



Psychological Impact of COVID-19 on the Sports Population from Santiago



Milan Ochoa Chang a, Briseida Yusin Rivera Labaut b, Geidy Rodriguez March c, Eloy Rafael Oliveros Serrano d

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Corresponding Author a



Abstract

COVID-19 has caused great effects on the economic and social order of all the countries involved, it is recognized the great psychological impact that this terrible pandemic has brought with it in the general population. Athletes are not exempt from these effects, so the research was determined to evaluate such impacts on athletes from Santiago to implement psychological intervention actions that would minimize such consequences. The study was carried out in 926 athletes belonging to all sports categories and age groups, using three questionnaires and the thematic drawing technique. The surveyed athletes did not show great psychological effects; however, the most recurrent manifestations were tension, sadness, constant worry, fear and sleep disturbances. Action research was carried out in which immediate solutions were offered to the problems and demands diagnosed.

Keywords

COVID-19; economic and social order; population; psychological impact; sport;

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Contents

Abstract 140
1 Introduction 141
2 Materials and Methods 142
3 Results and Discussions 143
4 Conclusion 145

a Centro Provincial de Medicina Deportiva, Santiago de Cuba, Cuba
b Centro Provincial de Medicina Deportiva, Santiago de Cuba, Cuba
c Centro Provincial de Medicina Deportiva, Santiago de Cuba, Cuba
d Centro Provincial de Medicina Deportiva, Santiago de Cuba, Cuba

References.....	146
Biography of Authors.....	147

1 Introduction

The unexpected scourge of COVID-19 has shocked the world with a relentless thrust. This pandemic, unprecedented in the history of mankind, has put into operation creative mechanisms of thousands of people associated with the solution of epidemic problems, but not without first leaving the distaste of frustration at not being able to avoid so many deaths, dismemberment of families entire and enormous feelings of loneliness. Cuba, following the efforts of its already proven and effective health system, has dedicated all possible efforts to the search and implementation of strategies in order to stop the advance of this pandemic, however, the constant threat of this disease that, as AIDS has no face. Confinement or social isolation has been one of the most effective solutions to combat the disease, but it is undeniable that it is also putting the mental health of individuals at risk. During these days, psychologists repeat that confinement can increase feelings of anguish, catastrophic thoughts and even generate depressive symptoms.

COVID-19 is forcing the majority of high-performance athletes to train in their homes in isolation, without being able to have contact, both with family and friends, as well as with the rest of their colleagues and technical team. Thus, for example, countries such as Spain carried out widely disseminated campaigns (#YoMeNuevoEnCasa or #YoEntrenoEnCasa), these have reached 88,600 and 41,300 followers, respectively. In both cases, these campaigns were launched by well-known influencers of physical activity and supported by the main sports institutions (Piedra, 2020). A study carried out with Chilean athletes reveals which are the main emotions that arise during the process of confinement in their homes, and at least three general phases are recognized (uncertainty and disbelief, anxiety versus activation and motivation for the return). Regarding the phase of uncertainty and disbelief, they report that at first they had uncertainty because they thought that this would not affect their work, that it would be something momentary, later the feeling of disbelief appears due to the time of confinement and the possible effects that the pandemic in the practices of their sport (Véliz et al., 2020). This confinement to which athletes are forced, together with the fear of not achieving the performance that is required of them, can generate high levels of anxiety and stress, as well as a decrease in motivation to continue with their workouts from home. The psychological factors that most influence the performance of athletes are motivation, concentration, self-confidence and control of their emotions. It is, therefore, essential to take care of these aspects on the days of confinement so that their performance does not decrease every time they return to the usual routine (Sulistiawati et al., 2017; Solórzano & Zambrano, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic caused the paralysis of sports activities in the world. In the midst of this situation, Cuba also stopped its competitive actions, as well as the preparation of its athletes for the Tokyo Olympic Games, with the primary objective of preserving the health of all members of its sports movement. For sports populations and especially for athletes in our sports movement, this situation has represented an important socio-psychological and physical affectation. In addition to the potential risk of becoming ill or a family member that our athletes face, activities related to their preparation have been interrupted and their immediate sports commitments postponed. This supposes the postponement in time and in many cases the endangering of the scope of some purposes that are part of their respective sports and life projects. This situation, unprecedented due to its characteristics in its impact on the athlete's preparation, is something unusual for them and can cause insecurity, distrust, pessimism, lack of communication with their coaches, maladjustment to home and family life, fears of illness, and the little preparation of parents to face this challenge (Doherty, 2013; James, 2011).

