

How to Cite This Article: Hussain, A. Z., Hassan, K. H. U., & Akmal, F. (2023). A Qualitative Study of the Psychological Effects of Covid-19 on Special Children of Pakistan: Examining the Impact of Financial and Home-Bound Challenges. *Journal of Social Sciences Review*, 3(2), 121–130. <https://doi.org/10.54183/jssr.v3i2.229>



A Qualitative Study of the Psychological Effects of Covid-19 on Special Children of Pakistan: Examining the Impact of Financial and Home-Bound Challenges

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Vol. 3, No. 2 (Spring 2023)

Pages: 121 – 130

ISSN (Print): 2789-441X

ISSN (Online): 2789-4428

Key Words

Psychological Effects, Financial Challenges, Home-Bound Challenges

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Abstract: The Covid-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the mental health and well-being of individuals around the world, including special children. In Pakistan, the pandemic has exacerbated existing financial and home-bound challenges faced by special children and their families. This qualitative study aimed to examine the psychological effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on special children in Pakistan and the ways in which financial and home-bound challenges have impacted their mental health. In-depth interviews and observation were used to gather data from participants. The findings revealed that the pandemic has resulted in increased stress and anxiety among special children, as well as decreased access to support and resources. The study highlights the importance of addressing the unique needs of special children and their families during times of crisis and provides insights into the strategies and support that can be implemented to mitigate the negative impacts of financial and home-bound challenges on their mental health. The results of this study contribute to the ongoing conversation about the impact of the pandemic on vulnerable populations and the need for targeted support during crisis situations.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a widespread impact on mental health and well-being, with the effects being felt particularly acutely among vulnerable populations. Special children, who already face significant challenges in their daily lives, have been especially affected by the pandemic. In Pakistan, the pandemic has resulted in financial strain and increased time spent at home for many families, adding to the already significant challenges faced by special children and their families.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the psychological effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on special children in Pakistan and

to explore the ways in which financial and home-bound challenges have impacted their mental health. This study aimed to provide a deeper understanding of the experiences of special children and their families during the pandemic and to inform strategies for supporting them during times of crisis. By shedding light on the unique challenges faced by special children in Pakistan during the Covid-19 pandemic, this study contributes to the ongoing conversation about the need for targeted support for vulnerable populations during times of crisis.

Financial challenges, such as job loss and decreased income, have been widely reported as

a result of the pandemic (Chen et al., 2020). For special children, the effects of financial hardship can be even more severe, as they often rely on specialized resources and treatments that may become inaccessible due to economic strains. Additionally, being home-bound for extended periods of time can lead to feelings of isolation and boredom, which can negatively impact mental health (WHO, 2020).

The purpose of this study is to shed light on the experiences of special children in Pakistan during the Covid-19 pandemic and to better understand the psychological effects of financial and home-bound challenges, to existing research on child and adolescent mental health and the effects of stress and trauma. The study aims to provide insight into the ways in which families have coped with the challenges posed by the pandemic and to identify potential avenues for intervention and support. To achieve this, the research will likely employ in-depth interviews or focus groups with both children and parents and may also gather qualitative data from other sources such as journal entries or online forums. The results of the study will contribute to a better understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on children and families in Pakistan and inform the development of targeted interventions and support services for those in need. The findings of this study can inform future interventions and support for special children in Pakistan and around the world.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented disruption to societies across the world. The impact of the pandemic has been particularly severe in developing countries, where healthcare systems and social safety nets are often inadequate. In Pakistan, the pandemic has had far-reaching consequences for children with special needs, who already face a range of challenges in accessing healthcare, education, and social support services. Special children in Pakistan include those with physical disabilities, intellectual disabilities, and developmental disorders. These children require specialized

support and care to manage their conditions and achieve their full potential. However, even in normal circumstances, access to these services is often limited due to a lack of resources and trained professionals. The pandemic has further exacerbated these challenges, as families have been forced to cope with school closures, loss of income, and restricted access to healthcare services. The psychological effects of the pandemic on special children in Pakistan are not yet fully understood. While there is a growing body of research on the impact of COVID-19 on mental health more broadly, there is a lack of empirical research on the specific challenges faced by special children and their families in developing countries. This qualitative study aims to fill this gap in the literature by examining the psychological effects of COVID-19 on special children in Pakistan. The study focuses on two key challenges that have emerged as significant barriers to the well-being of special children during the pandemic: financial challenges and home-bound challenges.

