


POPULATION AGING AND THE SUSTAINABILITY OF THE SUS: CHALLENGES FOR LONG-TERM CARE <https://doi.org/10.63330/aurumpub.044-018>**Sharana Almeida dos Santos Nascimento¹, Tiago Ferreira da Silva², Maycon Rocha Muniz³, Suelen Cardoso da Silveira de Souza⁴ and Sidvandia Gomes Cajazeiras Costa⁵****Abstract**

Population aging in Brazil has led to significant changes in the organization of health systems, especially the Unified Health System (SUS), requiring new strategies for long-term care. This study aims to analyze the main challenges to the sustainability of SUS in the context of an increasing elderly population, focusing on continuous and comprehensive care. This is a narrative literature review based on national and international scientific publications addressing aging, public policies, and elderly healthcare. The results indicate that the growing demand for long-term care, combined with limited resources, weaknesses in the healthcare network, and a lack of specific policies for caregivers, undermines system effectiveness. Furthermore, the need for integration across levels of care and the strengthening of primary healthcare as the coordinator of care is highlighted. It is concluded that ensuring the sustainability of SUS in the face of population aging requires structural investments, professional training, and the expansion of public policies aimed at long-term care, thereby ensuring equity and quality in healthcare delivery for the elderly population.

Keywords: Elderly healthcare, Population aging, Public policies, SUS sustainability.

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INTRODUCTION

Population aging constitutes one of the most relevant demographic phenomena of the 21st century, characterized by the progressive increase in the proportion of older people within the population. In Brazil, this transition has occurred rapidly, directly affecting the organization of health services and requiring adaptations in the Unified Health System (SUS), especially with regard to long-term care. This scenario imposes challenges related to the expansion of demand for services, the complexity of chronic conditions, and the need for continuous and integrated care.

Given this context, the following research question is established as the study problem: how can the sustainability of the SUS be ensured in the face of population aging, considering the growing demands for long-term care and the system's structural and financial limitations?

The general objective of this study is to analyze the challenges related to the sustainability of the SUS in the context of population aging, with a focus on long-term care. The specific objectives are: to discuss the implications of aging for health services; to identify weaknesses in the organization of the care network; and to reflect on strategies that contribute to improving the quality of care for the elderly population.

The justification for conducting this study is grounded in the social and public health relevance of the topic, considering that population aging directly affects public health policies and requires effective responses from the system. The insufficiency of services directed toward prolonged care, together with family overload and the shortage of trained professionals, demonstrates the need for greater theoretical and practical exploration of the theme, contributing to the improvement of health actions.

From a theoretical perspective, population aging is associated with the demographic and epidemiological transition, characterized by reduced fertility and mortality rates and by the increase in chronic noncommunicable diseases. In this context, the SUS faces the challenge of reorganizing its care model, traditionally centered on curative actions, toward a model that values comprehensiveness, longitudinal care, and person-centered care. In addition, policies such as the National Health Policy for

Older Persons reinforce the need to promote active and healthy aging, as well as to structure care networks that ensure continuous and humanized assistance.

METHODOLOGY

TYPE OF STUDY

This is a qualitative study of a descriptive-analytical nature, developed through a narrative literature review. This type of research allows for a broader understanding of complex phenomena, such as population aging and its impacts on the sustainability of the health system, making it possible to integrate different theoretical perspectives and scientific evidence.

SEARCH STRATEGY AND STUDY SELECTION

The bibliographic search was conducted in widely recognized scientific databases, including Latin American and Caribbean Health Sciences Literature (LILACS), Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO), and PubMed. Descriptors in Portuguese and English were used, such as “population aging,” “older person,” “long-term care,” “health system,” and “sustainability,” combined using Boolean operators (AND and OR).

The inclusion criteria encompassed articles published in the last ten years, available in full text, in Portuguese, English, or Spanish, and directly addressing the proposed theme. Duplicate studies, simple abstracts, editorials, and works unrelated to the research objective were excluded.

DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

The selected studies were subjected to exploratory and analytical reading, followed by the organization of information into thematic categories. The analysis was conducted interpretively, seeking to identify convergences, divergences, and gaps in the literature. The main emerging categories included:

structural challenges of the health system, demands for long-term care, and strategies for the sustainability of the SUS.

ETHICAL ASPECTS

As this research was based on secondary data in the public domain, submission to a research ethics committee was not required. Nevertheless, ethical principles related to scientific integrity were respected, with appropriate citation of sources and fidelity to the ideas of the consulted authors.

