



## Menace of Poverty and Education on the Mental Health Outcomes of Children in Benin Metropolis

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**Abstract.** The primary aim of the study is to examine the menace of poverty and education on the mental health outcomes of children. It equally considers the impact of socio-economic status of the parents' education, and family environment. Ecological theoretical framework was adopted in this study. The literature established that children growing up in poverty are at a higher risk of experiencing stress, anxiety, and depression; it can retard their opportunities for rapid growth and development; and the lack of access to basic necessities and opportunity for education and personal development can further exacerbate mental health issues among children. The research design that was adopted in this study was the phenomenological research design and a qualitative methodology. A purposive sampling technique was employed, and 10 participants were recruited for this research study. Data was gathered through interviews and was thematically analysed. The study revealed inability of the parents to take care of their wards/children's basic needs, pushed the parents to engage them in child labour to augment income in their families and such labour increased their vulnerability and negatively impacted their overall quality of wellbeing. Similarly, it was also noted well-trained teachers are paramount to be able to manage children mental health issues. The study recommends the implementation of policies and programs aimed at enhancing the socio-economic conditions of families in Benin Metropolis. These initiatives could include providing financial aid, creating job opportunities for parents, offering educational support for children.

**Keywords:** Children, Education, Poverty, Mental health, Benin Metropolis

### 1. Introduction

Mental health problems in children encompass a variety of psychological and emotional complications that affect the well-being and functioning of individuals during their developmental years (Omorogiuwa, 2021). Children facing mental health

challenges might display signs like persistent feelings of sadness, irritability, changes in behaviour, trouble focusing, disruptions in sleep patterns, and thoughts of self-harm or suicide (Omorogiuwa, 2019). According to a survey conducted in Nigeria, the prevalence of mental health problems among children ranges from 10% to 37%, which could be linked to their functional impairments (Zaharaddeen, 2020). Thus, mental health problems in children have increasingly been recognized as a global health concern, with a growing body of evidence highlighting the impact of socio-economic factors such as poverty, education and the host of others on the well-being of children (WHO, 2022). Ogboghodo et al. (2018) asserts that 17.3% of the mental health burden in Benin City, Edo State, is attributed to childhood mental health issues, such as depression.

Smith and Jarden (2017) noted that poverty, parental unemployment, and limited access to quality housing as well as lack of quality education of parents contribute to stress, anxiety and other mental health issues among children, potentially leading to long-term psychological effects. Similarly, the development of childhood disorders is associated with a multitude of factors, including economic, neighbourhood, and environmental, social, and structural elements. Children experiencing these challenges may face heightened stress, anxiety, and depression due to the strain of living in such circumstances (WHO, 2022). The socio-economic landscape of Benin Metropolis, characterized by diverse and complex challenges such as poverty, urban stress, and educational pressures, presents a unique backdrop against which children's mental health issues may manifest and evolve (Okeke, 2018).

In a society where mental health is not given the adequate attention it deserves, individuals suffering from mental health issues may face stigma and discrimination, leading to isolation and a lack of support (Omorogiuwa, 2017). This can, in turn, hinder their ability to contribute to the social and economic

growth of the nation. Additionally, mental health issues can have a significant impact on children's education. Children and adolescents with mental health problems may struggle to learn effectively in school, leading to poor academic performance, limited opportunities for social and economic advancement, and widen the poverty cycle of such family. Furthermore, untreated mental health issues can also have long-lasting effects on an individual's ability to maintain stable employment and achieve financial security (Sutherland, 2018).

Despite the growing study and interest in mental health outcomes of the children, there is a dearth comprehensive discourse focused specifically on the impacts of poverty and lack of adequate education on the mental health issues of children. Furthermore, the etiology of these factors on the affected families in the study area remains unexplored especially in heterogeneous setting with diverse socio-cultural and economic context.

