The Role of Social Workers in Supporting Vulnerable Populations During Public Health Crises: Review

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Abstract

Background: The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the critical role of social workers in addressing the needs of vulnerable populations, including the elderly, homeless individuals, and those with pre-existing health conditions. Despite their essential contributions, research has primarily focused on healthcare professionals, leaving a gap in understanding the impact of social work during public health crises.

Methods: This review synthesizes existing literature on the role of social workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on their interventions, challenges, and contributions to vulnerable communities. It analyzes data from various studies to highlight the social vulnerabilities exacerbated by the pandemic and the responses initiated by frontline social workers.

Results: Findings reveal that social workers played a pivotal role in mitigating the adverse effects of COVID-19 on marginalized groups. Their interventions included providing mental health support, facilitating access to essential services, and advocating for policy changes to better serve disadvantaged populations. However, challenges such as inadequate resources, high demand for services, and the need for personal protective equipment (PPE) hindered their effectiveness.

Conclusion: The pandemic has illuminated the indispensable role of social workers in public health crises. Enhancing training, resource allocation, and inter-professional collaboration will be vital for improving their capacity to support vulnerable populations in future emergencies. Continued research is essential to fully understand the complex dynamics of social work during such crises and to inform policy and practice.

Keywords: Social work, COVID-19, vulnerable populations, public health crises, interventions.

1. Introduction

Social work has been essential throughout the COVID-19 crisis, addressing the most pressing social needs of vulnerable populations, including the homeless and the elderly. Nevertheless, research has mostly concentrated on health professionals, leaving a gap in knowledge about frontline social workers, particularly those employed in public health institutions [1,2]. According to scientific research, international and national health organizations indicate that susceptible, moderate, and high-risk categories include those with health disorders that impair their immune systems or the elderly [3]. In Wuhan, China, research indicates that 48% of adult COVID-19 patients had comorbidities, including hypertension, diabetes, or coronary heart disease, with mortality rates rising with advancing age [4]. In the European environment, namely in Lombardy, Italy, the majority of patients needing intensive care were older males, with 68% exhibiting at least one comorbidity [5]. Researchers emphasize the need to comprehend the social determinants of health, alongside older individuals or those with comorbidities, in combating the pandemic and understanding the social dynamics of COVID-19 [6].

The global scientific community has expressed concerns about the disparities associated with COVID-19. Historical data indicates that the most impoverished communities have been disproportionately impacted by pandemics, and the study of COVID-19 further illustrates how disinformation and misunderstanding adversely affect persons with limited access to governmental health advisories [7]. The effects of COVID-19 may vary significantly between regions because of their distinct circumstances and resources to confront the pandemic. The Global South's informal settlements exhibit inadequate readiness for fundamental necessities (such as water and garbage collection), with spatial limitations and issues like violence that need urgent interventions to safeguard the most vulnerable populations [8]. Authors from the Global South to the Global North, namely in the US, England, and Wales, examine the racial and ethnic disparities associated with COVID-19 and the effects on educational chances [9-11]. Simultaneously, pressing concerns like child abuse are essential to preventative measures during the COVID-19 pandemic [12].

The need for interdisciplinary research to address the repercussions of COVID-19 has been examined across several scientific domains [13,14]. Within this context, social sciences and social work research contribute to academic discourse while investigating methods to avoid, mitigate, and address inequities, as well as addressing the pressing social needs of disadvantaged populations notably impacted by COVID-19. Numerous scientific advancements have been documented about the circumstances of healthcare professionals and the effects of their roles in service delivery [15], although research on social workers in frontline positions remains limited. Further study is essential to enhance scientific understanding of the effects of their activities on socially disadvantaged people. This research enhances scientific understanding in this domain.

