

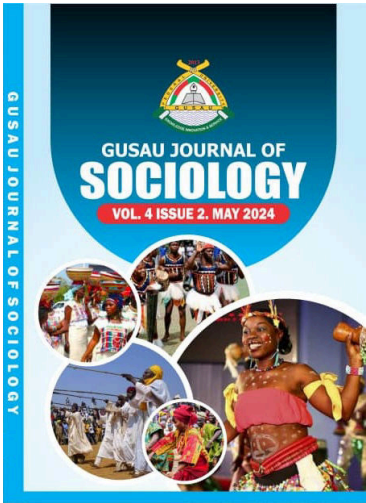
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ANALYSIS OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC RISK FACTORS OF MENTAL ILLNESS AMONG YOUTHS IN KWARA STATE, NIGERIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

¹**Abonyi, Sunday Evaristus Ph.D**

Department of Social Work
University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria
abonyi.se@unilorin.edu.ng, +2348030499523

²**Onwuka, Charles Chukwujekwu, Ph.D**

Department of Sociology
Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University,
Igbariam, Anambra state
onwuka.cc@coou.edu.ng, +2348064396459

&

³**Madu, Tochukwu Emmanuel, Ph.D**

Department of Criminology & Security Studies
Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University,
Igbariam, Anambra state
te.madu@coou.edu.ng +2347062847082

Corresponding Author: abonyi.se@unilorin.edu.ng

Abstract

The study examined socio-economic correlates and mental illness among youths in Kwara State, North Central, Nigeria. Multi-stage sampling procedure was employed to select 114 respondents from three council areas in the three senatorial districts of the state using structured questionnaire. Data collected were analysed using descriptive statistics and cross tabulation. Findings of the study revealed that 79.8% and 81.6% of respondents indicated that financial hardship and unemployment often take the center stage as the most socio-economic risk factors accountable to the increasing rate of mental illness among the youths while 88.6% and 83.3% of respondents respectively reported incessant strikes embarked upon by teachers/lecturers of educational institutions and undue threats by government security personnel. Similarly, 91.2% of respondents revealed poor social relationships maintained by the youths amongst other critical issues. Social workers were identified as playing crucial role in the areas of counseling, advocacy, collaborative services/referrals sequel to which a recommendation was made for inclusion of social work and mental health in the curriculum of primary and secondary schools as well as form part of general study courses in Nigerian higher institutions.

Key Words: Exploratory analysis, Mental illness, Social work, Socio-economic, Youth

Introduction

In Africa, the number of young people going through mental illness occasioned by the global economic crunch seems to be alarming. Mental illness here refers to health conditions that alter the individual's mode of thinking, feelings or behavior and also resulting to distress and difficulty in functioning. It portrays a symptom of disorder that could be clinically assessed such as abnormal thoughts, depression, anxiety, dementia, schizophrenia, autism, deficit hyperactivity disorder and so on (Kelani, 2019). Mental illness seems to affect the way the individual feels, thinks, behaves or interact with others. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2021) reported that 166 million adolescent boys and girls globally were diagnosed of mental illness in 2019. In 2021, the organization also reported that barely one in every seven adolescents (14%) have mental problem. The United Nation's International Children's Emergency Funds (UNICEF, 2020) however, noted that the economic meltdown of many nations brought a kind of crisis in the labour market which then placed the young people at the greater risk of unemployment and inability to enjoy stable livelihood and sustainable income. What this portends is that the impact of mental illness on young people in most African countries had become systemic and deep as a result of the ongoing economic depression and social change. South Africa recorded the highest rate in youth unemployment with 32.0% in 2023, followed by Djibouti (27.9%), Eswatini (24.65%), Gabon (21.35%) and Nigeria (7.2%) from its 4.2% earlier recorded in 2022 (Aina, 2023, NBS, 2023)).

