

Research on the Challenges and Coping Strategies of Social Work Practice in Public Health Emergencies

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Received: January 22, 2025; Accepted: February 15, 2025; Published: February 16, 2025

Fund project: Sanya University Autumn Semester 2022-2023 Academic year Young and middle-aged Teacher Training Project (Scientific research): Research on Social Work Practice in Community COVID-19 Prevention and Control (USYJSPY22-26).

Abstract

This study explores the main challenges and coping strategies of social work practice in public health emergencies. By reviewing major public health events in history, the key role of social workers in the crisis is analyzed. The study found that the challenges social workers faced in responding to these events included issues such as limited resources, a shortage of professionals, and difficulties in cross-cultural communication, which led to increased stress and unequal distribution of resources in crisis response. In order to better play the role of social work and respond to public health emergencies, the study suggests that social workers can improve their professional ability and response speed, establish a sound psychological intervention mechanism, and optimize resource integration and cross-agency cooperation measures.

Keywords: public health emergencies, social work practice, pluralistic cooperation

1. Research Background

A public health emergency is a disease or health threat that affects public health at a specific time and place, resulting in widespread and rapid spread. The suddenness, severity and complexity of these events often exceed the capacity of regular health systems and require the mobilization of multiple resources to respond. According to the definition of the International Health Organization, such incidents include but are not limited to epidemics, infectious diseases, food safety incidents, etc. In recent years, public health emergencies have occurred frequently, such as the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), SARS, H1N1 influenza and Ebola virus, which have had a profound impact on people's physical and mental health and social stability. These incidents have not only caused panic among the public, but also posed serious challenges to society's ability to cope.

Social work plays a crucial role in public health events, mainly in raising public health awareness, providing psychological support, coordinating resource allocation and promoting community participation. In public health events, social work is not only an important link in emergency response, but also a key factor in long-term public health construction. Through multi-dimensional intervention and support, social workers help communities better cope with public health crises and enhance overall social resilience and health literacy. History has shown that social work has played a key role in responding to these crises, effectively mitigating the negative impact of crises by promoting community cooperation and strengthening social ties. However, at present, there are still some deficiencies in the research of social work intervention in public health emergencies in our country, which are mainly reflected in the single perspective of intervention, the fragmentation of service content and the limitations of emergency services.

In this context, the research on the practical challenges and coping strategies of social work in public health emergencies is particularly important. Although some scholars have discussed the intervention mode of social work, systematic research on the problems in specific practice and coping strategies is still insufficient. Therefore, it is necessary to deeply analyze the specific performance of social work in different types of public health events, identify and summarize effective coping strategies, and form a more systematic and comprehensive practice framework.

By combing the existing research results and combining with actual cases, this study analyzed and summarized the experience and shortcomings of social work in public health emergencies, and provided reference for improving China's public health emergency management ability. At the same time, it also provides a new perspective for the development of social work, promotes the further deepening and expansion of social work in the field of public health, so as to enhance the resilience and anti-pressure ability of the whole society, and promote social harmony and stability.

2. Practical Challenges Faced by Social Work in Public Health Emergencies

2.1 Difficulties Faced by Social Work Practice

In public health emergencies, social work practice faces multiple dilemmas. Firstly, lack of resources is one of the major problems. During the pandemic, government and institutional resources are focused on emergency health response, resulting in a shortage of human, financial and material resources in the field of social work. In most areas, the number of social workers has decreased, the coverage of community services has declined significantly, and traditional financial support has stalled, affecting the sustainability and effectiveness of programs.

There are communication problems. Rapidly spreading outbreak information and instructions present challenges for social workers. The lack of effective communication mechanisms in many places has resulted in distorted or delayed information delivery, affecting timely responses to the people they serve. The lack of data and evaluation makes it difficult for social workers to prioritize the needs of the community, and the pertinency and effectiveness of services are greatly reduced. In addition, mental health problems are on the rise. Anxiety, depression and other feelings caused by the epidemic are widespread, especially among low-income and vulnerable groups. However, professional services in psychological counseling and support are seriously inadequate, and many social workers lack the necessary training and experience in emotional counseling, leading to poor service results.

