

## Advocacy for Psycho-Social Support to Parents in Informal Settlements: A Scoping Study

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**Abstract:** Providing advocacy requires people or persons to be more goal-oriented to keep pushing for the agenda on which they stand. This scoping study examines the advocacy strategies required to enhance psycho-social support systems for parents in informal settlements. Parents living in marginalised urban neighbourhoods often face significant psycho-social challenges, including economic instability, mental health issues, and social isolation, which negatively impact their well-being and the development of their children. Through a systematic review of relevant literature, the study identifies key advocacy strategies, including community-driven support networks, policy reforms to improve mental health services, and tailored programs for vulnerable groups. The findings show the importance of multidimensional advocacy efforts that incorporate community involvement, policy advocacy, and public education to improve the overall psycho-social well-being of parents in informal settlements. This study contributes valuable details to the development of effective support systems for parents in marginalised communities, indicating the need for continued advocacy and systemic change to address the root causes of psycho-social distress.

**Keywords:** Psycho-Social Support; Informal Settlements; Advocacy Strategies; Mental Health; Policy Reform; Urban Poverty; Community Involvement; Social Isolation; Economic Instability.

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### 1. Introduction

Parents in informal settlements face significant psycho-social challenges that impact their well-being and ability to provide a nurturing environment for their children. These parents often contend with poverty, unemployment, substance abuse, crime, and social exclusion, which exacerbate stress and mental health issues. According to Van Rensburg et al. [1], caregivers in disadvantaged communities struggle with emotional and psychological burdens, particularly in contexts where financial resources and social support are limited. The absence of adequate psycho-social interventions further deepens these challenges,

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leaving parents vulnerable to depression, anxiety, and social isolation. Additionally, Coverdale and Long [2] highlight that promoting mental health and emotional well-being among families in low-income settings requires a multi-faceted approach that incorporates community-based support systems, mental health education, and policy interventions. The need for structured psycho-social support is further emphasised by Munongi and Mawila [10], who found that orphaned and vulnerable children, including those raised in informal settlements, experience severe emotional distress due to inadequate parental support. Without intervention, the cycle of psycho-social distress continues, affecting not only parents but also the developmental outcomes of their children. Moreover, given these challenges, advocacy for psycho-social support becomes crucial for promoting the mental well-being, resilience, and social integration of parents in marginalised urban areas. This study seeks to explore the necessity, accessibility, and effectiveness of psycho-social interventions for parents in informal settlements and to identify strategies to foster emotional and psychological resilience in these communities.

### **1.1. Contextualising Psycho-Social Distress in Informal Settlements**

Parents in informal settlements do not experience psycho-social distress in isolation. Their lived realities are shaped by layered historical, economic, and spatial inequalities that have normalised deprivation as part of everyday life. In many urban informal settlements, overcrowding, insecure housing tenure, and poor access to basic services create environments where stress becomes chronic rather than episodic. Van Rensburg et al. [1] observe that prolonged exposure to such conditions weakens coping capacity, especially among caregivers of children, elderly relatives, or extended family members. Beyond material deprivation, informal settlements often function under conditions of social invisibility. Parents living in these spaces frequently report limited interaction with formal institutions such as health facilities, social welfare offices, and local governance structures. This detachment reinforces feelings of abandonment and mistrust, deepening emotional strain and discouraging help-seeking behaviour. As a result, psycho-social distress is not only a personal experience but also a collective condition embedded within settlement life. Understanding this broader context is essential for advocacy. Advocacy efforts that ignore the spatial and structural realities of informal settlements risk promoting interventions that are inaccessible or culturally misaligned. Effective psycho-social support must therefore emerge from an appreciation of how place, poverty, and social exclusion intersect to shape parental well-being.

### **1.2. Context**

Parents in informal settlements face immense psycho-social challenges stemming from poverty, crime, unemployment, and social exclusion, which significantly affect their mental well-being and parenting capacities. Many struggle with stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion, yet psycho-social support systems remain limited or inaccessible in these marginalised communities [1]. The absence of structured interventions leaves parents vulnerable to mental health deterioration, negatively impacting their ability to provide emotional stability for their children. Additionally, Munongi and Mawila [10] emphasise that the lack of support services contributes to a vicious cycle of neglect and emotional distress, not only for parents but also for children growing up in these environments. Despite the clear need for psycho-social interventions, advocacy efforts remain insufficient, and existing support frameworks often fail to address the unique challenges faced by parents in informal settlements. This study seeks to highlight the urgent need for targeted advocacy to ensure accessible and effective psycho-social support mechanisms for parents in disadvantaged urban communities. The following two are research objectives that guided the study:

- To determine the psycho-social challenges faced by parents in informal settlements and their impact on family well-being.
- To describe effective advocacy strategies for enhancing psycho-social support systems for parents in informal settlements.

