



The dignity of aging washed away by the floods in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil

A dignidade do envelhecimento levada pelas enchentes no Rio Grande do Sul, Brasil
La dignidad de la vejez arrasada por las inundaciones en Rio Grande do Sul, Brasil

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Corresponding author:

E-mail: roberth.murillo@edu.pucrs.br

Address: Bento Gonçalves Avenue 2076, Partenon,
Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil.

Roberth Steven Gutiérrez-Murillo¹ 

¹Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil.

Dear Editor-in-Chief,

Floods and inundations have plagued municipalities in Rio Grande do Sul for over a decade, yet the state's response continues to downplay the severity of the issue.¹ In 2024 (May-April) alone, 183 deaths were reported, with more than 35 people gone missing.² While local authorities have not released data on the specific impact on older adults, it is estimated that most victims were over 60 years or older, many with limited mobility and lacking adequate family or social support.³

The vulnerability of older adults during disasters is deeply concerning. Many live alone, have mobility difficulties, suffer from chronic illnesses, and face barriers to accessing emergency services. In the face of climate catastrophes, these conditions drastically increase their risk of harm, neglect, and psychological suffering. Yet, local responses have been unsound, especially regarding the mental health of older adults.⁴ The emotional toll of losing homes, routines, and community ties, along with the trauma of displacement and ongoing insecurity, demands a robust public health response, one of intersectoral nature.

As in every catastrophe, human solidarity inevitably emerges and plays a crucial role in aiding us endure adversity. Many individuals, including those from other states, stepped forward, offering material donations, their time, and personal commitment, to assist in search efforts and provide care to older adults affected by the disaster. While this reaffirmed our faith in the spirit of unity and our collective concern for societal well-being, it also exposed the inadequacy of the state's response, one that became transparent by the absence of effective planning and even minimal execution during the crisis, unveiling a troubling level of governmental unpreparedness to integrate with primary health systems.⁵

A real-time survey of 1,552 flood-affected individuals, including older adults, found that those with direct exposure or who had close ones affected exhibited significantly higher scores of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), generalized anxiety disorder, and acute stress.⁶ Broader reviews performed in state municipalities confirm that older adults are particularly vulnerable, showing stronger associations between flooding and depression and PTSD, often worsened by low familiar support.^{7,8}

Building on the bioethical principles and the sense of social fairness, state and municipal governments ought to treat climate-related disasters as public health emergencies, with due caution to the needs of all individuals.⁹ To draft comprehensive responses to the needs of older adults, immediate actions must include deploying mental health teams to shelters and affected communities in a swiftly manner, providing qualified emotional support and trauma-informed care. Therefore,

this translates into the urgency of training psychologists, social workers, and community health workers to identify symptoms of anxiety, depression, and posttraumatic stress, often underdiagnosed in this demographic.¹⁰

In the medium and long term, public policies must embrace in-home health care, mobile mental health units, community-based therapy groups, and social centers support reintegration and connection for older adults. Prevention strategies are also crucial: mapping risk zones with demographic and epidemiological data, creating accessible evacuation plans, training response teams to support people with reduced mobility, and strengthening local support networks.¹⁰

To treat aging with dignity during crises is not only a matter of compassion, but above all a matter of social justice. Neglecting this group in disaster response plans perpetuates structural negligence and institutional violence. We call for a government that is present, that protects its most vulnerable citizens, and that integrates mental health care into its broader strategy for coping with climate emergencies. Older adults are not just victims; they are pillars of resilience and memory. Let us honor them with the care and dignity they deserve.

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

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