

Characterization of formal caregivers of dependent elderly people at home in Paraguay: observational study

Caracterização dos cuidadores formais de pessoas idosas dependentes em domicílio no Paraguai: estudo observacional
Caracterización de los cuidadores formales de personas mayores dependientes en el domicilio en Paraguay: un estudio observacional

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Abstract

Objective: To characterize the sociodemographic and occupational profile of formal caregivers of dependent elderly people at home in the city of Asunción, Paraguay. **Methods:** Observational, cross-sectional and descriptive study. It was carried out in households in the urban area of Asunción, Paraguay. The participants were 25 formal caregivers of dependent elderly people at home, selected in a non-probabilistic, snowball fashion. Data was collected from June to December 2022 using a semi-structured interview script and analyzed using descriptive statistics. **Results:** The majority of caregivers are women (96%), aged between 31 and 45 (68%), born in the interior of Paraguay (52%), with a complete basic education, without a training course for caregivers (100%). Almost all of them had been working for more than three years (76%), paid more than one minimum wage (56%), were dissatisfied with their current salary (84%), had no formal work record (92%), had one day off a week (72%) and, in addition to caring for the elderly, performed domestic activities at home (92%). **Conclusion:** Understanding the sociodemographic and occupational profile of caregivers is essential for devising effective public policies to improve the quality of life of these professionals and, consequently, the care provided to the elderly.

Descriptors: Caregivers; Frail Elderly; Paraguay; Observational Study.

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Whats is already known on this?

There is a lack of data on caregivers of dependent elderly people at home in Paraguay. There is no information on care programs for the elderly in the country's government proposals

What this study adds?

Describes the profile of caregivers of dependent elderly people at home in Paraguay, with the aim of contributing to the formulation of public policies and a better quality of life for caregivers and the elderly.



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Resumo

Objetivo: Caracterizar o perfil sociodemográfico e ocupacional dos cuidadores formais de pessoas idosas dependentes em domicílio na cidade de Assunção, Paraguai. **Métodos:** Estudo observacional, transversal e descritivo. Realizado em domicílios da zona urbana de Assunção, Paraguai. Participaram 25 cuidadores formais de pessoas idosas dependentes no domicílio, selecionados de forma não probabilística, do tipo bola de neve. Os dados foram coletados de junho a dezembro de 2022, a partir da aplicação de um roteiro semiestruturado de entrevista e analisados por meio de estatística descritiva. **Resultados:** A maioria dos cuidadores são mulheres (96%), com idade de 31 a 45 anos (68%), nascidos no interior do Paraguai (52%), com educação básica completa, sem curso de formação para cuidador (100%). Quase a totalidade tem mais de três anos de trabalho (76%), com remuneração acima de um salário-mínimo (56%), insatisfeitos com a remuneração atual (84%), sem registro formal de trabalho (92%), com uma folga semanal (72%) e, que exerciam além do cuidado com o idoso, atividades domésticas na residência (92%). **Conclusões:** Compreender o perfil sociodemográfico e ocupacional dos cuidadores é fundamental para pensar políticas públicas eficazes que melhorem a qualidade de vida desses profissionais e, conseqüentemente, o cuidado prestado a pessoas idosas.

Descritores: Cuidadores; Idoso Fragilizado; Paraguai; Estudo Observacional.

Resumen

Objetivo: Caracterizar el perfil sociodemográfico y ocupacional de los cuidadores formales de personas mayores dependientes a domicilio en la ciudad de Asunción, Paraguay. **Métodos:** Estudio observacional, transversal y descriptivo, realizado en hogares del área urbana de Asunción, Paraguay. Los participantes fueron 25 cuidadores formales de personas mayores dependientes en el domicilio, seleccionados de forma no probabilística mediante el método de bola de nieve. Los datos se recogieron entre junio y diciembre de 2022 mediante un guion de entrevista semiestructurada y se analizaron utilizando estadística descriptiva. **Resultados:** La mayoría de los cuidadores eran mujeres (96%), de entre 31 y 45 años (68%), nacidas en el interior de Paraguay (52%), con educación básica completa y sin formación específica para cuidadores (100%). Casi todas trabajaban hacia más de tres años (76%), cobraban más de un salario mínimo (56%), estaban insatisfechas con su salario actual (84%), no tenían registro formal de trabajo (92%), contaban con un día libre a la semana (72%) y, además de cuidar personas mayores, realizaban tareas domésticas en el hogar (92%). **Conclusión:** Conocer el perfil sociodemográfico y laboral de los cuidadores es fundamental para diseñar políticas públicas eficaces que mejoren la calidad de vida de estos profesionales y, por consecuencia, la atención prestada a las personas mayores.

Descritores: Cuidadores; Anciano Frágil; Paraguay; Estudio Observacional.

