

# PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS AND TRAUMATIC STRESS NEGLECTED IN MENTAL HEALTH

South Africa has a high prevalence of mental health disorders – a substantial number of which remain undiagnosed and untreated. A South African population-based study found a 28.4% prevalence of psychological distress among participants 15 years and older. The SANHANES-I team reports.

The results of the first South African National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (SANHANES-I) indicated that mental health was possibly neglected in the country given that a relatively high prevalence of psychological distress and traumatic stress was found.

## Distress higher in females, black Africans

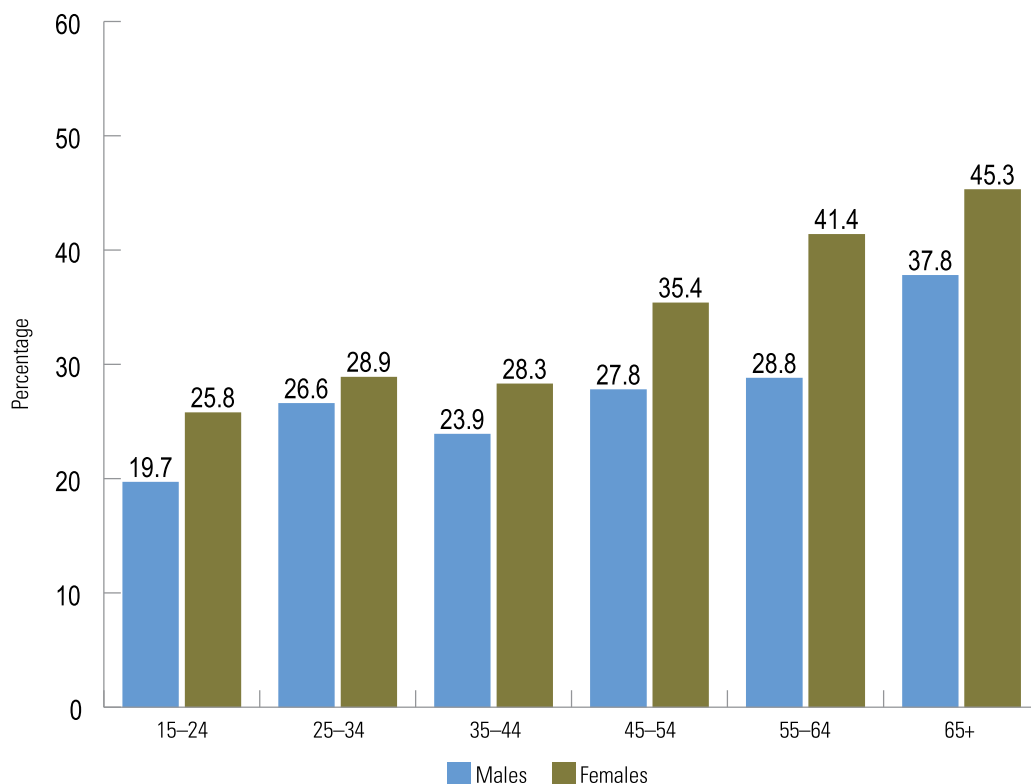
The prevalence of psychological distress was found to be 28.4% among participants 15 years and older. Psychological distress was higher in females (31.4%) than males (25%) and higher among black Africans (31.2%) than in white and coloured

participants (17.7% and 17.8% respectively). The prevalence of psychological distress also increased with age (Figure 1).