### **1.3. Rationale**

Parents in informal settlements experience heightened psycho-social stress due to economic hardships, social marginalisation, and exposure to crime and violence. These challenges not only affect their mental health and emotional well-being but also impact their parenting practices and children's development. This study aims to raise awareness of the psycho-social struggles of these parents and highlight the urgent need for structured support systems [1]. Understanding these challenges will provide a foundation for developing interventions that promote mental resilience among parents in disadvantaged communities. Despite the increasing recognition of mental health issues in marginalised populations, there is limited research on advocacy efforts specifically aimed at supporting parents in informal settlements. Existing interventions often focus on children or youth, neglecting parental well-being, which directly influences child outcomes. This study seeks to bridge that gap by emphasising the importance of targeted advocacy initiatives that ensure parents in informal settlements have access to mental health resources, emotional support networks, and community-based interventions. By doing so, this research contributes to policy development and social work practices that improve the overall well-being of families in low-income urban settings.

## **1.4. Theoretical Framework**

This study is grounded in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which explains how multiple environmental factors influence an individual's well-being and development. The theory posits that human development occurs within nested systems, including the microsystem (family and immediate surroundings), mesosystem (community and social networks), exosystem (institutions and policies), and macrosystem (cultural and societal norms). In the context of informal settlement parenting, this framework helps analyse how poverty, territorial stigmatisation, lack of social support, and systemic neglect contribute to the psycho-social challenges faced by parents. By applying this theory, the study highlights the need for multi-level interventions that address not only individual and family-level struggles but also structural and policy-driven barriers affecting parents in informal settlements. Advocacy efforts should focus on strengthening community networks (mesosystem), increasing institutional support (exosystem), and influencing broader social policies (macrosystem) to create a more supportive environment for parents in marginalised communities.

## **1.5. Conceptual Positioning of Advocacy in Psycho-Social Support**

This study adopts a structural advocacy position to examine psycho-social support for parents in informal settlements. Rather than treating advocacy solely as a mechanism for service delivery or awareness-raising, the study situates advocacy as an intentional effort to confront the social, economic, and institutional conditions that reproduce psycho-social distress among parents in marginalised urban spaces. Existing literature consistently documents the emotional strain experienced by parents in informal settlements, linking distress to poverty, social exclusion, and weak support systems [1]; [2]. However, many advocacy approaches discussed in practice-oriented studies remain focused on short-term interventions such as counselling sessions, community workshops, or isolated support programs. While such efforts are valuable, they often leave intact the structural arrangements that generate parental vulnerability in the first place. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, this study argues that effective advocacy must engage multiple levels of influence simultaneously.

At the microsystem level, advocacy should strengthen family and peer support structures. At the mesosystem and exosystem levels, it must challenge institutional gaps in mental health provision, social protection, and urban service delivery. At the macrosystem level, advocacy must question policy frameworks and societal narratives that normalise deprivation within informal settlements. From this position, psycho-social distress among parents is understood not merely as an individual or familial issue, but as a socially produced condition sustained by uneven development, policy neglect, and limited institutional accountability. Advocacy, therefore, is framed as a process of making parental distress visible in public discourse and policy arenas, rather than confining support to private or community spaces. This conceptual positioning informs the interpretation of the literature reviewed and the discussion of findings that follow. It allows the study to evaluate advocacy strategies not only based on their immediate supportive value, but also on their capacity to disrupt structural conditions that undermine parental well-being in informal settlements.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. The Psycho-Social Challenges Faced by Parents in Informal Settlements and Impact on Family Well-being**

Parents in informal settlements encounter significant psycho-social difficulties that hinder their emotional well-being and overall family stability. These challenges arise from economic hardships, exposure to crime and violence, inadequate access to healthcare, and social stigma associated with living in marginalised urban areas. Van Rensburg et al. [1] highlight that individuals in disadvantaged environments experience heightened psychological stress, which affects their ability to provide emotional support to their children. This stress is often compounded by unemployment, food insecurity, and inadequate housing, leading to mental health struggles such as depression, anxiety, and emotional burnout. Additionally, Macedo et al. [4] expand on Agere's findings by suggesting that prolonged exposure to social stressors in under-resourced neighbourhoods can increase the risk of developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among parents, further exacerbating their capacity to parent effectively. Furthermore, Coverdale and Long [2] emphasise the importance of mental well-being in fostering a stable family environment. Parents experiencing high levels of stress and emotional distress may struggle with effective parenting, leading to strained parent-child relationships. The lack of psycho-social support in these communities exacerbates these issues, making it difficult for parents to cope with the demands of caregiving while managing their own mental health. This can result in inconsistent parenting practices, neglect, or emotional detachment, which ultimately impact the psycho-social development of children in these households.

