



# Parents' Experience with Children's Mental Health During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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## ABSTRACT

It is widely known that the COVID-19 pandemic has led to an increase in mental health problems among children. However, there has been no systematic study on the level of parental challenges related to their children's mental health problems. Our study is one of the first to examine the experiences of New Jersey parents in seeking and accessing mental health services for their children during and after the pandemic. This study findings show that almost 75% of children's mental health problems began after the pandemic outbreak, and 43% of parents found their children's problems to be very or extremely challenging. Surprisingly, 39% of parents reported that they had never heard of or were not at all familiar with the service information available on the NJ Department of Family and Children's websites or NJ Department of Health websites. These results suggest that parents need more support and information services during pandemic outbreaks. The dissemination of this information needs to be more widely available to the general population.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

- The Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted our daily lives in ways we could never have imagined. Mental health has become one of the most talked-about topics during this period ("Children's mental health during the Covid-19 pandemic", 2021), with many studies showing the devastating impact on both children (Theberath et al., 2022) and adults (NCHS, 2023; Jewell et al., 2020). As preventing the loss of life became the most urgent concern of the governments, helping parents to deal with the mental health problems of their children were limited to providing self-support informational resources (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021).
- The lockdown, social isolation, and uncertainty have created a breeding ground for stress, anxiety, and depression. Children have been impacted as they are isolated from their friends and peers, which is vital for their social development (children's hospital). The increase in children's mental health problems associated with the Covid-19 outbreak is attested by emergency department visits. Leeb et al. (2020) reported that during the first 10 months of the outbreak, mental health-related emergency department visits increased by almost 30% for children aged 5 to 17.
- With the added stress of the pandemic, it is likely that the gap in mental health services was exacerbated. As hospitals and health resources were reserved for saving lives, it is reasonable to think that delivery of mental health services was relegated to low priority and parents were left to fend for themselves.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

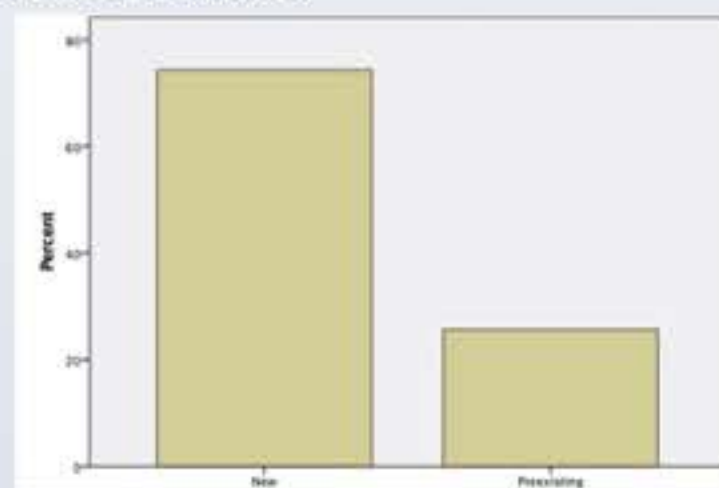
- Was there a spike in children's mental health issues during the Covid-19 pandemic?
- How severe were children's mental health issues during the Covid-19 pandemic?
- Did NJ offer adequate support and resources to parents to help guide them through their children's mental health issues?

## DATA COLLECTION

Our study utilized a mixed-method approach, consisting of an online survey and a focus group interview. The survey recruited 238 parents or guardians through a convenient sampling method, with 60% of participants being female. The majority of the participants had a Bachelor's degree or higher education and a professional background. In terms of racial or ethnic diversity, the sample included 12% Asian or Pacific Islander, 36% Black, 2% Hispanic, 9% Native American or Alaskan Native, and 43% White. Additionally, 25% of the participants had a household income below \$31,000. The focus group interview included six participants, four of whom were female.

## RESULTS

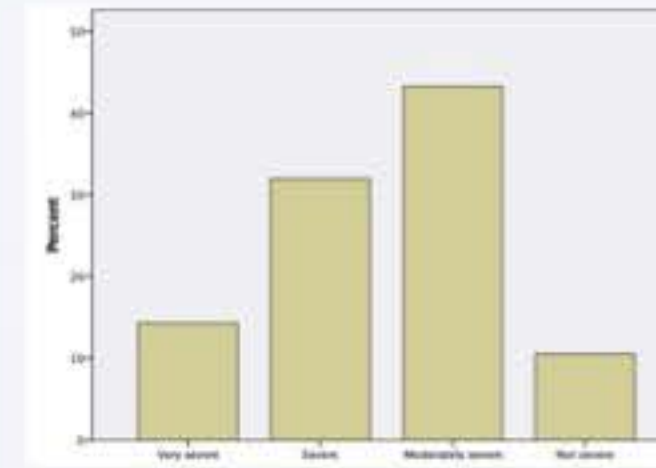
Was this change in your child's mental health a event or preexisting?



