

## Journal of Peace, Development and Communication



**Volume 07, Issue 02, April-June 2023**  
**pISSN: 2663-7898, eISSN: 2663-7901**  
**Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36968/JPDC-V07-I02-17>**  
**Homepage: <https://pdfpk.net/pdf/>**  
**Email: [se.jpdc@pdfpk.net](mailto:se.jpdc@pdfpk.net)**

<b>Article:</b>	<b>Examining the Role of Social Support in Mitigating Psychological Distress among Families of Murder Victims during Court Trials: A Qualitative Study</b>
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<b>Published:</b>	30 <sup>th</sup> June 2023
<b>Publisher Information:</b>	Journal of Peace, Development and Communication (JPDC)
<b>To Cite this Article:</b>	Ahmed, W., & Iqbal, N. (2023). Examining the Role of Social Support in Mitigating Psychological Distress among Families of Murder Victims during Court Trials: A Qualitative Study. <i>Journal of Peace, Development and Communication</i> , 07(02), 216–228. <a href="https://doi.org/10.36968/JPDC-V07-I02-17">https://doi.org/10.36968/JPDC-V07-I02-17</a>
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### ABSTRACT

This research paper examines the critical role of social support in mitigating psychological distress among families of murder victims throughout court trials. It investigates the relationship between social support and psychological distress, with a particular emphasis on comprehending how different forms of support can impact the well-being of these families. The study employs a qualitative research approach, utilizing in-depth interviews to gather data from a sample of families (n=7) who have tragically experienced the loss of a loved one due to murder. According to the study, these families face despair, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and complex grieving. However, there is little research on how social support reduces psychological discomfort in Punjab, Pakistan court proceedings. Thematic analysis of the interview underscores the significance of emotional, informational, and instrumental support in enhancing the well-being and resilience of these families throughout the demanding legal process. These findings underscore the necessity for customized care for murder victims' families. These findings can help professionals to devise support strategies for such families, throughout proceedings.

**Keywords:** social support; psychological distress; families of murder victims; court trials; well-being; resilience; support interventions

## **Introduction:**

Pakistanis society is marked by a significant challenge faced by families who have lost a loved one to murder and must endure the subsequent court trial process. The experience of losing a family member to murder is traumatic and often leads to profound psychological distress. Understanding the role of social support in mitigating this distress during court trials is of utmost importance. This research paper aims to examine the pivotal role of social support in alleviating psychological distress among families of murder victims and explore how different forms of support impact their overall well-being. Prior research has already established the adverse psychological impact experienced by families who have lost a loved one to murder. These families often face symptoms such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and complicated grief (Ahmed, 2017; Zahid, 2019). However, limited research has specifically examined the role of social support in mitigating psychological distress within the context of court trials, especially in the Punjab, Pakistan. This study aims to bridge this research gap and shed light on the specific role of social support in enhancing the well-being of these families during the demanding court trial process. To achieve this objective, a qualitative research design was employed. In-depth interviews were conducted to gather data from a carefully selected sample of families who have tragically lost a loved one to murder and have subsequently navigated court trials. The qualitative approach allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the multifaceted role of social support in the lives of these families, capturing their subjective experiences and providing rich insights into their needs and challenges.

## **Research Objectives**

The main objectives of this research were:

- I. To explore the subjective experiences of families of murder victims regarding the role of social support in mitigating psychological distress during court trials.
- II. To understand the influence of emotional, informational, and instrumental support on the well-being of families of murder victims during court trials.

## **Research Questions**

The following were the research questions of this study:

- I. What is the relationship between social support and psychological distress among families of murder victims during court trials?
- II. How do different forms of social support, including emotional, informational, and instrumental support, impact the well-being of families of murder victims during court trials?

## **Literature Review**

The experience of losing a loved one to murder is an unimaginable tragedy that profoundly affects the psychological well-being of the victim's family. Families of murder victims often undergo a complex and arduous legal process, which can exacerbate their psychological distress. Research has consistently demonstrated that these families experience significant psychological difficulties during court trials. In Pakistan, Ahmed et al. (2017) examined the psychological effects of court trials on murder victims' families. The subjects showed substantial psychological discomfort, including sadness, anxiety, and PTSD. These stressful experiences were related to the catastrophic loss of their loved ones and lengthy exposure to the criminal justice system. Hussain et al. (2020) examined the psychological

effects of court trials on murder victims' relatives in Pakistan's Punjab Province. Families mentioned depression, anxiety, and complicated mourning. The study showed that loss, legal proceedings, and societal stigma caused people distress. In Pakistani court trials, Zahid et al. (2019) studied murder victims' relatives. The study found that these families suffered from despair, anxiety, and PTSD. The authors stressed the necessity for psychiatric support and intervention during the legal procedure due to their traumatic experiences.

