

A STUDY ON MENTAL WELL-BEING AMONG CHILDREN WITH REFERENCE TO MELAVASAL, MADURAI

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Abstract

This study examines the mental well-being of children living in slum areas, where poor sanitation, overcrowding, and limited resources severely affect their development. These children often face emotional challenges such as fear, insecurity, low self-esteem, and trauma due to unstable family environments and exposure to violence. They also lack access to mental health support. Despite these hardships, some children demonstrate resilience through peer relationships and community engagement. The study highlights the urgent need for mental health interventions, supportive environments, and policy measures to improve their quality of life. Understanding their experiences is essential to ensuring their emotional well-being and future growth.

Keywords: Children, Mental well-being, Urban Deprived Area, Urban poverty

Introduction

Well-being is a multi-dimensional concept encompassing physical, psychological, social, and spiritual aspects of human life. It reflects a state in which individuals are healthy, emotionally balanced, socially connected, and spiritually aware. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental health is "a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and can contribute to his or her community." This interconnected understanding of health highlights how well-being in one area such as physical health can influence others like emotional stability and cognitive function.

Mental well-being has been acknowledged as a global priority under the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly in Goal 3: "Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages." Target 3.4 specifically addresses the reduction of premature mortality through the prevention and treatment of mental health issues by 2030. This underscores the growing recognition of mental health as a vital component of public health.

Diener & Suh (1996) have identified three key approaches to understanding well-being: the normative approach, based on cultural and ethical values; the preference approach, centered on individual desires; and the experiential approach, which considers subjective life satisfaction. Across these perspectives, well-being is seen as essential to a fulfilling human experience.

In vulnerable populations such as urban slum dwellers, the concept of well-being becomes particularly critical. Melavasal, a notified slum located in the heart of Madurai near Periyar Bus Stand, is home to nearly 4,000 families, many of whom work as daily wage laborers, rag-pickers, or street vendors. Though some residents were relocated to RCC housing structures in Avaniyapuram under government schemes, the community still struggles with overcrowded living conditions, poor sanitation, lack of clean water, and improper waste management. These challenges directly affect residents' mental and physical health, especially children.

Children in slum environments are among the most vulnerable. Living in unsafe and unsanitary conditions, with limited access to education and healthcare, they are at higher risk of emotional stress, trauma, and cognitive delays. WHO (2003) has emphasized that these adverse living conditions significantly impair a child's healthy development. The United Nations defines slums as lacking essential services, which compounds the risks faced by children growing up in such environments. Globally, over 30% of the urban population resides in slums, with children forming over 60% of this group in the least-developed countries (UN-Habitat, 2003; Unger, 2013).

As Chambers (2005) notes, well-being encompasses not only material aspects but also social, psychological, and spiritual experiences. For children, the impact of slum life is profound. Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory emphasizes the importance of early developmental stages—trust, autonomy, initiative, and industry in building emotional resilience. Disruption in these stages can lead to long-term mental health issues. In slums like Melavasal, children face constant exposure to violence, neglect, and instability, which hinders their emotional growth. However, some children demonstrate resilience through peer support and community interaction.

Review of Literature

Hijol, Salma, and Sarker (2024)- found that a significant number of slum dwellers suffer from mental health issues. The researchers emphasized that poverty, overcrowding, limited access to basic services, and unhygienic conditions are major contributors to psychological distress, particularly among children.

Martin et al. (2024) conducted a qualitative study focusing on the mental health challenges faced by children living in the slums of New Delhi. This research revealed a complex interplay of poverty, violence, academic stress, family instability, and inadequate access to mental health services as key determinants of poor mental health outcomes.

Unger (2013) highlighted that slums house over 30% of the global population, with children comprising over 60% in the least developed countries. These populations face extreme deprivation, exposing children to elevated mental health risks due to poor living conditions and a lack of basic support systems.

Nandhini and Sathyamurthi 2016 highlighted that mental well-being among adolescents is influenced by multiple factors including family structure, socio-economic background, peer pressure, and exposure to violence. Researchers found that while a majority of adolescents showed normal prosocial behavior, a significant percentage exhibited borderline or abnormal symptoms of hyperactivity, emotional difficulties, and peer problems

Aim

To study the mental well-being of children living in the Melavasal urban deprived area in Madurai.

Objectives

- To study the socio and economic conditions of the slum children
- To study the level of mental well-being among the slum children
- To suggest measures to improve the mental well-being of slum children.

