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Impact of COVID – 19 on mental health of institutionalized children: A social work perspective

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Abstract
A viral outbreak of COVID – 19 pandemic has distressed the world. The spread of the disease led severe disturbances in the socio-economic and health system of India. The rich and poor have been equally disturbed by the pandemic as regard to in terms of their mental health. The lockdown measures had a huge impact on the vulnerable strata, especially children in need of care and protection. In this regard, the article explores the vigorous dynamics deplorable condition of the intuitional care provided to children in need of care and protection who are residing in child care institutions in India. The aim of this paper is to bring out the impact of COVID – 19 on mental health of institutionalized children from a Social Work Perspective. The method of systematic literature review has been adopted. The content analysis method is used to identify the themes related to the COVID – 19 and its impact on institutionalized children. Critical evaluation of review of literature has been done by analyzing published articles, reports, webinars proceedings to bring out the thematic conceptualization of the article. Social workers plays an important role in the institutions and has a vital role in reintegrating these children back to the society. The constant counseling became essential in this pandemic and the initiatives of social workers under psycho-social support system for child care institutions was a great strength for the system.

Keywords: Children in need of care and protection, Child Care Institutions, COVID – 19 and psycho-social support

Introduction
Children are the most vulnerable strata of society. As per the Census of India (2011), there are around 158 million children who are in the age group of 0-6 years of age in India and there are in all 39% of the population constitute children. According to The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Amendment Act, 2021, children who are vulnerable and are in need of care and protection are placed in child care institutions. There are 9,589 Child Care Institutions in India sheltering more than 370,000 children (MoWCD, 2018) [6].

The pandemic endured very dangerous threat to mental health globally. Children and adult being more vulnerable to their mental health impact related to their development stages were more prone to infection, home quarantine, school closures and extra-curricular activities and the most important was physical distancing. The research portrayed that there were more depressive and anxiety symptoms among the children below the age of 19 years during the COVID -19 pandemic. Many research studies testified that children were facing mental health deterioration due to pandemic control measures. The better mental health resulted with the physical exercise, positive family relationship and social support. (Samji, H., *et al* 2021) [8].

The various studies have described that there is more vulnerability to the emotional effects of traumatic events if there have been disruptions in the daily lives of the children (Jones *et al*., 1994; McLean, 2016). Children had to struggle with adjustments to routines, with the closure of child care, school, home quarantine and physical distancing. The preventive measure have impacted the children including infants and toddlers as they observe their environment and people around. Taking on this into consideration the children reacts to the stress of their people around like parents, care givers, peers and others (Bartlett *et al*., 2020). In the midst of COVID 19 pandemic, children are more vulnerable as it is stressful and it can lead to traumatic stress and endangered the children with insecurities leading them to helplessness and vulnerability (HelpGuide, 2020).

School often plays an important role to help the children cope with mental health challenges and behavioural issues and school routine which are essential for them.

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The pandemic and total lockdown has increased the economic burden and these children are at higher risk of abuse. As pandemic hold for more than a year it was crucial to provide psycho social support system to the children who are vulnerable (Lee, J. 2020) [5].

Providing care and protection to children has been a daunting task for India since decades after independence. The growing focus on enactments of various schemes, statutes and provisions related to care and protections of children is evident from constant efforts of Government in bringing various legislations and schemes at state and national levels. Besides this, India being a signatory of conventions like United Nations Convention of the Rights of Child (UNCRC) shows its efforts to strive and work towards ensuring rights of children. The UNCRC is the abiding documents towards commitment of ensuring rights of children in their best interest (Roy, 2021) [7].

The Juvenile Justice system has laid stressed put emphasis on making utmost efforts to ensure and protect the best interest of children for their overall development. To achieve this important objective, the existing facilities may not be adequate. Furthermore, coordination, networking and linkages with various experts, professionals, certain institutions and civil society organizations are desirable who are well-versed with their concerned area of intervention. The services which cater the need of mental health serviced for children, parents and staff are required, which may include one to one and group counselling, need based therapy, regular consultation and supervision by a psychiatrist (MoWCD 2018) [6].

At the national level, the statistics shows that linkages of Child Care Institutions with external professionals are not so much encouraging. It may be due to the issue of non – availability of such kind of external services. The linkages with the external or referral services would help the children in need of care and protection for their overall development. Devising proper linkages with the professional institutions and experts would benefit the children. Whereas, lacking would deprive the proper development of the children and which leads to deprivation of their basic rights (MoWCD 2018) [6]. The referral services are very essential for the all-round development of the children in need of care and protection. The specialized professional or the agency would cater the special needs of the children.

