OPEN ACCESS
Al-Qamar
ISSN (Online): 2664-4398
ISSN (Print): 2664-438X
www.alqamarjournal.com

Al-Qamar, Volume 8, Issue 2 (April-June 2025)

A Cross Provincial Comparison of Challenges faced by Caregivers of Adults with Substance Use Disorder in Pakistan

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Abstract

Caregivers of individuals with substance use disorders (SUDs) in Pakistan encounter a range of emotional, financial, and social challenges that vary significantly across provinces due to differences in healthcare infrastructure, cultural norms, and socioeconomic conditions. This study aimed to conduct a cross-provincial comparison of the challenges faced by caregivers of adults undergoing treatment for SUDs in Pakistan. A qualitative research design was employed using non-probability sampling. A total of 48 caregivers from four provinces (Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Baluchistan) participated in semi-structured interviews. Data were collected till data saturation point. Five major themes emerged: emotional and psychological stress, financial burden, access to healthcare facilities, stigma and social isolation, and coping strategies. Caregivers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and

Baluchistan reported significantly higher emotional distress, stigma, and financial strain due to limited access to mental health services and treatment centers. In contrast, caregivers in urban areas of Punjab and Sindh experienced better support systems but still faced challenges in rural regions. The findings highlight profound regional disparities in the caregiving experience across Pakistan, emphasizing the urgent need for culturally sensitive, region-specific interventions.

Keywords: *Caregivers, SUDs, Provinces, Pakistan, Adults.*

Introduction:

Caregivers involved in the treatment of individuals with substance use disorders (SUDs) in Pakistan face a myriad of issues and challenges that are shaped by the socio-cultural, economic, and infrastructural contexts of different provinces. One of the fundamental challenges is the stigma associated with substance use, which varies across provinces. In conservative regions like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) and Baluchistan, substance use is often stigmatized, leading to reluctance in seeking treatment and limited support for caregivers (Ahmad et al., 2019).

Conversely, in more liberal provinces like Sindh and Punjab, while there might be relatively more acceptance of addiction as a medical condition, stigma still persists, affecting the quality of care provided by caregivers (Azim et al., 2011). The Study aims to address the caregiver burden and challenges associated with substance use disorders in different provinces of Pakistan. The study compared the caregiver burden in substance use disorder with that in severe mental disorders and explore the specific challenges faced by caregivers in the treatment of individuals with substance use disorders. Globally, substance abuse and usage continue to be major causes of disease and mortality. Studies on its genesis, epidemiology, and rehabilitation techniques have been conducted for many years. In spite of the fact that some people have drug addictions for life and others have never taken drugs, its epidemiologic tendencies remain steady and predictable. (Newcomb & Locke, 2005).

The emphasis of mental health care has changed over the last 20 years from institutionalization to community-based initiatives and shorter hospital stays. This shift implies that family members and other caregivers will have a bigger part in the care of those who are mentally ill. While there is proof for the advantages of deinstitutionalization, there are also signs

that caretakers bear a heavy burden. (Addo et al., 2018) There are many levels of social sensitivity to substance usage (individual, interpersonal and social). Multidisciplinary partnerships spanning the basic and behavioral sciences have enabled researchers to better understand how biological variables interact with social and cultural contexts to predispose people to substance abuse problems.

Physical dependence and drug use problems can arise as a result of long-term stressor exposure and a maladaptive stress response to those stressors. (Amaro et al., 2021b) Family is the fundamental social unit. Families will therefore unavoidably have an impact on an individual's growth or regression, which will then have an effect on communities and society. (Innocenti, 2018) Families are affected by substance abuse and addiction in numerous ways. Children who are exposed to illegal substances run the risk of developing mental health conditions like anxiety or depression, as well as behavioral and cognitive challenges that may hinder their ability to learn. Family caregivers improve the well-being of the individual with an addiction disorder by encouraging treatment participation and adherence, decreasing substance abuse and relapse.

However, providing care is also linked to detrimental effects on a caregiver's physical and mental well-being. (Tyo & McCurry, 2020) Relatives with a substance use disorder have been observed to have mental health issues like anxiety and depression. (Ólafsdóttir et al., 2018) Research has shown that the caregiver burden associated with substance use disorders is similar to that of severe mental diseases, highlighting the substantial obstacles that caregivers must overcome in both situations. (Mihan et al., 2023) Access to treatment facilities poses a significant challenge, particularly in rural and remote areas. Disparities in healthcare infrastructure and resources mean that urban centers like Karachi and Lahore may have better-equipped facilities compared to their rural counterparts (Mumtaz & Salway, 2009).