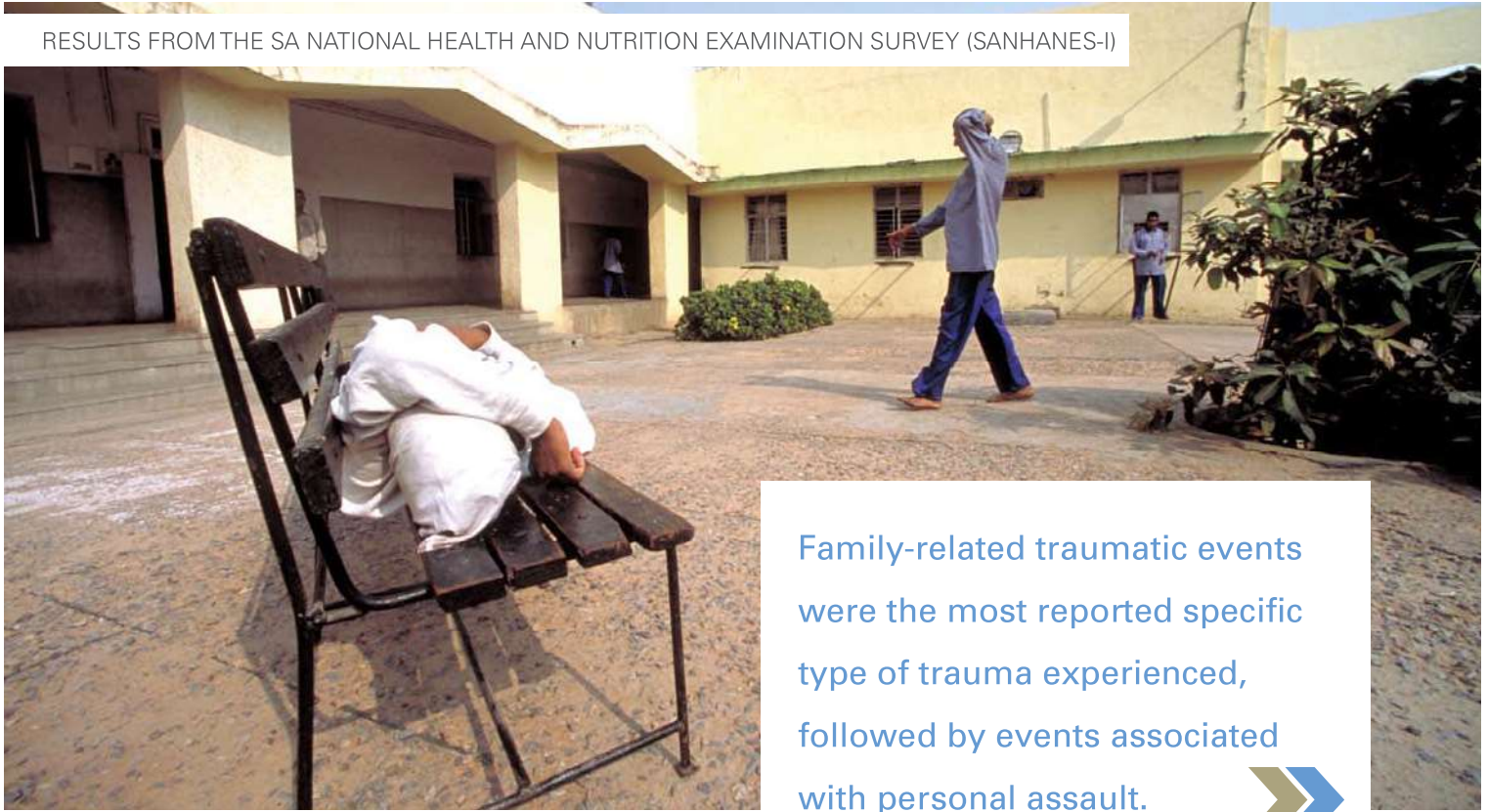
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Figure 1: Prevalence of psychological distress in adults 15 years and older by sex and age, SA 2012



Source: SANHANES-I 2012



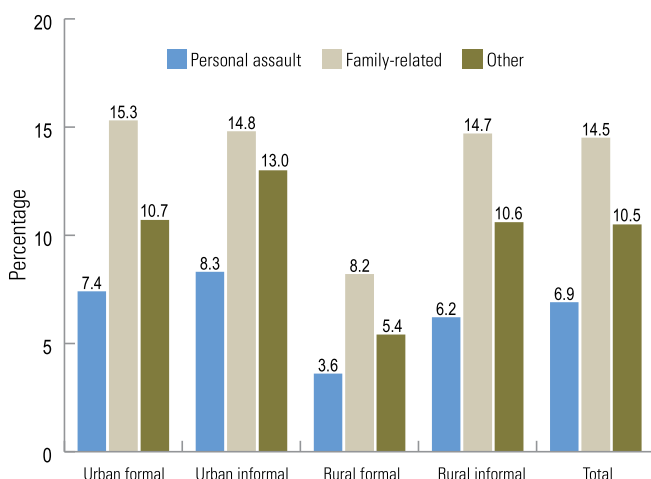
Family-related traumatic events were the most reported specific type of trauma experienced, followed by events associated with personal assault.

Traumatic events over a lifetime were mostly associated with family-related events followed by personal assaults.



Experiences of traumatic events over a lifetime were mostly associated with family-related events (14.5%) followed by personal assaults (6.9%). According to the areas where participants lived, those from urban areas (informal and formal) reported higher rates of personal assault compared to rural formal areas. Participants from urban formal areas also reported higher rates of family-related trauma compared to rural formal areas (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Experience of traumatic events by locality and type of trauma, SA 2012



Source: SANHANES-I 2012

### Discussion and recommendations

It is important for health authorities to recognise the burden of psychological distress among these specific groups of vulnerable individuals and to implement targeted interventions. Traumatic events may serve as precursors to severe mental distress and possible post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Family-related traumatic events (witnessing or having knowledge of violence against a family member or loved one) were the most reported specific type of trauma experienced, followed by events associated with personal assault (violence experienced by the participant themselves).

The current study estimated that at least one third of the population 15 years and older was psychologically distressed, and the highest percentage of lifetime experiences of traumatic events was associated with family and personal assault events. It is recommended that public mental health services be revised to meet population needs in South Africa.

More should be done to screen, diagnose and treat people with common mental health disorders presenting at healthcare facilities. Furthermore, mental health should be incorporated as part of routine care. It is recommended that the national departments of health and social development urgently address the shortage of mental health services and professionals within the public health system. ■

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