Social inequalities in children’s mental health: isn’t it time for action?
Maria Melchior

To cite this version:
Maria Melchior. Social inequalities in children’s mental health: isn’t it time for action?. European Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2021, 30 (9), pp.1317-1318. 10.1007/s00787-021-01855-x. hal-03356109

HAL Id: hal-03356109
https://hal.sorbonne-universite.fr/hal-03356109
Submitted on 11 Oct 2021

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire HAL, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.
Social inequalities in children’s mental health: isn’t it time for action?

Maria Melchior

Sorbonne Université, INSERM, Institut Pierre Louis d’Épidémiologie et de Santé Publique (IPLESP), Equipe de Recherche en Epidémiologie Sociale (ERES), F75012, Paris, France

Social inequalities with regard to children’s and adolescents’ mental health are documented for many years (1-4) and appear to have increased over time (5). Moreover, while the relationship between family socioeconomic circumstances and children’s and adolescents’ risks of mental health difficulties largely reflects the role of determinants outside of the healthcare context, there is also evidence that even in universal healthcare systems, there are disparities with regard to access to care in case of psychological or neurodevelopmental disparities, which further increase socioeconomic inequalities in this area (6).

As we enter the third academic year following the onset of the COVID-19 epidemic, it is impossible to ignore the toll the epidemic has taken on youths and associated socioeconomic inequalities in schooling and mental health. In Europe as in other parts of the world, millions of children were affected by school closures, which impacted their learning, sociability and perspectives for the future (7). For instance, in a study conducted for UNICEF in 2020 among 5000 children and adolescents, over half indicated that they learnt less since the beginning of the epidemic, 60% stated they preferred face-to-face learning, and 40% were worried about what would happen after the epidemic is over. Additionally, the epidemic has deprived children and adolescents of access to school-based healthcare and other services, leading to a reduction in the identification of cases of neglect and intra-familial violence which appear to have increased (8, 9). Lockdowns have also been related to negative changes in youths health behaviours. For example, a nationwide Italian study showed that in 2020 over 30% of primary school and over 50% of middle school students spent more than 2 hours a day using a screen for purposes other than distance learning, while their physical activity levels significantly dropped (10). Finally, numerous families have experienced COVID-19-related illness, sometimes death, financial difficulties and uncertainty about the future, which can also impact their children (9, 11).

Overall, consistent evidence indicates that youths levels of sleep as well as psychological difficulties are higher recently than in previous years, with unknown perspectives as of now. A recent meta-analysis, based on twenty-three studies, reported massive and higher than expected levels of mental health difficulties in children and adolescents in the context of the COVID-19 epidemic (symptoms of depression: 29%, anxiety: 26%, sleep problems: 44%, post-traumatic stress symptoms: 48%) (12). It is important to note that this review was mostly based on cross-sectional data exclusively from China, there is therefore need for robust data from other areas of the world, including Europe. However, existing evidence suggests that in European countries levels of mental distress among children and adolescents have also increased (11, 13), as have levels of emergency room visits related to eating disorders and self-harm (14).
All of these mental health risks related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated preventive measures have had greater consequences on children and adolescents growing up in families experiencing disadvantage or in deprived neighbourhoods (11, 13-15). These children have also disproportionately been affected in terms of academic achievement (7). Hence, the COVID-19 pandemic could significantly impact the socioeconomic future of millions of children, fuelling a vicious circle of later academic, work-related and mental health difficulties.

The health crisis, which we are experiencing for the past two years, has shed light upon the extent of socioeconomic inequalities with regard to mental health in children and adolescents and their increase over time. As advocated by the WHO Commission on Social Determinants of Health 15 years ago, achieving health equity via action upon multiple determinants of health is possible (16). Among the overarching recommendations of this international working group, are improvements of “daily living conditions of girls, women and children” and massive investments in “early child development and education of boys and girls”. These are more necessary than ever to prevent the marginalization of large parts of the population and reduce the possible impacts on the mental health of the next generation.

References

1. Costello EJ, Compton SN, Keeler G, Angold A. Relationships between poverty and psychopathology: a natural experiment. Journal of the American Medical Association. 2003;290(15):2023-9.
2. McLaughlin KA, Costello EJ, Leblanc W, Sampson NA, Kessler RC. Socioeconomic status and adolescent mental disorders. American Journal of Public Health. 2012;102(9):1742-50.
3. Reiss F, Meyrose AK, Otto C, Lampert T, Klasen F, Ravens-Sieberer U. Socioeconomic status, stressful life situations and mental health problems in children and adolescents: Results of the German BELLA cohort-study. PLoS One. 2019;14(3):e0213700.
4. Hegelund ER, Flensborg-Madsen T, Vassard D, Niclasen J, Mortensen EL. Parental socioeconomic position and risk of ADHD in offspring: a cohort study of 9648 individuals in Denmark 1976-2013. European Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. 2019;28(5):685-93.
5. Collishaw S, Furzer E, Thapar AK, Sellers R. Brief report: a comparison of child mental health inequalities in three UK population cohorts. European Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. 2019;28(11):1547-9.
6. Chui Z, Gazard B, MacCrimmon S, Harwood H, Downs J, Bakolis I, et al. Inequalities in referral pathways for young people accessing secondary mental health services in south east London. European Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. 2021;30(7):1113-28.
7. UNICEF. Preventing a 'lockdown generation' in Europe and Central Asia. 2021.
8. Chaabane S, Doraiswamy S, Chaabna K, Mamtani R, Cheema S. The Impact of COVID-19 School Closure on Child and Adolescent Health: A Rapid Systematic Review. Children. 2021;8(5).
9. Calvano C, Engelke L, Di Bella J, Kindermann J, Renneberg B, Winter SM. Families in the COVID-19 pandemic: parental stress, parent mental health and the occurrence of adverse childhood experiences-results of a representative survey in Germany. European Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. 2021:1-13.
10. Scarpellini F, Segre G, Cartabia M, Zanetti M, Campi R, Clavenna A, et al. Distance learning in Italian primary and middle school children during the COVID-19 pandemic: a national survey. BMC Public Health. 2021;21(1):1035.
11. Moulin F, El-Aarbaoui T, Bustamante JJH, Héron M, Mary-Krause M, Rouquette A, et al. Risk and protective factors related to children’s symptoms of emotional difficulties and hyperactivity/inattention during the COVID-19-related lockdown in France: results from a community sample. European Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. 2021:1-12.
12. Ma L, Mazidi M, Li K, Li Y, Chen S, Kirwan R, et al. Prevalence of mental health problems among children and adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic: A systematic review and meta-analysis. Journal of Affective Disorders. 2021;293:78-89.

13. Hu Y, Qian Y. COVID-19 and adolescent mental health in the United Kingdom. Journal of Adolescent Health. 2021;69(1):26-32.

14. Ford T, John A, Gunnell D. Mental health of children and young people during pandemic. British Medical Journal. 2021;372:n614.

15. Li W, Wang Z, Wang G, Ip P, Sun X, Jiang Y, et al. Socioeconomic inequality in child mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic: First evidence from China. Journal of Affective Disorders. 2021;287:8-14.

16. World Health Organization Commission on the Social Determinants of Health. Closing the gap in a generation: health equity through action on the social determinants of health. 2008.