Families and primary caregivers of people with SUDs and other mental health problems are at high risk of getting mental health problems themselves (Ali et al., 2022). Depression was identified in primary caregivers of people with substance use disorders. Researchers conducted interviews and applied the DSM 5 criteria for Depressive disorders on the primary caregivers of people with substance use disorders, the findings showed that there is a higher frequency of depression in the primary caregivers of people with substance use disorders and that they need early intervention in order to improve their mental health (Ali et al., 2022 & Idrees et al., 2022).

Consequently, caregivers in underprivileged provinces face hurdles in accessing appropriate treatment services for individuals with SUDs. Limited availability of trained healthcare professionals and rehabilitation centers further exacerbate the situation, particularly in

provinces like Baluchistan and Gilgit-Baltistan (Akhtar et al., 2018). Economic constraints play a pivotal role in shaping the treatment landscape for individuals with SUDs. Poverty, unemployment, and lack of financial resources hinder access to treatment services and medication (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2019). Caregivers, often family members, bear the financial burden of treatment, which may lead to stress and strain on familial relationships.

This issue is more pronounced in provinces with higher poverty rates, such as Baluchistan and Sindh, where healthcare expenses can push families deeper into poverty (Ahmad et al., 2019). The legal and policy framework regarding substance use and addiction also varies across provinces, leading to inconsistencies and confusion among caregivers. While federal laws govern drug trafficking and possession, provinces have autonomy in implementing healthcare policies (Azim et al., 2011). Inadequate integration between mental health and substance abuse services further complicates the treatment landscape, particularly in provinces with fragmented healthcare systems (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2019).

Research Question

What is the comparison between the challenges faced by caregivers of Adults with Substance Use Disorders in the Treatment across Different Provinces of Pakistan?

Aim

The aim of the study was to identify the differences in the challenges faced by caregivers of adults with SUD's across different provinces of Pakistan.

Methodology

Research Design

A qualitative research approach was used to obtain deeper insights into the difficulties faced by caregivers in different provinces of Pakistan who are seeking treatment for substance use disorders (SUDs). The purpose of choosing this approach was to gain a thorough understanding of the perspectives and firsthand accounts of people living with SUDs in Pakistan. Non probability sampling technique was used. Focus group discussions were held to collect in- depth data; they were held in welcoming environments to promote participation. After obtaining participants' informed consent, these interviews were conducted to learn more about the experiences and challenges of receiving treatment for substance use disorders. The application of thematic analysis enabled the identification of recurrent patterns and themes in the data, thereby enabling a thorough investigation of the diverse obstacles that adult patients in various provinces of Pakistan face when seeking and receiving treatment for substance use disorders.

Sample

A total of 48 participants were selected, non probability sampling technique was used which ensures a diverse participant pool that reflects a range of cultural backgrounds, demographics, and stages of recovery, thereby enhancing the depth and diversity of the information gathered. Caregivers were taken from Punjab, Sindh, Baluchistan and KPK.

Inclusion Criteria

Caregivers of adults with SUD, getting treatment in a rehab facility, only those participants were included who could communicate in Urdu, those caregivers were included whose family member had no other comorbid psychological disorder with SUD

Exclusion Criteria

Caregivers of Patients with comorbid psychological disorder with SUD were not included in the study.

Procedure

After developing rapport and outlining the purpose of the study as well as the rights and responsibilities of the volunteers, they provided written informed permission. Confidentiality of the data and participant anonymity were assured. Data was collected from the Rehabilitation centers with their consent, caregivers gave their consent as well and their psychoeducation was also done. Caregivers were individually interviewed by the Research Assistants for exploring the challenged they faced by dealing with Adults with Substance Use disorder in family. After the data was meticulously transcribed, thematic analysis was used to identify important themes and subthemes.

Result

The study revealed pronounced regional disparities in the challenges faced by caregivers of adults with Substance Use Disorders (SUDs) across Pakistan. Data was collected from caregivers in Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), and Baluchistan. These findings have been categorized into five key areas, each highlighting the unique struggles experienced by caregivers in different regions.