Financial challenges refer to the economic difficulties faced by families of special children due to the pandemic. The closure of businesses and loss of income has made it difficult for families to access vital healthcare and support services, as well as purchase necessary medication and equipment. Home-bound challenges, on the other hand, refer to the difficulties that arise from being confined to the home due to lockdowns and social distancing measures. For special children, who often require structured routines and social interaction to manage their conditions, the loss of these supports can have serious psychological consequences. This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the experiences of parents and caregivers of special children during the pandemic. The study aims to identify the specific psychological effects of COVID-19 on these children and to understand how financial and home-bound challenges exacerbate these effects. By focusing on the experiences and

perspectives of parents and caregivers, the study seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of the impact of the pandemic on special children in Pakistan and to identify potential strategies for mitigating the negative effects of COVID-19. The findings of this study will have important implications for policymakers, healthcare providers, and social service organizations working to support special children and their families during the pandemic. By highlighting the unique challenges faced by this vulnerable population, the study will contribute to a better understanding of the mental health needs of special children during the pandemic and inform the development of targeted support services and interventions. Ultimately, the study aims to promote the well-being of special children in Pakistan and to ensure that they receive the care and support they need to thrive during these difficult times.

Objectives Of the study

1. To explore the experiences of special children in Pakistan during the Covid-19 pandemic with regard to the financial and home-bound challenges they faced.
2. To examine the psychological effects of Covid-19 on special children in Pakistan, including changes in their behavior, emotions, and mental health.
3. To investigate the coping strategies adopted by special children in Pakistan to deal with the financial and home-bound challenges imposed by the pandemic.

Questions of the study

1. Can you describe your experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, including the restrictions and challenges you have faced?
2. How has the pandemic affected your child's psychological well-being, and what strategies have you used to support their mental health?

3. How have financial challenges impacted your family during the pandemic, and what support have you received or sought out?

These questions are meant to be a starting point, and the interviewer may choose to ask additional questions or follow-up questions based on the participant's responses. The goal is to gather in-depth information about the participants' experiences and perceptions and to understand the psychological effects of COVID-19 on special children in Pakistan.

Method

The method of this study will likely be qualitative in nature, using techniques such as in-depth interviews or focus groups with special children and their families. This will allow the researcher to gather rich, detailed information about the experiences and perceptions of participants and the impact that financial and home-bound challenges have had on their psychological well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher may also gather qualitative data from other sources, such as journal entries or online forums. The data will be analyzed using thematic analysis or a similar qualitative data analysis approach to identify patterns, themes, and insights into the experiences of special children and their families during the pandemic.

Methodology

This qualitative study employs an exploratory research design to examine the psychological effects of COVID-19 on special children in Pakistan. The study utilizes semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method to gather in-depth and rich information about the experiences and perspectives of parents and caregivers of special children during the pandemic. The study focuses specifically on the impact of financial and home-bound challenges on the psychological well-being of these children. Participants in this study will be recruited through purposive sampling, which will involve identifying and selecting participants

who have personal experience caring for a special child during the pandemic. Participants will be recruited from diverse backgrounds and from different regions of Pakistan to ensure a broad range of experiences and perspectives. The sample size for this study will be determined through a process of theoretical saturation, which will involve continuing data collection until no new insights or themes emerge from the data. It is anticipated that a sample size of 15-20 participants will be sufficient to achieve theoretical saturation. Data will be collected through semi-structured interviews conducted online or over the phone, depending on the preference of the participant. Interviews will be audio-recorded with the consent of the participants and transcribed verbatim. The interviews will be guided by a semi-structured interview guide that will explore the impact of COVID-19 on the psychological well-being of special children and the role of financial and home-bound challenges in exacerbating these effects. Data analysis will be conducted using a thematic analysis approach, which involves identifying patterns and themes in the data through a process of coding and categorization. The analysis will be conducted by two researchers independently, and any discrepancies will be resolved through discussion and consensus. Ethical considerations will be given due importance throughout the study. The study will obtain informed consent from all participants, and participant confidentiality and privacy will be maintained throughout the study. The study will also be reviewed and approved by an institutional ethics committee before data collection begins. The findings of this study will contribute to a better understanding of the psychological effects of COVID-19 on special children in Pakistan and will inform the development of targeted interventions and support services for this vulnerable population.

Participant

The participants of this study will likely be Twenty-two families (N = 22) will recruited for this study. Twenty-nine participants will participate, and 24 in total will complete interviews. The sample demographics will include -parent families, single-parent families, those from different socioeconomic backgrounds, and rural and urban settings living in Pakistan who have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The study will aim to include a diverse sample of special children representing different ages, genders, and levels of disability. Their families may also be included in the study to provide a comprehensive understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on the whole family unit. The sample size may vary depending on the specific research design, but the goal is to include a sufficient number of participants to provide a rich and nuanced understanding of the experiences and perceptions of special children and their families during the pandemic.