The researcher has adopted a descriptive research design for this study as it tries to describe the mental well-being of the slum children. Simple Random Sampling technique was applied to select 30 samples. The method that was used in the collection of data is in the interview. The scale

developed by Warwick-Edinburgh for Mental Well-being was used to collect data. The method used for collecting data was a face-to-face interview.

Results & Analysis

Demographic findings

In the present study, 24% of the respondents are found to be between the ages of 12 to 14 years. Among them, 21% are girls. In terms of birth order, 17% belong to the second birth order. Regarding their fathers' occupation, 15% are engaged in scavenging. About 25% of the respondents reported that their fathers have a monthly income ranging from ₹5,000 to ₹10,000. Furthermore, 22% of the respondents expressed that they feel more confident in all stages of life. It is also noted that 16% of their mothers are housewives, and 22% of the respondents are currently pursuing higher education.

The study found an association between the order of birth and the level of well-being. However, there is no significant association between age, gender, mother's occupation, and class of study with the level of well-being.

Level of Wellbeing

The study reveals that 40% of the children reported a moderate level of well-being, while 33% expressed a high level of well-being. However, 26% of the respondents reported low levels of well-being. These findings suggest that although a majority of the children possess a fair sense of emotional and mental stability, a notable portion of them remains emotionally vulnerable and may require focused support and intervention to enhance their overall mental health.

Demographic Influences on Children's Mental Well-being

The findings of the study provide insights into the factors associated with the mental well-being of children in the selected slum area. Gender-wise distribution revealed that although more girls reported moderate to high levels of well-being compared to boys, the chi-square test ($p = 0.343$) indicates no statistically significant association between gender and well-being. This suggests that gender may not play a decisive role in the well-being levels of the respondents.

When examining age and emotional states, the majority of children aged 12–14 reported feeling relaxed rarely or none of the time, which may point to the identity-related stress and role confusion often experienced during early adolescence. In contrast, children aged 15–17 exhibited a more even distribution in their responses, suggesting slightly better emotional regulation or coping skills. Interestingly, when asked about optimism regarding the future, an overwhelming number of respondents, particularly in the 12–14 age group, reported feeling optimistic “all of the time,” reflecting a developmental stage filled with hope, enthusiasm, and relatively fewer real-world responsibilities.

The analysis of birth order and emotional relaxation showed that firstborn children were more likely to report feeling relaxed “none of the time” or “rarely.” This could be linked to greater expectations or responsibilities placed upon them within the family. Second-born children, however, showed a more balanced distribution across all levels of relaxation, suggesting they may face comparatively less pressure. The only third-born child in the sample reported feeling relaxed “all of the time,” possibly indicating a more relaxed upbringing due to a more experienced parenting approach or fewer demands.

Regarding the educational level, students pursuing higher education predominantly reported feeling good about themselves “all of the time,” indicating improved self-awareness and

exposure to motivational environments. High school students also reflected a rising trend in self-esteem, whereas the single respondent from the primary level reported full positivity, likely influenced by early-stage optimism and minimal social comparison.

Suggestions

- Improve Play Areas for Children-Build and maintain safe parks and playgrounds so children have space to play, relax, and enjoy themselves.
- Create Awareness of Good Parenting-Organize sessions to help parents understand how to support their children's mental and emotional needs.
- Teach Children About Happy Schooling-Make schools a fun and stress-free place by using creative teaching methods and encouraging positive learning experiences.

Conclusion

The study titled "Mental Well-being Among Children with Reference to Melavasal Urban Deprived Area" examines the link between socioeconomic deprivation and children's psychological health. It found that while many children displayed moderate to high levels of well-being and optimism, younger adolescents (12–14 years) showed emotional unrest, particularly difficulties in feeling relaxed—likely tied to early adolescent challenges. Interestingly, although girls reported higher well-being than boys, gender was not statistically significant. This study provides valuable insights into the mental well-being of children living in slum areas, specifically in the Melavasal Slum.

Additionally, the study may contribute to a better understanding of the factors that influence children's mental health and well-being, helping educators, policymakers, and social workers to design more effective interventions and support systems. The study emphasizes the inclusion of emotional well-being in school curriculum and the development of child-focused community programs. Despite its limited sample size, it offers important insights for shaping effective interventions. Future research should expand to larger, more diverse groups and adopt a longitudinal approach to better understand changes over time.

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