In addition to imparting negatively on the mental health wellbeing of the individuals, the productivity levels recorded among this segment of the population seems to have decreased drastically. According to reports from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2023), Nigeria's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) remained at 2.51% in the second quarter of 2023 which seemed to be lower than 3.54% recorded in the second quarter of 2022 and which was attributed to the challenging economic conditions being experienced in the nation. The youths which in this study chronologically refers to individuals within the ages of 18 and 35 years constitute more than 40% of Nigerian population and forms the backbone of the nation in terms of socio-economic and political development (Odo & Eme, 2014, Ojoye, 2019). Many studies have also confirmed that a reasonable percentage of young people in Nigeria and across the globe suffer from one form of mental illness or the other (Ogbonna et al, 2020, Kuranga & Yusuf, 2021, Ajike et al, 2022, Babasola et al, 2024)).

In Nigeria, the increase in mental illness among the young people was also exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic that invaded the country in the later part of 2019 to almost half of 2020. This generally led to the reduction of income of the nation which invariably may have translated to poor physical and mental health among many people as a result of anxiety and depression (Ardington, 2010). It is likely that once an individual is enjoying a robust income and maximum standard of living, there is the tendency to be happy and less disposed to depression and other psychiatric disorder that are prevalent among people with low income (Hanlon & Carlisle, 2013). Onyedinefu (2021) added that even before the coronavirus incidence, many young people carried the burden of mental illness but without significant efforts to address them. The psychiatric disorder or mental illness could emanate from financial stress that interferes with the individual's ability to meet up with some basic needs and functions within the society. It is the human brain that forms the major organ for the onset of mental illness because it is responsible for the primary functions of the human body (Gould, 2010). According to Health Direct (2023), some of the symptoms of psychiatric disorder or mental illness include; Aggression, Illogical thoughts, poor concentration and memory, disturbance in mood (irritability), lack of motivation, drug abuse,

incoherent speech, paranoid, neglect of personal hygiene and other responsibilities, wandering tendency, talking to the self, amongst others.

Garba (2021) observed that though the increase in the population of youths in Nigeria is an asset, the reality is that the resources are not being properly harnessed as a result of poor governance, corruption and misplacement of priorities. In most developed countries of the world, the celebrated growth in their economies are credited to the youths who are regarded as the economically active segment of the population (World Bank, 2023). Patel (2001) noted that the relationships between financial difficulties and mental health is a vicious cycle as poor/inadequate income invariably results to high level of stress and reduced access to better health services, malnutrition and other physiological challenges which predisposes one to mental illness. Many of the Nigerian youths seem to be negatively affected more than any other segment of the population as a result of the dwindling income accruable to the government in this period of economic crunch which had resulted to disruption of essential health, nutrition and social services (Partnership for Maternal Newborn and Child Health-PMNC, 2021). What this implies to is that mental illness could emerge in the individual's life as a result of financial difficulties and inability to pay for health promoting resources or treatment /medications. Bhat (2012) noted that owing to the fact that many young people in Nigeria and other developing nations are involved in low level jobs with very low remunerations, this group of people become more prone to frustration especially on the financial pressure needed to support oneself and family resulting to mental illness. The author also observed that the global economic challenges contributed further in making the reward structure of many workers swallowed up by inflation and then making the purchasing power to be so low which is bound to generate anxiety and mental imbalance.

Unemployment also appears to be another formidable factor and a major zone of anxiety among youths in many countries including Nigeria. According to reports from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2023, the youth unemployment figure in Nigeria increased to 7.2% in the second quarter of 2023 from the 4.2% recorded in 2022. The reports further highlighted that within the periods, unemployment among the males occupied 3.5% far below that of the females (5.9%), 8.5% for those with tertiary educational certificates, 5.4% for those with Senior School Certificates, 3.7% for those with Junior Secondary Certificate, 3.0% for those with Primary School Certificates and 2.5% for those with no formal education. This portrays an evidence of stagnation in employment generation for the youths in both rural and urban centers across Nigerian states and which indirectly subject this young people to stress, financial pressure, lower self-esteem and consequently mental illness. In other words, the Nigerian economy which is expected to be booming and stimulating investment/production as well as creating more jobs and better income becomes far from reality (Garba, 2021). Adler and Stewart (2010) however argued that securing employment has its own latent functions on the wellbeing of the individual as it could lead to a more positive mental health. The authors noted that many young people have expressed frustrations and depression which have made them to develop mental health problems as a result of lack of employment opportunities. This situation became so precarious since the onset of the democratic governance in Nigeria in 1999 that had denied the youth opportunities for good jobs (Oladeinde, 2021) and increasing the number of patients admitted into psychiatric hospitals. The Chief Medical Director of the Federal Neuropsychiatric Hospital Yaba, Lagos, recently revealed that in 2023, the hospital recorded one hundred per cent increase in admission of young people with mental illness which the physician attributed to the economic and socio-economic factors in the country (Ogundepo, 2024).

