LMICs, Pandemic & Suicide

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Abstract. The current Covid-19 is a serious global public health emergency that has both physical and mental health consequences. It has been hypothesized that the pandemic may lead to increase in suicide rates, due to various factors: fear, anxiety, uncertainty, loss, bereavement, increased unemployment and loss of livelihood amongst other factors. But it is also possible that increased family time, connectedness and mutual support may mitigate the effects of risk factors of suicide. The mental health and suicide-related consequences of the pandemic might vary depending on how countries' health and public health systems respond to it. The health and mental health systems of low and middle-income countries (LMIC) are being severely challenged, as pre-pandemic most LMICs already had poor health and mental health systems. Other factors in LMICs that have an adverse effect on mental health include social effects of banning religious gatherings (esp. funerals), an increase in domestic violence and the millions of migrant workers who lost their livelihoods overnight. Most LMICs do not have any safety welfare nets. Stigma and ostracism of Covid patients has lead to their and their families' social exclusion. All these factors are likely to lead to compromised mental health, with a possible increase in suicidal behaviors. Unfortunately, the absence of good surveillance systems in most LMICs means that any change in the pattern of suicidal behaviors will be difficult to assess. It is imperative that LMICs use the opportunity to improve their health systems, increase investment in mental health, develop a national mental health and suicide preventive strategies. At the very least there is urgent need to develop robust surveillance systems to monitor the patterns of suicide and self-harm in LMICs.