Table 1: Percentage of Child Care Institutions having linkages with external professionals

States/Ut's	Mental Health Services	Education	Vocational Training	Life Skills Based Workshop	Recreational Activity	Health Including Speech/ Physiotherapy	Legal Aid Services	De- Addiction Services
A&N	0	0	11.8	5.88	11.8	5.9	0	0
Andhra Pradesh	30.2	45.5	26.0	25.33	57.7	22.7	7.9	2.1
Arunachal Pradesh	12.5	25.0	25.0	25.00	37.5	12.5	12.5	0.0
Assam	25.2	31.3	24.4	12.21	22.1	21.4	17.6	8.4
Bihar	9.5	15.5	4.8	3.57	10.7	9.5	13.1	6.0
Chandigarh	93.8	93.8	75.0	6.25	75.0	93.8	75.0	50.0
Chhattisgarh	27.9	25.4	23.8	18.85	30.3	11.5	9.8	4.9
Delhi	64.0	69.6	44.8	57.60	64.0	63.2	60.8	18.4
Goa	72.9	75.7	65.7	74.29	85.7	47.1	27.1	12.9
Gujarat	37.9	45.6	42.0	32.54	56.2	35.5	29.0	26.0
Haryana	77.2	63.3	58.2	74.68	81.0	72.2	54.4	19.0
Himachal Pradesh	17.4	13.0	13.0	10.87	17.4	19.6	8.7	10.9
J&K	20.2	12.4	6.9	7.46	15.2	6.1	19.1	22.7
Jharkhand	21.3	36.2	26.0	22.83	29.9	17.3	19.7	9.4
Karnataka	36.0	37.1	30.3	38.75	57.8	26.5	17.9	7.6
Kerala	32.9	33.6	23.6	31.72	47.8	14.0	9.0	3.7
Madhya Pradesh	41.8	45.2	25.3	22.60	49.3	21.2	11.6	6.2
Maharashtra	25.6	28.9	24.0	24.69	38.0	13.2	17.4	6.1
Manipur	6.5	19.4	33.9	11.29	37.1	8.1	9.7	6.5
Meghalaya	32.1	20.2	31.0	46.43	69.0	19.0	35.7	11.9
Mizoram	65.2	54.3	28.3	50.00	84.8	47.8	21.7	10.9
Nagaland	4.5	14.9	26.9	47.76	55.2	1.5	7.5	1.5
Odisha	22.7	24.7	30.7	26.46	43.6	19.7	11.9	10.1
Puducherry	79.1	89.0	11.0	54.95	70.3	17.6	4.4	1.1
Punjab	67.1	67.1	35.6	23.29	52.1	68.5	47.9	12.3
Rajasthan	45.1	46.9	48.4	36.10	70.4	41.9	25.6	10.8
Sikkim	34.8	73.9	13.0	21.74	69.6	52.2	34.8	13.0
Tamil Nadu	36.6	43.5	25.4	30.12	57.4	24.7	16.0	11.2
Telangana	22.3	27.3	21.1	25.91	30.4	16.0	10.9	4.7
Tripura	40.9	36.4	36.4	29.55	56.8	9.1	34.1	15.9
Uttar Pradesh	45.3	50.6	34.1	33.53	53.5	38.2	27.6	10.6
Uttarakhand	48.2	44.6	37.5	41.07	26.8	35.7	1.8	10.7
West Bengal	38.2	74.6	57.5	24.46	74.6	35.2	24.2	5.5
Total	33.2	38.3	27.8	29.39	49.4	22.4	16.7	8.3

Source: MoWCD Report 2018 Part II) [6]

The above data represents the States and Union territories in India with respect to Mental Health Services for children in need of care and protection. The data reveals that the Chandigarh (93.8%) has the highest percentage of child care institutes or children's home where children were provided mental health services and where staff and parents were reportedly being called in, followed by Pondicherry at 79.1% and Haryana at 77.2%.

Comprehensive well – being and health of children living in the child care institutions is extremely central and this includes not only overall physical health but mental health as well. The report throws sheds light on the emphasis of (not needed) on ensuring the happiness, growth and overall development of children in child care institutes/homes, timely assessments and intervention is necessary. During the COVID – 19 pandemic these linkages and referral services were hindered. Initially most of the children in the child care institutions were not been able to attend life skill based workshops and recreational activities. The schools were shut and children were confined to the walls of the institutions. The mental health of these children got affected and their coping skills were not up to the mark and it resulted disruption in their day to day activities.

Concept of Child Welfare and Child Care Institutions
Child welfare in simple terminology means the well-being of the children in all types of situations. They should not only be protected but well- cared also. The child should be provided with all the essential services for the overall physical, emotional, intellectual and mental growth. In order to have a healthy nation it is necessary that child is provided with all the basic services boosting for his physical, mental, emotional and intellectual growth (Bhattacharya, S., 2008) [2]. The development of children is as important as the development of material resources. The best way to develop national human resources is to take care of children. Children are considered a supremely important asset of our nation. Every developed nation or developing nation links their future with the status of the child. The development of the child is an essential and has to be taken care of today by providing the conducive environment to his social, mental and physical health. If protection of children are not ensured timely, it may have an immense impact on children's lives and cause an endless loss for the Nation.