The educational system of a nation could also inject pressure into the lives of the young people. In many societies, majority of the parents/guardians would like to see their children setting a good record in academic performance among their peers without taking cognizance of their abilities. Bhat (2012), argues that academic burden and stress could be a predisposing factor to mental illness among the youths especially those in higher schools/colleges and universities. The author further noted that majority of academic programmes in many parts of Africa countries were designed or tailored towards getting the white-collar jobs which makes the youth to live with high expectations to pursue paper certificates only, so as to qualify for the jobs without caring to acquire some vocational skills.

On the other hand, the disruption of academic calendar and programmes in public educational institutions occasioned by incessant teachers' strikes could be considered as one of the outstanding factors promoting mental illness in many developing countries (Ewa et al, 2023). In Nigeria, for example, the incessant strike action by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and other university based unions including those in polytechnics and colleges of education down to secondary and primary schools seem to have imparted negatively on the mental health of the youths with a record of 25% out of 10,420 students in a study carried out in 2019 (Esan et al, 2019) while in Ethiopia, it ranges from 21.6% to 40.05% (Dachew et al, 2015). The United Nation's International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF, 2020) noted that young people whose educational programmes are disrupted are likely to experience anxiety or depression compared to others who have never experienced such disruptions in most countries. This is because most of the course outlines slated to be covered in three months or more would now be compressed to last for one or two months. In the same vein, Nigeria in particular has witnessed an increasing number of young people seeking for admission into the universities, polytechnics and colleges of education that have limited space for admission thereby subjecting the youths to unbearable pressure and then to use any available means to secure such admission which may in the process affect their mental health negatively. A revelation by Sule (2021) shows that an average of 65% of candidates who applies for admission with the Nigerian Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB) are denied of admission into the universities and other higher institutions in the country annually. The author cited the case of one of the federal universities in Nigeria that recorded 108,917 applications for admission in 2019 and was only able to offer 10.7% admission to candidates out of the total applicants. The implication is that candidates may develop loss of confidence, anxiety or sense of being dysfunctional and mental illness if they keep trying every year without success (Zada et al, 2021).

Louise (2018) however, argues that whereas entering into higher institution could mark the beginning of an exciting life for the individual, many young people undergo a lot of stress capable of developing into mental illness in their struggle to transit from secondary schools to the universities. Zada et al, (2021) argued that gaining admission into the university changes one's life both emotionally and intellectually thus resulting to considerable stress for students to meet up with the academic dealings and the necessary adjustments in the competitive environment. Pedrelli et al (2015) revealed in one of their studies that anxiety disorders are the most prevalent mental problems among university students with approximately 11.9%, followed by depression with about 7-9%. In a related study carried out by Ogunmodede et al (2023), it was revealed that 23.5% of students in Nigerian higher institutions have experienced one form of mental illness or the other as a result of some stressful conditions which may form a trigger for emotional upheavals.

The social relationships of the individuals also count a lot in the development of mental illness among the youths in many societies. The isolation of the young people may encourage them

to engage in risky behaviors and consumption of hyperactive substance which results to mental illness. Studies shows that during the COVID-19 lockdown, the rate of loneliness among the youths increased from 5.8% before the pandemic to 20.8% during the lockdown, a situation that placed many young people into mental health crisis (OECD, 2021).

