Psychological Distress During the Covid-19 Pandemic?

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ABSTRACT

University students are in the period of emerging adulthood that are vulnerable to experience psychological distress compared to other populations. They receive various pressures from social contexts such as academic demands, relationship issues, or career problems. Understanding student psychological distress is important as its impact is debilitating student academic life and well-being. The focus of this study is to identify the prevalence of student psychological distress of University “X” in Jakarta. A total of 514 students was involved in this survey using a convenience sampling. The Hopskin Symptom Checklist-25 was used as a screening tools to assess depression and anxiety. The result showed the prevalence of students who experienced depression and anxiety based on the demographic characteristics such as gender, year entry, and household status. More than 80% students were indicated as a high-risk group either in depression or anxiety. This study implies that the university should promote more prevention and intervention programs to help students in dealing with psychological distress.

Keywords: anxiety; depression; psychological distress; university students

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INTRODUCTION

University students are in the sensitive period to experience a lot of demands. They have to cope with academic and social demands such as the preparation for future careers and family. This condition was associated with stressful situations, then in turn it was related to mental health problems. Mental health problems refer to the term of psychological distress that are measured by self-report, or mental disorders as assessed by clinical interviews. Distress is recognised by short-term symptoms and are associated with stressful situation. An individual likely suffers from a disorder when a situation triggers excessive and disproportionate symptoms (Payton, 2009).

The mental health of university students is identified internationally as a critical public health issue because of its high prevalence among the university student population (Knapstad, 2019). The World Health Survey across 21 countries by The World Health Organization (WHO) found that one in five of university students had a 12-month DSM-IV disorder (Auerbach et al., 2016). Especially of the first-year university students, another WHO survey identified that one-third of first-year students reported at least one disorder of DSM-IV: anxiety, mood or substance use (Auerbach et al., 2018). Some studies also found that psychological distress among students are higher than non-student peers (Stallman, 2010).

The term psychological distress is frequently and widely referenced in health sciences such as nursing, medical, psychological, and social sciences (Ridner, 2004), but the concept of psychological distress is most often not defined clearly (Bernhardsdóttir & Vilhjálmsón, 2013; Drapeau, Marchand,

& Beaulieu-Prevost, 2012). Mirowsky (2007, in Payton, 2009) defined psychological distress as an individual's unpleasant emotional state, and typically consists of two common symptoms; depression and anxiety. Moreover, Ridner (2004) conceptualise specific features of psychological distress, including changes in an emotional state, feelings of discomfort, inability to cope effectively and feelings of harm.

The development of psychological distress among university students may be influenced by many risk factors. Some studies identified several risk factors; academic pressure, financial problem, female gender, minority group, overuse of technology, family functioning, rurality, housing condition (Hakami, 2018). Moreover, specific condition may play an important role in increasing the prevalence of psychological distress. Since the corona virus disease 2019 (COVID-19) had spread worldwide at the start of 2020, more studies were conducted to find out the psychological impact of the outbreak COVID-19. A study reported that more than 50% participants rated their psychological distress as moderate to severe level of symptoms (Wang et al., 2020).

Understanding psychological distress among students is critical because the implication of this issue to many aspects of student life, such as academic achievement, social relationships, future career, marital life (Hakami, 2018), and risk of suicidal thought and behaviors (Keyes et al., 2012). The aim of this study is to figure out the prevalence of psychological distress among undergraduate students at University "X" in Jakarta. Data was presented based on the demographic characteristics. Furthermore, this study also aimed to examine the differences level of psychological distress based on gender, year entry, and household status. This study would contribute in developing the prevention and intervention programs to help students in dealing with their mental health problems.

METHOD

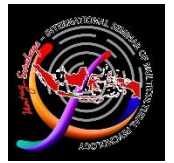
Participants

A total participant who filled out the questionnaires was 514 undergraduate students at University 'X' in Jakarta. Out of the sample, the male students constituted 110 (21.40%) and the female students comprised 404 (78.60%). Age of participants ranged from 17 to 24 years old, and the mean age was 20.30 (SD= 1,29). Number of students from each faculty as following: Faculty of Education 104 (20.23%), Faculty of Literacy & Art 64 (12.45%), Faculty of Math & Science 64 (12.45%), Faculty of Social Sciences 40 (7.78%), Faculty of Technology 51 (9,92%), Faculty of Sport Sciences 59 (11.48%), Faculty of Economics 70 (13.62%) and Faculty of Psychology 62 (12.06%).

Instrument

The Hopkins Symptom Check List (HSCL)-25 is a self-report rating scale that was developed to measure distress symptoms (Derogatis et al, 1974). The HSCL-25 consists of 10 items of the anxiety subscale (such as being suddenly scared for no reason; feeling fearful), 13 items of the depression subscale (feeling hopeless about the future; feeling lonely) and two items of somatic symptom (poor appetite; difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep). The participants were asked to rate themselves on a four options scale to each statement that describes the symptoms. The scale ranged from 1 indicating "not bothered at all" to 4 representing "extremely bothered".

This study used the Indonesian version of HSCL-25 that was adapted and validated through cultural testing by Turnip & Hauff (2007). In this study, the internal consistency of subscale anxiety and depression presented the Cronbach Alpha 0.91 and 0.89, respectively. A mean score of 1.75 was used as a cut-off point to distinguish between distressed (above cut-off point) and non-distressed (below cut-off point) students. This critical point has been proposed in the HSCL original version and was recommended to use in various studies (Winokur, Winokur, Rickels, & Cox, 1984).



Research Procedure

This study was a cross-sectional survey that data were collected on September 2020. The HSCL-25 was administered on an online survey platform. In order to reach out students from various faculties, the link of questionnaire was disseminated through the social networking sites. All participants were involved in this study voluntarily as indicated by their informed consent within this survey.

