

Child and Adolescent Mental Health in Haiti



Developing Long-Term Mental Health Services After the 2010 Earthquake

Rupinder K. Legha, MD^{a,b,*}, Martine Solages, MD^c

KEYWORDS

• Haiti • Earthquake • Child mental health • Structural violence • Child protection

KEY POINTS

- Structural violence and the lack of child protection in Haiti assault children's well-being and their parents' ability to nurture healthy emotional and physical development. However, strong family and community ties can mitigate children's vulnerability.
- The 2010 Haiti earthquake highlighted a lack of pre-existing formal biomedical mental health services and worsened the impact of structural violence on children's well-being.
- Developing a sustainable mental health care system for children in Haiti demands a bio-psycho-social approach that capitalizes on the strengths of Haitian children, their families, and communities.
- Haiti's history of foreign aid and exploitation must inform international organization's efforts, which should be based on accompaniment and support of Haitian providers and community members.

INTRODUCTION

On January 12, 2010, a catastrophic 7.1 earthquake struck the capital of Port-au-Prince, killing 250,000 people, injuring 300,000, and displacing another 150,000, half of whom resettled in surrounding regions that were not prepared to receive them.¹ Homes, schools, churches—the structures comprising the fabric of daily

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^a Dr. Mario Pagenel Fellow in Global Mental Health Service Delivery, Partners in Health, 888 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, MA 02215, USA; ^b Program in Global Mental Health and Social Change, Department of Global Health and Social Medicine, Harvard Medical School, 641 Huntington Avenue, Boston, MA 02115, USA; ^c Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Children's National Medical Center, 111 Michigan Avenue, Northwest, Washington, DC 20010, USA

* Corresponding author. Partners in Health, 888 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, MA 02215. E-mail address: legha@pih.org

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life—were destroyed, resulting in incomprehensible suffering in a country already rife with structural violence. In the aftermath, efforts were made to address the mental and emotional needs of children, but the scope of the disaster combined with Haiti's fragile infrastructure and limited pre-existing mental health services restricted their impact.² Later that spring, 2 children who had survived the earthquake and migrated to the nearby town of Mirebalais, located 60 km outside of Port-au-Prince, jumped from their school window after feeling the ground shake as a large truck drove by. Worried that another earthquake had struck, the youngsters instinctively bolted from the second story and landed on the concrete below, losing consciousness and suffering significant physical injuries. Despite a massive humanitarian effort and billions of dollars in aid, the earthquake's aftershocks continue to reverberate throughout the country. Haiti is a young country with some estimates indicating that one-third of the population is under the age of 15.^{3,4} To rebuild Haiti, or to build back better, as the slogan goes, the mental well-being of the young people, the future of Haiti, must be considered; sustainable, effective interventions must be developed that capitalize on its strengths, while also addressing its challenges.

HISTORY

Haiti's oft-cited distinction as the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere⁴ obfuscates the historical basis of its poverty as well as the fortitude of its poor majority. It had proud beginnings becoming the first black republic in the world in 1804 after slaves successfully overthrew their French colonial oppressors and declared independence. The "Pearl of the Antilles" had been the most lucrative French colony, contributing two-thirds of French colonial revenues between 1697 and 1804. Despite extracting Haiti's wealth through a cruel plantation economy, France demanded an indemnity of 150 million francs (roughly 3 billion dollars in today's currency) following independence to compensate slave owners for their loss of human chattel, threatening to continue warfare and economic sanctions otherwise. Forced to loan the money from France, the Haitian government entered a crushing cycle of debt that endured for 60 years, during which time it took out additional loans from other foreign powers in order to sustain itself. By 1914, 80% of Haiti's budget went toward paying back additional debts to other countries, leaving little to develop the country's infrastructure and economy during the century after independence.⁵

Having abolished slavery decades before the United States and other surrounding countries, Haiti represented a significant threat to the colonial world order. As a result, outside forces strove to subjugate it politically and economically. In 1915, the US Marines landed in Haiti reportedly to bring order following a bloody coup and occupied the country for the next 2 decades. Under the pretext of democratizing Haiti's political institutions and building schools and roads, they ushered in agricultural companies who forced Haitian peasants off their land and created new plantations to advance US economic gains. To quell popular resistance, they installed a police unit that served as the predecessors to the Duvalier regime's infamous Tonton Macoute, a paramilitary force that engaged in violence and egregious human rights abuses from the 1950s through the 1980s.⁶

However, Haiti's colonial and postcolonial history fostered strengths. Branded with their masters' initials and killed by overwork and disease, slaves remarkably developed their own language and culture to sustain their African heritage. African religious practice was actively suppressed, and slaves were forced to convert to Christianity. So, over time, they developed Voodoo, a hybrid form of worship that allowed them to mix various heritages and disguise outlawed cultural practices. Kreyol was also

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