An early approach to the consequences that this situation has had on the sports population throughout the country in the psychological, physical and social order is convenient, which will allow feedback to the respective management bodies and sports authorities in each of our territories. for the adoption of the pertinent measures. Due to what has been expressed previously, and following the ideas of Cañizares, Huie & Duarte, it is of vital importance to focus on the situation of our athletes and their adaptation to the home in isolation and training conditions at home together with family coexistence. , to provide support and stimulate

in them positive, healthy psychological coping mechanisms, from psychoprophylaxis. For this, it is necessary to carry out psychological orientations of resilient strategies, to help and contribute to the emotional stability of athletes and their coexistence at home (Brooks et al., 2020; Temsah et al., 2020).

Taking these claims into account, the Provincial Center of Sports Medicine of Santiago de Cuba, following the magnificent initiative of the Department of Sports Psychology of the sister province of Guantánamo, which became an idea to generalize in the rest of the country, has immersed itself in the task of evaluating the psychological impact that the most catastrophic pandemic in history has brought on athletes from Santiago, with the commitment to implement intervention strategies that allow reverting such results. This sister province focused its research on a specific sector of the sports population, exempting other age groups that are also part of the high performance pyramid, which is why Santiago de Cuba undertook the task of including these age groups and make the effectiveness of such research more comprehensive. In this sense, this research states as objectives:

- 1) Identify the negative psychological manifestations of a general and specific nature that predominate in the athletic population of Santiago de Cuba during the COVID-19 pandemic stage
- 2) Implement psychological intervention actions to minimize the effects of COVID-19 in athletes from Santiago.

2 Materials and Methods

Through ongoing research, it is intended to help minimize the psychological effects of COVID-19 on the athletic population of Santiago. For this, the strategy of structuring an initial diagnostic phase was organized with the application of three questionnaires, prepared with the purpose of evaluating the socio-psychological impact of the COVID-19 phenomenon in the chosen sample. The three questionnaires pursue this objective, but differ, in that they were suitable for different age groups, according to the dissimilar characteristics of the psychological development that they present, thus, they were distributed in a population that was over 15 years old, another contained in the ages of 12, 13 and 14 years, and the last framed in the youngest athletes (eight, nine, ten and eleven years). In this last group, the complementary application of a thematic drawing was necessary since at an early age it is a very useful diagnostic tool (Schuit et al., 2002; Gill et al., 2001).

It is important to highlight that the sample was selected in a probabilistic, intentional way. 31 sports disciplines were represented in the school, youth and social categories, all of them belonging to the Santiago EIDE, the Gymnastics, Boxing, Athletics, Soccer, Baseball, Nautical Academies, as well as a large number of athletes from the national teams. In our province, a total of 501 athletes over 15 years old were surveyed, 346 between 13 and 14 years old and 79 between the ages of 8, 9, 10 and 11 years, collecting a total of 926 athletes of both sexes. The tabulation process was carried out by sports psychologists from the Provincial Center of Sports Medicine of Santiago de Cuba with skills to use the Excel Windows program and the SPSS statistical package available. As part of the type of study (action-research), intervention actions were interspersed during the diagnostic phase to guarantee immediate attention to the problems that arose, these activities were enriched and perfected as they were integrated other needs. Proposed actions:

- 1) Telephone counselling: these were carried out in order to mitigate concerns and offer psychological tools to resolve possible negative emotional manifestations (critical phase of the pandemic).
- 2) Use of social networks and other technological platforms: they started from the Need to disseminate audiovisual capsules that offered timely and short-term information with messages addressed to the sports population (critical phase of the pandemic). These first two actions presuppose the urgency of interacting and intervening psychologically with athletes using sports technologies. Information and communications due to the necessary use of these unconventional forms of psychological assistance imposed by the pandemic. This modality of psychological services receives different names: computerized therapy, online counseling, online psychological therapy, and tele-psychology, among others. It has advantages such as the immediacy of communication, its multimedia possibilities (involving text, image, and audio), ease of establishing contact from different devices and locations, possibility of anonymity, among others (Montoya et al., 2020).