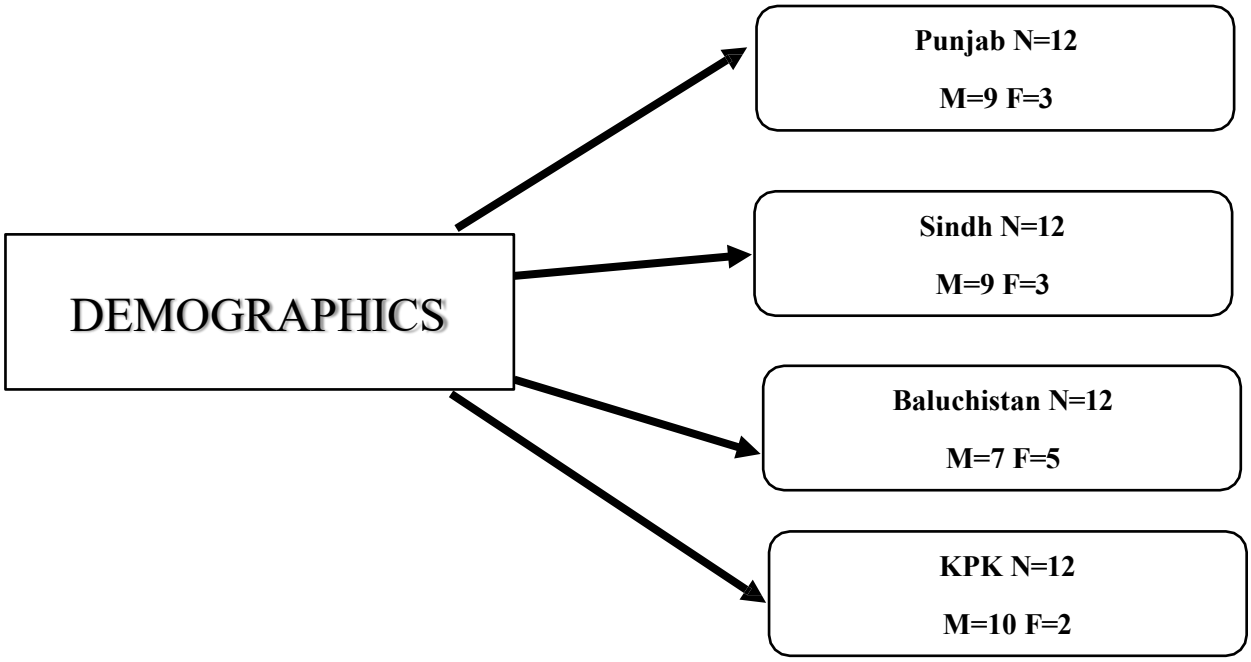

Figure 1: Demographic Characteristics.

Here is a table summarizing the themes and sub-themes from the study:

Theme	Provinces	Description
Emotional and Psychological Stress	Stigma and Social Isolation	Highest prevalence of emotional distress (78%); limited
		Baluchistan
		Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP)
		Punjab and Sindh
		Sindh and Punjab
		KP and Baluchistan
Financial Burden		Punjab and Sindh
		KP and Baluchistan
Access to Healthcare Facilities		Punjab and Sindh

mental health services; severe shortage of professionals and facilities.	compared to other regions; better access to counseling and resources in urban centers like Lahore and Karachi; rural areas face more challenges.	
High emotional stress (72%); linked to regional instability, cultural stigma, and lack of psychological support infrastructure.		Relatively better access to financial aid programs; free or subsidized treatment facilities available in urban areas.
Prevalence of distress lower		Severe financial hardships; high cost of treatment, transportation, and medication; rural families often forced to sell assets or borrow money.
		Higher concentration of SUD treatment centers in urban areas (e.g., Lahore, Karachi, Faisalabad); shorter travel distances and better-equipped facilities.
		Sparse distribution of treatment centers; caregivers often travel long distances; lack of specialized facilities exacerbates physical and financial burdens.
		Severe societal stigma; women caregivers face higher isolation; cultural norms and traditional beliefs intensify discrimination, especially in rural and tribal areas.
		Stigma still prevalent but lower in urban areas due to awareness campaigns and formal support networks; rural caregivers face similar challenges as those in KP and Baluchistan.