### 1.1 Research Questions

- How does poverty influence the mental health of children in Benin Metropolis?
- What are the educational influences on the mental health of children in Benin Metropolis?

## 2. Review of the Literature

Social determinants such as poverty, and education play a crucial role in mental health. As highlighted by Patel and Goodman (2018), factors such as socio-economic status, education, employment, family environment, and cultural influences can significantly impact mental health. These determinants can either pose risks or provide buffers against mental health problems, emphasizing the need for a holistic approach to mental health that considers the broader social and economic context. Poverty is a significant socioeconomic determinant of mental health issues among children in Nigeria (Mustapha & Ebomoyi, 2022). The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) 2022, reported that a large percentage of Nigerian children live below the poverty line, lacking access to basic necessities such as food, shelter, and mental healthcare (Multidimensional Poverty Index, 2022).

Children growing up in poverty are at a higher risk of experiencing stress, anxiety, and depression due to their living conditions and limited opportunities for growth and development (Omorogiuwa, 2021). Poverty also limits access to mental health services and support systems, further exacerbating the issue.

According to Smith and Foster (2022), children living in impoverished household are more likely to experience mental health issues due to factors like violence, instability, and limited access to quality health and educational services. The persistent high rate of unemployment and extreme poverty in Nigeria can create an environment of economic instability, insecurity and poor mental health for families. Children growing up in such conditions may experience heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and uncertainty about their future (Mustapha & Ebomoyi, 2022).

The lack of access to basic necessities and opportunities for education and personal development can further exacerbate mental health issues among children. Socioeconomic disadvantage often leads to reduced employment opportunities and lower wages when individuals are employed. Limited access to quality education and training programs can result in a lack of skills necessary for securing stable employment (Ayeni, 2021). Individuals facing socioeconomic disadvantage often encounter barriers that hinder their educational progress. These barriers can include limited access to quality education, inadequate resources, and a lack of support systems (Johnson & Tyler, 2020). The relationship between socioeconomic status and academic performance has been extensively studied and consistently shown to be associated across international studies (Johnson & Tyler, 2020).

The school environment has a significant impact on the mental well-being of young learners (Martin & Marsh, 2020). It encompasses various factors such as the physical infrastructure, social dynamics, and overall atmosphere within the school (Akpede & Omi-Ujuanba, 2018). Academic pressure is one of the most prominent educational factors affecting children mental health. According to Martin and Marsh (2020), a positive school environment, characterized by supportive teachers, inclusive practices, and a safe and nurturing atmosphere, can significantly enhance students' mental well-being. Thompson and Haines (2021). found that positive teacher-student relationships are strongly associated with lower levels of depression and higher self-esteem in students. Moreover, the inclusivity and adaptability of the education system play a significant role in mental health. Inclusive education, which addresses the diverse needs of all students, including those with learning difficulties or mental health challenges, is crucial (Akpede & Omi-Ujuanba, 2018).

### 3. Theoretical Framework

This study adopted social ecological systems theory which was developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979). The theory premised on the assumption that the environments or contexts in which children grow up have a significant impact on their development. According to this theory, the family, including parent-child subsystems, is the most important system. Additionally, there are five other systems that are critical in influencing and being influenced by a child's behaviour, namely the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). **Microsystem** represents the immediate environment in which an individual lives and interacts. For children, this includes their family, school, peer group, and neighbourhood. These settings are where the most direct interactions with social agents occur. **Mesosystem** encompasses the interconnections between the microsystems. It represents the linkages between home and school, family and peers, and other combinations of direct environments. For example, a child's academic performance may be influenced by the degree of involvement and communication between their parents and teachers.

**Exosystem** includes the broader social systems that do not directly include the individual but still exert an influence on them. This can include a parent's workplace, community-based services, or neighbourhood policies. For example, a parent's work stress can indirectly affect a child's well-being. **Macrosystem** consists of cultural values, customs, laws, and resources that shape the larger society in which an individual lives. It reflects the overarching cultural or societal blueprint that influences all the other systems. For instance, a society's views on child-rearing practices or education can profoundly influence a child's development. **Chronosystem** dimension encompasses the dimension of time, reflecting the life transitions and environmental events that occur during an individual's lifetime, including socio-historical contexts.

