

**Women's' Experiences with Postpartum Depression
During the Covid-19 Pandemic: An Integrative Review
of the Literature**

Honors Thesis

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ABSTRACT

Aim: The aim of this integrative review of literature was to assess the correlation between the rates of Postpartum Depression (PPD) during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Background: Risk factors of PPD include social isolation and stressful life events that were both occurring during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Materials and Methods: An integrative review of the information provided by ten scholarly articles from the EBSCO databases CINAHL and MEDLINE. These articles were then synthesized by theme in the literature review section.

Analysis: Three major themes were used to separate the articles used for this integrative review. These themes included "The Importance of Social Support", " Significant Increase in Symptoms During the COVID-19 Pandemic", and " Other Risk Factors During the Pandemic".

Conclusions: Postpartum depression is a devastating mental health issue that many women deal with in the United States. Factors brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic increased the risk of PPD. There must be new pandemic-related implementations and more research done on PPD.

Keywords: "postpartum depression", "Covid-19 pandemic", "quantitative", "qualitative", "experiences", and "United States"

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis project investigates the literature surrounding the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on women who struggle with postpartum depression. Postpartum Depression (PPD) is considered true depression following giving birth that causes persistent sadness, guilt, and disinterest in their child. Postpartum depression is a major issue for women after pregnancy that is overlooked in many areas throughout the United States (Joy, 2023). Around fifty percent of those who have postpartum depression are left undiagnosed by a healthcare provider (Carberg, 2023). The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Prevention revealed in a study on postpartum depression using the Pregnancy Risk Assessment Monitoring System (PRAMS) that 1 in 8 U.S. women who had recently given birth were experiencing symptoms of postpartum depression (CDC, 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic began in 2019 in China and came to the United States at the beginning of 2020. COVID-19 can be described by the World Health Organization (WHO, nd) as an “infectious disease caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2” (WHO, nd, para. 1). As the extremely infectious COVID-19 continued to spread throughout the United States, it was creating a negative impact on the physical and mental health of the population. Concerning mental health, the COVID-19 Pandemic caused a twenty-five percent increase in anxiety and depression across the world (WHO, 2022).

The CDC claims that certain risk factors, such as stress-inducing events and a decrease in a support system, can increase the risk of PPD (CDC, 2023). Since the COVID-19 pandemic could be considered a stressful life event and caused social

isolation, there is reason to investigate the relationship it had with PPD and mental illness in postpartum women. The goal of this literature review is to learn how the COVID-19 pandemic affected postpartum women as they dealt with isolation, stress, and fear brought on by this worldwide health issue.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROBLEM

Postpartum Depression (PPD) is often confused with the "baby blues" which can be defined as having normal emotions of stress, anxiety, loneliness, or tiredness after giving birth (APA, 2022). Baby blues typically goes away within the first few days of the onset of symptoms and is not threatening for the mother or baby. PPD is a much more severe mental health illness which can last for much longer indicating the need for treatment (OASH, 2023). Symptoms of PPD can vary from person to person but can consist of the symptoms such as guilt, irritation, uncontrollable sadness, insomnia, excessive sleep, lack of interest for their family, and thoughts of self-harm or infanticide (APA, 2022).

There are treatment options that are available for PPD such as psychotherapy, antidepressants, or anti-anxiety medications (Mayo Clinic, nd). Postpartum women had access to prescription antidepressants during the pandemic but, "women with postpartum depression are more likely to... take longer to respond to antidepressants, and require more antidepressants" (Sharma and Sommerdyk, 2013, para. 2). Lifestyle changes are also a major part of a treatment plan for PPD such as getting out of the house more often, visiting friends or family, joining a support group, and asking others for support (OASH, 2023). If these treatment plans were to be effective, the mother would recover from the PPD. However, the COVID-19 pandemic did not

allow for these types of nonpharmacological remedies. During the pandemic, everyone in the United States had to follow the quarantine, lockdown, and social distancing rules that were put in place. On March 13, 2020, POTUS Donald Trump had declared that COVID-19 pandemic was to be considered a country-wide emergency (DoD, nd). Stay-at-home orders were placed across the United States as the COVID-19 pandemic took over the country.