Similarly, the World Health Organisation [12] argues that the absence of supportive social networks and mental health resources within low-income communities results in an increased likelihood of emotional burnout and disengagement from caregiving roles. Ford [5] examines how unresolved mental health challenges in parents can contribute to intergenerational cycles of distress. Children raised in such environments may develop behavioural issues, academic difficulties, and emotional

insecurities, perpetuating a cycle of disadvantages. Research by Coverdale and Long [2] suggests that parental involvement positively impacts children's academic achievement and socio-emotional development, findings that align with those of UNICEF Zambia [11]. Without adequate mental health resources and advocacy for psycho-social support, these parents remain trapped in a system that does not address their needs. In support of conclusions, Eljo et al. [3] show that parents' mental health struggles often result in lower emotional investment in their children, which can impact the children's ability to form secure attachments, leading to long-term developmental setbacks. The literature underscores the need for structured interventions, such as mental health programs, community support networks, and policy-driven initiatives, to enhance the resilience and emotional well-being of parents in informal settlements.

## **2.2. Effective Advocacy Strategies for Enhancing Psycho-Social Support Systems for Parents in Informal Settlements**

Advocacy for psycho-social support among parents in informal settlements requires multi-faceted strategies that address both systemic barriers and immediate mental health needs. Given the high levels of stress, food insecurity, and lack of institutional support in marginalised communities, a strong advocacy framework is necessary to ensure accessible, sustainable, and community-driven interventions. These authors highlight that parental well-being is directly linked to resource availability, emphasising the need for integrated support systems that include mental health services, financial assistance, and nutritional aid to enhance resilience among struggling parents. Furthermore, the World Health Organisation [12] points out that advocacy efforts should also address the stigma surrounding mental health in impoverished areas, creating a culture of acceptance and openness that encourages parents to seek help. One of the most effective advocacy approaches is community-based intervention programs. Makuyana et al. [8] discuss the psycho-social deficits experienced by child-headed households, noting that interventions focused on peer-support networks, mental health counselling, and educational initiatives can significantly improve psycho-social well-being.

Applying these principles to parents in informal settlements, grassroots organisations, NGOs, and social workers can play a crucial role in providing targeted psycho-social support services tailored to the needs of parents in disadvantaged urban settings. In addition, UNICEF Zambia [11] argues that community-based programs should take a holistic approach, addressing not only immediate psychological needs but also long-term social and economic empowerment, thereby offering comprehensive support to parents facing multiple stressors. Additionally, Munongi and Mawila [10] emphasise that policy advocacy is critical in addressing systemic challenges. Governments and stakeholders should prioritise legislative measures that improve access to mental health services, parental training programs, and economic empowerment initiatives. Advocacy should also push for the integration of psycho-social support into public health and social welfare policies, ensuring that parents in informal settlements receive adequate and sustained assistance rather than short-term relief. Echoing these views, Macedo et al. [4] suggest that policy reforms should focus on reducing socioeconomic inequalities and increasing access to healthcare, thereby addressing the root causes of psycho-social challenges in informal settlements. In promoting mental health awareness, financial stability, and social inclusion, these advocacy strategies can foster long-term well-being and resilience among parents in marginalised communities.

## **3. Methods**

This study employed a scoping study approach to explore the existing literature on advocacy for psycho-social support to parents in informal settlements. A scoping study is a research method used to map key concepts, identify knowledge gaps, and summarise existing evidence on a given topic. The study followed the UNICEF Zambia [11] framework, which includes identifying the research question, searching for relevant studies, selecting appropriate sources, charting the data, and summarising the findings.

### **3.1. Identification of Relevant Studies**

The research began with a broad literature search across multiple academic databases, including Google Scholar, PubMed, ScienceDirect, and CORE Repository. Keywords such as "psycho-social support," "informal settlements," "mental health advocacy," "marginalised parents," and "urban poverty" were used to retrieve relevant papers. Both peer-reviewed journal papers and reputable reports were considered to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the topic.

### **3.2. Inclusion Criteria**

To maintain the relevance and quality of the study, the following criteria were applied:

- Studies published in English within the last 10 years (except for key foundational studies).
- Research focusing on psycho-social challenges, mental health advocacy, and support systems for marginalised parents in informal settlements.

