

Rickshawala's "Everyday" Life: A Brief Psycho- Social Enquiry

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the mental health struggles of rickshaw drivers in Pune, India, focusing on occupational and socio-economic stressors that affect their well-being. Despite their critical role in urban transport, rickshaw drivers face numerous challenges, including long working hours, physical exhaustion, financial instability, and difficulties in navigating Regional Transport Office (RTO) processes. Customer interactions and fluctuating passenger demand further add to their stress. Socio-economic disadvantages, such as poor living conditions and limited healthcare access, exacerbate their struggles. Based on 10 personal interviews, a focused group discussion, and a key informant interview with Nitin Pawar, the findings highlight the need for targeted interventions. These include stress management programs, affordable healthcare services, and simplified administrative procedures to ease their burdens. Raising public awareness of the challenges faced by informal sector workers is equally important. By addressing these issues, policymakers can improve the quality of life for rickshaw drivers and foster a healthier, more productive urban workforce.

Keywords: *Rickshaw Drivers, Mental Health, Occupational Stress, Financial Challenges, Urban Transport*

Rickshaw drivers are an integral part of urban transportation systems, providing critical mobility services in cities and catering to a wide range of commuters. Despite their indispensable role, they face significant challenges that remain largely overlooked. These challenges stem from various occupational stressors, including long working hours, inconsistent and often insufficient incomes, exposure to air and noise pollution, and the mental toll of navigating congested traffic on a daily basis. The situation is exacerbated by the absence of job security, limited access to healthcare, and the lack of social safety nets that could alleviate their burdens. Rickshaw drivers also endure social stigma and harassment, whether from passengers, traffic authorities, or local enforcement officers, adding layers of stress to an already precarious livelihood. Their work environment often leaves them vulnerable to both physical and mental health challenges, yet their psychological well-being remains an under-researched area. This study aims to explore the influence of these occupational stressors on the mental health of rickshaw drivers, with a particular focus on the urban context where such issues are often most pronounced.

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In India, rickshaw driving predominantly falls within the informal economy, which constitutes a significant portion of the country's workforce. This sector, while crucial to the economy, lacks formal protection and benefits for workers. Rickshaw drivers typically operate without fixed salaries, insurance coverage, or regulated work hours, which leads to a highly unpredictable and unstable financial situation. They are often required to work long hours to meet daily financial targets, sacrificing personal and family time. This not only strains their physical health but also places immense pressure on their mental well-being. Additionally, their exposure to urban pollution—both air and noise—is continuous and severe, leading to adverse effects on their health over time. The lack of institutional support for their needs further aggravates their vulnerability. Rickshaw drivers must navigate a complex web of occupational hazards while dealing with daily interpersonal challenges, including unruly passengers and conflicts with traffic officials. These compounded factors demand a closer examination to understand their full impact on mental health.

The focus on rickshaw drivers' mental health is particularly significant in urban environments where occupational stressors are amplified. High population densities, unregulated traffic conditions, and economic disparities contribute to an environment of chronic stress for drivers. Many rickshaw drivers experience feelings of frustration, hopelessness, and anxiety, often linked to their inability to meet financial demands or cope with the pressures of their job. The lack of accessible mental health services and social support systems for these individuals makes it difficult for them to seek or receive help. Furthermore, their work leaves little room for self-care or stress management, as their livelihoods depend on their continuous availability and performance. The psychological toll of this lifestyle is often reflected in symptoms of burnout, depression, and reduced overall well-being. Understanding these issues requires delving into their lived experiences, their coping mechanisms, and the systemic barriers they face. By shedding light on these aspects, this research seeks to address a critical gap in the study of occupational health and provides a foundation for targeted interventions.