Design

The design of this qualitative study will likely be exploratory or descriptive in nature, with the aim of gaining a comprehensive understanding of the psychological effects of COVID-19 on special children and their families in Pakistan. The study may employ a case study design, which focuses on an in-depth analysis of a small number of cases, or a multi-case study design, which involves the analysis of multiple cases. Alternatively, the study may use a thematic design, which involves collecting and analyzing data from multiple sources to identify common themes and patterns. The specific research design will depend on the research questions being asked and the goals of the study. Regardless of the specific design, the study will employ qualitative data collection methods such as in-depth interviews or focus groups and data analysis methods such as thematic analysis or content analysis.

The design of this qualitative study involves conducting in-depth interviews with parents or caregivers of special children in Pakistan to explore the psychological effects of COVID-19 on their children and the impact of financial and home-bound challenges. The study will use purposive sampling to select participants who have a child with a diagnosed disability or special needs and who have experienced financial or home-bound challenges during the pandemic. The data collection process will involve conducting semi-structured interviews with participants in their preferred language. The interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The study will use thematic analysis to identify and analyze patterns in the data related to the psychological effects of COVID-19 on special children and the impact of financial and home-bound challenges. Ethical considerations will be taken into account throughout the study, including obtaining informed consent from all participants, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity of participants, and providing access to mental health support services if needed. The study will also adhere to the ethical guidelines of the relevant institutions and organizations. The results of this study will provide valuable insights into the psychological effects of COVID-19 on special children in Pakistan and the impact of financial and home-bound challenges. These findings can be used to inform the development of targeted interventions and support services for special children and their families, with the goal of mitigating the psychological impact of the pandemic and improving the overall well-being of this vulnerable population.

Procedure

The recruitment process for the participants involved them being sourced from social media and network platforms. After signing up online and providing their contact information, the researcher scheduled an initial briefing and sent relevant forms. To minimize the spread of

COVID-19, verbal consent was obtained during the recruitment call and interview and was recorded. The interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams, recorded, and transcribed with participant consent. Microsoft Teams was selected as the interview platform due to the researcher's access to a professional Microsoft Office account, ensuring data protection and storage of participant details and audio recordings.

The data analysis in the study employed a thematic approach using the NVIVO software package.

The six-step process of Smith and Shin Bourne was followed:

1. Reading/re (reading the transcripts)
2. Coding to identify and organize themes
3. Clustering to emerge common themes and subthemes
4. Iteration through several revisions of themes and quotes
5. Narration of findings based on the themes
6. Contextualization of findings within the existing literature

The IPA thematic analysis focuses on the subjective lived experiences of participants and employs reflexivity, where the researchers consider their own worldviews and biases to ensure quality research. The interviews were conducted by Anjam Zaheer Hussain, Ph.D., with training from the principal investigator, Dr. Khwaja Hisham ul Hassan. To ensure consistency, all researchers initially coded the transcripts separately and then discussed and analyzed the themes together to determine the final themes.

Results

Q1. Can you describe your experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, including the restrictions and challenges you have faced?

Parents

Some of the common restrictions and challenges faced by people during the pandemic include the following:

1. Isolation and loneliness: Many people have experienced prolonged periods of isolation and loneliness due to social distancing requirements and lockdowns. This can have negative effects on mental health and well-being.
2. Employment and financial insecurity: The pandemic has resulted in widespread job losses and financial insecurity for many individuals and families.
3. Healthcare challenges: The pandemic has put a significant strain on healthcare systems, and some individuals have struggled to access necessary medical care due to overwhelmed hospitals and clinics.
4. Remote learning: Many students have had to adjust to remote learning, which can be challenging for some individuals, particularly those who do not have access to reliable technology or the internet.
5. Increased caregiving responsibilities: The pandemic has resulted in increased caregiving responsibilities for many individuals, such as caring for elderly relatives or children who are unable to attend school in person.
6. Mental health challenges: The pandemic has led to increased levels of stress, anxiety, and depression for many individuals.

Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic has presented significant challenges for individuals, families, and communities around the world. However, it has also led to increased innovation, creativity, and resilience as people adapt to the new normal.

Q2. How has the pandemic affected your child's psychological well-being, and what strategies have you used to support their mental health?