INTRODUCTION

The aging process is a gradual transformation in the structure and functioning of a person's body, occurring over time as a result of a complex interplay between genetic, environmental, and lifestyle factors. It results in both psychological and biological changes and represents a natural phase in the human life cycle. The term "aging" can be defined as a continuous evolution, whereas "old age" represents a specific stage of human life. ⁽¹⁾

The National Census of Paraguay, conducted in 2022 by the National Institute of Statistics of Paraguay, indicated that the life expectancy of the male population was lower than that of the female population. The average lifespan of men is approximately 72 years, while that of women is approximately 78 years. This discrepancy of six years between the sexes could be attributed to a multitude of factors, including a global trend of men being more resistant to seeking preventive care. ⁽²⁾

Furthermore, it is estimated that 7% of the Paraguayan population is over the age of 65, with a total population of approximately 7,353,038 in 2021. The latest census projections indicate that the number of individuals aged 60 or above is approximately 746,000, while the number of those aged 75 or above is 187,000. In the age group of people over 60, 51.7% are female and 48.3% male, while in the age group of people over 75, this percentage is 56.3% and 43.7%, respectively. ⁽³⁻⁶⁾

The process of aging can contribute to social isolation, particularly due to the functional limitations imposed by this life cycle. In elderly individuals who require assistance with daily activities, these limitations are more pronounced, further restricting their social interactions. The advent of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has served to accelerate this process of social isolation, thereby exacerbating the risk of both physical and mental illness. ⁽⁷⁻¹⁰⁾

Furthermore, the elderly are a demographic with an elevated risk of infection and exacerbation of symptoms associated with SARS-CoV-2. They require observation and care from qualified individuals who are knowledgeable about and able to implement biosafety measures to ensure their safety. Social distancing is the most effective method of preventing infection and the spread of this disease. ⁽¹¹⁾

Historically, the care of the elderly has been a nursing function. However, the economic situation and associated health costs make it challenging for families to hire a professional in this area. Consequently, the responsibility for the care of the elderly is assumed by other individuals, the training and qualifications

of whom are often unclear. Thus, families who are unable to provide care for their own members frequently seek to employ informal caregivers as an alternative means of assisting with the care of the elderly. ⁽¹²⁻¹³⁾

A caregiver is typically defined as an individual who provides care to another person in need, regardless of whether the care recipient is bedridden, has physical or mental limitations, and regardless of whether the caregiver receives remuneration for their services. There are two principal categories of caregiver: the formal caregiver and the informal caregiver. A formal caregiver is an individual who provides care under the auspices of a professional contract, operating within the parameters of legal regulations. This may be in a health institution or in the context of a contracted home care arrangement. In contrast, the informal caregiver is typically a family member or friend who provides care without receiving compensation. Both are fundamental to meeting the daily needs of frail elderly people, following guidelines for health, well-being, safety and comfort, and encouraging the elderly person's autonomy and independence. ⁽¹⁴⁾

In Paraguay, care for the elderly is not specifically included in health programming, unlike other programs, such as care for children in their first years of life (vaccinations, monitoring growth and development), prenatal care and reproductive planning. As a result, this population is vulnerable because it does not receive qualified attention from the primary care health team. ⁽¹⁵⁾

The Paraguayan health system lacks a provision for nursing care at home for dependent patients, a service that is available in other countries. In this regard, this study is significant in that it provides insight into the reality of elderly caregivers, which serves as a foundation for the development of assertive public policies aimed at enhancing the quality of care and quality of life for the elderly within the health system.

In light of the dearth of studies on formal caregivers of the elderly and the aforementioned issue, this study aims to characterize the sociodemographic and occupational profile of formal caregivers of dependent elderly individuals in the domestic setting in the city of Asunción, Paraguay.

METHODS

This study employs an observational, cross-sectional, and descriptive approach to characterize formal caregivers of elderly individuals residing in the community, with a particular focus on the interplay between sociodemographic and occupational variables. In accordance with the recommendations set forth by the EQUATOR Network's scientific writing guide (STROBE), this production was conducted.

The study site was households in the urban area of Asunción, the capital of Paraguay. In 2022, the total population of Asunción was 520,917, of whom 274,360 were women and 246,557 were men. Furthermore, the 2020–2025 period was indicated by an aging index of P65+/P0-14*100.

The participants were formal caregivers of home-dependent elderly individuals residing in the city of Asunción. In the absence of data regarding the number of formal caregivers in the municipality, a non-probabilistic snowball sampling method was employed. Once a participant who met the eligibility criteria was identified, other participants were contacted, resulting in a sample of 25 caregivers who met the criteria presented below.

The inclusion criteria for this study were as follows: the caregiver must be a formal caregiver, over the age of 18, of either sex, with preserved cognitive ability and access to a smartphone or telephone, with at least six months' experience as a caregiver for dependent elderly people, and who was working during the pandemic. Caregivers were excluded if they were unable to participate due to a transient disability or communication limitation at the time of the survey.