This research is particularly relevant in the context of the increasing emphasis on mental health awareness in India. While significant strides have been made in understanding and addressing mental health issues in formal work environments, the informal sector remains largely neglected. Rickshaw drivers, as a significant subset of this sector, embody the challenges faced by informal workers who lack structured support systems. The study aims to highlight their struggles, document their occupational profiles, and provide a ground-level understanding of their day-to-day realities. Through personal interviews, focused group discussions, and key informant inputs, the research intends to capture a holistic view of the stressors and their effects. The findings can inform policies, interventions, and awareness campaigns designed to alleviate the mental health challenges of rickshaw drivers and similar occupational groups. This research thus contributes to the broader discourse on occupational health and underscores the need for inclusive mental health solutions that cater to marginalized and underserved populations.

The Pune Auto Rickshaw Panchayat is a group that supports auto-rickshaw drivers in Pune by standing up for their rights and solving their problems. It helps drivers deal with challenges like low incomes, high fuel costs, and competition from app-based services. The Panchayat also works with the government to push for better policies and organize protests when needed. It gives drivers a voice and helps them improve their working conditions and daily lives.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The study titled "*Common Mental Disorders in Public Transportation Drivers in Lima, Peru*" (June 2014) by Paulo Ruiz-Grosso and colleagues estimated the prevalence of mental health conditions among public transportation drivers, including major depressive episodes, anxiety symptoms, alcohol abuse, and burnout syndrome. Conducted between January and June 2010, it employed a cross-sectional design and snowball sampling to include 505 bus and rickshaw drivers. The findings revealed high rates of mental disorders, with 74.3% experiencing alcohol abuse, 13.7% reporting major depressive episodes, and 24.2% displaying clinically significant anxiety symptoms. The study concluded that public transportation drivers had a higher prevalence of these disorders compared to the general population, highlighting the mental health vulnerabilities within this occupational group.

In February 2018, Veena Melwani and Angelin Priya conducted a cross-sectional study assessing the socio-demographic profile, health status, and working conditions of auto-rickshaw drivers in Bhopal, India. The study involved 300 drivers from 15 stands, using a pre-designed questionnaire for data collection. Findings showed that the mean age of drivers was 39 years, with common health issues including hypertension, diabetes, and vision problems. Substance addiction, such as tobacco and alcohol use, was prevalent. Prolonged sitting, exposure to vibrations, and work stress led to frequent complaints of back pain, neck pain, and headaches. The research emphasized the need for improved transportation systems and social security measures for these drivers and advocated for health promotion and regular medical check-ups.

In September 2018, Benjamin Bryer published an article titled "*The Determinants that Influence the Subjective Health and Well-Being of Cycle Rickshaw Wallahs in Varanasi, India.*" The study used qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews and participant observation, to explore how work-family interface, religious practices, and social relations impacted the health and happiness of 11 rickshaw pullers. Factors such as age, daily income, competition, and social support significantly influenced their well-being, while their religious beliefs played a role in their health-seeking behavior. Bryer highlighted the necessity of government policies and community interventions to enhance their quality of life, focusing on both subjective and objective determinants.

A 2019 cross-sectional study by Palle Satya Reddy, Sujatha N., and Bhaskar Kurre assessed stress levels among auto-rickshaw drivers in Raichur, India. Conducted between April and July 2019, the study included 206 drivers selected through random sampling. Using the Perceived Stress Scale, researchers found that 29.61% of participants experienced stress, with financial difficulties, health problems, and challenging driving conditions identified as key contributors. Most drivers worked over 12 hours daily, and stress levels were significantly associated with factors such as age, years of driving experience, and work hours. Recommendations included periodic health check-ups, stress management training, and awareness of health insurance schemes to alleviate stress and improve drivers' well-being.

The COVID-19 pandemic's impact on rickshaw pullers in Bangladesh was explored in a 2020 study by Faria Ahmed and Ridwan Islam Sifat. Using qualitative methods, the researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 11 rickshaw pullers and reviewed secondary data. The findings revealed that pandemic-induced income reductions caused significant economic stress, leading to heightened anxiety and depression among these workers. The

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study emphasized the urgent need for targeted interventions to address the compounded socio-economic and mental health challenges faced by rickshaw pullers during the crisis.

