

TITLE: Child Mental Health in Crisis: Examining access to mental health services, socio-economic support, and unmet needs during the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Background: Child and adolescent mental health pose a global public health challenge, particularly during health crises including a pandemic. However, little is known about access to child and adolescent mental health (CAMH) services, socio-economic support, and unmet needs for children with mental disorders during the COVID-19 pandemic in sub-Saharan Africa.

Aim: To examine the sociodemographic and clinical characteristics of access to CAMH services, socio-economic support, and unmet needs among children and adolescents with mental disorders and their family caregivers during the COVID-19 pandemic in Lagos, Nigeria.

Methods: In a cross-sectional study, five hundred and thirty-seven (537) family caregivers of and their children with mental health problems were consecutively recruited over a period of 3 months from a child and adolescent specialist outpatient clinic during the first year of COVID-19 in Lagos, Nigeria. Data were collected using Socio-demographic, clinical, and COVID-related instruments with a Multidimensional Scale for Perceived Social Support tools. Statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) was utilized for data analysis.

Results: The mean age $\pm$ SD of the children was 9.81 $\pm$ 5.72 with a male preponderance (61.1%). Family caregivers were mostly female (91.2%) with a mean age $\pm$ SD of 42.05 $\pm$ 8.97. More than two-thirds of the children (70.4%) had no access to CAMH care during the lockdown, 91.4% had

unmet needs and, 70.8% had low to medium social support. Poor mental care access was significantly associated with the younger ages: of the child, primary caregiver, father, and mother respectively ($p < 0.001$, $p = 0.001$, $p < 0.001$, $p = 0.002$), developmental disorder diagnosis ($p = 0.006$), perceived home pressure ($p = 0.021$), and lack of socio-economic support/relief ($p = 0.002$). During the pandemic, unmet needs were associated with an older child's age ($p = 0.025$) and low socio-economic support/relief ($p = 0.001$).

Conclusions: Nigerian Children and adolescents with mental disorders had low socioeconomic support, poor access to mental care, and high unmet needs during the COVID-19 Pandemic. The findings resonate with a call to action for child mental care to move beyond in-person services to innovative programs and technologies including telemedicine for better child health crisis preparedness, particularly in Africa.

Keywords: Children, Adolescent, child mental health, Care access, unmet needs, COVID-19, Nigeria