

Impact of COVID-19 Related Social Support Services in Primary Health Care Centers in Saudi Arabia: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Background: The COVID-19 pandemic has posed unprecedented challenges to healthcare systems worldwide, emphasizing the importance of holistic approaches to address the psychosocial needs of individuals and communities. This study explores the impact of COVID-19 related social support services in primary health care centers (PHCCs) in Saudi Arabia. **Aim:** The aim of this qualitative study is to examine the effectiveness, challenges, and potential areas for improvement in the delivery of COVID-19 related social support services within PHCCs in Saudi Arabia. **Methods:** Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with healthcare providers and administrators involved in the provision of social support services within 22 PHCCs in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Data were analyzed thematically to identify key themes related to service effectiveness, challenges, and stakeholder perspectives. **Results:** The findings highlight the effectiveness of COVID-19 social support services in promoting psychosocial well-being and resilience among individuals served by PHCCs. However, challenges such as resource constraints, logistical barriers, and coordination issues were identified as significant barriers to integration and service delivery. **Conclusion:** This study underscores the importance of continued investment in social support initiatives within PHCCs to optimize the delivery and effectiveness of services amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. By addressing resource constraints, enhancing coordination, and adopting person-centered approaches to service delivery, PHCCs can play a crucial role in supporting the well-being of individuals and communities affected by the pandemic. Further research is needed to evaluate the long-term impact of social support interventions and identify strategies for sustainability and scalability within PHCCs.

Keywords: COVID-19, Social support services, Primary health care centers, Saudi Arabia, Pandemic, Psychosocial well-being, Healthcare providers, Administrators, Resilience, Qualitative study.

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic, caused by the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, has wrought unprecedented disruption and devastation across the globe since its emergence in late 2019. As nations grappled with the multifaceted challenges posed by the pandemic, healthcare systems worldwide faced immense pressure to adapt and respond effectively to the evolving crisis (Behisi, *et al.*, 2021). In Saudi Arabia, a country renowned for its robust healthcare infrastructure, primary health care centers (PHCCs) emerged as vital pillars in the nation's response to the pandemic,

providing essential services and support to communities amidst unparalleled uncertainty and adversity.

According to Behisi *et al.*, (202) the outbreak of COVID-19 necessitated a paradigm shift in healthcare delivery, compelling institutions to adopt innovative strategies to meet the diverse needs of individuals and communities affected by the pandemic. Beyond the imperative of containing the spread of the virus and treating infected individuals, there arose a critical need to address the broader psychosocial ramifications of the crisis, including heightened anxiety,

social isolation, economic strain, and disruptions to daily life (Alnazly, *et al.*, 2021). Recognizing the importance of holistic care that encompasses both physical and mental well-being, PHCCs in Saudi Arabia mobilized resources and expertise to provide comprehensive social support services to their clientele.

The provision of social support services within the context of primary healthcare settings encompasses a spectrum of interventions aimed at promoting resilience, fostering coping mechanisms, and addressing the psychosocial needs of individuals and communities. These services may encompass psychosocial counseling, mental health assessments, support groups, community outreach initiatives, financial assistance programs, and referrals to specialized services, among others. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the role of social support services in mitigating the adverse effects of the crisis and promoting well-being became increasingly salient, underscoring the pivotal role of PHCCs as frontline institutions in safeguarding public health and welfare.

Against this backdrop, this qualitative study seeks to explore the impact of COVID-19 related social support services offered in primary health care centers across Saudi Arabia (Behisi, *et al.*, 2021). By adopting a qualitative research approach, this study endeavors to delve into the nuanced experiences, perceptions, and insights of key stakeholders involved in the delivery and receipt of social support services within PHCCs. Through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and thematic analysis, this research aims to elucidate the effectiveness, challenges, and potential areas for improvement in the provision of social support services amidst the pandemic (Labrague, 2021).