Data collection occurred between June and December 2022, utilizing a structured interview script that was validated through a pilot test involving individuals with analogous characteristics to those of the study participants who were not part of the study sample. It should be noted that, even with these initial precautions in place, the script was translated into Guaraní before the pilot test commenced, with the intention of facilitating comprehension for the interviewees. Accordingly, in light of the research objectives, the language and select terminology in the instrument were modified following the test phase. Due to the circumstances of the pandemic and the considerable distances that had to be traversed to reach the participants, the interviews were conducted via video call.

The interview script was constructed and adapted based on the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation's Research Manual, entitled "Situational study of dependent elderly people living with their families with a view to subsidizing a policy of care and support for caregivers," and included variables related to

sociodemographic and occupational characteristics. The information collected was entered into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to organize the data. ⁽¹³⁾

The data were entered into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to organize the database, which was then exported to the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20 software for descriptive analysis using absolute frequency and percentage calculations.

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles that guide research involving human subjects. It was submitted to and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Nursing and Obstetrics at the National University of Asunción. It is noteworthy that data collection commenced only after approval was obtained.

The voluntary and informed consent of the study participants was obtained after the Free and Informed Consent Form (FICF) had been presented, read, and signed. The participants were informed of the purpose of the study, guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity, and were assured that they could withdraw from the research at any time without any kind of damage. It should be noted that the project was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Nursing and Obstetrics of the National University of Asunción under the opinion of the Dean of the Faculty of Nursing and Obstetrics (DFEOUNA) No. 316/2021.

RESULTS

Among the participants' sociodemographic characteristics, the following were notable: female (96%), aged between 31 and 45 (68%), residing in the rural area of Paraguay (52%), having completed high school (36%), and lacking training in geriatric care (100%). Table 1 presents a comprehensive overview of the sociodemographic variables investigated.

Table 1. Sociodemographic characterization of formal caregivers of dependent elderly people in Asunción, Paraguay, 2023 (n=25).

Variable	Absolute frequency	Percentage
GENDER		
Male	1	4%
Female	24	96%
AGE GROUP		
18 to 30 years old	7	28%
31 to 45 years old	17	68%
60 years or older	1	4%
PLACE OF BIRTH		
Asunción	10	40%
Countryside of Paraguay	13	52%
Urban area of Paraguay	2	8%
EDUCATION LEVEL		
Secondary school	8	32%
High school	9	36%
Technical education	3	12%
Nursing assistant	1	4%
College student	4	16%
ELDERLY CARE COURSE		
Yes	0	0%
No	25	100%

Source: Developed by Authors (2023).

With regard to their work situation, the participants who provided care for only one elderly person (100%), had been employed for more than three years (76%), received a salary of more than one minimum wage (56%), expressed dissatisfaction with their current salary (84%), lacked a formal work record (92%), had one day off per week (72%), and, in addition to providing care for the elderly, engaged in domestic activities at home (92%).

Table 2. Characteristics of the working situation of formal caregivers of dependent elderly people Asunción, Paraguay, 2023 (n=25).

Variable	Absolute frequency	Percentage
No. OF ELDERLY PEOPLE CARED FOR		
1	25	100%
2 or more	0	0%
TOTAL TIME WORKING WITH THE CURRENT ELDERLY PERSON		
Less than 1 year	0	0%
1 to 2 years	6	24%
3 years or more	19	76%
SALARY		
Less than 1 minimum wage	10	40%
1 minimum wage	1	4%
More than 1 minimum wage	14	56%
SATISFACION WITH CURRENT SALARY		
Satisfied	4	16%
Dissatisfied	21	84%
EMPLOYMENT CONTRACT/ REGISTRATION		
Yes	2	8%
No	23	92%
DAY OFF		
Once a week	18	72%
Once every other week	2	8%
None	5	20%
ACTIVITIES CARRIED OUT		
Only activities with the elderly	2	8%
Domestic activities	23	92%

Source: Developed by Authors (2023).