Theme	Provinces	Description
Coping Strategies	Punjab and Sindh	Utilization of formal support systems (e.g., government- led support groups, counseling services, community networks); peer groups provide emotional and practical support.
	KP and Baluchistan	Reliance on informal support mechanisms, such as extended family networks; lack of formal support systems leaves caregivers feeling overwhelmed.

1. Emotional and Psychological Stress

Caregivers consistently reported experiencing significant emotional and psychological distress. Anxiety, depression, and feelings of helplessness were common across all provinces. However, the severity of emotional stress varied:

- *Baluchistan:* Caregivers reported the highest prevalence of emotional distress, with 78% indicating symptoms of anxiety and depression. Limited access to mental health services exacerbates these issues, as the province faces a severe shortage of trained mental health professionals and facilities. One caregiver expressed their distress, stating, *"Every day feels like a battle. There is no one to help us, and we are left to suffer in silence."* Another caregiver added, *"My nights are sleepless, and my days are filled with fear. I don't know how long I can take this burden alone."*
- *Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK):* Emotional stress was similarly high, affecting 72% of caregivers. Many participants cited ongoing regional instability, cultural stigmas, and the lack of psychological support infrastructure as contributing factors. One respondent shared, *"People tell me to be strong, but how can I when there is no support? We are struggling, and no one understands our pain."* Another caregiver stated, *"Every time I*

see my loved one suffer, I feel helpless. The stress is unbearable, and I feel like there's no way out."

- *Punjab and Sindh:* Although emotional distress was prevalent, caregivers in these provinces had slightly better access to counseling and mental health resources. Urban centers such as Lahore and Karachi offered more accessible support systems compared to rural areas. A caregiver from Punjab remarked, *"At least here in the city, we have some access to counselors. But in the villages, people suffer in silence."* Another added, *"I try to stay strong, but inside, I feel broken. People don't understand the toll this takes on us."*

2. Financial Burden

Financial strain emerged as a pervasive issue, though the degree of burden varied by region:

- *Sindh and Punjab:* Caregivers in these provinces reported relatively better access to financial aid programs and government subsidies for healthcare. Urban areas had more availability of free or subsidized treatment facilities, which eased some financial challenges. A caregiver from Karachi noted, *"Without the government's assistance, I don't know how we would manage. It's still tough, but at least we have some support."* Another shared, *"The expenses keep adding up. Even with aid, it's a daily struggle to make ends meet."*
- *KPK and Baluchistan:* Caregivers in these provinces experienced severe financial hardships. The cost of treatment, transportation to distant facilities, and medication were identified as significant challenges, particularly for rural families. These financial burdens often forced families to sell assets or borrow money, further compounding their

distress. One caregiver from Balochistan shared, *"We had to sell our land just to afford treatment. Now we have nothing left, and we still don't know if it will be enough."* Another added, *"I have borrowed money from relatives, but I don't know how I will pay them back. We are drowning in debt."*

3. Access to Healthcare Facilities

A stark disparity was observed in the availability and accessibility of healthcare facilities:

- *Punjab and Sindh:* These provinces had a higher concentration of SUD treatment centers, particularly in urban areas like Lahore, Karachi, and Faisalabad. Caregivers benefited from shorter travel distances and better-equipped facilities. A caregiver from Lahore stated, *"At least we don't have to travel far to find treatment. But for those in villages, it's a nightmare."* Another remarked, *"Even with facilities nearby, the waiting lists are long, and it takes months to get proper treatment."*
- *KPK and Balochistan:* Caregivers in these regions faced significant challenges due to the sparse distribution of treatment centers. Many reported traveling hundreds of kilometers to access basic services, adding to their physical and financial burden. The lack of specialized facilities in these provinces was highlighted as a critical gap. One exhausted caregiver from KP said, *"I have to take a three-day journey just to get my son treated. By the time we get back home, we are already too tired to function."* Another added, *"We have no choice but to wait for months to get an appointment. Our loved ones suffer while we wait for help."*

4. Stigma and Social Isolation

Stigma surrounding SUDs was a universal challenge across all provinces but was

particularly acute in KP and Balochistan:

- *KPK and Baluchistan:* Societal attitudes toward SUDs were deeply negative, resulting in widespread stigma and discrimination. Caregivers, especially women, faced significant social isolation, as they were often blamed for the condition of their loved ones. This isolation was more pronounced in rural and tribal areas where traditional beliefs and gender norms are deeply entrenched. A caregiver from Balochistan lamented, *"People look at us with disgust, as if we are the ones to blame. They don't understand that we are suffering too."* Another shared, *"I avoid social gatherings because the whispers and judgment are too much to bear."*
- *Punjab and Sindh:* While stigma was still prevalent, urban caregivers reported slightly lower levels of isolation due to better awareness campaigns and access to formal support networks. However, caregivers in rural areas continued to face similar societal pressures as those in KP and Balochistan. A caregiver from Sindh explained, *"At least in cities, there is some awareness. In villages, no one even talks about it. They just judge and exclude us."* Another caregiver shared, *"Even among family members, we are seen as an embarrassment. No one wants to talk about what we go through."*

5. Coping Strategies

Caregivers employed various coping mechanisms to manage the stress and challenges of their roles. The strategies varied significantly by region:

- *Punjab and Sindh:* Formal support systems, such as government-led support groups and community networks, were more widely used. Urban caregivers often sought counseling services or joined peer groups, which provided emotional and practical support. A caregiver from Lahore shared, *"Being able to talk to others who understand what I'm*

going through has been a lifesaver." Another added, *"Therapy has helped me cope, but not everyone has access to it."*

- *KPK and Baluchistan*: Informal coping mechanisms dominated, with caregivers relying heavily on extended family networks for support. However, the lack of formal support systems often left caregivers feeling overwhelmed and unsupported. A caregiver from KP admitted, *"I rely on my family, but sometimes, even they don't understand. It feels like I am all alone in this struggle."* Another said, *"Faith is the only thing keeping me going. There is no other support for us here."*

Discussion

Caregivers consistently reported experiencing significant emotional and psychological distress. Anxiety, depression, and feelings of helplessness were common across all provinces. However, the severity of emotional stress varied: Caregivers reported the highest prevalence of emotional distress, with 78% indicating symptoms of anxiety and depression. Limited access to mental health services exacerbates these issues, as the province faces a severe shortage of trained mental health professionals and facilities. The lack of available psychological support services increases the emotional burden on caregivers, making it difficult for them to manage their own mental well-being while tending to their loved ones (Khan & Javed, 2022). Emotional stress was similarly high, affecting 72% of caregivers. Many participants cited ongoing regional instability, cultural stigmas, and the lack of psychological support infrastructure as contributing factors. Caregivers in KP frequently experience burnout and compassion fatigue due to the chronic stress of managing addiction-related challenges in an unsupportive environment (Ahmad et al., 2021).

Although emotional distress was prevalent, caregivers in these provinces had slightly

better access to counseling and mental health resources. Urban centers such as Lahore and Karachi offered more accessible support systems compared to rural areas. Studies suggest that access to mental health services significantly reduces psychological distress among caregivers, highlighting the importance of resource allocation to rural regions (Shah et al., 2023).

Financial strain emerged as a pervasive issue, though the degree of burden varied by region: Caregivers in these provinces reported relatively better access to financial aid programs and government subsidies for healthcare. Urban areas had more availability of free or subsidized treatment facilities, which eased some financial challenges. Research indicates that government- sponsored healthcare subsidies can alleviate financial burdens and improve access to treatment for families dealing with substance use disorders (Hussain & Raza, 2022). Caregivers in these provinces experienced severe financial hardships. The cost of treatment, transportation to distant facilities, and medication were identified as significant challenges, particularly for rural families. These financial burdens often forced families to sell assets or borrow money, further compounding their distress. Economic constraints are a major barrier to accessing healthcare, particularly in regions with inadequate infrastructure and limited financial support programs (Ali & Zafar, 2020).

A stark disparity was observed in the availability and accessibility of healthcare facilities: These provinces had a higher concentration of SUD treatment centers, particularly in urban areas like Lahore, Karachi, and Faisalabad. Caregivers benefited from shorter travel distances and better-equipped facilities. Research suggests that the availability of well-resourced treatment centers significantly improves health outcomes for individuals with substance use disorders and reduces caregiver burden (Farooq et al., 2021). Caregivers in these regions faced significant challenges due to the sparse distribution of treatment centers. Many reported

traveling hundreds of kilometers to access basic services, adding to their physical and financial burden. The lack of specialized facilities in these provinces was highlighted as a critical gap. Studies show that geographic accessibility to healthcare is a key determinant in treatment adherence and recovery outcomes (Rahman & Sultan, 2022).