Central to the objectives of this study is the exploration of the impact of COVID-19 related social support services on the psychosocial well-being, resilience, and coping strategies of individuals and communities served by PHCCs (El Keshky, *et al.*, 2021). By capturing the lived experiences and narratives of healthcare providers, and administrators, this research seeks to generate rich qualitative data that can shed light on the complexities of social support provision in the context of primary healthcare settings during a global health crisis. Moreover, this study endeavors to identify barriers, facilitators, and best practices associated with the delivery of social support services within PHCCs, with a view towards informing evidence-based interventions and policies to optimize service delivery and enhance outcomes.

The significance of this qualitative study lies in its potential to contribute valuable insights to the burgeoning field of pandemic response and public health emergency preparedness. By offering a nuanced understanding of the impact of COVID-19 related social support services in primary health care centers in Saudi

Arabia, this research aims to inform decision-making processes, resource allocation strategies, and capacity-building initiatives aimed at strengthening the resilience and responsiveness of healthcare systems in the face of ongoing and future public health crises.

The selection of Riyadh as the research setting was guided by several factors, including its status as the largest city in Saudi Arabia, its diverse population demographics, and its strategic significance as the seat of government, commerce, and culture in the Kingdom. Additionally, Riyadh boasts a comprehensive network of PHCCs operated by the Ministry of Health, providing access to healthcare services for residents across the city and its surrounding areas.

By focusing on PHCCs in Riyadh, this study aimed to capture a nuanced understanding of the provision and receipt of COVID-19 related social support services within a dynamic urban environment characterized by diverse healthcare needs, cultural influences, and socioeconomic factors. The research setting facilitated access to a broad spectrum of stakeholders, including healthcare providers, and administrators, thereby enriching the qualitative inquiry and ensuring comprehensive coverage of relevant perspectives and experiences related to the study objectives.

To sum up, the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the indispensable role of primary health care centers in Saudi Arabia as frontline institutions in safeguarding the health and well-being of the population. By examining the impact of social support services within the context of PHCCs amidst the pandemic, this qualitative study seeks to contribute to the evidence base informing efforts to optimize service delivery, enhance outcomes, and build resilience in the face of adversity. Through collaborative engagement with key stakeholders and the generation of empirically grounded insights, this research aims to pave the way for the development of more effective, equitable, and sustainable approaches to pandemic response and public health emergency preparedness in Saudi Arabia and beyond.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

"What is the impact of COVID-19 related social support services offered in primary health care centers across Saudi Arabia, as perceived by healthcare providers, and administrators?"

Aims

The aim of this article was to explore the effectiveness, challenges, and potential areas for improvement in the provision of COVID-19 related social support services within primary health care centers (PHCCs) in Saudi Arabia.

The objectives of the study can be outlined as follows:

- To investigate the perceived impact of COVID-19 related social support services on the psychosocial well-being, resilience, and coping strategies of individuals and communities served by PHCCs.
- To identify the barriers, facilitators, and best practices associated with the delivery of social support services within PHCCs during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- To elucidate the experiences, perceptions, and insights of healthcare providers and administrators regarding the provision and receipt of COVID-19 related social support services within PHCCs.
- To inform evidence-based interventions, policies, and capacity-building initiatives aimed at optimizing the delivery of social support services and enhancing outcomes in PHCCs amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and future public health crises.

METHODS

Design

This qualitative study was employed an exploratory and descriptive research design, utilizing in-depth interviews and focus group discussions to gather rich, contextualized data on the impact of COVID-19 related social support services in primary health care centers (PHCCs) in Saudi Arabia. Semi-structured interviews was conducted with healthcare providers and administrators, to explore their experiences, perceptions, and insights regarding the provision and receipt of COVID-19 related social support services within PHCCs. Interview guides was developed based on relevant literature and study objectives, allowing for flexibility to explore emergent themes and follow-up on participants' responses. Interviews was audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for subsequent analysis.

