

“You have to be careful about every detail” How the COVID-19 Pandemic Shaped the Experiences of Canadian Personal Support Workers Working in Home Care

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The Issue:

- Personal Support Workers (PSWs) are an essential and vulnerable workforce supporting the home care sector in Canada.
- Given the impact COVID-19 has had on healthcare workers globally, understanding how PSWs have been impacted is vital.

Study Objective:

The objective of this study was to describe the experiences of PSWs based in Toronto, ON, working in home care during the 1st and 2nd wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methods:

- Using a qualitative descriptive approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted virtually with PSWs.
- Thematic analysis was guided by the DEPICT model of collaborative analysis

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Results:

Nineteen PSWs shared their experiences. The sample was predominately women from visible minority groups and just over half (58%) were aged 45 and over.

Theme 1 – Motivation to work during a health crisis

- PSWs are motivated by intrinsic rewards such as their duty to and relationships with their clients.

Theme 2 – Manifestation of occupational stress

- PSWs experienced daily co-occurring occupational stressors linked to how their job might put their lives, and the lives of their loved ones at risk.
- Emotional support systems and access to mental health resources were not well defined.
- Organizational factors that combatted feelings of vulnerability were access to PPE and frequent communication that promoted worker safety.

Theme 3 – Changing work conditions

- Experiences are shaped and underscored by longstanding sector issues such as workforce shortages, inconsistent work schedules and hours, and occupational hazards (e.g., exposure to verbal abuse, risks during travel) that became exacerbated by pandemic conditions.

Conclusions:

- Reported occupational stress and interrelated job stressors are likely to contribute to workforce burnout and continued health human resource issues in the home care sector.
- To prepare for future crises, employers should implement proactive strategies that promote and protect the wellbeing of PSWs while continuing to advocate for sector improvements.