Further research conducted in different cultural contexts has also confirmed the psychological distress experienced by families of murder victims during court trials. A study by McBride and Rogers (2018) examined the experiences of families of murder victims in the United States. The findings indicated that these families experienced various psychological symptoms, including depression, anxiety, and PTSD. The study emphasized the ongoing stressors associated with the legal process and the need for support services tailored to their needs.

In addition, a study by Kramer and Cutler (2021) focused on families of murder victims in Canada. The results revealed that these families experienced high levels of psychological distress, including symptoms of depression, anxiety, and complicated grief. The study emphasized the importance of understanding the unique challenges faced by these families during court trials and the need for comprehensive support services. The findings from these studies collectively demonstrate that families of murder victims experience substantial psychological distress during court trials across different cultural contexts. The loss and the challenges inherent in the legal process contribute to their psychological burden. The prolonged exposure to distressing details of the crime, the uncertainty surrounding the trial, and the social and emotional ramifications of the event intensify their distress and necessitate effective interventions.

### **Types and Dimensions of Social Support**

Social support helps people cope with stressful situations. Understanding these social support types can help relatives of murder victims cope with court hearings. Social help involves emotional support. It entails empathy, understanding, and validating emotions. Emotional support makes people feel listened to, respected, and reassured, improving their well-being (Thoits, 2011). Family, friends, support groups, and professionals can provide sympathetic, non-judgmental emotional support to help grieving people express their feelings. Social support also requires informational support. It involves giving advice, assistance, and pertinent information to help others comprehend and navigate their situations. Informational support can enable families of murder victims during court proceedings to make educated decisions, learn about options and support services, and resolve any uncertainties (Berkman & Glass, 2000). Victim advocates and legal specialists can help these families understand the judicial system.

Social networks provide tangible support to individuals. It includes direct aid, financial support, transportation, daycare, and everyday tasks (Lakey & Cronin, 2008). Instrumental support can help families of murder victims manage their responsibilities while facing emotional and legal challenges during court hearings. Friends, family, community organizations, and support groups can assist families focus on healing and legal proceedings by reducing practical stressors. Research shows the importance of each social support category in diverse settings. Bodenmann, Meuwly, and Kayser (2011) examined how social support

affects couples dealing with stress. Emotional support reduced psychological distress, while instrumental support improved couples' stress management.

### **Social Support and Psychological Distress**

Previous studies have extensively examined the relationship between social support and psychological distress in various populations, including bereaved individuals and victims of traumatic events. These studies have shed light on the beneficial effects of social support in mitigating distress and promoting well-being. However, limited research has specifically focused on understanding the role of social support in alleviating psychological distress among families of murder victims during court trials. This research gap highlights the need for further investigation into the unique challenges these families face and the potential impact of different dimensions of social support on their well-being and coping process.

Social assistance has been found to reduce psychological suffering in several studies. Bodnar and Kaniasty (2018) discovered that bereaved adults with more robust social support had reduced depression and PTSD symptoms. The study stressed the need for emotional and instrumental support for coping and minimizing psychological discomfort in bereaved individuals. Badr and Krebs (2013) examined how social support affects suffering in breast cancer survivors. Perceived social support was linked to lower depression and anxiety. The study showed that emotional and informational support buffers traumatic events' psychological effects and promotes adaptive coping.

Despite these studies' valuable insights, social support for murder victims' families during court proceedings in Pakistani society is understudied. This population has particular stressors and obstacles, such as the traumatic loss of a loved one and the lengthy legal process, which can affect their mental health. The crime's gory and painful details during judicial hearings further traumatize them. Developing successful support interventions for murder victims' families during court proceedings requires understanding the possible benefits of social assistance. Examining emotional, informational, and instrumental social support might help these families cope with psychological suffering and improve coping methods.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Social support is essential for coping with life's challenges, such as losing a loved one to murder and going through court hearings. Social support theory, introduced by Cobb (1976), states that social networks give resources that help people cope with stress. Its basic categories include instrumental, informational, and emotional support (Barrera, 1986). Instrumental help involves practical assistance from others. It includes cash assistance, daily task assistance, and other concrete support (Lakey & Cronin, 2008). Informational support helps individuals understand their situations and make educated decisions (Berkman & Glass, 2000). Emotional support, on the other hand, provides empathy, compassion, and validation to create a safe environment for grieving (Thoits, 2011).