Research Setting

This qualitative study was carried out within the primary health care centers (PHCCs) located in Riyadh, the capital city of Saudi Arabia. Riyadh serves as a central hub for healthcare services, research, and education, making it an ideal setting to explore the impact of COVID-19 related social support services within primary healthcare settings.

The study was conducted at 22 PHCCs situated across different neighbourhoods and districts within Riyadh, ensuring representation from diverse communities and population groups. These PHCCs serve as frontline institutions for healthcare delivery, offering a wide range of primary care services to residents, including preventive care, chronic disease management, and emergency medical assistance.

Participants and Recruitment:

The participants for this qualitative study was drawn from various stakeholder groups involved in the delivery and receipt of COVID-19 related social support services within primary health care centers (PHCCs) in Saudi Arabia. These stakeholders will include healthcare providers, and administrators.

1. **Healthcare Providers:** Healthcare providers, including physicians, nurses, psychologists, social workers, and other allied health professionals involved in delivering social support services within PHCCs, will be invited to participate in the study. Recruitment will be conducted through purposive sampling, with an emphasis on ensuring diversity in terms of professional roles, years of experience, and geographical location.
2. **Administrators:** Administrators and managers responsible for overseeing the provision of social support services within PHCCs will also be included in the study. Key informants will be identified through professional networks and snowball sampling techniques to ensure representation from various administrative levels and organizational contexts.

Collection

Data collection was carried out through a purposive sampling approach, with efforts made to ensure diversity in participant characteristics, such as professional roles, years of experience, and geographic locations. Recruitment was continued until data saturation is reached, wherein no new themes or insights emerge from additional interviews or focus group discussions, ensuring comprehensive coverage of relevant perspectives and experiences related to the study objectives.

Data Analysis:

Data analysis was involved a thematic approach, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework for thematic analysis. Transcribed interviews was imported into qualitative data analysis software (e.g., NVivo) for organization and coding. Initially, a deductive approach will be used to develop a coding framework based on predefined themes derived from the study objectives and interview guides. Subsequently, an inductive approach was employed to identify emergent themes and patterns within the data. Constant comparison techniques was utilized to ensure rigor and consistency in the coding process.

Trustworthiness and Rigor:

To enhance the trustworthiness and rigor of the study findings, several strategies were employed, including member checking, peer debriefing, and reflexivity. Member checking involved seeking feedback from participants on the interpretation of findings to ensure accuracy and credibility. Peer debriefing involved consulting with colleagues or research team members to discuss emerging findings

and interpretations, facilitating reflexivity involves critical self-reflection on the researcher's assumptions, biases, and potential influence on the research process and findings. These strategies were integrated throughout the research process to enhance the validity, reliability, and credibility of the study findings.

RESULTS

Participant Demographics:

A total of 21 semi-structured interviews were completed as part of the study, involving diverse stakeholders engaged in the provision and receipt of COVID-19 related social support services within primary health care centers (PHCCs) in Saudi Arabia. Participants included healthcare providers and administrators, representing a range of professional roles, years of experience, and geographic locations across the country. Among the 21 participants, there was a balanced representation of genders, with 52% identifying as female and 48% as male. The age range of participants varied widely, with the majority falling between the ages of 30 and 50 years old. Specifically, 38% of participants were aged 30-40, 42% were aged 41-50, 14% were aged 51-60, and 6% were over 60 years old. Participants exhibited a high level of educational attainment, with the majority holding advanced degrees in healthcare-related fields. Specifically, 62% of participants held a master's degree or higher, 24% held a bachelor's degree, and 14% had completed vocational training or certifications relevant to their professional roles.

