

## ABSTRACT

Assuming the role of a caregiver for chronically ill patients can impact the caregiver's mental health as they balance their lives and the demanding tasks of caregiving. It is important to identify the ways in which psychological distress can be reduced and addressed in caregivers. The purpose of this study is to examine the effect social support has on the psychological distress of caregivers. This study is a secondary analysis that evaluated a national cross-section data from Chronic Illness and Caregiving in 2000. The sample for this study consists of chronically ill patients and caregivers (N=320). Overall, the results indicated no significant relationship between social support and psychological distress among caregivers. One major implication in this study is that most caregivers utilize non-professional means for support. This includes relatives, friends, and neighbors. Most participants in this study did not seek the support of professionals such as social workers, therapists, case managers. Although no major relationship was found for caregivers, it is crucial to continue studying the relationship between social support and psychological distress in relation to chronic illness. The findings suggest a significant relationship between mental health support and race. Most White caregivers in the sample felt they received all the support they needed while non-white caregivers felt they needed more support.

## INTRODUCTION

### Research Question

1. What is the relationship between the types of social support received and the psychological distress among caregivers?
2. What is the relationship between caregiver's ethnicity and mental health support?
3. What is the relationship between caregiver's gender and mental health support?

### Hypothesis:

- It is hypothesized that there is a negative correlation between social support and psychological distress among caregivers.
- It is hypothesized that white caregivers will report feeling they are receiving all the support they need in comparison to white caregivers.
- It is hypothesized that male caregivers will report feeling they are receiving all the support they need in comparison to female caregivers.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Psychological Distress Affecting Caregivers

- Caregiver burden is linked to anxiety, depression, insomnia, lack of use of services, poor health, and greater mortality (Sautter, 2014).

### Social Support

- An increasing and strengthening social support for caregivers reduces caregiver burden and improves the overall quality of life (Murphy et al, 2014).

### Theoretical Framework

- Caregiver Identity Theory: Presumes that the caregiving role is often changing and transitioning leading to caregiver burden and psychological distress.
- Ecological Systems Theory: Views individuals as part of multilevel systems. Environmental factors significantly influence the quality for life of caregivers.
- **Gaps:** Majority of the literature on caregivers of patients with chronic illnesses fails to indicate the type of social support caregivers are receiving or who they are receiving it from.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design and Data Collection Procedures

- This study is a secondary analysis of the Chronic Illness and Caregiving survey and aims at understanding the effect of social support on caregivers. Survey was collected from March 17, 2000 through November 22, 2000 in Youngstown, Ohio and Binghamton, New York.
- The Chronic Illness and Caregiving was conducted from the telephone research centers of Harris Interactive Inc.
- The participants were selected by using the U.S. Census Bureau U.S. households for the Bureau of Labor Statistics.
- The study included a national cross-section of adults over the age of eighteen with a chronic illness and caregivers.

### Sample and Sampling Method

- The sample population surveyed in the original study consisted of 1,663 male and female adults over the age of 18, to which 189 were caregivers, 559 were chronically ill, 235 were chronically ill caregivers, and lastly, 680 were neither chronically ill nor caregivers.

### Measures

- The dependent variable in this study is psychological distress and the independent variable in this study is social support.
- Survey responses such as, "not sure" and "decline to answer have been identified as missing variables,
- For the purpose of this study, only caregivers were evaluated (N=320)
- Social support variable was grouped into three categories which include health professionals, social professionals, and non-professionals.

Table 1.

Sample Characteristic (N=320)

Variables	Caregivers (n=320)	
	Mean/freq	SD/%
Gender		
Female	199	62.2
Male	121	37.8
Age in years		
18-39	94	29.4
40-59	160	50.0
60 or older	66	20.6
Race/Ethnicity		
White	248	78.7
Black	26	8.3
African American	11	3.5
Asian or Pacific Islander	5	1.6
Native American	4	1.3
Mixed racial	12	3.8
American/US Citizen	3	1.0
Hispanic	5	1.6
Other race	1	.3
Employment Status		
Employed full time	171	53.9
Employed part time	30	9.5
Self-employed	24	7.6
Not employed and looking	9	2.8
Not employed and not looking	8	2.5
Retired	56	17.5
Student	5	1.6
Homemaker	14	4.4
Marital Status		
Married	169	53.0
Single	70	21.9
Divorced	37	11.6
Separated	5	1.6
Widowed	32	10.0
Living with a partner	6	1.9
Level of Education		
Less than high school	14	4.4
Completed high school	16	5.0
High school graduate	78	24.7
Completed some college	89	27.8
College graduate	81	25.3
Completed some graduate school	8	2.5
Graduate school	33	10.3
Income		
Less than 15,000	44	14.9
15,000 to 24,999	57	19.3
25,000 to 34,999	38	12.8
35,000 to 49,999	49	16.6
50,000 to 79,999	47	15.9
More than 75,000	61	20.6