Data Analysis Techniques

As the aim of this study is to figure out the prevalence of psychological distress among students, data have mostly been analysed by descriptive statistics. The number of students was presented into percentage based on several demographic variables and categorisation of psychological distress. Furthermore, inferential statistics (t-test & analysis of variance) were used to find out whether there is a significant different level of psychological distress based on gender, year entry, and household status.

RESULT

The prevalence of psychological distress of this sample were computed based on the individual level of psychological distress. The threshold 1.75 was used to categorise the students who have the mean score ≥ 1.75 for the entire scale, anxiety sub-scale and depression sub-scale. Table 1 showed the number and percentages of students with the mean score ≥ 1.75 .

Table 1. The Prevalence of Psychological Distress

	Total		Mean Total ≥ 1.75		Mean Anxiety ≥ 1.75		Mean Depression ≥ 1.75	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Gender								
Male	110	21.40	96	87.27	93	84.55	92	83.64
Female	404	78.60	357	88.37	350	86.63	348	86.14
Age								
17 – 18	31	6.03	26	83.87	27	87.10	24	77.42
19	120	23.35	100	83.33	100	83.33	96	80.00
20	135	26.26	127	94.07	120	88.89	125	92.59
21	150	29.18	131	87.33	128	85.33	127	84.67
22	58	11.28	51	87.93	51	87.93	51	87.93
23 - 25	20	3.89	18	90.00	17	85.00	17	85.00
Year Entry								
2019	135	26.26	114	84.44	113	83.70	110	81.48
2018	78	15.18	73	93.59	69	88.46	69	88.46
2017	243	47.28	217	89.30	213	87.65	213	87.65

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2014-2016	58	11.28	49	84.48	48	82.76	48	82.76
Household Status								
At home	369	71.79	322	87.74	321	87.47	311	84.74
Rent a room	117	22.76	110	95.65	104	90.43	108	93.91
Others	28	5.45	21	65.63	18	56.25	21	65.63

Table 1 showed that the number of students who experienced psychological distress based on total score, anxiety sub-scale and depression sub-scale generally more than 80%. This number indicates the higher rate of prevalence of psychological distress among students in this study.

This study also aimed to examine the differences level of psychological distress based on demographic variables, such as gender, year entry, and household status, as shown at Table 2.

Table 2. Level of Psychological Distress

	Total		HSCL-25			Anxiety				Depression			
	N	Mean	SD	F/t test	Sig	Mean	SD	F/t test	Sig	Mean	SD	F/t test	Sig
Gender													
Male	110	2.51	0.68	-1.506	0.133	2.78	0.61	-1.792	0.074	2.70	0.57	-0.764	0.445
Female	404	2.62	0.67			2.91	0.59			2.75	0.55		
Year Entry													
2019	135	2.55	0.59	0.742	0.527	2.88	0.62	0.677	0.566	2.71	0.56	0.173	0.914
2018	78	2.66	0.68			2.97	0.55			2.72	0.49		
2017	243	2.63	0.42			2.87	0.59			2.75	0.56		
2014-2016	58	2.53	0.10			2.82	0.63			2.76	0.64		
Household Status													
At home	369	2.60	0.68	-1.272	0.204	2.88	0.60	-0.486	0.627	2.75	0.56	0.222	0.824
Rent a room	117	2.69	0.61			2.91	0.59			2.74	0.56		

As seen in Table 2, there is no significant difference of level psychological distress between male and female students ($p > 0,05$). Based on the duration of study at university, the level of psychological distress was not significantly different among four groups of students ($p > 0.05$). Comparison of level psychological distress was conducted among students who lived with parents at home and those who lived in a rented room. The result showed that no significant different between those groups ($p > 0.05$). In conclusion, this study found that there was not significantly different level of distress based on gender, year entry, and household status.

DISCUSSION

This study indicates the prevalence and level of psychological distress of 514 samples. As many as 80% students experience above cut-off score, so that they endorsed either as the high depression or



high anxiety characteristics. This high rate of prevalence cannot identify the sources of stress experienced by students because this study did not provide more details about the everyday life of students. Moreover, this study was conducted during the outbreak COVID-19 that may play as an amplifier of the existing stressors in the normal conditions. Compared to other studies, this study showed higher rate of prevalence of psychological distress. The high rate of prevalence should be considered as a critical indicator that students need help urgently to cope with their psychological problems. This finding highlights the need to develop proper support services by health-care professionals at the university counseling centre. Otherwise, the debilitating severe impact of students' psychological distress may be happening.

Several previous studies showed the prevalence rates of psychological distress were higher in women than men (Adlaf, Gliksman, Demers, & Newton-Taylor, 2001; Knapstad et al., 2019). However, this study did not support that women are more likely experiencing higher psychological distress than men. This study is also not in line with previous study that found the more years at the university have impacted in decreasing distress (Adlaf et al., 2001; Bayram & Bilgel, 2008). These studies found that the first- and second-years students showed higher level of depression and anxiety than older students.

Regarding the household status, this study did not find any differences between students who are living at home (with parents) and those who living alone (rent a room). This finding is supported by Heath & Kenyon (2001) that living with other household members may offer either positive or negative effect. An individual may get emotional support, but on the other hand the presence of other household member may add pressure because they have a worse relationship.

This current study has several limitations. This study may not represent all undergraduate students at the University 'X' as the samples was recruited using non-random sampling. In addition, because this study used a cross-sectional design, the level and the prevalence of psychological distress may not be indicative of students' psychological distress throughout the academic year. Moreover, the data were collected during the outbreak COVID-19 that triggering a variety psychological strain.

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