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Department of Public Health and Department Of Gerontology
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Prof. dr. Johan Bilsen, Promotor

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INVITATION to the Public defence of

Roel VAN OVERMEIRE

To obtain the academic degree of

DOCTOR OF SOCIAL HEALTH SCIENCES**The association between exposure to terrorist attacks
and mental health in Belgium**

The defence will take place on

Monday, 20 December 2021 at 5 p.m.

In Auditorium Vanden Driessche

Faculty of Medicine and Pharmacy, Laarbeeklaan 103, 1090 Brussel

ADMITTANCE: due to Covid restrictions, please contact the PhD candidate if you want to attend the public defence in person.

The public defence can also be followed online via Zoom meeting, accessible through the following link:

https://gf.vub.ac.be/redirects/PhD_defense_Roel_Van_Overmeire.php

Summary of the dissertation

Since the Oklahoma City Bombing and the attacks of the 11th of September 2001, research has shown that exposure to terrorist attacks can cause mental health problems, both on those directly exposed as well as society as a whole. As with most trauma-focused fields, researchers have concentrated on a disorder called Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). However, research on the relation between PTSD and terrorism has at times been methodologically questionable. Additionally, the focus on PTSD has led to a shortfall of insight in other areas that are related to exposure to terrorism attacks, such as the role of the social context. This PhD focuses on areas understudied in terrorist attack studies.

The first part of the PhD focussed on direct victims of the attacks. Chapter one and three showed that the potential development of mental health issues can cause problems for social relations, both professionally and personally which tend to further undermine proper recovery. Chapter two showed that many postpone seeking professional mental health due to such social aspects.

The second part of the PhD focussed on society as a whole. Chapter four showed augmented suicide rates in the acute period after the Paris-attack (22/11/2015), while showing no increase after the Brussels-attack (22/03/2016). Chapter five investigated reactions of minors who are exposed to terrorist attacks through social media. Finally, chapter six showed that there are indications that feeling threatened by terrorism can be associated with avoidance behaviour in the long-term, while the link with mental health is weaker in comparison.

Curriculum Vitae

Roel Van Overmeire (1991) obtained a master's degree in sociology at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), and a master's degree in EU-studies at the Universiteit Gent. In December 2017, he started his PhD at the Mental Health and Wellbeing research group (MENT) at the VUB under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Reginald Deschepper and Prof. Dr. Johan Bilsen. During his PhD trajectory, he was involved in several other research projects. He participated in the Big Bird Trial, an interuniversity project sponsored by the KCE on the discontinuation of benzodiazepine-use in Belgium. He was also involved in a study on mental health among funeral directors and he conducted research for Awel, a youth helpline in Flanders. Furthermore, he taught several scientific and methodological topics for Medicine, Biomedicine and Pharmacy students at the VUB.

He is (co-)author of over twenty scientific articles, has performed almost forty peer-reviews, is author of two reports and has presented his work at two international conferences. He also co-supervised two master theses and three bachelor theses to completion at the Faculty of Medicine and Pharmacy at the VUB. Finally, he is member of the EU centre of Expertise for Victims of Terrorism and the Belgian Public Health Association.