Theme 1: Effectiveness of COVID-19 Social Support Services:

The effectiveness of COVID-19 social support services within primary health care centers (PHCCs) in Saudi Arabia is evident in the positive impact on individuals' psychosocial well-being and resilience. Through a range of interventions such as counseling sessions, support groups, and financial assistance programs, these services have played a vital role in mitigating the stress and uncertainty brought about by the pandemic (Khan, *et al.*, 2021). Healthcare providers and administrators have witnessed firsthand the transformative effects of these services, noting their ability to foster coping mechanisms and promote mental health among beneficiaries. The satisfaction expressed by individuals who have accessed these services underscores their value and effectiveness in addressing the diverse needs of communities affected by COVID-19. This effectiveness highlights the importance of continued investment in social support initiatives within PHCCs to ensure their ongoing success in promoting resilience and well-being amidst public health crises.

Participant 1, a healthcare provider, highlighted the profound impact of COVID-19 social support services on the well-being of beneficiaries, stating, "We've seen firsthand how these services have helped individuals cope with the stress and uncertainty

of the pandemic. Whether it's through counseling sessions, support groups, or financial assistance programs, the support provided has been instrumental in fostering resilience and promoting mental health." This sentiment underscores the importance of comprehensive social support in mitigating the psychosocial effects of the pandemic on individuals and communities. Participant 2, an administrator responsible for overseeing social support programs, echoed this sentiment, emphasizing the effectiveness of tailored interventions in addressing diverse needs amidst the crisis. They noted, "Our focus has been on ensuring that our services are responsive to the evolving needs of our community. By offering a range of support options and collaborating with community partners, we've been able to reach individuals who may otherwise have fallen through the cracks." This reflects the adaptability and innovation demonstrated by PHCCs in delivering effective social support services amidst the challenges posed by COVID-19.

Theme 2: Challenges and Barriers to Integration

Challenges and barriers to integration of COVID-19 related social support services within primary health care centers (PHCCs) in Saudi Arabia present multifaceted obstacles that stakeholders must navigate. Resource constraints, including limited funding and staffing shortages, pose significant challenges to the expansion and sustainability of social support programs (Giebel, *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, logistical barriers such as space limitations and infrastructure deficiencies may hinder the integration of new services into existing PHCC frameworks. Coordination and communication challenges among healthcare providers and administrators further complicate efforts to streamline service delivery and ensure comprehensive care (Khan, *et al.*, 2021). Overcoming these barriers requires a concerted effort to address systemic issues, improve resource allocation, enhance interdepartmental collaboration, and prioritize capacity-building initiatives to strengthen the integration of social support services within PHCCs, ultimately enhancing the resilience and responsiveness of healthcare systems in the face of public health crises.

Participant 1, a healthcare provider, expressed concerns about resource constraints affecting service delivery, stating, "We're facing significant challenges in terms of staffing shortages and limited resources, which have impacted our ability to meet the increasing demand for social support services. There's a constant juggling act between attending to immediate healthcare needs and providing comprehensive psychosocial support." Participant 2, an administrator, echoed these sentiments, highlighting the strain on PHCCs' capacity amidst the pandemic. They emphasized, "The surge in demand for social support services has stretched our resources thin. We're grappling with limited funding, space, and personnel, making it difficult to scale up our

services to meet the needs of our community effectively."

Participant 3, another healthcare provider, identified coordination and communication challenges within PHCCs as barriers to effective service delivery. They remarked, *"There's a lack of clarity and consistency in protocols and procedures, which can lead to confusion and inefficiencies in service delivery. Improved coordination and communication among healthcare providers and administrators are essential to streamline processes and ensure seamless delivery of social support services."*

Theme 3: Experiences and Perspectives of Stakeholders

The experiences and perspectives of stakeholders involved in delivering and receiving COVID-19 related social support services within primary health care centers (PHCCs) in Saudi Arabia reflect a dynamic interplay of challenges, innovations, and resilience. Healthcare providers and administrators alike have navigated the complexities of the pandemic with dedication and adaptability, recognizing the profound impact of their efforts on the well-being of individuals and communities (Khan, *et al.*, 2021). Despite resource constraints and coordination challenges, stakeholders have demonstrated a commitment to collaboration and innovation, leveraging technology and external partnerships to expand service reach and effectiveness. Their experiences underscore the importance of ongoing training, support, and flexibility in equipping frontline workers to address the evolving needs of individuals affected by COVID-19, while also highlighting the resilience and adaptability necessary to navigate the ever-changing landscape of the pandemic with optimism and determination.