Stigma surrounding SUDs was a universal challenge across all provinces but was particularly acute in KP and Balochistan: Societal attitudes toward SUDs were deeply negative, resulting in widespread stigma and discrimination. Caregivers, especially women, faced significant social isolation, as they were often blamed for the condition of their loved ones. This isolation was more pronounced in rural and tribal areas where traditional beliefs and gender norms are deeply entrenched. Research indicates that stigma remains a major barrier to seeking treatment, as it discourages families from accessing professional help (Niazi & Yasir, 2023). While stigma was still prevalent, urban caregivers reported slightly lower levels of isolation due to better awareness campaigns and access to formal support networks. However, caregivers in rural areas continued to face similar societal pressures as those in KP and Balochistan. Studies suggest that targeted awareness programs and community interventions can help reduce stigma and encourage more open discussions about substance use disorders (Saleem et al., 2021).

Caregivers employed various coping mechanisms to manage the stress and challenges of their roles. The strategies varied significantly by region: Formal support systems, such as government-led support groups and community networks, were more widely used. Urban caregivers often sought counseling services or joined peer groups, which provided emotional and practical support. Studies highlight the benefits of structured support groups in reducing caregiver burden and improving psychological resilience (Zahid & Khan, 2022). Informal coping mechanisms dominated, with caregivers relying heavily on extended family networks

for support. However, the lack of formal support systems often left caregivers feeling overwhelmed and unsupported. Research indicates that in the absence of professional support, caregivers turn to religious and community-based coping strategies, which, while beneficial, do not fully address the psychological challenges they face (Mahmood & Faraz, 2023).

Conclusion

The study highlights critical regional disparities in the challenges faced by caregivers of adults with Substance Use Disorders (SUDs) in Pakistan, emphasizing the multifaceted nature of caregiver burdens. Emotional and psychological stress, financial strain, limited access to healthcare facilities, pervasive stigma, and varied coping strategies were common themes across the provinces. However, caregivers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Baluchistan were disproportionately affected due to limited healthcare infrastructure, cultural stigma, and financial hardships. These findings underscore the urgent need for tailored interventions to address these disparities and provide comprehensive support to caregivers nationwide.

Limitations

- Although data was collected from all provinces, remote and tribal areas, particularly in KP and Balochistan, may not have been fully represented due to accessibility challenges.
- The study relied on self-reported data, which could have been influenced by social desirability or recall biases.
- The cross-sectional design captures challenges at a specific point in time but does not provide insights into the long-term trajectory of caregiver experiences.
- The disproportionate representation of female caregivers in some regions may not fully reflect the experiences of male caregivers, limiting the generalizability of findings.

Future Recommendations

- Establish additional treatment centers in underserved areas, particularly in KP and Balochistan, to reduce the physical and financial burden on caregivers.
- Incorporate mental health services within existing healthcare facilities to address caregivers' emotional needs.
- Develop government-led financial aid programs specifically for caregivers of individuals with SUDs, ensuring equitable access across all provinces.
- Promote microfinance initiatives in rural areas to alleviate financial strain.
- Launch culturally sensitive awareness campaigns to reduce stigma associated with SUDs and caregiving, focusing on rural and tribal communities.
- Engage local influencers and community leaders to promote understanding and acceptance.
- Facilitate the formation of caregiver support groups, particularly in KP and Balochistan, to provide emotional support and shared experiences.
- Train healthcare providers to offer caregiver-centric counseling and stress management resources.
- Advocate for national policies recognizing caregivers as key stakeholders in SUD recovery and ensuring their inclusion in healthcare planning and decision-making processes.

Implications

- The findings provide evidence for policymakers to allocate resources equitably and prioritize regions with acute disparities. Comprehensive policies addressing financial, healthcare, and social support for caregivers are essential.
- Strengthening healthcare infrastructure and integrating mental health services can

significantly reduce caregiver burden, particularly in underserved regions.

- Reducing stigma through education and awareness campaigns can foster a more supportive environment for caregivers, improving their overall well-being and effectiveness in their roles.
- This study paves the way for longitudinal research to explore the evolving challenges faced by caregivers and evaluate the effectiveness of implemented interventions.

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