- Studies employing qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods approaches that provided insights into advocacy strategies and interventions.

The exclusion criteria were eliminated:

- Studies focusing exclusively on child mental health without addressing parental well-being.
- Research that did not discuss advocacy efforts or psycho-social interventions.
- Papers with insufficient methodological rigour or incomplete findings.

### 3.3. Selection Process

A total of 37 studies were initially retrieved. After screening titles and abstracts, 20 studies remained for full-text assessment. After full-text assessment, 15 studies met all inclusion criteria and were included in the final synthesis (Figure 1).

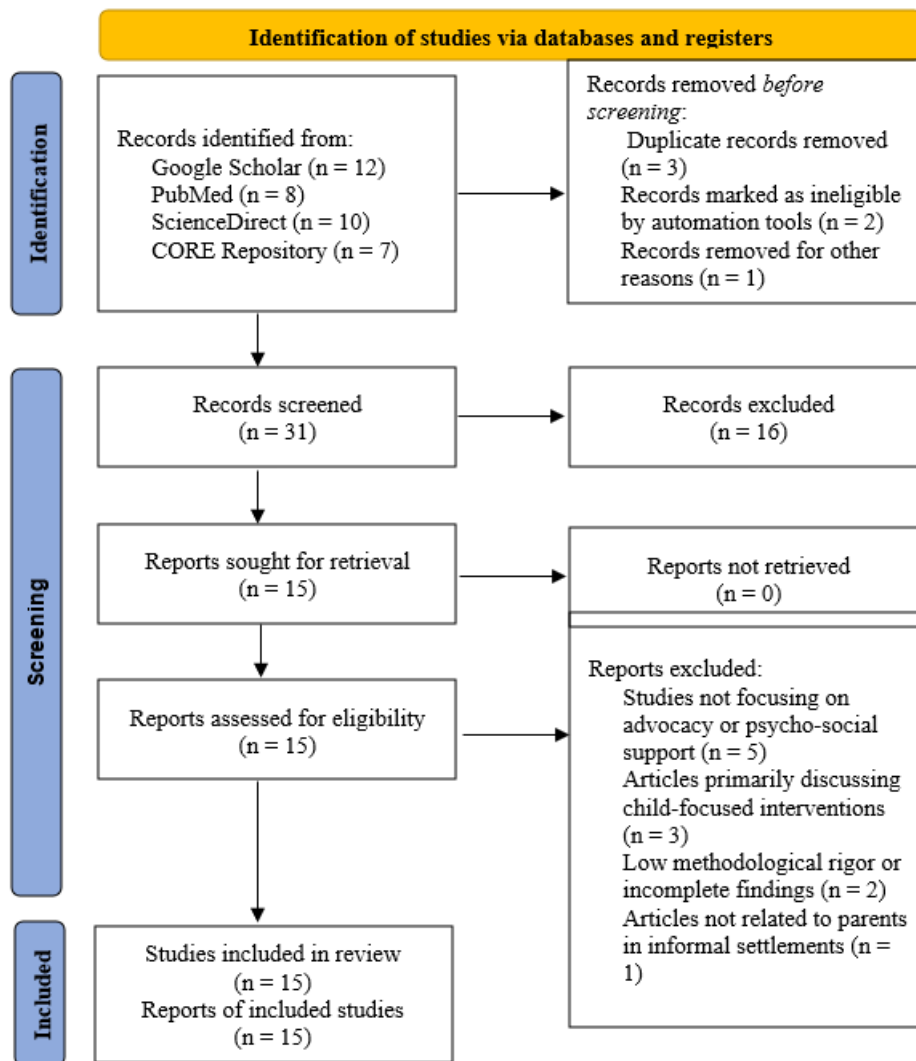


Figure 1: PRISMA chart

The additional studies strengthened thematic saturation across advocacy models, community-based interventions, and policy-level analyses relevant to psycho-social support for parents in informal settlements. During data charting and analysis, key information from the selected studies was extracted and organised into themes. These were:

- Psycho-social challenges faced by parents in informal settlements.
- Barriers to accessing mental health and social support.
- Advocacy strategies for improving psycho-social support systems.

- Policy implications and intervention models.

A descriptive analysis of the literature was conducted to synthesise key findings, highlight research gaps, and identify best practices in advocacy. The results were then contextualised within Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory, emphasising the multi-layered influences on parents' psycho-social well-being in informal settlements. Using a scoping study approach, this research systematically mapped the available knowledge on the topic and identified key areas for further exploration and policy action (Table 1).