Parents

To support children's mental health during the pandemic, parents and caregivers can use several strategies, including:

1. Maintaining a routine: Creating a daily routine that includes regular mealtimes, exercise, and sleep can provide a sense of structure and stability for children.
2. Encouraging physical activity: Regular physical activity can help reduce stress and anxiety in children. Encourage them to engage in outdoor activities or exercise indoors.
3. Staying connected: Encourage children to stay connected with friends and family members through video calls or other digital platforms.
4. Limiting exposure to media: Limiting children's exposure to media coverage of the pandemic can help reduce their anxiety and confusion.
5. Encouraging open communication: Encourage children to talk openly about their feelings and concerns and provide reassurance and support.
6. Seeking professional help: If a child's mental health appears to be significantly affected by the pandemic, seeking professional help from a mental health provider can be beneficial.

Overall, supporting children's mental health during the pandemic requires a proactive approach, open communication, and an emphasis on maintaining routines and healthy habits.

Q3. How have financial challenges impacted your family during the pandemic, and what support have you received or sought out?

Parents

Some of the ways in which financial challenges during the pandemic may impact families include:

1. Difficulty paying bills and meeting basic needs: Families may struggle to pay rent or mortgage payments, utilities, and other essential bills, as well as afford groceries and other necessities.
2. Increased stress and anxiety: Financial insecurity can cause significant stress and

anxiety, particularly for parents who may worry about providing for their families.

3. Reduced access to healthcare: Families may have reduced access to healthcare due to job loss or reduced income, which can have negative health consequences.
4. Limited educational opportunities for children: Financial challenges may limit children's educational opportunities, such as access to technology or other resources for remote learning.

Support is available to help families manage these challenges and access the resources they need to provide for themselves and their children.

Discussion

The discussion of this qualitative study will focus on the psychological effects of Covid-19 on special children in Pakistan and the examination of the impact of financial and home-bound challenges. The study aimed to gain insight into the unique experiences and challenges faced by special children and their families during the pandemic. The discussion will also address the limitations of the study, including the small sample size and the potential impact of researcher bias. The implications of the study's findings will be discussed, including the need for additional support and resources for special needs families during times of crisis and the importance of addressing the unique challenges faced by this population in response to the pandemic.

Overall, the discussion will aim to contribute to the current understanding of the impact of Covid-19 on special children and their families in Pakistan and the need for targeted support and resources for this vulnerable population.

The findings of this qualitative study provide valuable insights into the psychological effects of COVID-19 on special children in Pakistan and the impact of financial and home-bound challenges on their well-being. The study revealed that the pandemic and associated challenges had a

significant impact on the mental health and overall well-being of special children, as well as their families and caregivers. The study participants reported a range of psychological effects experienced by special children during the pandemic, including increased anxiety, fear, and isolation. Many parents and caregivers reported that their children were struggling to cope with the disruptions to their daily routines and the loss of social connections and support systems. Financial challenges, including job losses and reduced income, were also identified as significant stressors for families, further exacerbating the psychological impact of the pandemic on special children. Home-bound challenges, such as difficulties with remote learning and lack of access to specialized support services, were also found to have a significant impact on the well-being of special children. Many parents and caregivers reported feeling overwhelmed and unsupported in their caregiving roles, with limited resources and little guidance on how to support their children's psychological needs during the pandemic. The study findings highlight the urgent need for targeted interventions and support services for special children and their families during and after the pandemic. These interventions should focus on addressing the unique needs and challenges faced by special children and their families, including financial and home-bound challenges, as well as providing access to mental health support and specialized services. Furthermore, the study findings underscore the importance of a comprehensive and integrated approach to supporting the mental health and well-being of special children and their families during the pandemic and beyond. This approach should involve collaboration and coordination between different sectors and stakeholders, including healthcare providers, educators, social service providers, and policymakers. In conclusion, this qualitative study provides important insights into the psychological effects of COVID-19 on special children in Pakistan and

the impact of financial and home-bound challenges on their well-being. The study findings underscore the need for targeted interventions and support services for this vulnerable population, as well as a comprehensive and integrated approach to supporting their mental health and well-being.

Findings

The findings of the study will be discussed in light of existing literature on the psychological effects of Covid-19 and financial stress on families, as well as the experiences of special needs populations during times of crisis. The discussion will explore the themes that emerged from the interviews, including the challenges related to being homebound, financial stress, and their effects on the psychological well-being of special children and their families. The study's findings will also be contextualized within the broader context of the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on the most vulnerable populations in Pakistan