2. Social Vulnerabilities and Issues Emerged During the COVID-19 Context

Social vulnerabilities in the context of COVID-19 include individuals living in poverty or overcrowded houses, without adequate access to water or sanitation, and possessing limited reading skills, among other factors. Numerous research examining the impacts of COVID-19 have shown the unequal impact on African American communities, highlighting racial disparity and socioeconomic marginalization [16,17]. Furthermore, nations like Bangladesh have significant obstacles related to social isolation and inadequate living circumstances in urban slums, indicating that cleanliness guidelines cannot be adhered to [18]. Similarly, housing vulnerability has been examined for its role in exacerbating disparities during the pandemic, with insufficient housing central to the research of at-risk migrant workers in Singapore [19,20]. Research on socioeconomic vulnerabilities associated with the pandemic includes poverty in several aspects. Child poverty has been examined in connection with school closures to propose measures to prevent a social catastrophe impacting children from low-income households, and the diminished access to healthcare for individuals of poor socio-economic status has been highlighted [21,22]. The homeless population, among the most socially disadvantaged, presents a significant challenge to public health, particularly for disaster preparation in communities under lockdown [23].

The social vulnerabilities associated with COVID-19, and its mitigation methods pertain to issues such as unemployment, gender-based violence, anxiety, depression, and homelessness. In Germany, the shutdown measures implemented in April 2020 resulted in a short-term rise in unemployment [24]. The report titled "The COVID confinement measures and EU labor markets," which examines the restrictions on activities in three EU member states (Italy, Germany, and Spain), reveals asymmetric effects of the COVID lockdown measures among various worker groups. The analysis indicates that limitations on economic activity mostly harm low-wage workers and those with poor job circumstances, with a pronounced effect on women and young people. Unemployment correlates with an elevated risk of suicide, and during COVID-19, suicide prevention efforts have intensified, alongside the necessity for enhanced psychological support to mitigate issues such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder in especially vulnerable populations [25-27]. In this context, homeless individuals constitute a vulnerable demographic more prone to disease or mortality from COVID-19 because of their physical and mental health issues [28].

3. Social Work in the Context of COVID-19

The COVID-19 epidemic has directly influenced social work responses, affecting social services consumers, social workers, and other professions, among other factors. International social work organizations have coordinated initiatives to address pressing social problems, exemplifying the core ideals of the field [29]. Since the onset of the pandemic, the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) has articulated its commitment to social work's role in fostering a better society, addressing the ethical problems encountered by practitioners, and advocating for the integration of transformational practices. Likewise, the distribution of publications by the International Association of Schools of Social Work [30] illustrates the social work sector's reactions to crises in educational institutions, communities, and families. The IASSW collection of country reports presents national responses to the crisis, with particular emphasis on social work interventions aimed at supporting the most vulnerable populations, including elderly persons and impoverished kids.

The COVID-19 pandemic's effect on social service users is associated with the circumstances encountered by disadvantaged populations, necessitating social work interventions to enhance their welfare and living situations. Swinford et al. [29] use gerontological social work views to mitigate the adverse effects of the pandemic on the elderly population, taking into account the diversity within this demographic. The writers emphasize the need to address ageism, particularly focusing on the beneficial contributions of older individuals to the community, including their involvement in volunteer or supervisory roles with youngsters. Klein [30] presents several difficulties, discussions, and inquiries related to attitudes and definitions about the elderly during COVID-19. The author advocates for a more analytical approach to comprehending the mechanisms that render old individual's incapable of communication. Omorogiuwa [31] examines the COVID-19 crisis and its impact on older persons in Africa, concentrating on social workers using mass media to advocate for policy reform. This research indicates that social workers serve as agents of change and may empower older individuals via mass media. In the domain of homelessness, the contributions of social work are less prevalent than those in the health sector, where social health professionals play a vital role. Benavides and Nukpezah [32] examine the function of public administrations and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the United States, illustrating methods to meet the requirements of the homeless during the pandemic and highlighting the need for collaboration and shared responsibility. Within the European framework, local and regional authorities and organizations have instituted several programs, including the prompt interventions of social workers at the frontline.

