

## **DISTRESS, DESPAIR, AND SUICIDALITY IN RURAL SOUTH AFRICAN YOUTH**

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**Background:** Suicide is an important proxy measure of severe emotional distress. Although youth are disproportionately affected by common mental disorders, inequities in mental health and mental healthcare across the urban-rural divide, compounded by substance use can magnify distress. This study highlights these inequities in a rural South African community.

**Objectives:** The objective of this study was to determine the rates of severe emotional distress, and their correlation with alcohol and cannabis use among rural SA young men.

**Methods:** In this cross-sectional study, we used quasi-probability cluster sampling in Harry Gwala District, a rural Zulu district with high rates of youth unemployment (44%), interpersonal violence (Mngoma et. al., 2016) and high incidence of self-inflicted injury in young men. Interviews and focus groups were conducted in isiZulu with audio, computer-assisted self-interviewing (ACASI) data collection. Rates and symptom severity for depression, anxiety symptoms, hopelessness, worthlessness, and suicidal thoughts were identified and statistical differences between groups and predictors determined.

**Results:** High rates of depression, anxiety, hopelessness, and worthlessness were reported among the 355 males (age 14 to 24 years). One in four reported current suicidal thoughts associated with depression, anxiety, feelings of worthlessness and correlated with binge drinking. Both alcohol and cannabis use were problematic. More than half (57%) of the participants reported symptoms of severe psychological distress in the preceding week, half of the participants reported hopelessness, 43.7% worthlessness, and 25% suicidal thoughts.

**Discussion:** This remote area has some of the highest suicide rates in SA and severe emotional distress has been found to be associated with gender-based violence, interpersonal violence and suicidality (Mngoma, et. al., 2016; Mngoma, Ayonrinde, Fergus et. al., 2020). The absence of vocational opportunities, high rates of physical health co-morbidity and limited health resources highlight the need for greater research and resource allocation to rural regions of Africa.

### Full List of Authors

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### Learning Objectives

At the conclusion of this presentation, participants will be able to:

1. Participants will be able to identify the relationship between health inequities and severe emotional distress in rural South African.
2. Participants will be able to identify the correlates of suicidality in rural South African youth.

## References

Mngoma, N, Fergus, S, Jeeves, A, et al. (2016). Psychosocial risk and protective factors associated with perpetration of gender-based violence in a community sample of men in rural KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. *South African Medical Journal*, 106(12).

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