



ANXIETY ABOUT THE SPREAD OF COVID-19 – ADVERSE IMPACT ON PUBLIC HEALTH

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a study on the level of anxiety regarding the spread of COVID-19 among social work professionals, their attitude towards vaccines, and the influence of certain demographic characteristics.

Purpose: The main purpose of the study is to assess the levels of anxiety, attitudes toward vaccines, and trust in information sources among social work professionals in order to support the development of more effective strategies for enhancing support and protecting their mental health.

Materials/Methods: An online survey was conducted with 316 social work professionals from several Bulgarian regions, and statistical analyses (SPSS) were applied to examine anxiety, vaccine attitudes, and demographic influences.

Results: The analysis shows that most professionals experience high anxiety (61%) regarding COVID-19, exhibit mixed attitudes toward vaccines (41% positive, 46% hesitant), and demonstrate varying levels of trust in medical information, with demographic factors significantly affecting these variables.

Conclusions: The obtained results provide grounds for recommendations that contribute to improving the public health of those working in helping professions.

Keywords: COVID-19, Public Health, Social Work Professionals,

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2022) caused significant anxiety and social tension with adverse effects on public health and mental well-being [1, 2]. Restrictive measures and social isolation complicated access to healthcare services, especially for vulnerable groups [3, 4, 5]. According to a report by the Health Inequalities Portal, the most vulnerable and socially excluded groups face greater risk not only of infection but also of severe health consequences due to existing social, economic, and health inequalities. Social inequalities represent systemic differences in health among various social groups [6], and the EuroHealthNet Health Inequalities Portal [7] provides information on health inequalities in Europe, including research, policies, data, practices, and initiatives. Its work is based on partnerships between organizations and institutions operating in public health.

In this context, raising public awareness and cooperation among health professionals, social work professionals, and communities is essential for restoring the mental and physical health of the population and reducing the pandemic's impact on public health [8, 9]. The above supports the thesis that social work professionals, as a key group of helping professionals [10, 11], experience increased levels of stress and anxiety, threatening the effectiveness of their work and public health [12].

PURPOSE

This study aims to examine the level of anxiety about the spread of COVID-19 during 2020-2021, attitudes toward vaccines, and trust in information sources among social work professionals, in order to inform recommendations for improving their support and mental health.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study involved 316 social work professionals from the regions of Stara Zagora, Haskovo, Sliven and

Yambol, working in various positions – primarily social workers, but also educators, psychologists, nurses, and others. The majority were women (89.56%) aged between 46 and 60 years, with over 80% of participants holding higher education degrees. Those working with children slightly outnumber those working with adults (53% vs. 46%), almost half were social workers (45.60%), but a significant share (21%) were non-specialists working in the social sector.

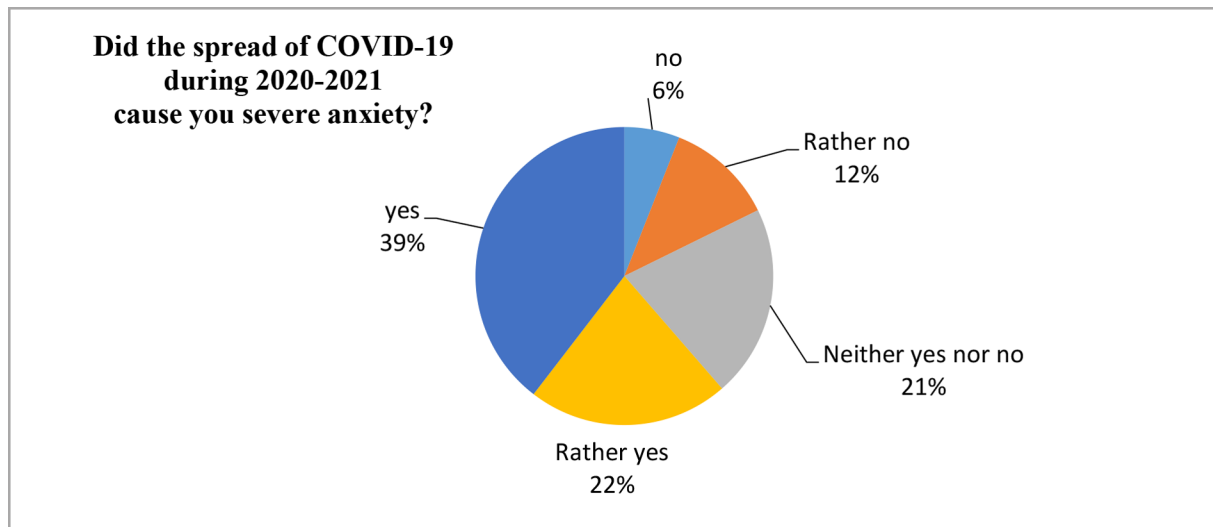
Data were collected via an online survey on anxiety around COVID-19, vaccines, and trust in information

sources, with a reliability coefficient (Cronbach’s alpha) of 0.542 for the questions used. Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS (descriptive statistics, Pearson coefficient, ANOVA, Student’s t-test, etc.) and Excel, with results presented in tables and graphs.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