Mental illness among the youths creates a form of social burden not only to the individual suffering it but to the entire family and the society in general especially when left untreated at the early stage (Uche & Uche, 2012), hence, the need for collective efforts in the treatments. This is one of the assumptions of the Biopsychosocial theory enunciated by George Engel in 1977, which forms the theoretical framework of this study. The theory which is rooted in the General system theory provides a holistic approach to mental illness and states that the personality and the emotional tone of the individual, the surrounding environment and other social parameters do influence manifestation of mental illness (Babalola et al, 2017, Tripathi et al, 2019). In most developed countries for instance, the federal and state laws provide that employment and mental health services be provided to people with mental illness, but this practice is not common in Nigeria and other African countries. The reality that mental illness among the youths is caused by multi-level mechanisms makes the biopsychosocial theory highly relevant for social work intervention. The theory helps social workers to be more holistic and integrative in their attempt to resolve client's problems especially as it relates to mental illness (McInerney, 2015). Uche and Uche (2012) also stated that social work services have had substantial influence on mental health policies of many countries in the areas of advocacy, counseling, linkage to resources and collaborative principles with health care professionals. In other words, social work profession makes an important contribution to mental health services and a crucial component of its development. Similarly, Gould (2010) stated that social work values, skills and knowledge are part of the intervention approaches in mental health policy documents in many advanced countries.

Prior studies concentrated more on the prevalence of mental illness among adolescents with little or no emphasis on its implications for social work practice (Ogbonna et al, 2020, Babasola et al, 2024) while others dwelt on social epidemiology and public awareness of mental illness (Salami, 2019, Ajike et al, 2022. Moreover, only few of the studies were situated in Kwara state. The only related study carried out in the study area dwelt on psychosocial factors associated with psychiatric morbidity among students of higher institutions with no emphasis on social work (Ogunmodede, 2023). This study was initiated to address this gap in knowledge. The study was embedded on the following objectives: (i) To ascertain whether financial hardship and unemployment are socio-economic risk factors for mental illness among youths in Kwara state (ii) To ascertain whether the incessant strikes by teachers/lecturers in public institutions in Nigeria are among the predisposing factors to mental illness among youths in Kwara state (iii) To find out whether negative attitude of the government security personnel and poor social relationships of the individuals are accountable to mental illness among youths in Kwara state (iv) To examine the role undertaken by social workers in addressing cases of mental illness among youths in Kwara state.

Materials and Methods

The study was conducted in Kwara state, North central, Nigeria between the months of May to August, 2023. The choice of Kwara state for the study was informed by the researcher's years of residence in the study area and visits to Government hospitals where many young people having some forms of mental illness were observed. The study adopted survey research design and multi-stage sampling techniques. Kwara state was clustered into three units which aligns with the three senatorial districts (Kwara North, Kwara Central & Kwara South) and one local government

council selected from each (Edu from Kwara north, Kwara south from Kwara central and Isin from Kwara south, i.e., three on the whole) using simple random sampling (balloting). Similarly, from each of the local government council areas, one community preferably the council headquarter was purposively chosen as most activities involving the youths are conducted in the headquarters.

A sample questionnaire with open and close ended items were then administered to 120 respondents (i.e. 40 respondents within the ages of 18-34 years, for each community), who were randomly chosen and where at the end, only 114 (94%) were properly completed and returned while 6 (6%) were declared invalid. The questionnaire administration was done by the researcher and two research assistants who were in the final year degree programme in social work. Informed consent of every participants in the study was obtained after explaining the purpose of the study to the participants. In all, 114 copies of the questionnaire were used for analysis with SPSS computer software (version 21.0). The analysis was done using simple descriptive statistics.

Findings

Table 1: Socio-demographic features of respondents (n=114)

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	59	51.8
Female	55	48.2
Age (in years)		
18-21	16	14.0
22-25	23	20.2
26-29	25	21.9
30-33	36	31.6
34+	14	12.3
Marital status		
Single	77	67.5
Married	34	29.8
Ever married	3	2.7
Educational level		
Non-formal	2	1.8
Primary	8	7.0
Secondary	42	36.8
Tertiary	62	54.4
Religious Affiliation		
Islam	54	47.4
Christianity	41	36.0
Traditional	19	16.6
Employment status		
Gainfully employed	15	13.2
Student	30	26.3
Business	20	17.5
Applicant	49	43.0