New mothers were isolated to their homes not allowing for certain support systems they would have had access to prior to the pandemic. Along with the lack of support systems, many people feared going into the doctor's office or hospitals during the height of the pandemic. A survey done by the Society for Cardiovascular Angiography and Interventions (SCAI) showed that about forty percent of people in the United States did not feel comfortable going to their healthcare office for care (DAIC, 2021). Postpartum care done by a healthcare provider can be critical in recognizing health issues such as PPD (Planned Parenthood, nd). These in-person postnatal visits can also play a vital role in diagnosing PPD since many women will not report their symptoms due to the embarrassment of not feeling joyful about their new baby (OASH, 2023). There were numerous factors created by the COVID-19 pandemic that played a role in increasing rates of postpartum depression. Research done by the University of Michigan School of Nursing and Michigan Medicine showed that one in three postpartum women were suffering from PPD, which correlated with the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (Mostafavi, 2022). Due to the information surrounding the correlation of rates of PPD and the COVID-19

pandemic, there seems to be a lack of focus on caring for Postpartum Depression and attempting to prevent it from occurring or treating it when it has been diagnosed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Importance of Social Support

During the COVID-19 pandemic, most were isolated from their typical social support and communities. Social support, as stated above, can have play an important part in a postpartum woman's mental health. According to Liu et al. (2021), an online survey was completed by women who were pregnant during the year of 2020. The Edinburgh Postpartum Depression Scale (EPDS) and a generalized anxiety scale were used as the tools for this study. The results of these tools concluded that COVID-19 did have an impact on the mental health of these pregnant women (Liu et al., 2021). It was recognized that a decrease in social support and emotional support had a negative impact. Social distancing was positively correlated with symptoms of depression (Liu et al., 2021). The pandemic led to a heightened percentage of pregnant women with symptoms of anxiety and/or depression (Liu et al., 2021). Even though this study did not focus on women who were postpartum, a risk factor for PPD is having depression during the time of pregnancy (March of Dimes, 2019).

Continuing on with social support being a major issue, research from Feinberg et al. (2022) reviewed data that was retrieved from the "Listening to Mothers in California" survey. 7.0% of those who participated in the survey had increased perinatal mood and anxiety disorders or PMAD. PMAD is often used to describe a mental health issue during or after pregnancy (Minnesota DOH, 2023). Out of those who participated, only 45.9% claimed to have social support. Results showed that

those who had "functional social support" had a rate of PMAD symptoms one-half compared to the rate of the participants who did not have support (Feinberg et al., 2022, p. 1). With access to social support, postpartum women were suffering less with their mental health. Due to these outcomes, social support can be recognized as a protecting component against PMADs (Feinberg et al., 2022).

Further research was done on the association between postpartum depression and support from Gildner et al. (2021) that analyzed postpartum women who delivered their babies at different time periods during the pandemic with a cross-sectional analysis. The focus was on seeing if those who had "instrumental support" during postpartum stages reported less symptoms of PPD (Gildner et al., 2021, p. 1). The data for this research was collected from the COVID-19 and Reproductive Effects (CARE) study. Women who were postpartum during the later stage of the study were unlikely to report the pandemic playing a role in the support they had access to and had a significantly lower rate of depression. Those who did claim to have issues with support created by the pandemic had higher scores of depression (Gildner et al., 2021). It can be concluded with the research from this article that those with support during the time of the pandemic had a better chance of not dealing with symptoms of depression.

Significant Increase in Symptoms During the COVID-19 Pandemic

For future implementations to be made related to pandemic-related situations surrounding postpartum women, there is a need for research on whether the COVID-19 pandemic and PPD are correlated. Bajaj et al. (2022) released research on if there was a relationship between the initial stages of COVID-19 and the rates of PDD. The

research was done using a survey on the Flo mobile application that track's women's menstrual cycles with women who within ninety days of having their baby. The national rate of PPD symptoms went from 6.5% to 6.9% during the early pandemic period revealing a 6.31% increase in the number of postpartum women who were struggling with their mental health (Bajaj et al., 2022). The change in postpartum depressive symptoms during the pandemic had a significant p-value of .042 (Bajaj et al., 2022).

