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RESEARCH ARTICLE (ORIGINAL)

Self-Reporting Questionnaire-20 as a Predictor of Suicide Attempts: A Cross-Sectional Observational Study

Self-Reporting Questionnaire-20 como Preditor de Tentativas de Suicídio: Estudo Observacional Transversal

Self-Reporting Questionnaire-20 como Predictor de Intentos de Suicidio: Estudio Observacional Transversal

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Abstract

Background: Exposure to psychosocial stressors is associated with the development of common mental disorders and an increased risk of suicidal behavior. Individuals with depressive and anxiety symptoms are more likely to experience psychological distress over time. In this context, the Self-Reporting Questionnaire (SRQ-20) has been widely used as an early screening tool for common mental disorders.
Objective: To analyze the predictive capacity of the SRQ-20 in relation to suicide attempts.
Methodology: Cross-sectional observational study with 313 participants from the interior of Paraná, Brazil. Suicidal attempt was considered outcome variables, and the SRQ-20 was treated as a predictor. Data were analyzed using logistic regression with JASP software, version 0.18.3.
Results: The model presented an Area Under the Curve (AUC) of 0.78, an accuracy of 88.6%, and a specificity of 80.2%, indicating satisfactory discriminative performance.
Conclusion: It is concluded that the SRQ-20 showed moderate predictive capacity for suicidal attempts, demonstrating its potential as an auxiliary instrument in the early identification of suicidal risk in people with common mental disorders.

Keywords: suicide; mental disorders; anxiety; depression

Resumo

Enquadramento: A exposição a stressores psicossociais está associada ao desenvolvimento de transtornos mentais comuns e ao aumento do risco de comportamento suicida. Indivíduos com sintomas depressivos e de ansiedade apresentam maior probabilidade de sofrimento psíquico persistente. Neste contexto, o *Self-Reporting Questionnaire* (SRQ-20) tem sido amplamente utilizado no rastreio precoce desses transtornos.
Objetivo: Analisar a capacidade preditiva do SRQ-20 para tentativas de suicídio.
Metodologia: Estudo observacional transversal de abordagem quantitativa, realizado com 313 participantes do interior do estado do Paraná, Brasil. A tentativa de suicídio foi definida como variável de desfecho e o SRQ-20 como variável preditora. Os dados foram analisados através de regressão logística no software JASP (versão 0.18.3).
Resultados: O modelo apresentou uma área sob a curva (AUC) de 0,78, com uma precisão de 88,6% e uma especificidade de 80,2%, indicando um desempenho discriminativo satisfatório.
Conclusão: O SRQ-20 demonstrou capacidade preditiva moderada para tentativas de suicídio, podendo contribuir para a identificação precoce do risco suicida em pessoas com transtornos mentais comuns.

Palavras-chave: suicídio; transtornos mentais; ansiedade; depressão

Resumen

Marco contextual: El estrés psicosocial se asocia al desarrollo de trastornos mentales comunes y conductas suicidas. El *Self-Reporting Questionnaire* (SRQ-20) es ampliamente utilizado para la detección precoz de este malestar.
Objetivo: Analizar la capacidad predictiva del SRQ-20 para los intentos de suicidio.
Metodología: Estudio observacional transversal cuantitativo con 313 participantes en Brasil. El intento de suicidio se definió como variable de resultado y el SRQ-20 como predictora. Los datos se analizaron mediante regresión logística en el software JASP (versión 0.18.3).
Resultados: El modelo presentó un área bajo la curva (AUC) de 0,78, con una precisión del 88,6 % y una especificidad del 80,2 %, indicando un rendimiento discriminativo satisfactorio.
Conclusión: El SRQ-20 demostró una capacidad predictiva moderada, consolidándose como una herramienta útil para la detección precoz del riesgo de suicidio en personas con trastornos mentales comunes.

Palabras clave: suicidio; trastornos mentales; ansiedad; depresión

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Introduction

According to the Brazilian Ministry of Health (Brasil, 2022), suicide is a complex phenomenon with biological, psychological, social, and cultural determinants. According to the World Health Organization, more than 700,000 people die by suicide each year, accounting for approximately one in every 100 deaths recorded globally. In the Americas, the suicide rate has increased by 17% in recent years and is now the fourth leading cause of death. Recent studies (Curtin & Garnett, 2023; Garnett et al., 2023) reveal a rising trend in suicide mortality, especially among adults. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1.7 million adults attempted suicide, 12.3 million experienced suicidal thoughts, and 3.5 million made concrete plans, leading to over 48,000 deaths.