"The Covid pandemic was really upsetting for my household. My oldest has autism and he really struggled with the change in format and the lack of structure."-Focus group participant (FGP)

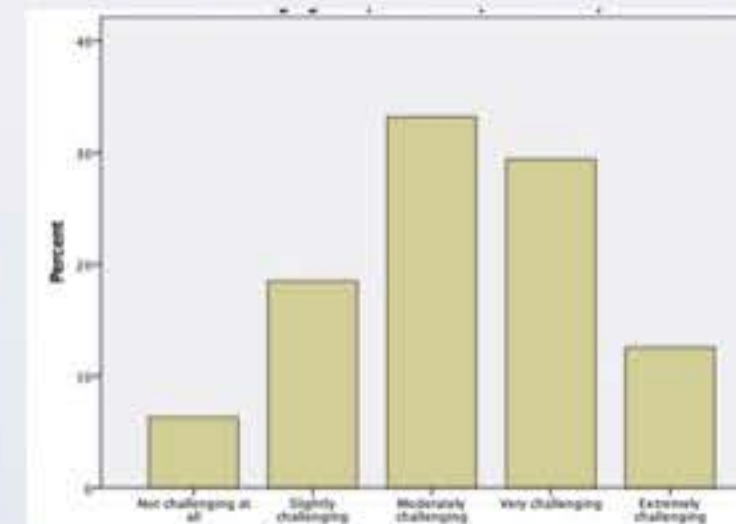
"I think the biggest change I saw in my household was in my oldest. She was 11, going on 12 at the time and going into that very, very hormonal age... on top of feeling very isolated and cut off from friends... her mental health took a huge turn. [She] struggled with depression, anxiety... and we're still coming off of that today." FGP

How severe was your child/ren's mental health problem?



"I ended up having to [contact] emergency services for self-harm, suicidal ideation, and she ended up hospitalized and was in and out of several different hospitals that summer." FGP

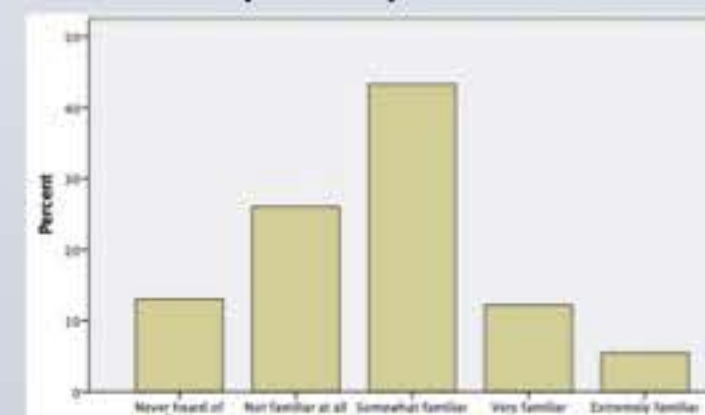
How challenging was your child's problem for you?



"...it was definitely a struggle. And then there was my struggles." FGP

"I never knew anyone that had gone through this kind of struggle before, so I didn't have friends to talk to..." FGP

How familiar were you with the information and services provided on the websites of the Department of Children and Family Services (DCF-NJ) or the Department of Health and Human Services (DHS-NJ)?



## DISCUSSION

While pandemics and natural calamities that result in shutdowns and family isolations may be rare, they are becoming more frequent due to global conditions and the rapid development of global warming. In light of the serious challenges experienced by parents during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is imperative that policies and programs be implemented to combat stigma surrounding mental health problems and to more effectively disseminate information about mental health services. Supporting parents in dealing with the challenges of their children's mental health problems should become a priority social issue. By learning from these challenges, we can better prepare for and mitigate the effects of future crises.

## LIMITATIONS

Our study had limitations, including the use of a convenient sampling method that cannot ensure a representative sample, the potential for biased reporting with the online survey method, and a small number of participants in the focus group interview. However, the large sample size in the online survey may help mitigate the limitations of the sampling method, and the anonymity provided by the online survey method may encourage genuine reporting of children's mental health problems, which are still stigmatized.

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