Children who are under need of care and protection are placed in children homes and children who are in conflict with law are placed under observation homes, special homes and place of safety. The ICPS also lays down the hierarchy for various agencies responsible to ensure the execution of provisions as laid down under the scheme and thereby assisting to execute the provisions laid down under the J.J. Act, 2015 (Modi, K., Das, A. K., & Mandela 2020)

Impact of COVID – 19 on Children
Stress has an effect on children even before they are born. During stress, parents, particularly pregnant mothers, are more prone to psychological vulnerability and experience depression and anxiety which is linked biologically to the well-being of the fetus. This course may be said as antenatal stress or depression where pregnant mother face lack of social support as well as different kind of abuse from their partners (Biaggi *et al*., 2016) [3]. (This sentence has to be reframed according to heading) The pandemic too had an effect on the well-being of the pregnant mothers and their expected children. The preventive lockdown measures had impact on social as well as emotional development of the children. The studies show that during pandemic, it was found that younger children aged 3 to 6 years old were having symptoms of clinginess and the fear of family members getting infected than older children of aged 6 to 18 years. Whereas the older children were experiencing anxiety and distractions. They were asking about COVID – 19 and

spread of its infection. Although, severity of psychological conditions increased in all the age group of children like, irritability, inattentiveness, clinging behavior and anxiety (Vinner *et al*., 2020). Based on the experiences of the parents and relevant information gathered from them, it was found that children were fearful and felt uncertain and isolated. The children had poor appetite, agitated, disturbed sleep patterns and nightmares. Poor appetite and separation anxiety from their dear ones (Jiao *et al*., 2020).

Methodology
The researcher conducted a review of articles through online search engines like google scholar, pubmed, web of science on impact of COVID 19 on mental health of vulnerable children published in English and have thematically organized them. The content analysis method was used to identify the major themes related to the impact of COVID – 19 on mental health and its impact on institutionalized children. Critical evaluation of review of literature has been done in terms of published articles, reports, newspaper articles to bring out thematic conceptualization of the article. Further, literature review was carried out to understand the problems of the child care institutions. In this regard article explores the impact of COVID- 19 on the mental health of the children under institutional care. The article cannot be generalized, it tries to shed light on the preliminary research of COVID-19' and its impact on mental health of the children under institutional care and provides the center stage towards its discussion.

Challenges for Childcare Institutions and Children
It is observed that COVID-19 crisis would increase the number of children in child care institutions that would in return make the management of the CCI more challenging. The pandemic resulted in socio- economic problems and would turn more than 65 million children into poverty and approximately adding to 386 million children in 2019 to vulnerability (United Nations 2020). The school closures and due to unaffordability to be in schools would lead number of school dropouts, child labour and forced child marriages and issues of trafficking and violence of children. This would result in rescue and rehabilitation needs and admission into child care institutions would enormously increase.

Funding from the concerned departments would be restricted and limited to meet immediate needs. The dependency would be increased on local donation. According to Ministry of Women and Child Development (2018), only 42.3% of CCIs received funds through government grants, and 23.4% and 14.8% through foreign sources and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) respectively. It is pertinent to mention that 56.8% of funds are received through means of individual donations, which, in this current economic crisis, have drastically dropped. There is a lot to be done in terms of networking and coordination with various experts, professional institutes for services such as educational, health and skill training. In this report, it was found that only 27% of CCIs in India have linkages in terms of vocational training, 16.7% for legal training, 33.2% in terms of mental health and 22.4% for health services respectively (MoWCD, 2018) [6]. For educational, recreational and de-addiction services, the figures stand at 38.3%, 49.4% and 8.3% respectively. Conversely, Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS),

created in 2009–2010, released only 44% of the funds allocated in the year 2019 (till December 2019) under this scheme as against 79% released in 2018–2019 (Mazumdar, 2020). Concurrently, CCIs in India can receive funding only after applying for it they need to submit specified budget proposal that undergoes tight, lengthy scrutiny as a part of approval process. The difficult and time consuming process of grant approval often fails to deliver funding at appropriate times when the CCIs need it most.