**Table 1:** Characteristics of included studies (n = 15)

Study ID	Authors and Year	Title	Focus Area	Key Contribution
S1	Van Rensburg et al. [1]	Psycho-social stressors among caregivers in disadvantaged urban communities.	Caregiver psycho-social stress	Identifies systemic socioeconomic stressors that exacerbate psychological vulnerability in urban caregivers.
S2	Ford [5]	Peer-led psycho-social models in informal settlements.	Peer-led interventions	Demonstrates the efficacy of community-driven support networks in mitigating mental health gaps in informal housing.
S3	Coverdale and Long [2]	Community mental health and parental well-being in low-income settings.	Community mental health	Establishes a direct correlation between localised mental health resources and improved parental stability.
S4	Chirwa and Kaulule [9]	Intergenerational impact of parental mental health.	Intergenerational health	Provides evidence that parental mental health outcomes significantly influence the developmental trajectory of children.
S5	Eljo et al. [3]	Post-pandemic caregiver distress in vulnerable communities.	Post-pandemic recovery	Analyses the long-term exacerbation of caregiver burnout following global health crises in marginalised settings.
S6	Macedo et al. [4]	Public awareness and family advocacy models.	Family advocacy	Proposes a framework for leveraging public awareness to empower family-led mental health advocacy.
S7	World Health Organisation [12]	Reducing stigma in mental health interventions.	Stigma reduction	Evaluates specific communication strategies that effectively lower social barriers to accessing mental health services.
S8	Rosen et al. [7]	Integrated support systems for low-income families.	Integrated support	Advocates for a multi-sectoral approach combining financial, social, and psychological services for family resilience.
S9	Makuyana et al. [8]	Peer-based advocacy models in marginalised urban communities.	Peer advocacy	Highlights the role of grassroots advocacy in improving service navigation for marginalised urban dwellers.
S10	Munongi and Mawila [10]	Psycho-social outcomes among vulnerable children and caregivers.	Vulnerable populations	Examines the dyadic relationship between child welfare and caregiver psychological health in high-risk environments.

S11	Chirwa and Kaulule [9]	Grassroots parenting support initiatives in Zambia.	Grassroots initiatives	Details successful localised parenting models that utilise indigenous knowledge within the Zambian context.
S12	Rosen et al. [7]	Policy reform and access to mental health in low-income communities.	Health policy reform	Argues for legislative changes to dismantle structural inequities in mental health service distribution.
S13	Eljo et al. [3]	Chronic stress and parental resilience in urban poverty.	Chronic stress resilience	Explores the psychological mechanisms that enable certain parents to maintain functional resilience despite chronic poverty.
S14	UNICEF Zambia [11]	Community-based mental health programming in urban settlements.	Programmatic intervention	Provides a comprehensive evaluation of current institutional strategies for mental health delivery in Zambian urban centres.
S15	Keetley et al. [6]	Emotional burnout in disadvantaged caregivers.	Emotional burnout	Diagnoses the specific drivers of clinical burnout among caregivers in resource-constrained environments.

#### 4. Result and Discussion

A total of 15 studies met the inclusion criteria and were included in the final synthesis. The inclusion rate was 40.5% (15/37). The expanded sample deepened the thematic analysis across community-based advocacy, policy reform, stigma reduction, and structural support systems. The findings of this scoping study are interpreted through a structural advocacy lens informed by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. Rather than treating the identified psycho-social challenges as isolated outcomes of poverty or individual vulnerability, the discussion situates parental distress within a broader web of social, institutional, and policy conditions. This approach allows the analysis to move beyond description toward an examination of how advocacy responses either reinforce or disrupt the structures sustaining psycho-social distress among parents in informal settlements.

##### 4.1. The Psycho-Social Challenges Faced by Parents in Informal Settlements and Impact on Family Well-being

The findings from the selected studies highlight the significant psycho-social challenges experienced by parents in informal settlements and their profound impact on family well-being. Parents in informal settlements often face multiple layers of stress stemming from economic hardships, social stigma, and limited access to healthcare and social support systems. These challenges not only affect their mental health but also influence their ability to provide emotional and social support to their children, thus impacting family dynamics and overall well-being.

