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**Taking the Pulse of the Nation:
Validating a single-item
measure of mental distress**

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Abstract

There are occasions when a very short assessment of mental health or distress is needed. The weekly assessment of distress in Australia during the COVID-19 crisis using the nationally representative Taking the Pulse of the Nation (TTPN) Survey is one example. This paper assesses the psychometric properties of a single-item measure of mental distress against the widely used six-item Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K6). The analysis, based on wave 13 of the TTPN survey, considers data from 1,158 respondents selected from across Australia. The new single-item measure was highly correlated with the K6 ($\rho = 0.82$), the area under the curve (AUC) was 0.93, and at the optimal cut-point the sensitivity was 0.71, the specificity was 0.93, and the proportion of respondents correctly classified by the single-item measure was 0.90. The measure of mental distress developed for the TTPN survey provides a valid measure of population mental distress for circumstances where only a single item can be used.

JEL classification: I10

Keywords: psychological distress, COVID-19, mental health, measurement