The lack of access to technology is also a major dilemma. While the use of online platforms is increasing, some elderly and low-income people have difficulty using smart devices and the Internet, affecting their ability to access social work services. Most social work services rely on face-to-face contact, which is particularly difficult under the pandemic restrictions, affecting the accessibility and timeliness of services. These difficulties need urgent attention, and measures such as innovative service models, enhanced resource integration, improved technology application, and optimized policy environment should be taken to enhance the response capacity and practical effectiveness of social work in public health emergencies.

2.2 Mental Health and Psychological Assistance Challenges

Public health emergencies have led to a significant increase in mental health problems, and psychological assistance faces multiple challenges. First, mental health problems such as anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder caused by the pandemic are widespread. For example, during the pandemic, the demand for mental health intervention has increased, and many people with good mental health tend to deteriorate due to long-term isolation, social restrictions and economic pressure. In particular, front-line medical workers and susceptible people, the former's psychological stress index increased to 2-3 times their normal level, while the latter showed obvious anxiety and panic.

Psychological assistance resources are unevenly distributed, especially in remote and rural areas, and there is a serious shortage of professional psychological service personnel, resulting in a lack of effective coping mechanisms in the face of large-scale mental health needs. This has pushed social workers to take on more responsibilities, but their expertise and skills in mental health interventions are often inadequate, affecting the effectiveness of services and the quality of interventions.

Psychological assistance faces the challenge of information dissemination. The wide spread of false information and negative news intensifies the panic and misunderstanding of the public, which makes the psychological aid work more complicated. The rapid spread of social media has allowed negative emotions to spread quickly, leading to public neglect and misunderstanding of mental health issues, and reducing the willingness to seek professional help. Today's society needs to enhance mental health education and improve public awareness of mental health knowledge, so as to reduce misunderstanding and negative impact.

The model of psychological assistance needs to be adjusted flexibly. While traditional face-to-face counseling has been limited during the epidemic, remote counseling is on the rise, but its effectiveness needs to be further evaluated. The survey showed that many groups have concerns about the safety and effectiveness of online counseling, and even are unfamiliar with the technical operation, which has affected the popularity and promotion of psychological assistance. Therefore, the training of social workers and counselors should be strengthened in the future to improve their ability to use technology for psychological assistance.

Cultural differences are also key challenges in psychological assistance. In different cultures, individuals differ in the way they perceive, express and seek help for psychological problems, leading to the poor effectiveness of standardized psychological assistance programs in some groups. Developing culturally appropriate interventions and increasing cultural sensitivity will help improve the effectiveness of psychological assistance. Research in the field of mental health should pay more attention to cultural factors and explore more diversified intervention strategies to better adapt to the needs of different groups.

2.3 Barriers to Resource Allocation and Multi-Agency Cooperation

In public health emergencies, insufficient resource allocation frequently becomes an important obstacle to the effective implementation of social work. Especially in the early stages of the epidemic, medical resources, material distribution and human resources are all in short supply. Inadequate funding of social work agencies also limits the scope and depth of their services, and many grassroots organizations often rely on short-term donations and lack sustainable financial support. It is difficult to coordinate multi-agency cooperation. Their different interests, goals and working methods lead to information asymmetry and resource misallocation in the cooperation process. Different agencies often lack effective communication mechanisms when making decisions, resulting in inefficient allocation of resources.

Restrictions in laws and regulations also affect the efficiency of cross-departmental cooperation. For example, some social work organizations face difficulties in data sharing when working with medical institutions and cannot get timely information and policy guidelines on epidemic handling, making it difficult for them to respond in a timely manner. The verticality of the management system increases the complexity of information flow and reduces the speed of response and the accuracy of services. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen the communication and collaboration mechanism among multiple agencies. The establishment of inter-departmental emergency response mechanisms, such as regular coordination meetings and information sharing platforms, will help promote the effective allocation of resources and improve response speed.

The lack of technical support is also an obstacle that cannot be ignored. Many social work agencies lack the ability to quickly acquire and analyze real-time data when faced with public health emergencies, leading to a lag in their judgment and response to events. In addition, the lack of digital transformation has made some small institutions and community service centers face greater challenges, unable to effectively use scientific and technological means, such as big data analysis and online consultation platforms, for epidemic prevention and control and matching service needs. Therefore, improving the level of digitization in the field of social work and promoting the combination of offline resources and online services is the key to breaking the current bottleneck.