- 3) Educational talks: implemented in the recovery phase, they favored the modification of some psychological squeal derived from the most critical phase of the pandemic.
- 4) Psychodramas and role plays: they allowed to materialize more attractive interventions for the youngest athletes in the assumption of more responsible behavior patterns towards health care and compliance with epidemiological measures.

3 Results and Discussions

Main results of the application of the surveys and the thematic drawing Athletes over 15 years of age

Initially it is stated that only 2.8% of the athletes surveyed had a family member or friend sick with COVID-19, in the same way, 3.6% said that someone they knew from the family environment was admitted for suspicion of the disease. For their part, none of the athletes studied was ill with COVID-19, although 4 of them (1.4%) sustained the experience of being hospitalized for suspected suffering from the disease. It is important to note that the Santiago de Cuba province sustained, in this first stage of the pandemic, a very low incidence of positive cases, so the effects on the sports population are analyzed mainly related to confinement and social distancing. In relation to the activities developed by the sample studied in a confinement situation, it is specified that the most frequented were listening to music (90.6%), physical activities (88.8%), sharing with the family (83.8%), Physical preparation (82%) and social networks (77%). However, those linked to psychological preparation were not the most favored, such as the psychological preparation itself (27.9%), the mental representation of the element's technicians (35.1%) and mental representation of the competition (39.5%) (Costanza, 1999; Martínez et al., 2007).

Considering the negative psychological manifestations experienced by the athletes surveyed, an interesting data can be observed, all of them were expressed below 31%, which indicates that most of these athletes from Santiago did not suffer great effects. However, it should be considered that among these manifestations the most recurrent were tension (30.8%), anguish and sadness (29.5%), lack of motivation to exercise (25.7%), difficulty in finding alternatives (23.6%), confusion, uncertainty in the future and constant worries (21.5%) and lack of motivation for daily activities (20.3%). Similar studies in populations of these ages in Colombia observe physical symptoms, sleep or appetite problems, isolation from peers and loved ones, but also an increase or decrease in their energy, apathy and inattention to behaviors related to promotion. of health. The situation caused by COVID-19 can be the trigger for the emergence of anxiety and depression problems in minors, because of the fear of getting infected they stop attending certain places and excessive health concerns limit their functioning (Ramírez et al., 2020).

Sleep disorders (16.8%), appetite disorders (14.6%), alcohol consumption (8.8%), relationship difficulties (8.6%) also showed a low incidence in the sample studied), isolation behaviors (8.2%), among other negative aspects. In the order of sports goals, a favorable trend towards their restructuring is perceived in the sample studied. Thus, 61.7% declare that they can postpone them. Performing the analysis of the psychological tools to face special situations like this, it is highlighted that a good part of the athletes from Santiago (73%) studied reported having them. However, this result requires the intervention of psychology professionals to verify how effective these tools could be (Kim & Su, 2020; Tetro, 2020).

High school athletes

In this group, like the previous one, the experience of having a close relative or having been suspected of the disease was of very low incidence. The activities most developed by the sample studied during the pandemic were: television (84.1%), listening to music (83.2%), and study of teaching content (68.5%), physical preparation (67.5%) and share with family (66.8%). In this sector of the population, activities related to psychological preparation continue to be little favored (relaxation exercises in 41.6%, mental representation in 9.5% and breathing exercises in 4.3%). Some studies show that playing sports can protect against mental health symptoms and disorders. In adolescents, physical activity has been shown to reduce symptoms of

depression and anxiety. Therefore, the restriction of sports can have a detrimental impact on the mental health and well-being of young people, as periods of inactivity, isolation from sports teams, distance from the sports community have been shown, less qualified interactions with sports coaches and lack of social support cause emotional and psychological disorders in athletes ([Center for Sport and Human Rights, 2020](#)).

