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±SD of the children was 9.81±5.72 with a male preponderance (61.1%).

Family caregivers were mostly female (91.2%) with a mean age±SD of 42.05±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