Exposure to psychosocial stressors is a relevant risk factor for the development of common mental disorders (CMD) and for increased risk of suicidal behavior. Individuals with depressive symptoms, anxiety, or somatic disorders are more likely to experience psychological distress over time. The main stressors include occupational, financial, and relational factors, such as the lack of social support in adverse situations (Torres Neto et al., 2023).

A Swedish cohort study found that the most stressful factors were financial and linked to receiving unemployment benefits, welfare, or early retirement. These stressors were associated with an increased risk of suicidal behavior, with risk varying by sex and age at the time of exposure. Initial risk ratios for suicide attempts ranged from 1.37 to 3.86 and were similar for death by suicide; these ratios also decreased after controlling for psychopathology and time elapsed since exposure (Edwards et al., 2025).

In post-pandemic studies, healthcare remains one of the most stressful sectors. Accordingly, the use of the Self-Reporting Questionnaire (SRQ-20) among mental health professionals showed that 98.1% (n = 106; N = 108) of workers were experiencing psychological distress during care delivery. Female sex and marital status of Married/ being in a de facto union also predominated. These variables contrast with that of other studies indicating that single individuals are more likely to experience distress (Stander et al., 2024). Another group that shows an important association with the suspected presence of CMD is healthcare students.

Mann et al. (2021) showed that 90% of people who died because of suicidal behavior had some psychiatric disease or complaint. The most common complaint in the study was related to mood disorders. An Indonesian study of master's students found that moderate stress levels were present in most students, that is, 18 people (51.4%) (Asram et al., 2024).

Thus, the present study proposed to perform logistic regression to determine whether the SRQ-20 serves as a predictive model for suicide attempts.

Background

Understanding suicidal behavior requires a multifaceted approach that considers the interplay among biological, psychological, and social factors. Mental disorders are among the primary contributors to psychological distress and the risk of suicidal behavior; therefore, their early identification in the context of healthcare is essential.

Frequently underdiagnosed, CMD are conditions that significantly affect individuals' functioning, including depressive symptoms, anxiety, and somatic manifestations, as described in the International Classification of Diseases, 11th Revision (ICD-11), and the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition (DSM-5; Lopes & Freitas, 2024).

In this context, the SRQ-20 stands out as a widely used instrument for screening CMD, enabling the early identification of signs of psychological distress. Empirical evidence has demonstrated an association between high SRQ-20 scores and a greater likelihood of risk behaviors, including suicide attempts (Silveira et al., 2022).

The use of this instrument enables assessment of psychological and somatic symptoms, such as fatigue, insomnia, mood changes, decreased appetite, and intrusive thoughts, which may precede suicidal behaviors. Its application across care settings, together with the simplicity of its dichotomous response format, supports its use as a tool to assist clinical practice.

To evaluate the SRQ-20's predictive ability, binary logistic regression was used because it is appropriate for modeling binary outcomes, such as suicide attempt occurrence. The model's performance was measured using discriminative metrics, primarily the area under the curve (AUC), which quantifies the instrument's ability to differentiate between individuals with and without the outcome.

Research question

How does the SRQ-20 predict the occurrence of suicide attempts in individuals with CMD?

Methodology

This cross-sectional observational study was conducted in southern Brazil (State of Paraná) between 2022 and 2024. The nonprobability convenience sample comprised 313 adult participants (≥ 18 years), recruited consecutively from two therapeutic communities and one community-based mental health treatment unit.

Female participants predominated (57.9%), with a mean age of 36.8 years (SD = 13.2; range 18-68 years). Regarding education, approximately 60% had not completed secondary school, and monthly income of up to two minimum wages was most common. All participants had

at least one mental disorder diagnosis and depression was the most frequent (43.4%).

Inclusion criteria were to be 18 years or older and to have at least one diagnosed mental disorder. Individuals who were unable to understand the instruments or who showed clear signs of acute psychological distress at the time of data collection were excluded.