Among the most frequent psychological effects were: sadness (31.2%), fear (21.4%), Difficulty concentrating (13.9%), sleep and appetite disorders (19.7% and 19, 4%, respectively), constant worries (16.5%), tension (14.7%) and irritability (14.2%). It should be noted that none of these effects obtained very significant percentages. Anxiety, boredom, frustration and high rates of stress are some of the mental health problems that children face in the face of the outbreak of this disease. Studies in adolescent populations have revealed psychiatric manifestations of COVID-19 and threats to mental health as a result of consequent restrictions, and levels of loneliness, depression, harmful use of alcohol and drugs, as well as self-harm or self-harm are expected to increase. Suicidal behaviors ([Center for Sport and Human Rights, 2020](#)).

In the UK, more than 80% of children with mental health problems have shown a deterioration in their well-being as a result of the restrictions imposed ([Minds, 2020](#)). In relation to sports goals, a high percentage (70.8%) affirmed the possibility of being able to resume them. For their part, 81.8% expressed being able to solve the fears and concerns that the pandemic would leave in its wake. It is important to ensure that children and young athletes have access to guidance and information to help them develop or develop healthy coping strategies. [McDuff et al. \(2020\)](#), propose that this includes developing a daily schedule focused on nutrition, fitness, flexibility, learning, and social connections. They further recommend that young athletes be encouraged to share this schedule with friends and coaches to increase responsibility and motivation ([Center for Sport and Human Rights, 2020](#)).

Primary school athletes

The athletes belonging to this group did not have close experiences in relation to suffering from the disease, as manifested in the previously analyzed groups. For their part, the activities most frequented by the little athletes were: play and television (88.6%), reading and studying teaching content (84.8%), sharing with the family (82.3%) and activities physical (81%). Psychological preparation was not a part of the priorities of this sample, with breathing exercises (35.4%) and relaxation exercises (24.1%) being the most frequent. The most recurrent psychological manifestations were around worries and restlessness (54.4%), difficulty sleeping (31.6%), sadness (27.8%), difficulty concentrating (22.8%), difficulty in memory (21.5%), lack of appetite (20.3%) and fear (19%). When considering the effects of isolation, the feelings experienced by children when their sporting activities are canceled may also include disappointment, missing teammates, and concerns that skills will be delayed / lost without practice. Indeed, with the disruption in learning, the inability to go to school, and the cancellation of sports, the pandemic may have created a sense of isolation that may spread more than the pandemic itself among millions of children. These repercussions can be magnified among young elite athletes ([Center for Sport and Human Rights, 2020](#)).

The first study carried out on a Spanish child population concluded that 89.0% of the children presented behavioral or emotional alterations as a result of confinement. In research carried out on the psychological consequences of COVID-19 and confinement, the authors' attention was drawn to the existence of a higher percentage in the youngest of manifestations, such as: psychological distress, increased levels of anxiety, depression and stress, concentration problems and irritability ([Navarro-Soria et al., 2021](#)).

1) Elements determined through thematic drawing

It was possible to apply 25 drawings in the youngest children that belong to early initiation sports (Gymnastics and Diving). Through this technique some significant elements were observed, although in a reduced sample of the group studied. Thus, for example, 4% of athletes showed anxiety traits, only 2% signs of aggressiveness, and 2% feelings of insecurity.

2) Summary of the most significant and integrating data of the total population studied

The athletes studied did not show significant effects, from the psychological point of view, directly linked to the pandemic, a large part of these small impacts is caused by the low incidence of positive cases COVID-19 in Santiago de Cuba, in the period that the study was carried out. These data show points in common with the study carried out by [Jaenes et al. \(2020\)](#), on Andalusian athletes, where no

greater psychological implications were observed. However, these results, the most recurrent affectations turned out to be tension, sadness, constant worries, fear and affectations in sleep; for Jaenes et al. (2020), uncertainty and loss of vigour were the most frequent. For their part, Montoya, emphasize in their research that the difficulties manifested by the greatest number of athletes were anxiety, lack of motivation and boredom. In general, the athletes from Santiago developed, as compensatory activities during confinement times, listening to music, watching television, sharing with the family, as well as physical preparation. Psychological preparation was not a priority within the alternative actions developed. It is significant to note that the expectations to reorganize the sports goals were always high, this denotes a very favorable element from the volitional point of view that would imply fewer incidents at the time of reincorporation to the training macro cycles.

