Research Brief

LVCT health
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Voices of the youth:
Addressing Mental Health Gaps for adolescents and young people in Kenya

Introduction

The mental health of adolescents and young people (AYP) in Kenya suffers from significant gaps in services, necessitating targeted research and interventions. This study aimed to identify mental health challenges faced by AYP in Kenya, propose practical recommendations to address these issues, and reduce the mental health burden within this population.

Methods

A one-day stakeholder meeting was convened with 41 participants, including youth leaders, Ministry of Health officials, academic experts, and representatives from non-governmental organizations. The discussion used qualitative methods to gather data on mental health needs and precipitating factors among AYP.

Findings

1 **Legislative Mental Health Gaps**

- **Special Populations Ignored:** Limited attention to special populations, including youth, exists, which impacts the provision of mental health services.

- **Policy and Implementation Barriers:** There are inadequate mental health structures and leadership, both at national and county levels. The slow implementation of policies and insufficient funding further exacerbate the mental health service delivery issues.

- **Infrastructure Issues:** Limited mental health infrastructure restricts access to services, especially when compared against the significant population in need.

- **Preventive and Promotional Programs:** There is a notable gap in preventative and promotional mental health programs. Most existing programs focus on mitigating rather than preventing mental health disorders.

2 Service Provider Mental Health Gaps

- **Lack of Training:** Public healthcare facilities lack trained mental health professionals who can address the issues faced by AYP.

- **Negative Attitudes and Stigma:** Healthcare providers often exhibit negative attitudes towards mental health, which deters AYP from seeking help. Fear and bias are common due to age differences between providers and youth.

- **Non-Prioritization:** Mental health is not prioritized in healthcare settings, leaving many issues undiagnosed and untreated.

- **Lack of Adolescent-Friendly Spaces:** Most facilities do not have spaces designed to cater specifically to adolescents' needs, leading to a lack of tailored and population-focused services.

- **Stigma and Service Coordination:** Segregation of mental health units, lack of confidentiality, inadequate assessment tools, and poor service coordination create significant barriers to accessing mental health care.

3 Adolescent Level Needs

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Recommendations

Legislative Recommendations

- **Insurance Financing:** Increasing insurance coverage through mechanisms like the National Health Insurance Fund to offer mental health services.

- **Policy Implementation:** Implement existing mental health policies and amend outdated ones to improve access and reduce stigma.

- **National Mental Health Response Team:** Upscale psychosocial guidelines and establish an effective response team to manage mental health issues, particularly post-COVID-19.

- **Infrastructure Improvements:** Establish more mental health facilities and equip existing ones with adequate resources and second-line medications.

- **Preventive Strategies:** Develop and implement promotive and preventive mental health strategies to reduce the prevalence of mental disorders.

Service Provider Recommendations

- **Community Health Interventions:** Train community health assistants and volunteers in mental health services.

- **Data and Assessment Tools:** Develop a reliable mental health database and comprehensive, culturally-tailored assessment tools for AYP.

- **Training Youth Advisors:** Increase the training of Youth Advisory Champions for Health (YACH) to provide peer support.

- **Adolescent-Friendly Spaces:** Establish safe, confidential spaces for adolescents in healthcare settings.

- **Telehealth Services:** Enhance telehealth services to provide accessible, confidential mental health care.

Adolescent Level Recommendations

- **Awareness and Advocacy:** Promote mental health awareness and positive mental health-seeking behaviors through social platforms.

- **Developing Coping Skills:** Educate AYP on adaptive coping mechanisms to manage stress and mental health challenges effectively.

Conclusion

Mental health among AYP in Kenya is a critical issue that needs comprehensive intervention at legislative, service provider, and individual levels. By involving youth in the conversation, this study identified key gaps and practical recommendations to improve mental health outcomes. Enhanced mental health literacy, policy implementation, and creation of supportive environments are essential steps toward addressing mental health challenges among AYP in Kenya.

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