This framework provided a solid basis for exploring the experiences of children as it considers the numerous systems that consciously and unconsciously impact their families and environment. This perspective is particularly useful in studies focusing on childhood development, as it allows for a comprehensive understanding of the various

environmental influences that shape a child's growth and development.

### 4. Methodology

#### *Area of study and Population*

The areas under study included Ogbe, Ugbowo, Uselu, Eviemwen, and Oka community in the Oredo, Egor, and Ikpoba-Okha Local Government Area of Edo State. These communities were situated in Benin metropolis and were among the most populated communities in Edo State. Benin City, the capital of the ancient Benin kingdom, had undergone significant transformation over the centuries. The total population of Benin Metropolis, according to the National Population Commission (2006), was 1,086,882; however, the NPC projection for the year 2024 was 1,973,000. The population for this study consisted of parents/guardians and children between the ages of 10-17 years, with a total projected population of 1,973,000 (NPC, 2024) in the Oredo, Egor, and Ikpoba-Okha Local Government Area of Edo State.

#### *Research Design, Sample Size and Technique*

The phenomenological design was adopted for the qualitative data. In the context of studying the impact of poverty and education on mental health outcomes of children, this approach helped uncover how social and economic factors shaped children's mental well-being. It enabled researchers to explore the meanings children attributed to their experiences and how these meanings were influenced by their socio-economic environment. The study adopted a purposive sampling technique for the qualitative data, which allowed the researcher to select 10 participants, comprising 5 parents/guardians and 5 children, including both male and female participants. This approach helped the researcher gather insights from both generations and explores their perspectives on the research topic. The inclusion criteria for the participants were both male and female parents or guardians and children residing in the targeted communities within Benin Metropolis. The parents or guardians were required to have children between 10-17 years of age or have raised children within this age bracket who suffered from mental health issues due to socio-economic factors. These sampling strategies were employed since the researcher did not have a thorough understanding of all potential study participants and because it was preferable to meet the needs of the study.

5. Results

*Background Information of Interviewees*

**Demographic characteristics of interviewees**

S/N	Participants	Age	Gender	Religious Affiliation	Occupation	Educational Background
1	Mrs Anita	65	Female	Christian	Self-employed	Tertiary
2	Mr Bamilola	40	Male	Christian	Civil Servant	Tertiary
3	Miss Cellina	16	Female	Christian	Student	Secondary
4	Miss Daniella	15	Female	Christian	Student	Secondary
5	Mrs Esther	57	Female	African Religion	Trader	Secondary
6	Mr Fred	38	Male	Christian	Public Servant	Tertiary
7	Master Gideon	16	Male	Christian	Student	Secondary
8	Master Harris	15	Male	Christian	Student	Secondary
9	Master Iyobo	15	Male	Christian	Student	Secondary
10	Mr Joel	45	Male	Muslim	Civil Servant	Tertiary

*Field Survey, 2024*

Age distribution of participants ranges from 15 to 65 years, comprising adolescents (15–16 years), middle-aged adults (38–45 years), and older adults (57–65 years). Gender distribution of participants includes 5 males and 5 females. Religious Affiliation of the participants indicated that Christians were 8 with 1 Muslim and 1 African Traditional Religion adherent. Occupation of the participants revealed that civil/public servants were 3, self-employed/traders were 2, and students were 5. Educational background of the participants show that 4 adults possess tertiary education, 2 have secondary education, while all (4) the adolescents are currently at secondary school level.