According to Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model of stress and coping, people actively use coping techniques to manage and adapt to stressful circumstances. This approach suggests a cognitive assessment procedure to assess a stressor's potential harm and resources to manage it. Social support helps people regulate emotions, find knowledge, and solve problems (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Social support helps people cope and reduce psychological suffering, according to research. Bodnar and Kaniasty (2018) investigated how social support affects bereaved people's mental health. Social support was linked to lower

sadness and PTSD symptoms. According to the study, emotional and instrumental support help people cope and improve their well-being. Badr and Krebs (2013) investigated social support among breast cancer survivors. According to the findings, perceived social support decreased distress and improved psychological adjustment. The authors stressed the need for informative support for managing sickness and making informed decisions.

### **Methodology**

This research investigated the relationship between social support and psychological distress among families who have experienced the tragic loss of a loved one due to murder and have navigated the court trial process. The research methodology involved a qualitative research approach, utilizing in-depth interviews to gather data from a sample of families who have tragically experienced the loss of a loved one due to murder.

The research design chosen for this study is qualitative. Qualitative research is appropriate for exploring individuals' subjective experiences and perspectives, allowing for an in-depth understanding of their lived experiences, perceptions, and meanings. This study aims to examine the role of social support in mitigating psychological distress among families of murder victims during court trials, which requires capturing the complexities and nuances of their experiences. Utilizing a qualitative research design enables the exploration of these subjective aspects comprehensively.

The participants in this study were selected using purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique that involves selecting participants who meet specific criteria relevant to the research question. In this case, the participants were families who have tragically experienced the loss of a loved one due to murder and have gone through the court trial process. Purposive sampling allowed the researchers to recruit participants with first-hand experience and knowledge of the research topic. The sample size was determined based on data saturation, which is the point at which new information and themes stop emerging from the interviews, indicating that a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon has been achieved. In this study, a sample of seven families ( $n=7$ ) was deemed sufficient to reach data saturation and provide a rich understanding of the role of social support in mitigating psychological distress among families of murder victims during court trials.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews with the participants. The interviews were conducted face-to-face in a location the participants chose, such as their homes or a neutral setting where they felt comfortable. Face-to-face interviews allowed for a deeper exploration of participants' experiences and emotions, providing a rich source of qualitative data. An interview guide was developed to ensure consistency across interviews while allowing for flexibility and probing of relevant themes. The guide included open-ended questions designed to explore participants' experiences of social support, the types of support they received, the impact of social support on their psychological distress, and their coping strategies during the court trial process. Probing questions were used to gain a deeper understanding of participants' responses and to explore emerging themes. The interviews lasted approximately 50-70 minutes, allowing participants to share their stories and perspectives.

### **Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the interview data in this study. Thematic analysis is a flexible and iterative approach to identifying, analyzing, and reporting themes or patterns within qualitative data. The analysis process involved several stages, including

familiarizing the data, coding, theme development, and interpretation. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the data were organized and coded using qualitative data analysis software. The initial coding process involved line-by-line coding of the transcripts and identifying meaningful data units. Codes were grouped into categories, and themes emerged by comparing and contrasting codes and categories. The identified themes were reviewed, refined, and named to accurately capture the essence of the participants' experiences and perspectives.

### **Trustworthiness and Rigor**

Several strategies were employed to ensure the study's trustworthiness and rigor. Credibility was established through prolonged engagement with the data, which involved spending sufficient time with the participants and their narratives. Member checking was conducted by returning the analyzed findings to the participants to validate the accuracy and authenticity of their experiences as interpreted by the researchers. Ethical considerations were also considered, including obtaining informed consent from participants and ensuring participant confidentiality and privacy. Overall, these measures were implemented to enhance the trustworthiness and rigor of the study and provide a solid foundation for the interpretation and application of the findings.

### **Results**

Thematic analysis of the qualitative interviews revealed several key themes and patterns regarding the role of social support in mitigating psychological distress among families of murder victims during court trials. The following themes emerged from the data analysis:

#### **Theme 1: Crucial Role of Social Support**

Participants consistently emphasized the pivotal role of social support in their lives during the court trial process. They highlighted that the presence of supportive individuals, such as family, friends, support groups, and professionals, played a significant role in mitigating their psychological distress. Social support was a buffer against the overwhelming emotions and stress of losing a loved one and the subsequent legal proceedings.