###### 4.1.1. Economic Hardships

Many parents in informal settlements face chronic poverty, which exacerbates feelings of helplessness and stress. According to Van Rensburg et al. [1], the financial strain on caregivers often leads to heightened anxiety and depression, which in turn affects their ability to provide a stable and nurturing environment for their children. The study highlights that low-income parents frequently experience parental burnout due to the dual pressures of work and family responsibilities, which limits their capacity for effective parenting. Across the reviewed studies, psycho-social challenges experienced by parents emerge as cumulative rather than episodic. Economic hardship, exposure to crime, housing insecurity, and social marginalisation do not operate independently. Instead, they interact over time, producing sustained emotional strain that gradually weakens parental coping capacity. The cumulative nature of stress helps explain why short-term, single-focus interventions often yield limited impact in informal settlement contexts. From an ecological perspective, these challenges reflect failures across multiple levels of the system.

At the microsystem level, parents struggle to maintain emotionally responsive caregiving under conditions of chronic stress. At the mesosystem level, weak linkages between families and support institutions limit access to consistent psycho-social assistance. At the exosystem and macrosystem levels, inadequate mental health policies and urban planning frameworks indirectly shape daily parental experiences by restricting access to services and social protection [2]; [11]. This pattern suggests that parental psycho-social distress should not be interpreted primarily as a deficit in resilience or parenting capacity. Rather,

it reflects sustained exposure to environments that systematically deprioritise emotional well-being. Advocacy efforts that focus narrowly on parental behaviour change, without engaging these structural dimensions, risk misdiagnosing the source of distress.

#### **4.1.2. Social Stigma and Isolation**

Coverdale and Long [2] found that social stigma, often associated with living in disadvantaged areas, worsens the emotional well-being of parents in informal settlements. These parents frequently report feeling isolated and disconnected from broader society, contributing to their low self-esteem. The social marginalisation they experience further reinforces negative self-perceptions, leading to mental health struggles. The impact of these struggles is also seen in how parents engage with their children, often leading to parenting difficulties and sometimes even dysfunctional family relationships.

#### **4.1.3. Mental Health Struggles and Caregiving**

The psycho-social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has further aggravated the difficulties faced by parents in these communities. Eljo et al. [3] show that COVID-19 orphan children in India, and similarly in other informal settlements, suffered from emotional distress and anxiety. The pandemic amplified the existing challenges faced by parents, especially in situations where parents were already struggling with mental health issues. This pattern of overwhelming stress often leads to caregiver burnout, where parents may neglect or have difficulty meeting the emotional and developmental needs of their children.

#### **4.1.4. Psycho-social Stressors in Orphan and Vulnerable Children**

Munongi and Mawila [10] postulate that orphaned and vulnerable children, living in unstable environments like children's homes, are at an increased risk of psycho-social problems. For parents living in such conditions, the compounded stress of raising children under such vulnerable circumstances leads to poor emotional regulation and psycho-social development within families. The World Health Organisation [12] posits that dense living conditions and a lack of basic infrastructure, such as running water and proper sanitation, have made it difficult for residents to follow recommended hygiene practices. The economic impact of the pandemic has been particularly harsh in these communities, where many people rely on daily wages from informal jobs. Parents in informal settlements, particularly those raising children in such conditions, often report feeling overwhelmed by the mental health needs of their children and the lack of available support networks. The studies reviewed consistently highlight the interconnectedness of poverty, social stigma, and mental health challenges in shaping the psycho-social well-being of parents in informal settlements.

The lack of support systems, social capital, and access to mental health resources reinforces a vicious cycle of stress and disadvantages. This not only affects the parents but also has significant long-term consequences for their children's emotional and psychological development, further perpetuating the cycle of disadvantage. The impact on family well-being is evident, with parents in informal settlements experiencing increased psychological distress that affects their parenting quality and leads to negative outcomes for their children. These findings align with Ecological Systems Theory, which posits that environmental stressors and the lack of social support systems at the microsystem level (home environment) interact with broader societal influences (macrosystem) to result in psycho-social challenges. Compared with other research in similar marginalised settings, the findings here underscore the need for multi-level interventions, including mental health support, community-based advocacy, and policy change to address the unique stressors faced by parents in informal settlements. These findings further suggest that integrating psycho-social support into policy frameworks and community health initiatives is critical to improving the quality of life for both parents and children in these areas.

#### **4.2. Fragmentation of Psycho-Social Interventions Across Ecological Levels**

Although the reviewed studies propose a range of advocacy strategies to improve psycho-social support for parents in informal settlements, the findings reveal a persistent pattern of fragmentation. Interventions are frequently implemented at isolated ecological levels, most commonly at the community or individual level, with limited coordination across institutional and policy domains. This fragmentation reduces the overall effectiveness of advocacy efforts and constrains their capacity to produce sustained improvements in parental well-being. At the microsystem level, interventions often prioritise emotional coping, parenting skills, or peer support. These approaches are important, yet they assume that emotional resilience can be cultivated independently of material conditions. Van Rensburg et al. [1] demonstrate that emotional distress among caregivers is closely tied to chronic economic insecurity, suggesting that microsystem-focused interventions alone are insufficient when structural pressures remain unaddressed. At the mesosystem level, weak coordination among community organisations, health services, schools, and faith-based institutions further undermines the continuity of support.

