

# **The 30-year mental health legacy of the Chernobyl disaster.**

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## **Abstract**

The disaster at the nuclear power plant at Chernobyl (Ukraine) in 1986 had a significant ecological, economic and public health impact in a wide geographical area surrounding the accident site. The 2006 the Chernobyl Forum Report from the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary concluded that mental health effects were the most significant public health consequence of the accident (WHO and IAEA, 2006)

This paper provides a critical overview of international, peer-reviewed mental health research conducted during the first 3 decades with an emphasis on understudied and poorly studied mental health issues.

It is concluded that a majority of the affected population did not suffer clinically significant mental health effects. Mothers with young children and clean-up workers were at the highest risk for developing mental health problems. In addition to these mental health consequences in a strict sense, the disaster appears to have affected overall well-being, help-seeking behavior and labor participation in the exposed population.

In seeking to understand the apparent persistence of the mental consequences of Chernobyl, we identify four contributing factors: indirect effects of health surveillance, compensation (financial, medical and educational), ongoing concerns about current and future health effects of the original exposure and ongoing alarmist media coverage at the local level.

We also compare key themes to findings from the Three Mile Island and Fukushima Daiichi disasters.