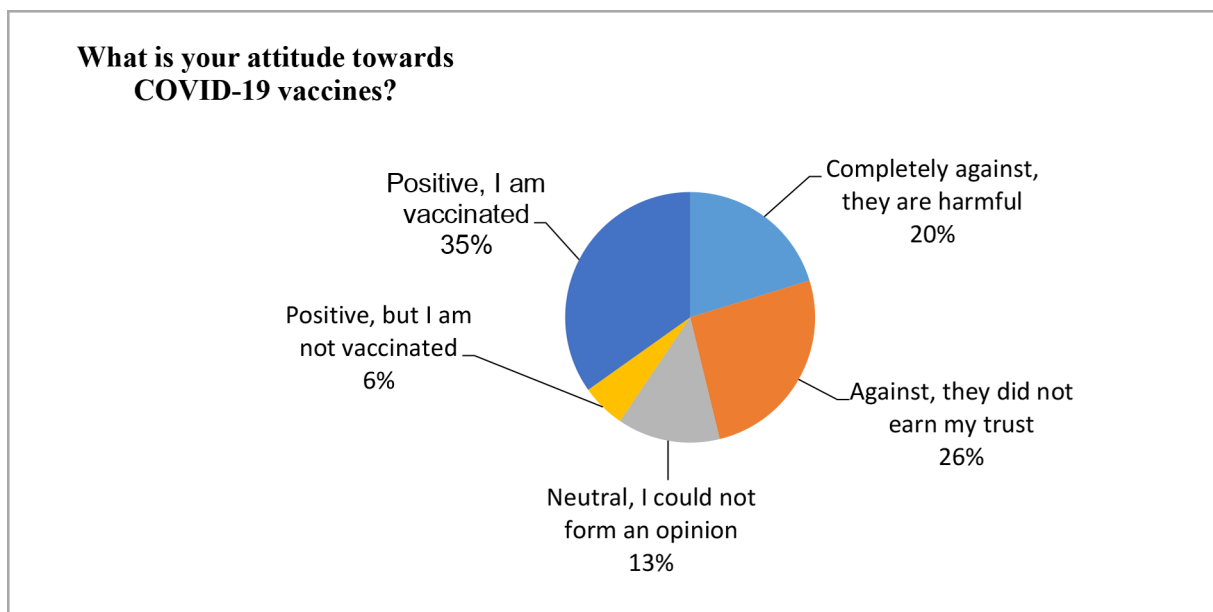
The data analysis shows that a significant proportion of social work professionals experience high levels of anxiety about the spread of COVID-19, with 61% reporting this, while only 18% report low or no anxiety (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Level of anxiety about the spread of COVID-19 among social work professionals.



This trend indicates serious stress affecting their health and deteriorating working conditions, which could reduce their engagement in providing help and support to vulnerable groups in society.

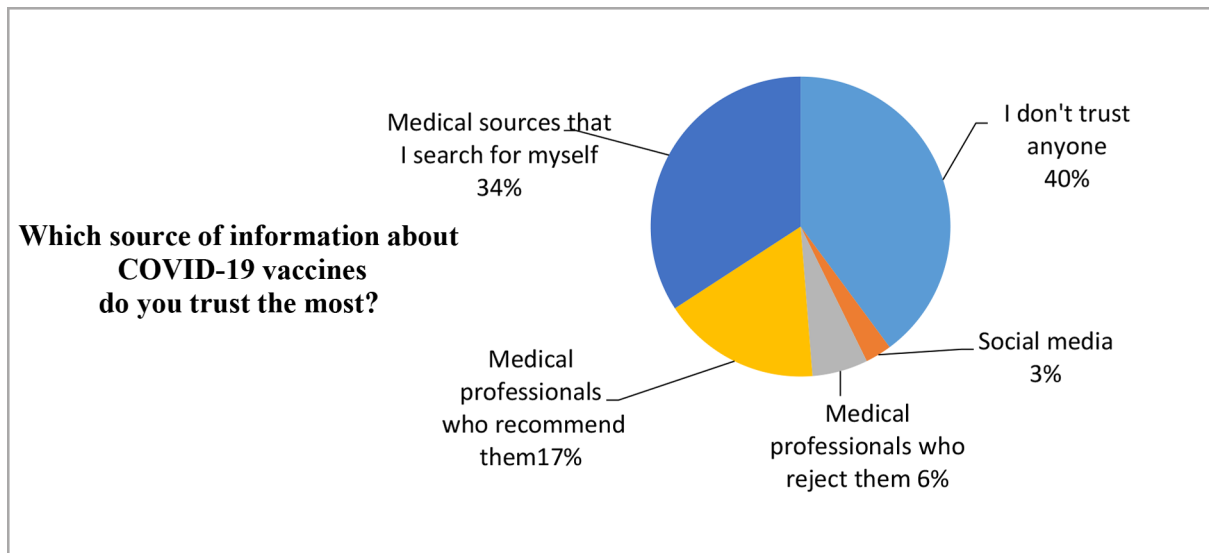
Fig. 2. Attitude towards COVID-19 vaccines.