3) Experiences obtained from the psychological intervention actions

For the interventional phase it is relevant to highlight that it was necessary to take immediate part in the possible difficulties that were detected as the selected techniques were applied. Therefore, different intervention modalities listed in the previous chapter (material and methods) were carried out in unison. All the aforementioned activities have had a great impact on the sports population of Santiago de Cuba by minimizing the psychological effects that were diagnosed as a result of the impact of COVID-19, however, they continue to implement and incorporate other modalities of individual intervention and group; In this sense, it is important to remember that modifications in human behavior are complex and difficult to achieve in a reduced space of time, that is why the need to continue extending the interventional phase to the following periods of sports preparation arises (Wang et al., 2020).



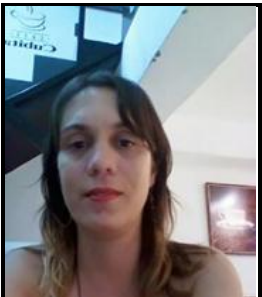

4 Conclusion

- 1) Most of the athletes surveyed did not experience, indirectly (through family and friends), and directly, the COVID-19 disease.
- 2) The athletes from Santiago studied did not show great negative psychological implications caused by the conditions of confinement and social isolation, however, the most recurrent manifestations of tension, anguish, sadness and lack of motivation toout various activities.
- 3) Psychological intervention actions were implemented that allowed mitigating the effects of COVID-19 in the sports population from Santiago evaluated.

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Biography of Authors

	<p>Milan Ochoa Chang Graduated in Psychology, graduated from the University of Havana, 1997. For 14 years she was linked to the work of people with disabilities as part of the genetic and psychosocial study carried out on people with disabilities in Cuba, Venezuela and Ecuador. Since 2014 she works as a Sports Psychologist at the Provincial Center of Sports Medicine of Santiago de Cuba. She is currently head of the Department of Psychology, assistant teaching category and has a Master's degree in Sports Psychology. He has obtained several relevant awards for the presentation of scientific and research works. <i>Email: milan.ochoa@nauta.cu</i></p>
	<p>Briseida Yusín Rivera Labaut Degree in Psychology, graduated from the Universidad de Oriente, 1996. Master in Community Social Work. He has been part of event tribunals, thesis discussion of university graduates and has done thesis tutorials, specializing in Psychology. Research activity has been linked in recent years to moral self-regulation and its influence on personality development, a system of actions for behavior modification in adolescents with conduct disorders, and actions of psychological orientation that favor responsible sexual behavior in youth volleyball players, as well as Bach Flower Therapy, an alternative to improve concentration of attention, in basketball athletes. <i>Email: rubenb97@nauta.cu</i></p>
	<p>Geidy Rodríguez March Graduated in Psychology, graduated from the Universidad de Oriente, 2008. She worked as a psychologist in the multidisciplinary team of care for patients and relatives of addicts at the Center for Specialized Treatments belonging to the Psychiatric Hospital of Havana during the years 2009 and 2010. Later She works as an educational psychopedagogue in a Basic Secondary institution in the city of Baracoa. She currently works as a sports psychologist at the Provincial Center for Sports Medicine in Santiago de Cuba. <i>Email: geyroma@nauta.cu</i></p>
	<p>Eloy Rafael Oliveros Serrano Medical graduate in 1985. First Degree Specialist in Sports Medicine. (1993). Assistant Professor. He works at the Provincial Center of Sports Medicine of Santiago de Cuba as director of the center. Lleva a cabo funciones directivas y administrativas en deporte y salud, con más de 25 años de experiencia aplicada al deporte y la salud en la provincia. Miembro de la Federación Cubana de Medicina Deportiva y Traumatología. Presidente del Comité Organizador de la I, II, III Olimpiada del Deporte Cubano en Santiago de Cuba. Jefe de la Misión Deportiva Cubana en la República de Perú y Coordinador de Cubadeportes, Autor y coinvestigador en varios estudios sobre deporte y salud. Ponente en eventos y congresos científicos provinciales, nacionales e internacionales de Medicina Deportiva y Traumatología. Tiene publicaciones en revistas deportivas y de salud. <i>Email: eloy.oliveros@inder.gob.cu</i></p>