In the effective allocation of resources and multi-agency cooperation, the guidance of government departments and the participation of social forces are needed to form a joint force. Cross-industry joint actions should be based on the principle of sharing, ensuring information transparency, rational allocation of resources and efficient operation of services, and promoting the collaborative work of social forces in public health emergencies.

3. Social Work Response Strategies in Public Health Emergencies

3.1 Enhance Professional Competence and Agility

In the context of public health emergencies, social workers face many challenges, and it is particularly important to enhance professional competence and agility. First, strengthening the updating of professional knowledge is key, including learning in areas such as epidemiology, psychosocial support and crisis intervention. Through online training and field simulations, access to the latest information and skills will enable social workers to respond quickly to crises.

Establish an inter-professional cooperation mechanism to promote information sharing and technical support. In this process, social workers will be helped to keep abreast of changes in economic, health and social policies by pooling resources, data and response experiences through regular cross-sectoral meetings. Further, advanced data analysis tools, such as big data and artificial intelligence, can be introduced to aid decision making, improve the ability to predict, analyze the epidemic trend and assess the risk, and ensure that social workers can respond quickly.

Initiatives to improve practical capacity are equally important. Promote the case study and reflection mechanism, through the analysis of actual cases, identify the shortcomings in the work and the direction of improvement, including the establishment of feedback groups and regular case discussions to promote regular learning. Combine internship with volunteer management to enhance the practical ability of workers in real scenarios, improve communication skills and project management ability.

Encourage social workers to actively participate in the development and certification of professional standards, and promote the promotion of industry awareness. By participating in the standards development of relevant

institutions, social workers can clarify their professional responsibilities and scope of work, enhance their sense of identity and professional confidence in their profession, and enhance the spirit of cooperation within the profession. Strengthen practical training in crisis management and emergency response, and improve social workers' coping strategies and solving abilities in the face of emergencies.

In terms of obtaining feedback and evaluation, it advocates the establishment of an evaluation mechanism, conducts quantitative analysis of work effectiveness on a regular basis, and formulates key performance indicators in order to timely modify strategies and improve work efficiency. This will not only help assess the effectiveness of existing programs, but also provide data to support future responses. Social media and other emerging platforms will be used to strengthen communication with the public, guide public opinion and disseminate information, and ensure that the public has quick and accurate access to information.

The refined practice and flexibility of social workers determine their important role in public health emergencies. Therefore, they must constantly promote their knowledge, skills, reflection and evaluation in order to maintain the effectiveness and agility of professional services in a complex and changing environment.

3.2 Building a Mental Health Intervention Mechanism

To construct a mental health intervention mechanism, it is necessary to integrate various social work theories and practices to ensure timely and effective responses to mental health problems. Firstly, a multi-level intervention system should be established to adapt to the needs of different groups of people. The primary intervention focuses on improving the public's awareness of mental health, and improving the ability of community residents to resist psychological crisis through universal psychological education and psychological counseling. With schools, communities and enterprises as the main positions, mental health publicity activities are carried out through the combination of online and offline ways to promote the dissemination of mental health knowledge.

Intermediate intervention is mainly aimed at sub-healthy people preliminarily screened, providing personalized support. By setting up a psychological counseling hotline and a psychological service platform, all-weather psychological support services without geographical restrictions will be provided. The ultimate intervention is mainly aimed at patients with severe mental illness, providing systematic psychological evaluation, treatment and rehabilitation services by combining professional treatment and care. It includes medication, psychological counseling, social skills training and career reconstruction to help patients reintegrate into society.

In the implementation process, emphasis is placed on data collection and analysis. The effect of intervention is evaluated regularly, so that the program is continuously optimized. For example, standardized psychological assessment tools, such as the Baker Depression Scale and the Self-Rating Anxiety Scale, were used to provide quantitative evidence for the effectiveness of interventions. Based on the data collected, intervention strategies are adjusted on the ground to ensure that they better meet the needs of the client.

It is particularly important to build a multi-party cooperation mechanism, and multi-forces such as the government, social organizations, psychological professional institutions, and volunteer teams need to work together to form a comprehensive and systematic intervention network. Through the establishment of an information sharing platform, effective communication and resource integration among various agencies should be ensured to avoid repeated interventions and waste of resources. At the same time, it is suggested to set up psychological intervention teams in high-risk groups such as universities, with full-time staff and volunteers working together to carry out related activities, so as to fully improve the accessibility and effectiveness of interventions.

