



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 a limited 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 found that health problems began after the pandemic outbreak, and 43% of parents found their children's problems to be very or extremely challenging. Surprisingly, 73% of parents reported that they had never heard of or were not at all familiar with the services or information available on the NJ Department of Health websites. These results suggest that parents need more support and information services during pandemic outbreaks. The dissemination of information needs to be more widely available to the general population.

LITERATURE REVIEW

- The Covid-19 pandemic has changed 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 an increase in mental health issues among 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 and children cope with the mental health challenges their children were limited to providing self-help resources (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021).
- The lockdown, social isolation, and uncertainty have created a breeding ground for stress. Children have been impacted as they are isolated from their friends and peers, which is vital for their social development (children's hospital, 2020). The 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 resources were reserved for saving lives, it is reasonable to think that mental health services were relegated to a lower priority for themselves.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

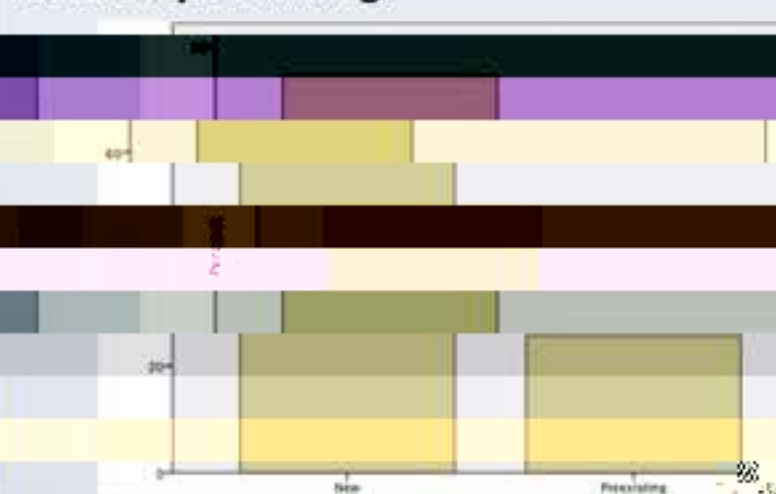
1. Was there a spike in children's mental health issues during the Covid-19 pandemic?
2. How familiar are you with the services or information available on the NJ Department of Health websites?
3. Did NJ offer adequate mental health services during the Covid-19 pandemic?

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 consisted of 2% Hispanic, 9% Native American or Alaskan Native, and 43% White. Additionally, 25% of the participants had a household income below \$31,000.

RESULTS

Was this change in your child's mental health even worse than pre-existing?



"The Covid pandemic was really hard on my oldest. He has autism and he really struggled with it."

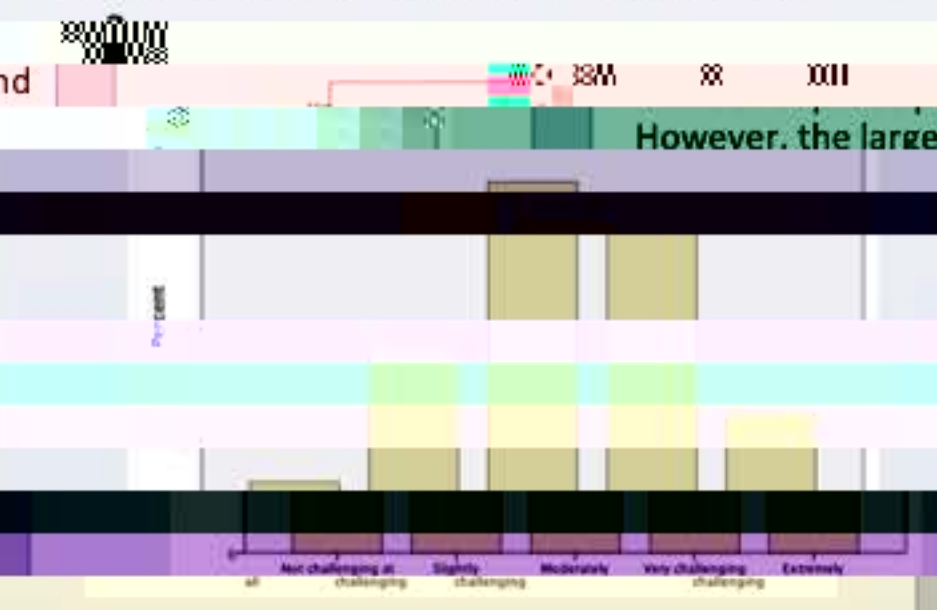
"I think the biggest change in my household was in my oldest. She was 11, going on 12, when the pandemic started. She was off from friends, her mental health was really affected."

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

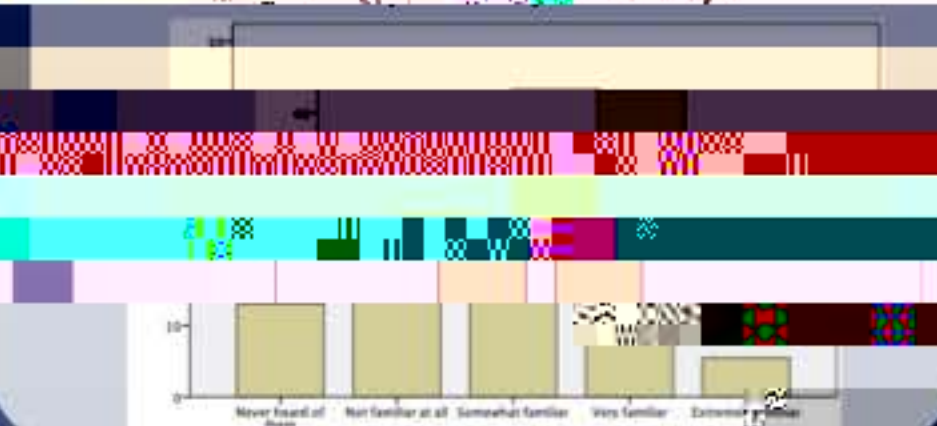


How challenging was your child's problem for you?



"This 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 are you with the services and information available on the websites of the NJ Department of Health and Human Services (NJDHHS)?



DISCUSSION

While pandemics and natural calamities that result in widespread and family isolation have become more frequent due to global conditions and the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important for mental health programs to be implemented effectively to disseminate information about mental health challenges of their children's mental health problems. These challenges, if not addressed, can lead to long-term life issues. Our study had limitations, including the use of a convenient sampling method that cannot ensure a representative sample, the potential for biased results in the online survey, and the anonymity provided by the online survey method may encourage genuine reporting of children's mental health issues.

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