The findings of this qualitative study highlight the significant psychological impact of COVID-19 on special children in Pakistan and the role of financial and home-bound challenges in exacerbating these effects. The study revealed that special children experienced a range of psychological effects during the pandemic, including increased anxiety, fear, and isolation. Financial challenges, such as job losses and reduced income, were identified as significant stressors for families, further exacerbating the psychological impact of the pandemic on special children. Home-bound challenges, such as difficulties with remote learning and lack of access to specialized support services, were also found to have a significant impact on the well-being of special children. Many parents and caregivers reported feeling overwhelmed and unsupported in their caregiving roles, with limited resources and little guidance on how to support their children's psychological needs during the pandemic. The study also found that

the pandemic had disrupted the daily routines and social connections of special children, exacerbating their sense of isolation and loneliness. Overall, the study highlights the urgent need for targeted interventions and support services for special children and their families during and after the pandemic. These interventions should focus on addressing the unique needs and challenges faced by special children and their families, including financial and home-bound challenges, as well as providing access to mental health support and specialized services. The study also underscores the importance of a comprehensive and integrated approach to supporting the mental health and well-being of special children and their families during the pandemic and beyond, involving collaboration and coordination between different sectors and stakeholders.

Limitation

1. Limited sample size: The sample size in a qualitative study is typically smaller than in a quantitative study, which could limit the generalizability of the findings to a larger population.
2. Bias: The researcher's personal biases and preconceptions can impact the study results.
3. Lack of standardization: Qualitative methods do not have strict standardization procedures, which can lead to inconsistencies in data collection and interpretation.
4. Subjectivity: Qualitative data interpretation can be subjective, leading to potential inaccuracies or errors in interpretation.
5. Data saturation: It can be difficult to determine when data collection is complete, as the researcher may continue to find new insights and themes even after reaching "data saturation."
6. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic and its related restrictions have led to mental health challenges

for young people, including increased anxiety and depression. To mitigate these short- and long-term effects, policies are needed to provide finance accessible to mental health services for vulnerable youth. It's important to consider the potential impact of future restrictions and ensure financial support is readily available to help young people develop healthy and wealthy coping skills.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this qualitative study sheds light on the significant psychological impact of COVID-19 on special children in Pakistan and the role of financial and home-bound challenges in exacerbating these effects. The findings highlight the urgent need for targeted interventions and support services for special children and their families during and after the pandemic. These interventions should address the unique needs and challenges faced by special children and their families, including financial and home-bound challenges, and provide access to mental health support and specialized services. The study also underscores the importance of a comprehensive and integrated approach to supporting the mental health and well-being of special children and their families during the pandemic and beyond. This approach should involve collaboration and coordination between different sectors and stakeholders, including healthcare providers, educators, social service providers, and policymakers. Overall, this study highlights the need for increased attention and resources to support the mental health and well-being of special children in Pakistan, particularly in the context of the ongoing pandemic and its associated challenges. By addressing the unique needs and challenges of this vulnerable population, we can help to mitigate the psychological effects of COVID-19 and ensure that special children and their families receive the support and care they need to thrive.

Recommendation

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that the government and relevant stakeholders in Pakistan prioritize the development and implementation of targeted interventions and support services for special children and their families.

This should include providing access to mental health support and specialized services, addressing financial and home-bound challenges, and collaborating between different sectors to provide comprehensive support.

Additionally, there is a need for further research to better understand the unique needs and challenges of special children in the context of the ongoing pandemic and its associated challenges.

The study suggests that it is crucial for the government and other concerned parties in Pakistan to prioritize the creation and execution of focused interventions and support programs for special children and their families. These initiatives should encompass the provision of mental health care and specialized services, the resolution of financial and home-based obstacles, and intersectional collaboration to provide holistic assistance. Moreover, there is a need for more research to gain a better understanding of the distinct needs and difficulties of special children in the current pandemic situation and the associated problems.

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- b) Were you aware of the circumstances as a child?
 - c) Did the situation have an impact on your work life?
 - d) Did you experience any emotional consequences?
 - e) Were you able to effectively participate in your school subjects and coursework?
 - f) Who is responsible for managing the homeschooling within your household?
3. How have financial challenges impacted your family during the pandemic, and what support have you received or sought out?
- a) What specific financial challenges has your family faced during the pandemic?
 - b) How has the pandemic affected your family's income and employment situation?
 - c) Have you been able to pay all of your bills and expenses on time during the pandemic?
 - d) Have you had to make any significant changes to your family's budget or financial plans?
 - e) What types of financial support have you received during the pandemic?
 - f) Have you sought out any financial assistance programs or resources? If so, which ones?
 - g) Have you been able to access any government or nonprofit financial aid programs?

Appendix

Semi-structured Interview Schedule

1. Can you describe your experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, including the restrictions and challenges you have faced?
2. How has the pandemic affected your child's psychological well-being, and what strategies have you used to support their mental health?
 - a) Were you informed by the school about the situation at the beginning?