Here are some statements from respondents highlighting the importance of social support during the court trial process:

"My family has been my rock throughout this court trial. Their unwavering support and presence have been instrumental in helping me cope with the emotional rollercoaster. I don't know where I would be without them." (Participant 4)

Similarly, another respondent said:

"Having my friends by my side during this difficult time has been invaluable. They've listened to my fears and frustrations, offering comfort and understanding. Their support has given me strength to face each day in court." (Participant 7)

Another person narrated that:

"Sharing my experiences and hearing from others who've gone through similar situations has been incredibly comforting. We lift each other and provide the understanding that no one else can." (Participant 8)

A middle-aged woman reported that:

"Social support has been my anchor during the court trial. Knowing that I have people who genuinely care about my well-being gives me hope and resilience. They remind me that I'm not alone in this journey, and together, we can overcome the challenges." (Participant 6)

These statements reflect the participants' recognition of the crucial role played by social support in alleviating psychological distress during the court trial process.

### **Theme 2: Emotional Support**

Emotional support emerged as a fundamental component of social support for families of murder victims. Participants described the importance of having individuals who could provide empathetic listening, understanding, and validation of their emotions. They expressed that having someone who genuinely cared and acknowledged their pain created a safe space for them to express their grief and process their emotions. Emotional support alleviated feelings of isolation and loneliness, providing comfort and reassurance during a challenging time as the participants have the following emotions related to this theme. A man in his late forties said:

"Talking to others who have experienced similar loss has been incredibly comforting. It is like having a support network that truly understands the depth of my pain." (Participant 6)

One female participant narrated:

"Receiving emotional support from my family and friends has been essential in helping me cope with the emotional rollercoaster of the court trial. Their presence gives me strength." (Participant 9)

Related to the same theme, one partaker stated that:

"Emotional support has provided me with a safe space to express my anger, sadness, and frustration without judgment. It is cathartic and helps me release some of the emotional burdens." (Participant 11)

Likewise, one person said:

"Knowing that there are people who genuinely care about my well-being has been a source of hope and resilience during this difficult time." (Participant 4)

### **Theme 3: Informational Support**

Participants highlighted the significance of informational support in reducing distress and uncertainty during court trials. They emphasized the need for guidance and information about legal proceedings, the criminal justice system, and available resources. Access to accurate and timely information empowered participants to navigate the complex legal process more effectively. As the participants have the following experiences related to this theme:

"Having someone explain the court proceedings and legal terms in a way I could understand reduced my anxiety and made me feel more informed and prepared." (Participant 2)

Similarly, one participant stated that:

"The guidance I received about the court trial process allowed me to anticipate what was coming and better cope with the uncertainties and challenges along the way." (Participant 7)

Likewise, another participant expressed:

"Informational support provided me with a sense of control and understanding. It helped me make more informed decisions and actively participate in the court trial." (Participant 9)

### **Theme 4: Instrumental Support**

Instrumental support, including practical assistance and tangible resources, was identified as another crucial dimension of social support. Participants described receiving assistance with practical matters such as childcare, transportation, financial support, and logistical arrangements during the court trial process. This support lightened their burden and allowed them to focus on their emotional well-being and engagement in the legal proceedings.



Instrumental support was perceived as a tangible demonstration of care and concern, providing stability and relief amidst their challenges. As the participants have expressed the following thoughts related to this theme:

"Friends and family stepping in to help with practical tasks, like preparing meals or organizing paperwork, allowed me to focus on supporting my family emotionally during the court trial." (Participant 1)

"Having someone accompany me to court proceedings provided me with a sense of comfort and support. It made the experience less isolating and overwhelming." (Participant 3)

"Knowing that I had someone I could rely on to take care of everyday responsibilities while I attended court hearings provided me with a sense of relief and allowed me to focus on seeking justice for my loved one." (Participant 16)

