

MHPSS Evidence Snapshot

Depression in informal caregivers in Serbia

Informal caregivers have an important and unique role in providing essential support to persons with disabilities and older persons in need of care. They enable these population categories to go on living with their families in a familiar environment and be equal members of the community. Unfortunately, despite the high price they often pay in terms of their own health and economic status, they remain in the blind spot of policy analyses and lack support and recognition, thus putting themselves and the persons they care for at risk.



Background

In Serbia, an increasingly ageing population has caused a continuous increase in the percentage of older people in the total population and a low and continuously declining percentage of younger people. All projections show this trend continuing with low birthrates and migration of working-age population to Western Europe, so it may be expected that while more older persons will need support in decades to come, there will be a reduced number of informal caregivers available. This will in turn put more pressure on informal caregivers, expose them to financial, social and health risks, especially affecting their mental health. This research explores the risks for their mental health and provides recommendations on how to preserve it.

How the research was conducted

The aim of this research was to present an overview of the impacts and effects of informal care on caregiver mental health, primarily during the COVID-19 pandemic. It contained a quantitative and qualitative section. The quantitative research used a custom made questionnaire as well as the Zarit Burden Interview and covered 798 informal caregivers from 41 Serbian municipalities. The qualitative research was conducted with four focus group interviews with 32 participants in total.

Key findings

The age of the surveyed informal caregivers ranged from 18 for the youngest participant, to 92 for the eldest. The largest number of the polled informal caregivers provide care to one person (84.9%), 12.6% provide care to two persons, and 2.6% provide care to three or more people.

Main results show that:

- Mild depression was present in 11.2% of informal caregivers, and moderate depression in 8.6% of respondents. Seven percent of informal caregivers were severely depressed.
- During the pandemic, informal caregivers needed protective equipment (32%), information (29.3%), while 18.5% of informal caregivers needed additional support and 14.8% of informal caregivers needed hygiene items.
- Also, 67.3% are now more concerned about own health and/ or health of the person they provide care to.

Informal caregivers of poorer self-assessed health, who provide care to a person with a higher degree of complexity and dependence in performing basic activities of everyday life, with insufficient financial resources to meet the needs of the person being cared for and a longer duration of day care have a higher overall burden.

Implications for humanitarian practitioners and policymakers

The results indicate the importance of mental health support for informal caregivers but also that systematic support is essential. Developing an integrated and efficient long-term care user-centred system, which would recognise the role of informal caregivers as irreplaceable is a long term goal. However, providing better and more flexible access to labour market, providing more support services for informal caregivers (education, psychosocial support, support and experience exchange groups, respite services etc.) and providing more formal care services to those in need are all steps that need to be made in the course of reaching this goal. Regular data collection, provision of regular health checkups and preventive programmes, along with a systematic way to share good practices are all recommended as permanent additions to the systems of care.

Recommendations for future research

Considering this study focused on the burden of providing informal care during an emergency future research will be useful to determine the burden during regular periods and what mechanisms may be developed to ensure continuation of service without sharp increases in burden during emergencies.

About the study team

The research was conducted by Nataša Todorović and Milutin Vračević, both of the Red Cross of Serbia and specialized in the topic of ageing and informal care, as well as Prof. dr. Dejana Stanisavljević and Prof. dr. Nataša Milić both from the Department of Medical Statistics and IT of the Medical Faculty of the University Belgrade.

Keywords

Examples: Mental health; informal caregivers; burden of care, COVID-19;

Articles and further reading

Full text of the research report:
<https://www.redcross.org.rs/media/8065/mentalhealthofinformalcaregivers.pdf>