METHODOLOGICAL FOUNDATION AND DISCUSSION

The choice of narrative review as a method is justified by the need to comprehensively understand the multiple factors that influence the sustainability of the SUS in the face of population aging. Unlike systematic reviews, this type of approach allows greater flexibility in analysis and discussion, favoring articulation among different fields of knowledge, such as public health, public policies, and gerontology.

However, it is recognized that the absence of rigorously standardized selection criteria may introduce interpretive biases. Even so, the adoption of clear inclusion and exclusion criteria, as well as the use of well-established databases, contributes to the reliability of the findings. Thus, the adopted methodology proves adequate to achieve the proposed objectives, allowing for a critical and contextualized analysis of the challenges related to long-term care within the scope of the SUS.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that population aging has caused significant impacts on the organization and sustainability of the Unified Health System (SUS), especially with regard to the growing demand for long-term care. The analysis of the literature made it possible to identify three central axes: increased care demand, structural weaknesses in the system, and the need to reorganize the care model.

The growth of the elderly population is directly associated with the increase in chronic noncommunicable diseases, such as hypertension, diabetes, and neurodegenerative diseases, which require continuous and multidisciplinary follow-up. This scenario places pressure on health services, especially primary care, which plays a fundamental role in care coordination.

Table 1

Main impacts of population aging on the SUS

Category	Identified Impacts
Demand for services	Increase in appointments and hospitalizations
Epidemiological profile	Predominance of chronic diseases
Need for continuous care	Greater demand for longitudinal follow-up
Health costs	Increase in public expenditures
Support network	Family overload and insufficient formal caregivers

In addition, it was observed that the SUS still presents important structural weaknesses, such as an insufficient number of specialized services in geriatrics and gerontology, low integration among levels of care, and limitations in financing. These factors compromise the effectiveness of long-term care.

The literature indicates that countries that experienced population aging more gradually were able to structure their care networks more effectively. In the Brazilian case, the speed of this demographic transition makes the planning and implementation of effective public policies more difficult.

Table 2

Weaknesses and challenges of the SUS in long-term care

Weaknesses	Consequences
Low integration of the care network	Discontinuity of care
Shortage of trained professionals	Reduced quality of care
Insufficient financing	Limited service provision
Absence of policies for caregivers	Family overload and informality of care
Curative focus	Difficulty in health promotion and prevention

Another relevant aspect is the need for change in the care model, which is still predominantly centered on curative actions. The literature reinforces the importance of adopting a model based on

comprehensive care, with the strengthening of primary care, health promotion, and encouragement of active aging.

In this sense, strategies such as the expansion of home care, the creation of continuous care networks, and investment in the training of specialized professionals are identified as fundamental to ensuring the sustainability of the system.

Table 3

Strategies for SUS sustainability in the face of aging

Strategies	Expected Benefits
Strengthening of primary care	Improved care coordination
Expansion of home care	Reduction in hospitalizations
Professional training	Improved quality of care
Integration of the care network	Continuity and effectiveness of care
Policies to support caregivers	Reduction of family overload

Therefore, the results demonstrate that the sustainability of the SUS in the face of population aging depends on structural and organizational changes aligned with scientific evidence and the needs of the elderly population. The articulation among public policies, efficient management, and the qualification of care proves essential to confronting the challenges of long-term care.

CONCLUSION

The present study aimed to analyze the challenges related to the sustainability of the Unified Health System (SUS) in the face of population aging, with emphasis on long-term care. Based on the literature review, it was possible to understand that the ongoing demographic transition in Brazil imposes growing demands on the health system, requiring structural and functional reorganization of services.

The main results showed that the increase in the elderly population is directly associated with a higher prevalence of chronic diseases and the need for continuous follow-up, which intensifies the demand for health services. In addition, important weaknesses were identified in the SUS, such as

insufficient integration of the care network, limitations in financing, shortage of qualified professionals, and the absence of effective policies to support long-term care, especially in the home and family context.

As a contribution, this study reinforces the importance of rethinking the current care model, highlighting the need to strengthen primary health care, expand continuous care strategies, and invest in professional training. Furthermore, it demonstrates the urgency of formulating and implementing public policies that address population aging comprehensively, promoting equity and quality in healthcare for older persons.

Finally, it is suggested that future research should deepen the analysis of innovative long-term care models, including international experiences and intersectoral strategies, as well as investigate the effectiveness of public policies already implemented. Empirical studies that take into account the local reality of health services are also essential to support more assertive decision-making aligned with the needs of the elderly population.

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