**Theme 1: Poverty and Mental Health outcomes among Children in Benin Metropolis**

Majority of the Participants noted that: Poverty can significantly impact a child's mental health in several ways. For instance, financial instability which can often leads to stress and anxiety within the family, this can be overwhelming for children. Lack of basic resources like adequate food, shelter, and healthcare can contribute to feelings of insecurity and deprivation. Additionally, poverty can limit access to quality education and healthcare, which are essential for a child's overall well-being. To effectively address the mental health needs of children living in poverty, a multi-faceted approach is necessary. This includes: Community-based programs such as free mental health counselling, School-based Programs such school feeding schemes, and skill acquisition initiatives are essential. Establishing community centres for recreational activities and ensuring accessible healthcare can significantly mitigate the mental health challenges children face. One participant remarked:

*"Okay, you see, due to poverty parents are not able to take care of their children's basic needs, and most of these children, because they don't have access to basic needs, are mentally stressed. In the sense that they are introduced to child labour, where the children are now asked to fend for themselves and their parents. I suggest a support system to provide the needs of these children either by the family, government, or well-meaning Nigerians and ensure that these needs get to them." (MRS Anita, 65 years, female, 27/11/24).*

This emphasizes how poverty negatively affects the overall emotional well-being of children and how the lack of access to basic resources due to poverty contributes to increased stress and anxiety among children. Another participant remarked:

*"I feel stressed because of my parents' financial status. I have to help my mother sell pure water at the market after school hours and sometimes during school hours. This has deprived me of so many things." (MISS Daniella, 15 years, female, 27/11/24).*

This illustrates how financial instability and lack of access to basic needs negatively impact the mental health of children. Consequently, poverty emerges as a critical issue affecting the overall well-being of children residing in Benin Metropolis.

**Theme 2: Education and Children's Mental Health in Benin Metropolis**

Majority of the Participants pointed out that: From their interactions with teachers and school staff, it's clear that they recognize the significant impact of education on children's mental well-being. They also believed that, a positive and supportive learning environment can boost self-esteem, reduce stress, and promote social and emotional development among children. Several factors within the educational system can influence children's mental health; such as teacher

qualifications and training, class size and student-teacher ratio, bullying prevention programs and mental health awareness and training for school staff. All these will generally impact the quality of teaching. Well-trained teachers can create positive learning environments and identify children who may be struggling. While smaller class sizes can allow for more individualized attention and support. Implementing effective bullying prevention programs can create a safer and more inclusive school environment. Educating school staff about mental health can help them recognize signs of distress and provide appropriate support. One participant remarked,

*"Now, from my own interaction, I can't profess to be an expert in this area, but from my interactions with teachers and school staff, it was clear that they recognized the significant impact of education on children's mental health. A positive and supportive learning environment can boost self-esteem, reduce stress, and promote social and emotional development." (MR Bamilola, 40 years, male, 27/11/24).*

This response indicates that well-trained teachers can create positive learning environments and identify children who may be struggling. The data further reveals that individuals with a higher level of education, particularly those with tertiary education, appear to have a better understanding of how to manage children's mental health issues. A participant noted:

*"Teachers' qualifications and training are crucial. Not just somebody who finished SSCE and does not have a job, then just starts teaching. Somebody who is properly trained on how to manage children will be able to impact better. A well-trained teacher will easily spot out certain characteristics which call for attention." (MR Fred, 38 years, male, 27/11/24).*

This highlights the role of education in enhancing awareness and access to healthcare. Educating school staff about mental health can help them recognize signs of distress and provide appropriate support.

## 6. Discussion of Finding

The findings of research question one reveals significantly on the influence of poverty on the mental health of children. The data from the analysis underscores a strong consensus among participants regarding the correlation between poverty and children's mental health. Respondents agree that children living in poverty are more susceptible to psychological distress, which can negatively affect their emotional well-being. This finding resonates with the research by Omorogiuwa (2021) and Mustapha & Ebomoyi (2022), which identified

poverty as a significant socioeconomic determinant of mental health issues among children in Nigeria.