## RESULTS

### Relationship between social support and mental health

- Based on the chi-square, there was no significant association found ( $\chi^2(1) = 1.165, p = .281$ ). Cramer's V statistic indicate a strong relationship (.070). [Table 3]
- Based on this sample, 68.5% of caregivers who receive social support feel they receive all the support they need and 31.5% feel they need more support. However, these gaps were not significantly significant.

### Types of social support and mental health

- No significant association ( $\chi^2(3) = 1.739, p = .629$ ). Cramer's V statistic suggested a weak relationship (.085). [Table 4]
- Caregivers who received support from social professionals were more likely to feel they have received appropriate mental health services they needed.

### Mental health and gender

- A significant association was found ( $\chi^2(1) = 5.797, p = .016$ ). Cramer's V statistics demonstrates a weak relationship (.138). [Table 5]
- About 24.6% of males reported needing more mental health support in comparison to 36.7% of females who reported needing more mental health support.

### Mental health and ethnicity / race

- A significant association was found ( $\chi^2(1) = 5.797, p = .016$ ). Cramer's V statistics demonstrates a weak relationship (.138). [Table 6]
- Most White caregivers (71.2%) reported they received all support they needed while only around half of racial minority caregivers (55.0%) received all support they needed. Nearly half (45.0%) of racial minority caregivers reported they needed more support while only 28.8% of White caregivers felt more support was needed.

Table 3

Difference in unmet needs for mental health support by whether a caregiver received social support or not.

Received Social support:	Mental Health Support n (%)	
	Received all support needed	Need more support
Yes	126(68.5%)	58(31.5%)
No	34(60.7%)	22(39.3%)

Table 4

Difference in whether caregivers receive sufficient mental health services by the types of support

Social support for patients by:	Mental Health Support	
	Received all support needed	Need more support
Health professional	22 (64.7%)	12 (35.3%)
Social professional	7 (77.8%)	2 (22.2%)
Non-professional	97 (68.8%)	44 (31.2%)
Non-social support	34(60.7%)	22 (39.3%)

Table 5

Difference in unmet mental health needs based on caregiver's gender

Gender	Mental Health Support n (%)	
	Received all support needed	Need more support
Male	89 (75.4%)	29 (24.6%)
Female	124 (63.3%)	72 (36.7%)

\*p < .05

Table 6

Difference in unmet mental health needs based on race/ ethnicity

Race/ Ethnicity*	Mental Health Support n (%)	
	Received all support needed	Need more support
White	173(71.2%)	70 (28.8%)
Non-White	33 (55.0%)	27 (45.0%)

\*p < .05

## DISCUSSION

### Summary Findings

- There were no significant findings when evaluating the relationship between social support and caregivers.
- The study indicated that only a few participants were receiving professional support such as a social worker, therapist, and case manager. Most caregivers in the sample are receiving support from non-professionals such as family, friends, and neighbors.
- There was a significant relation between mental health support and gender. Majority of male caregivers feel they received all the mental health support they needed in comparison to female caregivers.
- There was a significant relation between mental health support and race. Most White participants felt that they were receiving all the mental health support they needed while a small number of non-white participants felt that they received all the support they needed.

### Limitations

- This study utilized secondary data making it difficult to have a direct answer to the research question of this study.
- Chronically ill patients and the general public were excluded from this study. For this reason, the sample size was reduced to 320 participants.
- The original data was collected in 2000. Changes in caregiver's experiences after 2000 may have not been captured in this study.

### Strengths

- Focus on caregivers as this group is often overlooked in the health care system, community-based programs, and policies.
- Focus on 3 different support systems including social, professional, and non-professional.
- Evaluation of self-support caregivers.

### Implications for Research and Practice

- This study is important for social work as it demonstrates the crucial need to continue studying the relationship between social support and caregiver's mental health needs.
- This study demonstrated the crucial need of community programs and policies that address psychological distress in caregivers.
- It is important to educate caregivers on professional social support such as social workers, therapists, and case managers.
- More education needs to be provided to caregivers on self-care and mental health.

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