The existing literature reveals a critical gap in understanding the psycho-social factors influencing the mental health of rickshaw drivers. While studies from Peru, Raichur, and Bangladesh highlight high rates of mental health disorders, stress, and substance abuse, they often focus on economic or physical health aspects. This neglects the bio-psycho-social model essential for comprehensively addressing the drivers' well-being. Few studies incorporate psychological and social dimensions, which are pivotal in designing effective interventions and policies. A psycho-social approach, emphasizing social factors, mental health, and behavior, is necessary to capture the multifaceted determinants of rickshaw drivers' mental health and improve their quality of life.

Objectives

1. To identify the major occupational stressors among rickshaw drivers.
2. To document the occupational profiles of rickshaw drivers.
3. To document the ground level understanding of rickshaw drivers.

METHODOLOGY

This study aims to explore how various occupational stressors impact the mental health of rickshaw drivers in urban areas, focusing specifically on their everyday challenges, stress factors, and coping mechanisms. The research follows a qualitative approach, as it is best suited for gaining an in-depth understanding of the personal experiences and perceptions of the drivers. Participants were chosen based on their extensive experience, with a minimum of 10-15 years in the profession, ensuring that they had significant insight into the job's pressures. The sample consisted of drivers aged between 35 to 55 years, selected from various urban locations to capture a diverse range of perspectives influenced by different city environments.

Interviews were conducted in three formats: semi-structured personal interviews, a focused group discussion (FGD) with six rickshaw drivers, and a structured key informant interview with Nitin Pawar, the Secretary of the Rickshaw Panchayat. The semi-structured format of the personal interviews allowed for flexibility in questioning, encouraging participants to share their thoughts and experiences in detail. In contrast, the focused group discussion aimed to foster collective dialogue, highlighting shared challenges and coping strategies among the drivers. The key informant interview followed a structured format to ensure that all relevant topics regarding the broader organizational and systemic issues affecting rickshaw drivers were systematically covered.

Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes, with informed consent obtained from all participants beforehand to ensure their voluntary and willing participation.

The interview questions were designed around three key dimensions: major stressors, occupational profile, and ground-level understanding. Major stressors referred to the significant factors causing stress for drivers, such as long working hours, financial pressures, or customer interactions. The occupational profile dimension focused on gathering detailed information about the drivers' daily routines, job roles, and work conditions. Ground-level understanding explored the drivers' perspectives on the realities they face in their work environment and their insights into how the system could better support their well-being.

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Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data, focusing on identifying patterns and common themes across the responses.

By organizing the data according to these dimensions, the study provided a detailed understanding of how occupational stress affects the mental health of rickshaw drivers, highlighting both their challenges and the potential areas for intervention to improve their well-being.

Data Analysis

Rickshaw drivers in Pune face multiple challenges significantly impacting their mental health and well-being. Financial instability is a dominant stressor, with unpredictable daily incomes, rising fuel costs, and competition from ride-hailing apps like Ola and Uber exacerbating their struggles. These economic pressures force drivers into long working hours, typically 12 to 16 hours a day, leaving little time for family, rest, or self-care. The physical toll of extended driving includes chronic back pain, muscle fatigue, and deteriorating overall health. Interactions with law enforcement and RTO officials frequently involve harassment, fines, or bureaucratic complications, adding to their frustration and stress.

Drivers also encounter demanding passengers who exhibit disrespect or haggle over fares, further straining their mental resilience. Many drivers, particularly older ones, lack digital payment literacy, which increasingly marginalizes them in a cashless economy. Socially, they feel stigmatized and undervalued, as their profession is often perceived as low status, contributing to feelings of isolation and diminished self-esteem.

The study's findings underscore a diverse occupational profile among drivers, with varied educational and socio-economic backgrounds, ranging from those who entered the field due to financial necessity to others who see it as a permanent occupation despite aspirations for better opportunities. A ground-level understanding reveals their deep knowledge of city infrastructure, traffic patterns, and customer needs, though this expertise is underappreciated. Many drivers rely on informal networks for support and strategies to navigate challenges, yet systemic issues such as urban congestion and unplanned development persist. These stressors cumulatively create a cycle of anxiety, financial insecurity, and social marginalization, demanding urgent interventions like mental health support, policy reforms for fair treatment, and societal recognition of their contributions to urban mobility.