Another study that showed a significant increase in PPD symptoms was done by Droke et al. (2023). The data for this study was taken from information at a pediatric office in Michigan on postpartum women who completed the Edinburgh Postpartum Depression Scale. The data was put into stages of pre-pandemic, early pandemic, and later pandemic periods. It was revealed in this study that rates of PPD were at a high of 60% during the early stages of the pandemic in relation to the rate of 36% prior to the pandemic. It was also recognized in this research that mothers who had previously been diagnosed with mental health issues had a higher chance of having PPD (Droke et al., 2023). Waschmann et al. (2022) conducted a similar study with data from "two epochs" that were pre-pandemic and during the pandemic with the EPDS as well that was published (Waschmann et al., 2022, p. 1). There seemed to be an increased chance for anxiety and depression in the second epoch during 2020, but there was not a statistically significant difference between the first and second epoch (Waschmann et al., 2022).

Silverman and Loudon (2022) claimed that figuring out successful treatments for postpartum women suffering with mood disturbances is still hard to pin down even

though there are many options available. They went on to discuss the research done by Waschmann et. al (2022) and stated that it helped to shine light on how to start "addressing maternal support and easing the postpartum anxiety and depressive symptomatology associated with the profound adjustment of becoming a new mother." (Silverman and Loudon, 2022, p. 754).

A mixed-methods approach was used in the research done by Goyal et al. (2022) to look at how postpartum women were dealing with the pandemic. The research was focused on data from the six weeks following having their baby. A screening scale was used along with a section to answer open-ended questions in relation to PPD. Results showed that there was an average of 17.7 score and 75% of the women scored fourteen or higher. This score showed that there were "significant postpartum depressive symptoms" (Goyal et al, 2022, p. 1). Along with the quantitative data, the open-ended questions identified five main themes throughout that included "Isolation and seclusion continue", "Fear, anxiety and stress filled the days", "Grieving the loss of normal", "It's just so sad", "Complicated by postpartum depression: A dark time", and "There is a silver lining" (Goyal et al., 2022, p. 1).

Other Observed Risk Factors During the Pandemic

As discussed above, lack of social support was a major risk factor for PPD during the pandemic. Lack of social support was not the only important risk factor at the time. In research completed by Goldstein et al. (2022), there was a cross-sectional online survey that was to be completed by pregnant and postpartum women. Along with social support, this research looked at the need for healthcare and the access to healthcare. The data was separated into three classes that had differences with sleep

health, socializing, mental health, and exercise health. There were significant differences between these three classes in relation to the rates of stress, depression, and anxiety. Besides the differences in the classes, there was also a higher rate of need of healthcare regarding mental health than there was access to these facilities (Goldstein et al., 2022).

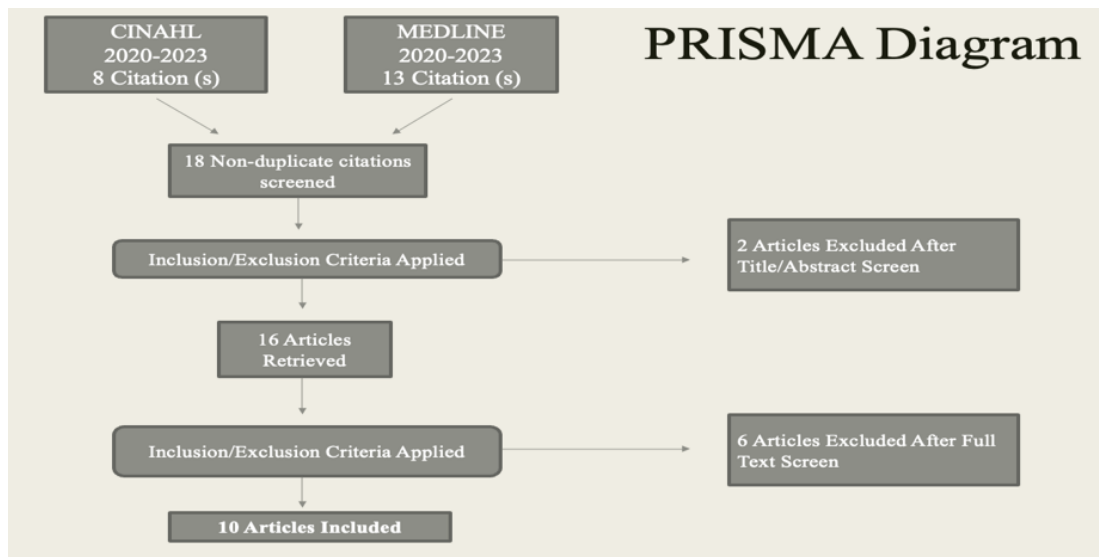
The research done by Mollard et al. (2021) looked at rates of stress, mastery and resilience in postpartum women and how they were related. Mastery levels were calculated with the Pearlin Mastery Scale, resilience levels were calculated with the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC), and stress levels were calculated with the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS). Women in this study reported higher stress levels and lower resilience in relation to before the pandemic. There was seen to be increased rates of anxiety, stress, and depression during the period of this study. There were some who did not report high amounts of stress in the PSS. Those who were in "partnered relationships", had income, and a full-time job reported less amounts of stress (Mollard et al., 2021, p. 1). Those who did have mastery and resilience had lower levels of stress and depression. With this research, there are certain protective factors that can prevent against heightened levels of stress on postpartum women at the time of a pandemic and that the lack of certain factors can lead to increased levels of stress (Mollard et al., 2021).

