



Assessing PNG Youths' Knowledge about Mental Health Issues, Substance Abuse, and Gender-Based Violence

Aileen Zuhukepe and Jameson Yembinaro

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Youth in Papua New Guinea (PNG) face serious challenges including mental health issues, substance abuse, and gender-based violence (GBV). In PNG, 67% of the population is under 35 (National Statistical Office 2021). However, only 10% of young people graduate from recognised tertiary institutions (colleges and universities) and gain employment each year (Napitalai et al. 16/4/2024). Youth crime is increasingly viewed as a major social issue, often linked to unemployment, limited access to higher education, and exposure to drugs, violence, and mental health struggles.

Awareness remains a critical first step in addressing these issues. This In Brief presents findings from a larger study assessing youth awareness of mental health, alcohol abuse, and GBV in the National Capital District (NCD).

Although PNG's Youth and Adolescent Health Policy (National Department of Health 2014) addresses mental health, research on youth awareness of such issues is limited. Alcohol and drug abuse, particularly among high school students, appears to be rising (Radio New Zealand 31/12/2018), yet few studies assess current youth knowledge of these harms (e.g. McDonald 2005). Regarding GBV, many young people report having witnessed, experienced, or engaged with it both in daily life and on social media (Awayang 2022). Awareness of GBV-related laws is also increasing (Kakarere 19/4/2024), but broader understanding remains uneven.

Methodology

We performed a cross-sectional survey that aimed to assess the awareness of young people about these three common issues affecting young adults from 18 to 35 years. The study was conducted during the Inaugural National Capital District Commission (NCDC) Youth Summit and Expo 2024 in Port Moresby. Of the 54 participants, all PNG citizens by birth, the modal age (in years) was 27 with 9 respondents (about 17%), followed by a second modal age at 23 years old (13%). The remaining ages were spread equally between 16 and 33 years old.

Results

Over 50% of the respondents knew and agreed that mental ill health is a serious issue, although they had little knowledge on the statistics globally. In terms of knowledge of mental health issues in PNG, 47 (87%) of the respondents confirmed their awareness that stress,

anxiety, and depression are major contributing factors to mental illness. Out of the 54 respondents, 40 (74%) said that they were able to give a rating for their mental wellbeing. Out of the 74% of youths who were able to rate their mental wellbeing, most gave their rating a score of 7/10, i.e. satisfactory. They also showed concern about the difficulty of accessing counselling services.

Almost all of the respondents, 51 (94%), agreed that alcohol and drug abuse is a growing challenge in PNG, contributing to a number of social problems in the community setting. The potential harms surveyed included increased petty crimes, violence and coercion, including sexual violence, unemployment, poverty, mental illness, suicide, short and long-term health consequences, and early death.

As a way forward to tackle these issues, 48 (89%) agreed that all these social and health problems relating to alcohol and drugs in PNG could be addressed through youth empowerment (for instance, workshops, training, and youth programs including sports and church programs, among others). There could also be other platforms, not surveyed, that could address these issues — for example, early education (parenting and formal childhood education).

Lastly, most (96%) of the participants agreed that GBV is a major social issue in PNG with 46 (85%) of respondents aware that it is influenced by rapid social, political and economic changes. Over half of the respondents (51%) confirmed that these issues can be addressed, minimised or controlled — for example, through education and awareness. Other respondents (49%) thought that introducing the improvement strategies would have little to no effect on controlling the issues as they rely heavily on a significant transformation of the youths' mindset.

Discussion

While there is general awareness of these issues, there remain gaps in addressing them. Perhaps the most interesting point arising from this study was the disjunct between what youths knew about the three categories of issues and what they were doing to avoid these potential problems in their own lives. The study found that most respondents are aware of mental health issues and their consequences. Over 50% of the participants do not seek available mental health counselling, such as that provided by Femili PNG, PNG family Support Centre, PNG Psychiatry, and PNG Counselling and Care

in Port Moresby. This is also the same for respondents' views on substance abuse and GBV. Even though there are significant findings showing that youths are aware of these common issues, addressing the main issues is still a challenge. This could be due to all forms of influence (e.g. peer, social media), ignorance, and other factors such as economic instability, poverty, and unemployment.

In the assessment of GBV, this study found that even though most PNG youths surveyed are aware of GBV, there is a lack of knowledge concerning how to address this problem. This could be due to weak law enforcement on perpetrators, or victims being unwilling to speak out to address this issue, or both. Further, with the normalisation of the narrative of GBV in society, there is no urgent interest among the general youth population to report these matters.

However, most participants (85%) agreed that if both government and NGO groups work together, these issues could be addressed.

Conclusion and recommendations

Social problems affecting youth such as mental ill health, alcohol and drug abuse, and GBV are serious issues that must be addressed in PNG, as well as in other Pacific communities and globally. All in all, from the study findings, it is noted that, although most youths are aware of the issues of mental health and its consequences, substance abuse and its association with other social problems in PNG and GBV and its consequences, the practical part is a massive gap. Almost all youth respondents have agreed to advocate for these issues, acknowledging the challenge of very limited services available to young people in PNG and the inaccessibility of existing services (NCD Youth Hub and Femili PNG, mental health counselling services, and so forth) especially outside the main urban centres.

To address the growing social and mental health challenges facing youth in Papua New Guinea, the following reforms are recommended from the larger study:

1. Update youth mental health data: Collect up-to-date statistics on youth mental health to identify service gaps and inform targeted interventions.
2. Establish youth hubs and support services: Set up youth hubs in NCD and other provinces offering counselling, peer support, and outreach programs.
3. Strengthen the PNG Youth Commission: Boost funding and capacity of the Youth Commission to coordinate national youth policies and programs.
4. Expand employment and education opportunities: Invest in technical and vocational training,

improve access to quality education, and create job pathways to reduce youth unemployment and related social risks.

5. Support from civil society and donors: Encourage collaboration between government, churches, non-government organisations, and donors to raise awareness and deliver services addressing mental health, GBV, and substance abuse.
6. Conduct regular Knowledge, Attitude and Practice (KAP) studies: Implement KAP surveys to monitor changes and guide responsive action.

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Notes on authors

Aileen Zuhukepe was an academic tutor at the School of Medicine & Health Sciences (SMHS), University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG), from 2022 to 2024. She is currently studying a Bachelor of Medicine & Surgery at the SMHS UPNG (2025).

At the time of the study, Jameson Yembinaro was a researcher based at the Public Health Division, SMHS UPNG.

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dpa@anu.edu.au

bellschool.anu.edu.au/dpa

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