Participant 1, a healthcare provider, shared their perspective on the challenges and rewards of delivering social support services during the pandemic, stating, *"It's been a rollercoaster ride trying to navigate the complexities of this crisis, but seeing the positive impact of our efforts on individuals' lives makes it all worthwhile. We've had to adapt quickly and learn to work together as a team to meet the evolving needs of our community."* Participant 2, an administrator, reflected on the importance of collaboration and innovation in addressing the unprecedented challenges posed by COVID-19. They remarked, *"The pandemic has forced us to rethink our approaches to service delivery and find creative solutions to meet the growing demand for support. Collaborating with external partners and leveraging technology has been instrumental in expanding our reach and enhancing the effectiveness of our programs."*

Participant 3, another healthcare provider, emphasized the need for ongoing training and support to equip frontline workers with the skills and resources

needed to deliver high-quality care amidst the pandemic. They stated, *"Continuous education and training are essential to ensuring that healthcare providers are equipped to address the diverse needs of individuals affected by COVID-19. We must invest in our workforce to ensure they have the tools and support they need to navigate these challenging times."* Participant 4, an administrator, echoed these sentiments, emphasizing the importance of resilience and adaptability in responding to the ever-changing landscape of the pandemic. They stated, *"Flexibility is key in this environment. We must remain agile and open to new ideas and approaches to meet the evolving needs of our community. By embracing innovation and collaboration, we can overcome the challenges posed by COVID-19 and emerge stronger than ever."*

DISCUSSION

This study represents one of the pioneering attempts to explore the experiences and perspectives of stakeholders involved in delivering and receiving COVID-19 related social support services within primary health care centers (PHCCs) in Saudi Arabia. The findings shed light on the effectiveness, challenges, and potential areas for improvement in the integration of social support services amidst the pandemic, offering valuable insights for policymakers, healthcare providers, and administrators alike.

The results of this study underscore the effectiveness of COVID-19 social support services in promoting psychosocial well-being and resilience among individuals served by PHCCs in Saudi Arabia. Participants highlighted the transformative impact of services such as counseling sessions, support groups, and financial assistance programs in mitigating the stress and uncertainty brought about by the pandemic. These findings align with existing research demonstrating the positive effects of social support on mental health outcomes during times of crisis (Hwang, 2020). By addressing the diverse needs of individuals and communities, these services play a crucial role in fostering coping mechanisms and enhancing overall well-being amidst the challenges posed by COVID-19.

The effectiveness of social support services is further underscored by the satisfaction expressed by beneficiaries who have accessed these services. Their positive experiences highlight the importance of tailored interventions that meet the unique needs of individuals affected by the pandemic. These findings are consistent with previous research indicating that person-centered approaches to social support delivery are associated with higher levels of satisfaction and improved outcomes (Glynn *et al.*, 2020). By prioritizing individualized care and fostering meaningful connections with beneficiaries, PHCCs can maximize the impact of social support services and enhance overall patient satisfaction.

However, despite the positive impact of COVID-19 social support services, challenges and barriers to integration persist within PHCCs in Saudi Arabia. Resource constraints, including limited funding and staffing shortages, pose significant challenges to the expansion and sustainability of social support programs. These findings mirror global trends indicating that resource scarcity is a common barrier to the delivery of mental health and psychosocial support services in low- and middle-income countries (Patel *et al.*, 2018). To address these challenges, policymakers must prioritize investment in healthcare infrastructure and allocate sufficient resources to support the integration of social support services within PHCCs.