Parents may encounter multiple unaligned programs, each addressing a narrow aspect of psycho-social well-being without sustained follow-up or referral pathways. Coverdale and Long [2] highlight that fragmented service environments increase

caregiver fatigue and reduce trust in formal support systems. The exosystem and macrosystem levels present the most significant gaps. Despite widespread recognition of psycho-social distress among parents in marginalised communities, mental health services and social protection mechanisms remain peripheral within urban policy frameworks. Munongi and Mawila [10] illustrate how institutional neglect at these levels indirectly shapes daily parenting experiences, reinforcing vulnerability rather than alleviating it. Advocacy efforts that fail to engage policy structures, therefore, risk operating within the very constraints that sustain psycho-social distress. From an ecological perspective, fragmentation reflects not a lack of intervention, but a lack of integration. Advocacy strategies that focus on isolated system levels inadvertently normalise the absence of structural accountability. This study argues that psychological support for parents in informal settlements requires coordinated advocacy that deliberately links family-level support, community mobilisation, institutional reform, and policy engagement. Without such alignment, advocacy remains remedial rather than transformative.

### **4.3. Effective Advocacy Strategies for Enhancing Psycho-Social Support Systems for Parents in Informal Settlements**

The findings from the scoping review revealed that advocacy strategies play a pivotal role in improving psycho-social support systems for parents in informal settlements, particularly those facing economic hardship, mental health challenges, and social isolation. Effective advocacy can help address these issues by promoting community-based solutions, public policy reforms, and mental health support systems tailored to the needs of parents in marginalised urban areas.

#### **4.3.1. Community-Based Approaches**

One of the most promising strategies identified is community-driven support networks. Keetley et al. [6] emphasise that a collaborative, grassroots approach involving local communities, families, and service providers can help address the psychosocial needs of parents in informal settlements. Community involvement emerged as a strong foundation for effective advocacy. In densely populated areas, grassroots organisations and community leaders were central to mobilising parents and raising awareness about parenting, substance abuse, and stress management. These community-led initiatives align with evidence that locally anchored advocacy fosters ownership, sustainability, and responsiveness. These networks offer a safe space for parents to discuss their challenges, seek emotional support, and access resources that may otherwise be unavailable. The success of such networks depends on building trust within the community and empowering local leaders to serve as advocates and liaisons between parents and service providers.

Community-based advocacy strategies demonstrate clear value in creating accessible spaces for emotional support and peer engagement. However, the reviewed literature also indicates important limitations. Community initiatives often operate within severe resource constraints and depend heavily on volunteer labour, short-term funding, or external donor priorities. Without complementary policy support, these initiatives risk becoming compensatory mechanisms that absorb the consequences of systemic neglect rather than challenging it [9]. This tension highlights a key finding of the study. Advocacy that remains confined to the community level, though socially valuable, cannot, on its own, alter the structural conditions that shape parental distress. From a structural advocacy standpoint, community action must be deliberately linked to policy engagement, institutional reform, and resource redistribution. Otherwise, responsibility for coping is shifted onto parents and communities already experiencing high levels of vulnerability.

#### **4.3.2. Policy Advocacy for Mental Health Services**

Rosen et al. [7] study highlights the importance of mental health services as a foundational aspect of advocacy. Advocating for policy changes that include affordable mental health care and mental health education programs in schools and communities is vital for reducing the stigma surrounding mental illness and improving mental health outcomes for both parents and children. Ensuring that mental health support is accessible and integrated into community health services can help parents in informal settlements manage the psycho-social challenges they face, such as anxiety, depression, and stress.

#### **4.3.3. Tailored Support for Vulnerable Parents**

The study by Makuyana et al. [8] underscores the need for advocacy to focus on vulnerable groups, such as single parents, immigrant families, and parents with disabilities. Tailored programs that address the unique needs of these groups, whether through specialised counselling, parenting workshops, or financial assistance programs, can significantly improve both parental well-being and child development. The study found that involving parent champions - local parents trained to advocate for psycho-social well-being boosted community trust and participation. Peer-led groups were especially successful in facilitating open discussions about mental health and parenting challenges. Research supports peer-based advocacy as a means to reduce stigma and increase uptake of support services in low-resource settings.