Source: Researcher's Field Survey, 2023

Table I shows the socio-demographic features of respondents. Majority of the respondents (59%) were males. The age of respondents ranges from 18-34 years with a greater percentage (31.6%) of respondents being within the ages of 30-33. Respondents' marital status shows that a greater percentage of respondents (67.5%) were single. Similarly, the educational qualifications of respondents show that a greater proportion (54.4%) possess tertiary educational certificates, only a small percentage (1.8%) indicated non-formal education. A greater percentage of respondents (47.4%) were found to be adherents of Islamic religion while 36% and 16.6% of respondents respectively were Christians and traditional religious worshippers respectively. Most of the respondents (43%) were applicants, only 13.2% of respondents were found to be gainfully employed. This is one of the major nightmares of the Nigerian youths in the contemporary period.

Table 2: Relationships between socio-economic risk factors and occurrence of mental illness among youths in Kwara state

Socio-economic Predictors	Occurrence of mental illness				
	Very often	Often	Rare	Very Often	Total
1. Financial Hardship					
Strongly Agree	44	18	1	0	63
Agree		18	8	1	28
Undecided		7	5	0	12
Disagree		2	2	1	7
Strongly Disagree		3	1	0	4
	74	34	3	3	114
2. Unemployment					
Strongly Agree	28	20	2	1	51
Agree		23	17	1	42
Undecided		5	8	1	14
Disagree		1	4	0	5
Strongly Disagree		0	2	0	2
	57	51	4	2	114
3. Teachers'/Lecturers' strike					
Strongly Agree	29	35	2	2	68
Agree		21	11	1	33
Undecided		4	6	0	10
Disagree		0	2	0	2
Strongly Disagree		1	0	0	1
	55	54	3	2	114
4. Threats by Government's Security personnel					
Strongly Agree	23	28	2	2	55
Agree		20	19	1	40
Undecided		5	6	1	12
Disagree		2	3	0	5
Strongly Disagree		2	0	0	2
	52	56	4	2	114

5. **Poor social relationships**

Strongly Agree	31	26	2	1	60	
Agree		20	23	1	0	44
Undecided		4	2	1	0	7
Disagree		0	2	0	0	2
Strongly Disagree		1	0	0	0	1
		56	53	4	1	114

Source: Researcher's field survey, 2023

Table 2 above shows the relationships between socio-economic risk factors and occurrence of mental illness among the youths in Kwara state. An overwhelming majority of 91 respondents (79.8%) indicated that financial hardship is one of major socio-economic risk factors accountable to the increasing rate of mental illness among Nigerian youths especially in Kwara state, however, 11 respondents (9.6%) did not subscribe to the opinion in addition to 12 others (10.5%) who did not disclose their views. Similarly, 93 respondents that is; 81.6% indicated that unemployment was another socio-economic risk factor to mental illness among youths as only 7 respondents or 6.1% disagreed to that assertion. More so, 101 respondents (88.6%) agreed that incessant strikes by teachers/lecturers in both higher institutions and other basic educational institutions forms another socio-economic risk factor to mental illness among the young people in Nigeria. Only 3 respondents (2.6%) disagreed to the opinion while the remaining 10 respondents (8.8%) did not disclose their view.

In the same vein, 95 respondents (83.3%) out of the total sample were of the view that threats unleashed to the youths by government's security personnel without any justification cannot be ignored with only 7 respondents (6.1%) disagreeing to the assertion. Finally, 104 participants or 91.2%% of the entire sample agreed that poor social relationships often result to many young persons having mental illness with only a small proportion (2.6%) not subscribing to the opinion.

Table 3: Respondents' view on the role of social workers in tackling mental illness among youths in Kwara state

Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Advocacy	30	26.3
Counseling	50	43.9
Linkage to resource system	13	11.4
Collaborative services	14	12.3
Others (specify)	7	6.1
	114	100

Source: Researcher's Field survey, 2023

Table 3 above shows respondents' views on the role of social workers in ameliorating the problem of mental illness among youths in Kwara state. A greater percentage of respondents (43.9%) indicated counseling as the most prominent role played by social workers in the amelioration of mental illness among youths in Kwara State while 26.3% and 11.4% indicated advocacy and linkage to the necessary resource systems. A small proportion of the sample (6.1%) however indicated others such as referral and educational services.