Recruitment was carried out through prior contact with the healthcare services, followed by an in-person approach to participants, with an explanation of the study objectives and the collection of informed consent.

The SRQ-20 served as the predictor variable, enabling the assessment of indicators of CMD. The instrument consists of 20 dichotomous items ("yes" / "no"), with a total score ranging from 0 to 20. A cutoff of ≥ 7 was adopted, based on previous validation in the Brazilian population.

The outcome variable was the occurrence of a suicide attempt. Data were analyzed using binary logistic regression to assess the predictive capacity of the SRQ-20.

Model performance was evaluated using the AUC, sensitivity, specificity, accuracy, and Nagelkerke pseudo-R^2. These metrics are widely used to assess the quality and discriminative capacity of logistic models (Hosmer & Lemeshow, 2013).

Multicollinearity was assessed using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) and tolerance values.

All analyses were conducted using JASP software (version 0.18.3) and followed the STROBE (Strengthening the Reporting of OBservational studies in Epidemiology) guidelines (von Elm et al. (2007).

The study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the State University of Londrina (Opinion No. 4,276,621/2020) in accordance with current legislation.

Results

The sample comprised 313 participants from one community-based mental health treatment unit and two therapeutic communities in inland Paraná State. Most participants were female (n = 181; 57.9%), with a mean age of 36.8 years (SD = 13.2; range 18-68 years).

In terms of education, 60.1% did not finish secondary school, and the most common monthly income was up to two minimum wages (80.5%). Every participant was diagnosed with at least one mental disorder, with depression being the most prevalent (43.4%), followed by anxiety (24.9%) and bipolar disorder (7.9%).

Binary logistic regression analysis indicated that the SRQ-20 had moderate predictive capacity for the occurrence of a suicide attempt. The model had an explanatory power of Nagelkerke R^2 = 0.342, suggesting that 34.2% of the variability in the outcome was explained by the predictor. Performance analysis showed an AUC of 0.78, with a sensitivity of 68.2% and a specificity of 80.2%, indicating satisfactory discriminative capacity. The remaining model fit and performance indicators are presented in Table 1. The chi-square test was statistically significant (p < 0.001), indicating the overall adequacy of the model. Additional model fit indicators are shown in the table below. The chi-square test was statistically significant (p < 0.001), and the information criteria indicated good fit.

Table 1

Fit, performance, and diagnostic indicators for the logistic regression model

Indicator	Value
Determination coefficients (Pseudo-R²)	
McFadden R^2	0.225
Nagelkerke R^2	0.342
Tjur R^2	0.235
Cox & Snell R^2	0.242
Overall model fit	
χ^2	86.916
AIC	304.976
BIC	316.215
Diagnosis of independent variables	
Wald Test	$p < .01$
VIF	1.202
Tolerance	0.832

Note. R^2 = coefficient of determination. χ^2 = Chi-square. AIC = Akaike Information Criterion; BIC = Bayesian Information Criterion; VIF = Variance Inflation Factor.

The information criteria (Akaike Information Criterion [AIC] = 304.976; Bayesian Information Criterion [BIC] = 316.215) indicated adequate fit, balancing goodness of fit and model parsimony.

Regarding the independent variables, the Wald test indicated a statistically significant association between the SRQ-20 score and the occurrence of a suicide attempt ($p < .01$), confirming the predictor's contribution to the model.

The assessment of multicollinearity revealed VIF = 1.202 and tolerance = 0.832, indicating no evidence of collinearity problems among the included variables, which reinforced the stability of the estimates obtained.

Discussion

The current study shows that the SRQ-20 has moderate ability to predict suicide attempts, highlighting its usefulness as a supplementary tool for suicide risk screening in mental healthcare. This method allows for a wider assessment of suicide risk, though it cannot differentiate among various severity levels of the phenomenon.

The model's performance, with an AUC of 0.78 and acceptable sensitivity and specificity levels, indicates the instrument's potential as a useful tool for early suicide risk screening. The Nagelkerke pseudo-R^2 value shows that a significant portion of the variability in suicide attempts is accounted for by the symptoms measured by the SRQ-20.