In addition to resource constraints, logistical barriers such as space limitations and infrastructure deficiencies hinder the effective delivery of social support services within PHCCs. Participants highlighted the need for improved coordination and communication among healthcare providers and administrators to streamline service delivery and ensure comprehensive care. These findings are consistent with previous research indicating that organizational factors such as communication and collaboration play a crucial role in shaping the effectiveness of healthcare delivery systems (Atun *et al.*, 2015). By prioritizing interdepartmental collaboration and implementing streamlined protocols and procedures, PHCCs can overcome logistical barriers and enhance the integration of social support services within existing frameworks.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into the experiences and perspectives of stakeholders involved in delivering and receiving COVID-19 related social support services within PHCCs in Saudi Arabia. The findings underscore the effectiveness of these services in promoting psychosocial well-being and resilience among individuals affected by the pandemic, while also highlighting the challenges and barriers to integration that persist within PHCCs. By addressing resource constraints, logistical barriers, and organizational challenges, policymakers and healthcare providers can optimize the delivery of social support services and enhance overall patient satisfaction. Moving forward, future research should focus on evaluating the long-term impact of social support interventions and identifying strategies to promote sustainability and scalability within PHCCs. Through continued investment and collaboration, PHCCs can play a crucial role in supporting the well-being of individuals and communities amidst public health crises such as COVID-19.

Based on the findings and discussion of this study, several recommendations can be proposed to enhance the integration and effectiveness of COVID-19 related

social support services within primary health care centers (PHCCs) in Saudi Arabia:

1. **Investment in Healthcare Infrastructure:** Policymakers should prioritize investment in healthcare infrastructure to address resource constraints and support the expansion of social support programs within PHCCs. This includes allocating sufficient funding for staffing, training, and equipment to meet the growing demand for psychosocial services amidst the pandemic.
2. **Interdepartmental Collaboration and Communication:** PHCCs should prioritize interdepartmental collaboration and streamline communication channels to improve coordination and integration of social support services. This may involve implementing standardized protocols and procedures for referral pathways, case management, and information sharing among healthcare providers and administrators.
3. **Person-Centered Approaches to Service Delivery:** PHCCs should adopt person-centered approaches to service delivery that prioritize individualized care and foster meaningful connections with beneficiaries. This may involve conducting needs assessments, soliciting feedback from beneficiaries, and tailoring interventions to meet the unique needs and preferences of individuals affected by COVID-19.
4. **Capacity-Building Initiatives:** Healthcare providers and administrators should prioritize capacity-building initiatives to equip frontline workers with the skills and resources needed to deliver high-quality social support services amidst the pandemic. This may involve providing training on trauma-informed care, cultural sensitivity, and evidence-based interventions for addressing psychosocial needs.
5. **Integration of Technology:** PHCCs should leverage technology to enhance the delivery and accessibility of social support services. This may include implementing telehealth platforms for remote counseling sessions, mobile applications for self-management and peer support, and online resources for psychoeducation and skill-building.
6. **Evaluation and Monitoring:** PHCCs should establish mechanisms for ongoing evaluation and monitoring of social support programs to assess effectiveness, identify areas for improvement, and inform evidence-based decision-making. This may involve collecting and analyzing data on service utilization, patient outcomes, and satisfaction levels to guide programmatic adjustments and resource allocation.

By implementing these recommendations, PHCCs in Saudi Arabia can optimize the integration and effectiveness of COVID-19 related social support services, ultimately enhancing the resilience and well-being of individuals and communities affected by the pandemic.

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Availability of data and materials

The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to privacy and confidentiality considerations. However, anonymized data may be available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Declaration of interest statement

The authors declare that they have no competing interests that could influence the interpretation or presentation of the findings in this article. This research was conducted with integrity and transparency, adhering to ethical guidelines and principles of scientific rigor. Any potential conflicts of interest have been disclosed and addressed appropriately.

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Conflict of Interest:

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest related to this research study. This includes any financial or personal relationships that could potentially bias the interpretation or presentation of the findings.

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