DISCUSSION

The female gender was the most prevalent, which aligns with the established profile of formal caregivers of the elderly in Paraguay and globally. This is corroborated by a national survey conducted in Portugal in 2021, which sought to ascertain the profile of formal and informal caregivers during the pandemic. The survey revealed that 91.4% of formal caregivers were female. ⁽¹⁶⁾

The majority of these formal caregivers fell within the age range of 31 to 45 years. This finding is consistent with the average age of 46 years reported in a multicenter study conducted in Brazil in 2019, which aimed to elucidate the challenges faced by this group. ⁽¹⁷⁾

With regard to the level of education completed, the majority of respondents had obtained a high school diploma, which is consistent with the findings of a study conducted in Brazil that investigated the profile of elderly caregivers in the city of Niterói in Rio de Janeiro based on their social, demographic, economic, and health conditions between 2016 and 2017. This study found that approximately 30% of the population fell into this category of schooling. ⁽¹⁸⁾

As demonstrated in this study, a study conducted in Cuba between 2017 and 2018 revealed that 100% of caregivers lacked prior experience in caring for the elderly and had never participated in training programs designed for elderly care. This finding corroborates the assertion that, as in other countries, the care of the elderly is the responsibility of individuals lacking the requisite training for this purpose. ⁽¹⁹⁾

The majority of the caregivers interviewed lacked any form of contractual guaranteeing an employment relationship. This phenomenon was also observed in Brazil, where 74% of the caregivers lacked a formal employment contract. However, the situation in some developed countries differs, as evidenced by the case of Portugal. A study conducted in Portugal in 2021 aimed to elucidate the characteristics of formal and informal caregivers assisting elderly individuals with functional dependency. The findings revealed that 85.5% of formal caregivers had an employment contract with an institute, company, or agency. ^(15, 20)

In this context, it is imperative to consider the well-being of caregivers, who are often subjected to low wages, which subsequently leads to job dissatisfaction, lack of formal contracts, and consequently, the inability to access some fundamental labor rights. ⁽¹⁶⁾

This reality was also evidenced in a study whose results demonstrate that the overload of caregivers involves biological, psychological, emotional, and economic factors. The low salary due to the workload, responsibility, and working hours, as well as the lack of recreation, exacerbate the overload of caregivers. ⁽²¹⁾

An additional aggravating factor that contributes to the work process becoming even more stressful is the exercise of domestic activities. This reality was corroborated by the findings of this research and by a multicenter study that sought to analyze the challenges faced by formal caregivers who provide assistance to dependent elderly people at home. The study, which was conducted in Brazil in 2019, revealed that 62.9% of the participants engaged in additional domestic activities alongside their caregiving responsibilities. This factor merits attention, as it has the potential to be deleterious to the mental health and quality of life of caregivers. ⁽¹⁶⁾

This reality places an excessive burden of activity on both formal and informal caregivers. The necessity for care that an elderly person requires places a significant burden on the caregiver, who must devote their attention to the individual in question. In some cases, this can lead to physical and mental strain, which can in turn result in illness in this population. ⁽¹⁸⁾

Furthermore, global sociodemographic trends indicate that the population is undergoing a gradual and progressive aging process. This necessitates the implementation of effective and efficient healthcare mechanisms that guarantee quality care for the elderly, wherever they require it. ⁽¹⁶⁾

Conversely, there is a scarcity of alternative care options for the elderly outside the family environment. The existing long-term care institutions for the elderly have been established and continue to operate with a high level of voluntarism, as well as a degree of improvisation. However, state action in this area is still relatively timid and lacks any real planning. ⁽²²⁾

Furthermore, it should be noted that in Paraguay, both the 1992 Federal Constitution and Law No. 1.885, which aim to safeguard the lives of these people, are weakened and inefficient, since the public health system does not have the necessary infrastructure for these guarantees, in addition to a shortage of qualified human resources to provide care for the elderly. ⁽²³⁾

Finally, one of the limitations of this study was that it was not possible to describe the practices and attitudes of caregivers in greater depth, as well as the time it took to collect the data and the lack of funding, which prevented the sample from being expanded. On the other hand, it is relevant because it was the first study in the health field to describe the working situation of formal caregivers of dependent elderly people at home in Asunción, Paraguay.

CONCLUSION

The research demonstrated that the majority of caregivers are women, aged between 31 and 45, born in the interior of Paraguay, with a high school education, no training course for caregivers, and have been caring exclusively for an elderly person for more than a year. Additionally, they do not have any type of contract that formalizes or guarantees an employment relationship and carry out domestic activities in addition to caring for the elderly.

As a result, the sociodemographic and occupational profile of formal caregivers in the municipality of Asunción, Paraguay, could be characterized. It is our intention to contribute to the formulation of assertive public policies that will provide quality of life for caregivers and, consequently, better quality care for the elderly. Furthermore, this research may inform the design of future studies aimed at advancing the theoretical understanding of this phenomenon.

CONTRIBUTIONS

Contributed to the conception or design of the study/research: Villamayor MEB, Figueiredo MLF, Tyrrell MAR. Contributed to data collection: Villamayor MEB. Contributed to the analysis and/or interpretation of data: Villamayor MEB, Figueiredo MLF, Tyrrell MAR. Contributed to article writing or critical review: Villamayor MEB, Silva RF, Alves SPLB. Final approval of the version to be published: Figueiredo MLF, Tyrrell MAR, Silva RF, Villamayor MEB, Alves SPLB.

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