#### 4.3.4. Public Awareness and Education

Raising awareness of the challenges faced by parents in informal settlements is another key advocacy strategy. According to Macedo et al. [4], a well-informed public can drive policy changes and encourage society to adopt a more empathetic and supportive stance toward parents living in marginalised communities. Awareness campaigns can also educate parents in informal settlements about available support services, fostering greater engagement with social welfare programs and mental health services. Harnessing Radio and Creative Arts for Mass Sensitisation: Community radio and drama were reported to be powerful media for promoting psychosocial messages. Stations in Zambia, such as Radio Christian Voice and Yatsani Radio, have run family-oriented programs in local languages, helping normalise mental health discussions [2]. This is consistent with global findings that culturally relevant media enhances advocacy in low-income urban settings. Faith-Based Engagement and Spiritual Counselling: strong religious foundations, such as churches and mosques, emerged as safe spaces where parents in informal settlements already seek emotional support. Faith-based advocacy efforts, such as sermons on family unity, youth behaviour, and mental health, helped shift attitudes and reduce stigma.

The involvement of religious leaders in psycho-social training, as seen in programs, created trusted platforms for promoting help-seeking behaviour. The advocacy strategies outlined above are essential in promoting the well-being of parents in informal settlements and their families. A significant takeaway from the studies reviewed is that advocacy must be multi-dimensional, incorporating efforts at the community, policy, and public awareness levels to address the complex psycho-social challenges that parents in informal settlements face. Empowering local communities to take an active role in their own advocacy and supporting policymakers in implementing relevant reforms are fundamental for creating sustainable support systems. Comparing these strategies to other studies in the field, there is a clear alignment with the idea that effective advocacy for parents in informal settlements cannot be achieved by top-down approaches alone. Community-led interventions that are both culturally relevant and accessible stand out as the most impactful in the long run. The combination of community support systems, mental health care advocacy, and tailored programs for vulnerable groups is a proven way to create lasting improvements in both parental and child well-being.

Moreover, these strategies underscore the importance of addressing the root causes of psycho-social issues, namely poverty, social isolation, and the lack of access to resources, rather than just treating the symptoms. The findings from this study reaffirm that advocacy for psycho-social support must be an ongoing, systemic effort that integrates efforts across sectors, from healthcare to education to social welfare, ensuring that the needs of parents in informal settlements are comprehensively tackled. Taken together, the findings indicate that effective advocacy for psycho-social support in informal settlements requires alignment across ecological levels. Interventions that address emotional distress at the family or community level are most effective when reinforced by institutional support and enabling policy environments. Where such alignment is absent, advocacy efforts tend to alleviate symptoms without altering the conditions that generate distress. This reinforces the study's central argument: psycho-social support for parents in informal settlements must be understood as a structural concern embedded in urban inequality, rather than a discrete social service issue.

#### 5. Conclusion

This scoping study examined advocacy strategies to strengthen psycho-social support for parents living in informal settlements. Drawing on existing literature and guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the study demonstrates that parental psycho-social distress in informal settlements is not an isolated emotional condition but a structurally produced outcome of persistent economic insecurity, social marginalisation, and institutional neglect. The findings indicate that many existing advocacy efforts remain concentrated at the community or individual level. Although such initiatives provide meaningful emotional relief and social connection, their impact is constrained when not reinforced by institutional coordination and policy commitment. From a structural advocacy perspective, psycho-social support that operates in isolation from urban policy, social protection systems, and mental health governance risks normalising deprivation rather than challenging it. This study contributes to the literature by repositioning advocacy for parental psycho-social support as a multi-level responsibility rather than a localised service response. By applying an ecological lens, the analysis clarifies how fragmented interventions limit effectiveness and how integrated advocacy across family, community, institutional, and policy levels offers greater potential for sustained improvement in parental well-being.

The study does not propose new intervention models; rather, it provides a conceptual clarification of how existing strategies must be aligned to address the conditions that produce psycho-social vulnerability. The use of a scoping study design allows for a broad synthesis of evidence but also presents limitations. The lack of primary empirical data limits the inclusion of parents' lived experiences and context-specific dynamics in informal settlements. Future research should therefore prioritise participatory and qualitative approaches that foreground parental voices and examine how advocacy processes unfold in practice. In closing, psycho-social support for parents in informal settlements should be understood as an urban justice issue rather than a peripheral welfare concern. Advocacy that seeks to improve parental well-being must extend beyond emotional

support to confront the structural arrangements that sustain vulnerability. Only through coordinated, multi-level engagement can psycho-social advocacy move from alleviating distress to reshaping the conditions under which parents raise their families.

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