Mental Health Concerns
COVID-19 has led an environment of uncertainty to deal with its consequences this has instilled fear, anxiety and trauma among the children in child care institutions. Social distancing can trigger the previous experiences of abandonment and other psychosomatic symptoms which can reawaken loneliness. The studies shows that children even find difficulties to adopt safety guidelines like frequent hand washing, wearing masks and safe distancing from one another. The studies also revealed that there is an increase of peer violence, physical abuse, aggressive behavior and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (El Koumi *et al*., 2012). This may be due to the lack of group interactions, recreational sessions, and not following a regular routine and non – visiting of external professionals. Maltreatment under institutional care has a negative implications on children (Johnson *et al*., 2006) that may lead to post – traumatic stress disorder and depression. Due to COVID – 19 there is an isolation and non-connectivity in children with the peer groups can lead to serious issues in mental health that can have prolonged effects on the cognitive development of the children (Dphil *et al*., 2020). The pandemic has affected mental health of institutionalized children. It may have a long-term effect. Not only children living in child care institutions but also children living with parents too have behavioral issues and mental health problems. Due to the vulnerability these children are in need of care and protection and pandemic has increased their issues and concerns related to mental health.

Social work interventions with children
The social work interventions with children living in child care institutions are of utmost important during this crucial time. The constant counseling became an essential part in these institutes and the initiatives of social workers under psycho-social support system for child care institutions was a great strength. Psychotherapy also helps these children in variety of ways. They are been given emotional support and how to resolve conflicts with their peers and people and understand their feelings, emotion and problems, and try to take out the solutions for their problems with the help of social workers. The goals and objectives of the therapy may be specific related to their change in behaviour or to improve relations with their peers or family, care giver or even more specific like in terms of dealing with anxiety, depression and inculcating better self-esteem etc.
There is need to formulate a suitable care plan through need-based assessment of the family socio-economic background. As a part of the continuum of care must be made before children are deinstitutionalized Post COVID - 19. Non-government organization and government should take initiatives under industrial partnerships with corporations and vocational training schools for young adults in aftercare for job placements. There should be a

training for the caregivers to handle the pandemic or disaster situation at the time of their recruitment. Studies have shown that high quality care provided by care givers of these institutions are essential for their emotional support and social competence and reduced behavioral issues (Burchinal, Vandergift *et al*, 2010; Curby *et al*, 2013). In an another intervention the study in Latin America showed improved caregiver-children interaction by being sensitive with the children and positive effect on their overall development with the staff trainings (Lecannelier *et al*. 2014; McCall *et al*. 2010).
The importance of mental health care services and experts like counsellors, social workers, psychiatric practitioners are pertinent in post COVID-19 era. Counselling at regular intervals and monitoring, recording and supervising the daily activities of children are of utmost importance to measure the progress and development of institutionalized children. Initiatives like tele counselling, tele-medicine delivery, online monitoring are some of the initiatives that have been taken to ensure psycho-social support for children in CCIs (Amnesty India International, 2020). There is a need to have regular interaction with children, ensuring that they follow the daily routine, understanding and dealing with negative behavioral symptoms are some the ways of intervention that caregivers must undertake in order to ensure emotional and psychological health of children in institutions during COVID-19 times. Considering best interest of the child, the initiatives should be child centric and rehabilitative practices for children at risk must be child -specific and should be built on social casework as methodology.

Conclusion
The social inequality is associated with the problems of mental health. The COVID 19 pandemic and preventive lockdown measures worldwide has experienced economic turn- down. Looking at the developing countries with the complete lockdown, the poor children had faced deprivation of nutrition and the protection. The elongated period of stress can have long term implications on the development of the children. For the developing country like India, which has largest child population in the world, the lockdown had severely impacted 40 million children especially from weaker section of the society.
There has been an unprecedented rise of 50 percent in calls received on Childline 1098 since the lockdown in India began (PTI, 2020). It further induces to probe the number of child victims in their own homes. The sudden halt arising out of lockdown measures imposed by the Government has put a large number of poor and migrant families having sudden stoppage and no source of daily wages to feed themselves and their families. The frustration and feeling of helplessness coupled with reason of displacement has resulted in increased conflicts and various forms of violence towards children. This kind of environment make children more vulnerable and prone to depression, anxiety, fear, anger and suicide (Jiao *et al*., 2020; Petito *et al*., 2020; Solantaus *et al*., 2020). The closure of schools and economic adversaries in the families may compel children and adolescents to work as child labor or work in any hazardous conditions in order to ease the pressure of economic dependence of their families. Children who are without parents are more prone and vulnerable to this type of situations (United Nations, 2020).

The initiative to offer distance learning or online mode of courses to students by many schools is an appreciable effort but in this the underprivileged children who do not have the basic infrastructure to be part of this new mode of learning are left out. The lack of stimulation and having no access to online resource material to study for these underprivileged children has resulted in a stark "digital divide." (McQuillan and Neill, 2009) in their study pointed out that the girls in underprivileged families have lesser access to gadgets in comparison to boys which further diminishes their involvement and contribution in digital platforms of learning. This inequality in gender may result in increase of dropouts among girls after the lockdown measures are lifted (Cooper, 2020; PTI, 2020).

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