Discussion

From the responses gathered, it becomes obvious that a great number of socio-economic risk factors have played immense role in promoting cases of mental illness among young people in Nigeria, especially in Kwara State. Findings emerging from the study reveals that financial hardship is one of the major socio-economic factors underlying mental illness among youths especially in Kwara State with 79.8% of respondents making the revelation. This finding corroborates the reports submitted by the World Health Organization (2021) that the exposure of the youths to poverty has been one of the leading causes of mental illness worldwide. Similarly, one of the studies done by Esan et al (2019) also identified financial stress as a major risk factor of mental illness among the youths than any other factors.

The implication is that when there is minimal access to financial resources for the individual's wellbeing, stress or emotional upheaval may set in and which may equally trigger mental illness. Unemployment was also reported by respondents as the second leading socio-economic risk factor pointed out by respondents (81.6%) as responsible for the escalation of mental illness among youths in Kwara State. This finding aligns with the view of Jibril (2020) that majority of Nigerian youths are vulnerable to mental illness as a result of some socio-economic challenges such as unemployment or limited employment opportunities. The implication is that staying without a job may generate significant emotional distress and could dispose the individuals to mental illness. In other words, once the individual is not actively employed, he/she becomes vulnerable to anxiety of not satisfying the basic needs and which may trigger mental illness.

Going further, 88.6% of respondents revealed that incessant strikes embarked upon by teachers/lecturers of our educational institutions are also among the socio-economic forces in the occurrence of mental illness among the Nigerian youths. Olanrewaju et al (2022) stated that since 1996, there is hardly any year that university lecturers and other teachers in Nigeria had not gone on strike which comes in the form of warning, indefinite or total/comprehensive strike. Falade et al (2020) also noted that during strike, the academic performance of students tends to drop and abuse of substance/alcohol heightened with its consequent development of mental illness heightened. This implies that when students are made to stay away from school for a longer period, there is the likelihood of having poor thinking capacity, loss of concentration, decline in memory, anxiety and depression, which in turn, may give birth to mental illness.

Study findings also revealed that undue threats by government security personnel is among the socio-economic risk factors for mental illness among Nigerian youths as 83.3% of respondents made the declaration. Moody (2020) remarked that the use of torture and ill treatment of the youths by police officers and other security personnel in Nigeria is an absolute disregard for international human rights laws and standards. More so, the poor social relationships maintained by the youths in their day to day interactions were discovered to be part of the socio-economic risk factors that could invoke mental illness among the youths in Kwara State with 91.2% of respondents making the revelation. This is in keeping with findings of a study carried out by Salami (2019), which reveals that lack of social relationships especially among family members could disrupt the provisions of basic necessities of life for its vulnerable members thereby making them to become dysfunctional leading to the emergence of mental illness. Respondents' view also confirmed that social workers play some critical roles in the amelioration of mental illness especially among the youths and other segments of Nigerian society. Gould (2010) stated that mental illness is a consequence of social circumstances that social workers can intervene to ameliorate the distress. A greater percentage of respondents (43.9% and 26.3%) indicated counseling and advocacy as the most crucial role of social workers in this respect while 12.3% and 11.4% reported collaboration

with other care service professional and linkage to resource system. This finding shows that social work profession could make important contributions in proffering solutions on issues related to mental illness.

Conclusion

The increasing rate of mental illness among youths in Nigeria especially in Kwara State occasioned by socio-economic risk factors such as financial hardship, unemployment, incessant strikes by teachers/lecturers, poor social relationships amongst others have become an issue of great concern to policy makers and every well-meaning individual in Nigeria. It is therefore necessary that all hands should be on deck to address this situation and rescue the youths who are regarded as the leaders of tomorrow.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are hereby advanced;

- (a) There is the need to revamp the economy and create more employment opportunities for the teeming population of Nigerian youths to cushion the effect of financial crisis.
- (b) There is also the need to avert all forms of strikes in our educational system that tend to keep the young people idle at home for months or years.
- (c) Social work education and mental health should be introduced as a compulsory subject in both primary and secondary schools as well as being a part of the general study courses offered by students in our higher institutions.

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