The Interview with Nitin Pawar highlights the key challenges faced by rickshaw drivers and offers valuable insights into the industry. He explains how competition from app-based rickshaw services has worsened income inequalities, leaving traditional drivers struggling to adapt to new technologies. He also points out the internal issues within the rickshaw driver community, such as personal differences and lack of unity, which make organizing collective action difficult. His experience in leading large-scale protests shows the importance of strong advocacy in fighting for drivers' rights. Additionally, he emphasizes the need for supportive government policies, like promoting cleaner energy options and providing social safety nets such as insurance and education subsidies. His forward-thinking approach combines solutions to the drivers' immediate problems with ideas for their long-term security, offering a clear path to improving their lives and supporting this vital urban workforce.

DISCUSSION

Conclusions

The study found that rickshaw drivers deal with many challenges that seriously affect their mental health, with financial struggles being the biggest issue. Their incomes often change from day to day, causing constant worry and stress. Rising costs and competition from app-based services make it even harder for them to make ends meet. On top of this, they work long hours, leaving them physically drained and with little time for rest or family. Many also face harassment from traffic authorities, which adds to their frustration and makes their work feel even harder. Together, these issues take a toll on their mental health and ability to take care of their families.

The research showed that rickshaw drivers come from different backgrounds, but most of them end up in this job out of necessity, not choice. While some have little to no formal education, others have vocational training or even higher qualifications. Regardless of their education, many feel stuck in this work because they don't see other options. Even though their work is difficult and requires skill, many drivers feel unhappy with their jobs, especially when they dream of better opportunities but can't reach them.

Implications

This study shows the need for better support for rickshaw drivers. To reduce financial stress, policies like fare regulations, subsidies, or financial literacy programs could help. Since long working hours affect their health, authorities could introduce rest areas or work-hour guidelines.

Improving relations between drivers and traffic authorities through training or complaint systems could reduce harassment. Many drivers feel stuck in this job due to a lack of options, so vocational training programs could help them explore other careers.

Recognizing rickshaw drivers as a key part of urban transport could lead to policies that improve their working conditions, such as better infrastructure, formal employment status, or access to health benefits.

Limitations

This research has several limitations that need to be recognized. First, the research was conducted within a specific geographic area, meaning the findings may not be fully generalizable to drivers in different regions or under different economic and policy conditions. Future studies should include a broader sample across multiple locations to gain a more comprehensive understanding of their challenges.

Second, the study primarily relies on self-reported data, which may be influenced by individual biases, recall errors, or reluctance to discuss certain issues openly. Supplementing qualitative interviews with observational studies or physiological stress assessments could provide a more objective view of their mental health struggles.

Another limitation is the relatively short duration of the research, which only captures a snapshot of the challenges faced by drivers. Longitudinal studies tracking drivers over extended periods could offer deeper insights into how their financial, social, and mental health situations evolve.

Scope for Future Research

Future research should focus on studying the mental health and stressors faced by rickshaw drivers over longer periods to better understand how their challenges evolve and impact their well-being. This would provide valuable insights into the long-term effects of their stressful work environment. Comparing the experiences of rickshaw drivers in different cities or regions could also reveal how local policies, cultural attitudes, and economic conditions shape their lives and mental health. Additionally, exploring how drivers cope with their daily struggles, whether through social support, resilience, or other methods, could help in designing strategies to improve their mental well-being.

Family dynamics play a critical role in a driver's life and understanding how family members influence career choices and stress management could provide a more complete picture of their challenges. Researching these relationships could lead to better ways of supporting drivers through family-focused interventions. It's also important to consider the unique vulnerabilities drivers face due to factors like age, gender, education, or socio-economic status. Recognizing these overlapping issues can help identify groups that may be more at risk and in need of tailored support.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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