4. Organizational Reactions of Frontline Social Workers

Social workers on the frontlines confronting the repercussions of COVID-19 get little public exposure, while managing immediate dangers and addressing the needs of vulnerable populations [33]. The organizational reactions of social workers to the pandemic include a variety of initiatives, including facilitating video chats between COVID-19 patients and their loved ones during their last moments. Regarding pre-death and post-death readiness and the organization of social workers, it is crucial to

acknowledge their pertinent role in delivering psychological therapies to mitigate the risk of extended mourning disorder within the framework of the pandemic [34]. Volunteers and civil society organizations have assisted social workers in their duties. The government in England received a commendable response from volunteers to address staff shortages in social care, highlighting the need for collaboration across all levels of involvement and sectors. In alignment with this approach, there are instances of collaboration between administrations and other organizations at the regional level in Spain, such as the agreement between the Catalan government and the Social Work Professional Association of Catalonia for intervention in crisis contexts. Instances of cooperation include the assistance of volunteers during a critical shortage of protective equipment [35].

The personal protective equipment (PPE) for frontline workers during the COVID-19 pandemic was a significant issue in many countries, especially at the onset of the outbreak due to material shortages. In this context, several publications highlight the lack of effective instruction and limited availability of PPE as contributing factors to the infection incidence among healthcare workers [36,37]. Baker, Peckham, and Seixas [38] assess the number of workers regularly exposed to COVID-19 infection and illness in the United States, specifying the vocations, including community and social service roles, as well as social work. The authors recognize the risks faced by these workers and the potential impact on their communities and families, necessitating public health initiatives that extend beyond hospital settings.

5. Interventions Addressing Immediate Social Needs and Their Effects

Evidence indicates the crucial significance of social work in addressing pressing social needs during COVID-19, while the specifics of the treatments used remain less understood. In this context, it is essential to emphasize the IASSW's endeavor to synthesize the replies from 16 nations across various global areas [30]. In Australia, social work interventions encompass strategies to address mental health issues during crises, the rise in gender-based violence, telehealth, and the implementation of various digital technologies to deliver social work services and offer alternative methods to engage with vulnerable populations. The identification of at-risk groups and the methods to engage them are fundamental components of the interventions. The paper indicates that in Italy, social workers emphasize their responsibilities to provide necessary services and enhance internal cohesiveness, whereas in Japan, homeless individuals are permitted to reside in business hotels. In Spain, towns established facilities for homeless individuals, with gender-based violence central to some initiatives. Despite these developments, the interpretation of the outcomes and the effect of these treatments remains little examined.

6. Discussion

This research identifies key exclusionary factors regarding the role of social work during COVID-19, including the unpreparedness of social workers for pandemic repercussions, insufficient personal protective equipment (PPE) for social workers, heightened basic needs (such as food and housing) among vulnerable populations, the cessation of services for the homeless, and alterations in official guidelines and protocols for operating within the COVID-19 framework. These factors presented challenges and impediments for social workers in advancing their practice. The transformative elements have facilitated progress in addressing exclusionary factors, encompassing the favorable responses of participants, the function of solidarity networks to enhance service preparedness and supply protective materials, the utilization of virtual tools to improve communication efficacy among professionals and ensure interaction between users and families, and ultimately, the interventions that have preserved lives. This research elucidates the role of social work in addressing the challenges faced by vulnerable populations during the COVID-19 epidemic, using transformational techniques in conjunction with other disciplines, which is especially pertinent in this context. The dialogue and communication of social workers with vulnerable populations, together with the involvement of civil society, have emerged as essential factors supporting the results. In this context, it is essential to emphasize the need to further examine the impact of the crisis on various cultural groups, including health disparities [39]. The examined social work initiatives have guaranteed that the most vulnerable populations, particularly the homeless and elderly, get food, housing, medical care, and emotional support. These results align with prior research [30] and enhance the current

understanding of the transformational interventions of social work and their effects in Barcelona, Spain. The distribution of food via structured networks, the identification of individuals in emergencies, and the availability of shelter have mitigated the heightened susceptibility of marginalized or at-risk populations. The interventions articulated by the insights and emotions of social workers enhance the current body of knowledge in social work research amid the COVID-19 epidemic. Moreover, the outcomes of the transformational interventions aimed at educating vulnerable populations about the issue align with prior findings [7].