METHODS

According to Robin Whittemore and Kathleen Knafl (2005), "an integrative review is a specific review method that summarizes past empirical or theoretical literature to provide a more comprehensive understanding" (Whittemore, 2005, p.

546). It allows for a mix of different methods as it analyzes different types of research. The project is an integrative research review examining quantitative and qualitative studies that focus on postpartum women's experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic with a focus in the United States. There was a focus on articles that discussed the negative experiences during the pandemic and how the pandemic resulted in Postpartum Depression.

This review was completed with resources from peer-reviewed literature that includes databases from the EBSCO databases Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL) and PubMed (Medline). This study's keywords that were input into an advanced search were "postpartum depression", "Covid-19 pandemic", "quantitative", "qualitative", "experiences", and "United States" between 2020 to 2023 to help narrow down the research that came up. The focus on the timeline of articles between 2020 to 2023 was to keep the concentration on the timing of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States. Another specification during the search was that only academic journals with full text available were reviewed. Before excluding articles for specific criteria, duplicate articles were screened to be removed to prevent from repeating information. CINAHL provided eight articles and four articles were excluded after the specific criteria was applied. Medline provided thirteen articles and six were excluded after the specific criteria was applied. After the exclusions, ten articles were left to be used for the literature review. After reviewing these ten articles, the information was then synthesized by themes throughout all the articles.



Above is Figure 1 which is a PRISMA diagram that shows the screening process done to finalize the most vital articles for this integrative review.

DISCUSSION

After reviewing these various academic articles, there seems to be a major need for new implementations in the care surrounding postpartum women especially during times such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Screenings for mental health on women during their pregnancy and after they give birth can be an important tool to recognize depression and anxiety symptoms. Since women with pre-existing mental health disorders are at higher risk for postpartum depression, screenings for them are especially important. Looking into the protective factors in a postpartum women's life can help to estimate the chances of depression and anxiety. Specific pandemic-related interventions need to be created due to the chance of future pandemics or health epidemics. Care models should be created in relation to pandemics for postpartum women. Making sure necessary resources are available to women is a key part in helping to avoid postpartum depression. Having these earlier implementations in place can help to prevent the increase in rates of

PPD during a pandemic. Further research must be done to figure out the association between postpartum depression and the COVID-19 pandemic.

CONCLUSIONS & LESSONS LEARNED

This integrative review revealed the role the COVID-19 pandemic played on postpartum women and their chance of having postpartum depression. The COVID-19 pandemic and the issues it created such as lack of social support, lockdown, and decreased access to healthcare put many postpartum women at risk for having depression and anxiety. After completing this review, it can be seen that there must be pandemic-related interventions put in place to aid postpartum women. Even as the world moves out of the COVID-19 pandemic, there still needs to be more research on PPD and implementations to prevent it.

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