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Is caring for others good for our mental health? Evidence from the COVID-19 pandemic

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Synopsis

Using panel data tracking respondents to the [UK's Understanding Society survey](#), we found that people who became informal carers during Covid-19 by helping family members, friends, or neighbours experienced a sharp decline in mental health. The decline was largest during national lockdowns and this group of carers coped less well than those who had been carers before Covid and than those without caring responsibilities. To put the magnitude of this decline into perspective, 'informal carers' experienced mental health decline akin to a divorce.

Introduction

There is increasing evidence that the COVID-19 pandemic and related social restrictions had a deleterious on mental health (e.g. Banks and Xu, 2020). This fast-growing literature has mainly focused on the general population and specific sub-groups, including young adults, women, ethnic minorities, households with children, and the least educated. However, less is known about the effect of COVID-19 on the psychological well-being of informal carers, one of the most affected yet potentially vulnerable groups of individuals.

Before the COVID-19 outbreak, informal care was already considered essential for the

sustainability of publicly funded healthcare systems because informal care is seen as a 'cost saving' alternative to formal care, for instance saving the UK Government £132 billion annually (Carers UK, 2015). In addition, care is often preferred by care recipients when provided by relatives or friends (Carers UK, 2020). When the pandemic began, the formal healthcare sector was overwhelmed by COVID-19 and long-term care systems were heavily disrupted.

While during the pandemic governments recommended avoiding close contact with the elderly and frail, the sudden disruption of most formal care services led existing carers to provide additional care, as well as many individuals starting to provide care (Carers UK, 2020). It is estimated that around 26% of the UK population are currently providing some form of informal care (Onwumere et al., 2021) and 4.5 million people became informal carers after the COVID-19 outbreak (Carers UK, 2020). Since providing informal care is often associated with an increase in psychological distress (Adelman et al., 2014), it is plausible that the pandemic harmed the mental health of informal carers, especially among those who started providing care during the pandemic.

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Methodology

Using the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ) scale – a psychometrically validated and widely used index of psychological distress (Goldberg et al., 1997), – we studied individual responses to the UK's Household Longitudinal Study (Understanding Society). We examined 4698 respondents from a total of eleven surveys – three collected before the outbreak of COVID-19 and eight collected between April 2020 and March 2021 using an additional survey specially designed to understand how society responded to the outbreak.

We focused on three specific groups of people: 'existing carers' (totalling 349 people who had caring responsibilities outside of their home before the pandemic), 'new carers' who started helping and continually provided care during the pandemic (1655 people), and a group of 'never-carers' (2694 people) who did not have caring responsibilities. The panel nature of the dataset allowed us to track the mental health of the members of these groups while controlling for time-varying and time-invariant factors also correlated with their mental health.

Our econometric models used a combination of propensity score matching and the very latest techniques relating to difference-in-difference models (e.g. Callaway and Sant'Anna, 2021) to account for self-selection into caring roles and investigate heterogenous effects of caregiving on mental health.

Findings

Our evidence suggests that while social restrictions were put in place to curb infection rates and protect the public from Covid-19, the mental toll on informal caregivers was sizeable. The most statistically significant moments of distress for new caregivers occurred during the UK's national lockdowns. Existing carers experienced a 0.48 point increase in mental deterioration during the third national lockdown, imposed by the British Government during January 2021. This measurement indicates worse mental ill-health than men who lose their jobs (measured at 0.41 points on the GHQ scale – for unemployed women, it is 0.60 points), while the death of a partner leads to worse mental health by 0.51 points for women, and 0.53 for men.

Overall, we found that mental health in the UK fluctuated according to the social restrictions

imposed by Government, but the mental health of those who started providing care informally during the pandemic was consistently worse than those who did not provide any informal care at all. That is not to say that the national lockdowns should not have been imposed, but rather the overall cost-benefit analysis should include analysis of the mental health effects of the lockdowns.

The effect on those who had been caring for people before the pandemic started is also very interesting. While existing carers were coping relatively well with the start of the pandemic, imposing the third lockdown almost one year looks to have really impacted their mental health sharply.

Our findings should be helpful for policymakers to provide psychological support for new informal care givers. Our evidence suggests it is important to look at forms of support for caregivers that go beyond financial or respite care. Hopefully, we will not see a pandemic like the last for quite some time, but for any future public health crisis, it is important to not overlook those beginning caring duties for the first time – especially if they might be socially isolated and therefore lacking any in-person support or network.

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