The findings of instances when social workers have contributed to saving lives are essential for comprehending the dynamics of how barriers to delivering remedies in pandemic scenarios (exclusionary dimension) may be altered (transformative dimension). The ramifications for social work research and other fields need additional exploration in diverse areas and situations to ascertain if similar occurrences have transpired elsewhere and in what manner. The findings indicate social workers' awareness of their significant role in assisting families and friends in mitigating the effects of bereavement, particularly in the context of resilience analysis [56]. This conclusion aligns with prior findings about psychological therapies to mitigate possible chronic mourning disorder [36].

The findings of organizational responses indicate the establishment of solidarity networks among civil society, organizations, and social workers, which have offered essential support to the community's involvement in these situations. The absence of PEE corresponds with prior study results [37,38]. Nonetheless, the data indicates that the contributions of volunteers and civil society groups have extended beyond social care assistance to include the provision of handcrafted protective materials. This coordination across various intervention levels has also contributed to social workers advocating for legislative reforms.

7. Conclusion

The interplay between social workers executing their duties remotely and those engaged in physical work has been insufficiently explored to date, necessitating a deeper investigation, as the study's findings indicate that it can enhance and mitigate future health emergency preparedness across various contexts. By the end of August 2020, Spain emerged as one of the European countries exhibiting a significant rise in COVID-19 notification rates per 100,000 individuals, so signaling a probable forthcoming scenario for social workers and other professionals. The results of this study demonstrate the management of the situation and the most relevant strategies to mitigate the effects of COVID-19 on vulnerable populations. The insights gained will enhance future performance. The examination of the Barcelona instance and its adjacent metropolitan regions, articulated by frontline social workers, will facilitate this objective, promoting the sustainability of social services in the medium and long term.

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دور الأخصائيين الاجتماعيين في دعم الفئات الضعيفة أثناء الأزمات الصحية العامة: مراجعة

الملخص

الخلفية: أبرزت جائحة COVID-19 الدور الحاسم للأخصائيين الاجتماعيين في تلبية احتياجات الفئات الضعيفة، بما في ذلك كبار السن، والمشردين، والأشخاص الذين يعانون من حالات صحية قائمة مسبقًا. على الرغم من مساهماتهم الأساسية، فإن الأبحاث ركزت بشكل أساسي على المتخصصين في الرعاية الصحية، مما ترك فجوة في فهم تأثير العمل الاجتماعي أثناء الأزمات الصحية العامة.

الطرق: تستعرض هذه المراجعة الأدبيات الموجودة حول دور الأخصائيين الاجتماعيين خلال جائحة COVID-19، مع التركيز على تدخلاتهم، وتحدياتهم، ومساهماتهم في المجتمعات الضعيفة. تحلل بيانات من دراسات متنوعة لتسليط الضوء على الفجوات الاجتماعية التي تفاقمت بسبب الجائحة والاستجابات التي بدأها الأخصائيون الاجتماعيون في الصفوف الأمامية.

النتائج: تكشف النتائج أن الأخصائيين الاجتماعيين لعبوا دورًا محوريًا في التخفيف من الآثار السلبية لـ COVID-19 على الفئات المهمشة. شملت تدخلاتهم تقديم الدعم النفسي، وتيسير الوصول إلى الخدمات الأساسية، والدعوة إلى تغييرات في السياسات لخدمة السكان المحرومين بشكل أفضل. ومع ذلك، فإن التحديات مثل الموارد غير الكافية، والطلب العالي على الخدمات، والحاجة إلى معدات الحماية الشخصية (PPE) أعاقت فعاليتهم.

الخاتمة: لقد أظهرت الجائحة الدور الضروري للأخصائيين الاجتماعيين في الأزمات الصحية العامة. سيكون من الحيوي تعزيز التدريب، وتخصيص الموارد، والتعاون بين المهنيين لتحسين قدرتهم على دعم الفئات الضعيفة في الطوارئ المستقبلية. إن استمرار البحث أمر ضروري لفهم الديناميات المعقدة للعمل الاجتماعي خلال مثل هذه الأزمات ولإبلاغ السياسات والممارسات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: العمل الاجتماعي، COVID-19، الفئات الضعيفة، الأزمات الصحية العامة، التدخلات.

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