The lack of access to basic resources resulting from poverty is highlighted as a pivotal factor contributing to heightened stress and anxiety among children. As poverty limits access to necessities like adequate food, shelter, healthcare, and quality education, children are more likely to experience feelings of insecurity and deprivation, which can impact their mental health adversely. The studies by Omorogiuwa, (2021) and Mustapha & Ebomoyi, (2022) support this notion, emphasizing how poverty can elevate the risk of mental health disorders in children. To address the mental health needs of children affected by poverty, the analysis suggests a multi-faceted approach involving community-based programs, school-based initiatives, and accessible healthcare services. These interventions align with the recommendations put forth by Omorogiuwa (2021) and Mustapha & Ebomoyi (2022) to mitigate the negative impact of poverty on children's mental health in Nigeria.

The participant testimonials further underscore the dire consequences of poverty on children's mental well-being. The accounts of children being forced into child labour due to financial instability and lack of basic needs vividly illustrate the detrimental effects of poverty on their mental health. These narratives mirror the findings of the aforementioned studies, emphasizing how poverty undermines the overall emotional and psychological welfare of children.

The overall responses of research question two indicate a strong consensus among respondents regarding the impact of education on children's mental health, emphasizing the critical role of quality education in shaping their well-being. This finding resonates with the research by Martin & Marsh (2020), Lee & Larson (2019), and Onolemhemen & Ekhenlen (2022), which demonstrated that excessive academic demands and pressure to succeed are linked to heightened levels of stress and anxiety among students. Participants emphasize the importance of a positive and supportive learning environment in boosting self-esteem, reducing stress, and promoting social and emotional development among children. Factors within the educational system, such as teacher qualifications, class size, bullying prevention programs, and mental health awareness for school staff, are identified as key determinants of children's mental health. These insights align with the studies by Martin & Marsh, (2020); Lee & Larson, (2019); Onolemhemen & Ekhenlen, (2022), which highlighting how educational factors can significantly influence students' well-being.

The remarks from participants underscore the significance of well-trained teachers in creating positive learning environments and identifying children who may be struggling. Educators with proper training and qualifications are better equipped to manage children's mental health issues, thereby enhancing the overall quality of teaching and support within schools. This aligns with the studies by Martin & Marsh, (2020); Lee & Larson, (2019); Onolemhemhen & Ekhenlen, (2022) which emphasize on the role of teacher qualifications and training in addressing students' mental health needs. Educating school staff about mental health is recognized as a crucial step in helping them recognize signs of distress and provide appropriate support to students. This highlights the importance of enhancing awareness and access to mental health resources within educational settings, as emphasized by the studies of Martin & Marsh, (2020); Lee & Larson, (2019); Onolemhemhen & Ekhenlen, (2022) linking educational factors to students' stress and anxiety levels

## 7. Conclusion

The study conclusively demonstrates that children mental health is not solely a function of individual or biological factors but is profoundly influenced by their socio-economic context (poverty and education inclusive). The significant role played by socio-economic factors, poverty, educational pressures, and the host of others in shaping the mental health of children in Benin Metropolis has been clearly established. The interconnectedness of these factors suggests that the mental health of children is a multifaceted issue, deeply embedded in the broader socio-economic and environmental fabric of their lives. This realization calls for an integrated approach in addressing child mental health, one that goes beyond traditional healthcare interventions and encompasses improvements in living conditions, educational reforms, and support for positive family dynamics.

## 8. Recommendations

The government and relevant stakeholders should implement policies and programs aimed at improving the socio-economic conditions of families in Benin Metropolis. This includes providing financial assistance, job opportunities for parents, and educational support for children. They should encourage schools to balance academic rigor with mental health support. Implement programs that promote positive teacher-student relationships, provide mental health education, and offer counselling

services. They should develop community-based programs that offer parenting workshops and family counselling services to promote positive family dynamics and effective parenting practices.

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