Furthermore, the variation in attitudes toward vaccination (Fig. 2) reveals that, despite a considerable share of vaccinated individuals and support for immunization (41%), there is also a substantial proportion of professionals with doubts and skepticism (46%). This reflects the complex social and psychological factors surrounding the topic. The diversity in opinions highlights the importance of an adequate information campaign and building trust to increase vaccine acceptance as a key public health tool.

Figure 3 illustrates which sources of information about COVID-19 vaccines respondents consider most authoritative. There is a positive trend of trust in expert medical information (51%), but a significant share (49%) report conflicting opinions even within the medical community. These data emphasize the importance of reliable medical communication and the need to build trust in vaccine information sources to increase public acceptance.

Fig. 3. Trust in information sources about COVID-19 vaccines.



The empirical study's data analysis shows correlations between the variables studied and establishes statistically significant influences of demographic factors on them.

1. Correlational relationships between the studied variables. Correlation analysis reveals a strong positive relationship ($r = 0.534$; $p < 0.01$) between trust in medical sources and positive attitudes toward COVID-19 vaccines, highlighting the importance of reliable information in shaping opinions. Additionally, there is a weak but significant positive correlation ($r = 0.156$; $p < 0.05$) between anxiety about the virus spread and a more positive attitude toward vaccination. These relationships reflect the vital role of information and emotional engagement in public opinion.

2. Statistically significant influences between the variables studied. Table 1 summarizes significant effects of major demographic characteristics on the variables related to anxiety about the spread of COVID-19, attitudes toward vaccines, and trust in information sources.

3. Age exerts a statistically significant influence on anxiety about the spread of COVID-19 ($F=6.27$; $p<0.05$), with anxiety increasing as age rises, along with a more positive attitude toward vaccines ($F=4.99$; $p<0.05$) and greater trust in medical information sources ($F=3.70$; $p<0.05$), except for people over 60 years old, who show greater distrust. These results highlight the need for targeted vaccination campaigns and a differentiated information approach ac-

ording to age groups.

Attitudes of professionals from the Stara Zagora region are statistically significantly more hesitant ($F=3.69$; $p<0.05$) compared to smaller regions — Haskovo, Sliven, and Yambol—likely due to the more diverse socio-economic profile of the population. Additionally, vaccine attitudes vary ($F=2.34$; $p<0.05$) depending on the groups served by social work professionals: those working with people with permanent disabilities are the most positive, while those working with individuals entitled to social assistance show more hesitation.

These findings emphasize the need to develop and implement expert-based informational and health campaigns, precisely adapted to regional particularities, job positions, and the specific profile of the target user groups.

CONCLUSIONS

The conducted study and the obtained results provide grounds for the following conclusions and recommendations:

- The COVID-19 pandemic has a significant impact on the mental health of social work professionals—the majority exhibit high levels of anxiety, which can reduce the quality of support provided. Age and demographic differences determine the levels of anxiety, attitudes toward

Table 1. Influence of Demographic Characteristics on Key Variables (ANOVA).

Demographic Characteristic	Key Variable	F; p<0,05	Direction of Influence
Age	Anxiety about COVID-19	6,27 ↑	Increases with age
	Attitude towards vaccines	4,99 ↑	More positive with age
	Trust in vaccine information	3,70 ↑	More trust with age
Place of residence	Attitude towards vaccines	3,69 ↓	More negative in Stara Zagora
Position held	Anxiety about COVID-19	3,73 ↑	Higher among social workers and managers
Work population	Attitude towards vaccines	2,34 ↑	More positive among those working with adults and children with disabilities

vaccines, and trust in medical information, necessitating a differentiated, targeted approach in communication and support.

- Recommendations can be directed toward building reliable informational campaigns and strategies to strengthen trust, conducting training programs and supervisions for social work professionals, as well as introducing remote work models to ensure safety and effectiveness.

These recommendations would support social work professionals in their role as specialists aiding public health, providing quality care and support to vulnerable groups.

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