



SEMAPHORE

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Matched Samples Comparison Confirms Seafarers' Pandemic Impacts

A comparison of symptoms of depression and anxiety reported by seafarers before and during COVID-19 has found the pandemic has “led to a deterioration of working conditions and increased mental health risks for seafarers”.

“Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of seafarers: A comparison using matched samples” was co-authored by Birgit Pauksztat of Sweden’s Uppsala University, Daniela Andrei of Perth’s Curtin University and Michelle Grech of the University of Queensland.

The 11-page report, which combined data collected in the summer of 2020 with data collected in 2015-2016, opens with the following quote taken from a December 2020 research article authored by Ana Slišković of Croatia’s University of Zadar.

“ ... I’m already sixth month on a board, with winter trading of the vessel to Iceland through the stormy weather my forces and willingness to be ready to keep the duties are reducing every hour and every day. If the situation with crew rotation will not come effective very soon, only God knows what can be happened due to fatigue of mind, body, soul ... ”

Abstract

The document’s Abstract notes that the pandemic and measures implemented to curb its transmission have altered workplaces and “challenged occupational health and safety in unprecedented ways”, with high levels of mental distress reported across several industries.

“In the maritime industry, occupational health and safety risks – including psychosocial risks – were a concern already before the COVID-19 pandemic,” it states.

“However, knowledge about the prevalence of mental health problems and the factors associated with them is still limited.

“The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the effects of respondent and work-related characteristics on seafarers’ self-reported symptoms of depression and anxiety. Data came from two cross-sectional convenience samples of seafarers on international commercial vessels, surveyed before (Npre-pandemic = 793) and during the pandemic (Npandemic = 504).”

Matching the two samples on respondent and work-related characteristics using propensity scores, the study found that the pandemic contributed to significantly-higher levels of depression and anxiety.

“Further analyses showed that seafarers with longer work periods, those who had been onboard longer than expected and those working on vessels registered with ‘flags of convenience’ reported significantly-higher levels of both depression and anxiety during the pandemic, but not prior to the pandemic.

“Taken together, these findings suggest that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic led to a deterioration of working conditions and increased mental health risks for seafarers. Practical implications for safe-guarding occupational health and safety during this and future crises are discussed.”

Conclusion

According to the document's Conclusion, the aim of the study is to contribute to a "more systematic" body of knowledge about the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on seafarers' mental health.

"Employing a rigorous research design that allows for comparisons across time periods, our results provide strong evidence for increased levels of depression and anxiety in the maritime industry due to the pandemic. This is problematic as employees in this sector were already identified to be at higher risk for mental health problems.

"Moreover, examining potential predictors of mental health problems before and during the pandemic, we found that factors at the job, vessel and industry level were significantly associated with the severity of depression and anxiety symptoms experienced during the pandemic. These patterns of association point towards the need to address systemic issues in this industry that contribute to its increased vulnerability during the pandemic.

"We hope that our research will instigate further systematic investigations on seafarers' mental health in general and the experience of the ongoing pandemic in particular. A systematic understanding of the changes associated with the pandemic as well as the contributing factors will allow for better and more targeted opportunities to intervene and alleviate mental health problems."

Three further papers are currently in preparation or under review within the Swedish-Australian academic project.

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