The summarized vital points of identified themes are shown in Table 1:-

Table 1

**Summary: Themes and Key Points**

Theme	Key Points
<b>Theme 1: Crucial Role of Social Support</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Social support played a pivotal role in mitigating psychological distress among families of murder victims during court trials.</li> <li>- Supportive individuals, such as family, friends, support groups, and professionals, were essential in buffering overwhelming emotions and stress.</li> </ul>
<b>Theme 2: Emotional Support</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Emotional support was a fundamental component of social support for families of murder victims.</li> <li>- Having empathetic listeners who understood and validated their emotions created a safe space for expressing grief and processing emotions.</li> <li>- Emotional support alleviated feelings of isolation and loneliness, providing comfort and reassurance during a challenging time.</li> </ul>
<b>Theme 3: Informational Support</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Informational support reduced distress and uncertainty during court trials by providing guidance and knowledge about legal proceedings, the criminal justice system, and available resources.</li> <li>- Access to accurate and timely information empowered participants to navigate the legal process effectively and make informed decisions.</li> </ul>
<b>Theme 4: Instrumental Support</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Instrumental support, including practical assistance and tangible resources, was crucial for families of murder victims during court trials.</li> </ul>

- Practical matters like childcare, transportation, financial support, and logistical arrangements were addressed, allowing focus on emotional well-being and engagement in legal proceedings.
- Instrumental support served as a tangible demonstration of care and concern, providing stability and relief amidst challenges.

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## **Discussion**

The discussion section aims to interpret and synthesize the study's findings on the role of social support in mitigating psychological distress among families of murder victims during court trials. The results highlighted the significant influence of social support, specifically emotional, informational, and instrumental support, on the well-being and resilience of these families. This section will delve deeper into the implications of these findings and their relevance to theory, practice, and future research. The study's findings underscore the pivotal role of emotional support in alleviating psychological distress among families of murder victims. Emotional support emerged as a fundamental component of social support, providing empathy, understanding, and validation of emotions. Participants expressed the importance of having a support network that genuinely comprehends the depth of their pain and provides a safe space for expression and grief processing. This finding aligns with previous research highlighting the therapeutic benefits of emotional support in coping with traumatic experiences (Smith et al., 2019). It emphasizes the need for interventions that promote empathetic connections and foster a sense of belonging for these families during court trials.

During court trials, informational support reduces stress and uncertainty. Participants said that instruction on legal proceedings, access to resources, and information about the criminal justice system helped them navigate the legal system. This supports earlier research, showing that informational assistance improves coping and reduces distress in many populations (Hawkins et al., 2020). It emphasizes the significance of providing murder victims' families with accurate and accessible information to allow them to engage in the court trial process actively.

These families also valued instrumental support, which helped with jobs and obligations. Participants were grateful for assistance with childcare, transportation, and food preparation. This support freed families to focus on emotional support and justice. In caregiving circumstances, instrumental support promotes well-being and reduces stress (Luszczynska et al., 2021). They emphasize the necessity for comprehensive support interventions that address families' emotional, informational, and practical needs throughout court cases.

To sum up, this study underscores the critical role of social support, encompassing emotional, informational, and instrumental dimensions, in mitigating psychological distress among families of murder victims during court trials. The findings have significant implications for theory and practice, emphasizing the need for tailored support interventions that cater to the unique needs of these families. By incorporating these findings into practice, professionals can provide invaluable support to families, empowering them to navigate court trials with increased strength and resilience. Future research should further explore the long-term effects of social support interventions on the well-being of families in similar contexts and investigate additional factors that may influence the effectiveness of support strategies.

## **Conclusion**

This study has examined the pivotal role of social support in mitigating psychological distress among families of murder victims during court trials. The findings have underscored the significant influence of social support, particularly emotional, informational, and instrumental support, on the well-being and resilience of these families. This study contributes to the existing literature by highlighting the specific dimensions of social support crucial in alleviating psychological distress in this unique context. The results emphasize the importance of emotional support in providing empathy, understanding, and validation of emotions for families of murder victims. A support network that genuinely comprehends the depth of their pain and provides a safe space for expression and grief processing is essential for these families during court trials.

It is essential to acknowledge the limitations of this study. The small sample size and reliance on qualitative interviews restrict the generalizability of the findings. Future research should aim for larger sample sizes and incorporate quantitative measures to strengthen the evidence base. Additionally, longitudinal studies can provide insights into the long-term effects of social support interventions on the well-being and resilience of families in similar circumstances.

To conclude, the ultimate goal is to enhance the overall well-being and resilience of families of murder victims during court trials, mitigating the psychological distress they experience and supporting them throughout the challenging legal process. Understanding the relationship between social support and psychological distress is crucial in providing practical support and interventions that meet the specific needs of these families. By building a solid support network and offering comprehensive support services, professionals can significantly impact the lives of families facing the aftermath of murder trials.

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