The importance of policy support is emphasized. The government should formulate special funds and policies for mental health and increase investment in mental health services. We should promote the normalization and institutionalization of mental health intervention mechanisms, and ensure the standardization and continuity of mental health services through legislative means. In addition, a feedback mechanism for mental health publicity and education should be established to ensure the smooth operation of intervention measures, improve public mental health awareness and coping ability, and form a virtuous circle.

3.3 Strategies for Multiple Cooperation and Resource Integration

In the context of public health emergencies, multi-cooperation and resource integration strategies for social work are crucial. Resources needed to respond to outbreaks often span multiple areas, including health, social services, mental health and volunteering. That is why it is critical to establish mechanisms for cross-cutting cooperation. Alliances should be formed across functional departments, ngos, businesses and community groups to co-ordinate the use of resources and ensure the sharing of information and experience. For example, local health departments and social service agencies share epidemic data in a timely manner through regular meetings and information platforms to optimize crisis response plans and effectively enhance response capacity.

The integration of resources at the community level is equally important. Encouraging community self-governing organizations and volunteers to participate in epidemic prevention and control can effectively mobilize community forces and support each other. For example, temporary service centers have been set up in specific areas, with community volunteers and social workers jointly responsible for information release, material docking and psychological counseling. This will not only promote a sense of community participation, but also achieve efficient allocation of resources.

Public and social engagement should also be an important part of partnership strategies. Use social media platforms to conduct online campaigns to raise public awareness and protection against health incidents. We will mobilize corporate resources and actively participate in the fight against the epidemic through donations and service support. For example, a company donated protective materials and provided epidemic information technology support, effectively optimizing the service process.

At the policy level, the government should strengthen training and support for social workers, especially in crisis response and resource integration, to ensure that they can respond quickly and provide effective support in emergencies. Governments at all levels can formulate policies to encourage multi-party cooperation, provide financial subsidies, tax breaks and other measures, and guide the participation of enterprises and non-profit organizations.

Regular evaluation and feedback mechanisms are an important basis for ensuring the effectiveness of resource integration. Through the establishment of evaluation index system, the effectiveness of cooperation projects should be evaluated on a regular basis and strategies adjusted. Make effective use of big data analysis and community feedback to optimize resource allocation in a timely manner and improve the overall response capacity and efficiency. This dynamic adjustment can provide room for continuous improvement in social work practices and help to respond quickly and effectively to complex challenges in public health emergencies.

4. Summary

Public health emergencies pose serious challenges to social work practice, especially in the aspects of emergency response, resource allocation and psychological support. Studies have shown that the flexibility and expertise of social workers during epidemics significantly increase the resilience of communities to withstand crises. Specifically, social workers facilitate the timely dissemination of information and the effective sharing of resources by building multi-level support networks. Among them, using community volunteers as a link and integrating the strength of local governments, health departments and non-governmental organizations helps to realize information sharing and resource complementarity, and effectively solves the phenomenon of information silos. In practice, according to the needs of different groups, social workers have developed personalized psychological counseling programs to support high-risk groups (such as the elderly and patients with chronic diseases) to overcome loneliness and anxiety, and improve their psychological resilience.

Studies have shown that social work plays an important role in transactional and planning decision-making. Through research and data analysis, social workers can better grasp the needs of the community and formulate corresponding operational programs. In this process, SWOT analysis was applied to assess the impact of the epidemic on community capacity and corresponding coping strategies, which effectively improved the scientific and targeted decision-making. In addition, by establishing an emergency response mechanism, local social workers quickly adjusted their work priorities to ensure that necessary assistance and services could be provided quickly during emergencies, laying the foundation for improving the overall community's ability to cope with public health emergencies.

In terms of practical value, this study provides theoretical basis and practical guidance for social work practice in future public health emergencies, emphasizes the irreplaceability of social work in crisis, and reflects the significance of enhancing community self-organization ability through professional intervention. At the same time, based on the data and cases of this study, professional training should be further strengthened to improve the professionalism of social workers in crisis management, so as to respond more efficiently to possible public health crises in the future. It is of important practical value to open the exploration of interdisciplinary cooperation, promote the integration of social work, medicine, psychology and other fields, and jointly improve the public health response ability.

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