These findings align with earlier research on the SRQ-20's effectiveness in identifying suicide risk. Silveira et al. (2022) found that people experiencing depressive thoughts face a higher likelihood of suicidal behavior, potentially up to four times greater. Additionally, for mood disorders like depression and anxiety, the odds ratios for suicide-related outcomes are notably elevated (Silveira et al., 2022).

Research across various care settings confirms that the SRQ-20 is an effective screening tool. In primary healthcare, it shows strong ability to detect psychological distress and risks linked to CMD, particularly in populations facing psychosocial challenges like low income and limited education (Torres Neto et al., 2023; Häfele et al., 2023). These results align with evidence that connects CMD to adverse social factors, including limited social support and poor socioeconomic conditions (Torres Neto et al., 2023).

The results also align with research examining the relationship between psychological symptoms and suicide risk across different contexts. Haas et al. (2024) found that individuals with more reported symptoms had a significantly higher risk of suicidal ideation, particularly in high-vulnerability contexts, such as the pandemic period. The SRQ-20 assesses psychological and somatic symptoms, including fatigue, insomnia, mood changes, decreased appetite, and unusual thoughts, which may precede suicidal behaviors (Silveira et al., 2022). Thus, its clinical usefulness extends beyond screening for CMD to the early identification of individuals at increased risk of suicide.

The present study's ROC analysis revealed that the SRQ-20 achieved a specificity of 80.2% and a sensitivity of 68.2%, both suitable for clinical use. Nonetheless, these outcomes should be interpreted within the relevant context, as cultural and situational factors can affect how psychological distress manifests.

International studies reinforce the SRQ-20's applicability across diverse populations. Research in a Vietnamese context demonstrated good validity and reliability of the instrument among pregnant women receiving care in healthcare services (Do et al., 2023). In addition, adherence to mental healthcare services has been associated with earlier detection of psychological distress and with protective practices in the context of suicide risk (Silva et al., 2023).

It is also important to note that the post-pandemic period has been marked by persistent psychological symptoms, such as irritability, difficulty concentrating, sleep disturbances, apathy, and intensified negative thoughts, which may increase vulnerability to suicidal behavior (Silva et al., 2023).

Despite these results, the SRQ-20 does not distinguish levels of severity of suicidal behavior, nor does it replace specific instruments for assessing suicidality. Its use should be integrated into a broader clinical assessment that accounts for the complexity of the phenomenon.

In summary, the results support the usefulness of the SRQ-20 as a mental health screening instrument, contributing to the early identification of individuals at risk, with its interpretation contextualized within clinical and social settings.

Study limitations

This study has limitations to consider when interpreting the results. Firstly, the sample was solely made up of participants from the State of Paraná in Brazil, which could restrict how well the findings apply to other regions or cultures.

Furthermore, because the study is cross-sectional, it cannot determine cause-and-effect relationships; it can only identify associations between variables.

It is important to note that every participant had at least one diagnosed mental disorder, which could introduce selection bias and restrict how well the results apply to populations not in mental health care.

The use of a self-report instrument such as the SRQ-20 may be subject to response bias stemming from participants' emotional states or from individual interpretations of the items.

Finally, variables like social support, physical comorbidities, and other psychosocial factors were not part of the model. These factors could influence the likelihood of a suicide attempt and may affect the observed findings.

Conclusion

The SRQ-20 showed moderate ability to predict suicide attempts, indicating it could serve as a useful supplementary tool for early detection of suicide risk in individuals with CMD.

The model's performance, with an AUC of 0.78, an accuracy of 88.6%, and a specificity of 80.2%, demonstrates good discriminative ability and supports the instrument's usefulness in clinical settings.

Although these results are promising, the SRQ-20 should not be used alone. Instead, it should be part of a thorough clinical evaluation that accounts for the complex and multifaceted aspects of suicidal behavior.

This study highlights the importance of using screening tools in mental health, especially in care environments where early risk detection is a key clinical goal.

Future research should separately examine various outcomes of suicidal behavior and incorporate other variables to enhance understanding of the SRQ-20's predictive ability.

Therefore, it is crucial to develop mental health promotion strategies and public policies that aim to reduce the stigma linked to mental disorders and the risk of suicide.

Author contributions

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