Mental Health and Resilience in Adolescents Resettled in Philadelphia

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Introduction

Mental health in adolescents impacts physical health, academic achievement, and overall well-being. Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), especially trauma, are associated with mental and behavioral health issues and negative adult outcomes.

Refugee youth are at an increased risk for mental health disorders. Adolescent refugees who resettle in high income countries endure mental and physical stress during and after displacement. Balancing integration into host society vs. preserving background culture makes youth more vulnerable.

Project Objectives:

- To assess the current status of mental health and access to mental health resources among resettled refugee adolescents in Philadelphia.
- To increase awareness and discussion of resilience and mental health throughout development and acculturation.
- To determine how to develop programming that is appropriate to specific populations of refugees.

Methods

Stakeholder Interviews

- Semi-structured interviews with 6 stakeholders to develop an understanding of the scope of the problem.
- Key informants: mental health provider, case worker from resettlement agency, social worker in inner-city youth, refugee program directors.
- Participants: 14 adolescents from Burma, Syria, Thailand, Afghanistan proficient in English.
- Transcription and qualitative thematic analysis via NVivo12.

Adolescent Interviews

- Semi-structured interviews with adolescent refugees resettled in Philadelphia high schools using a survey adapted from stakeholder data.
- Participants: 14 adolescents from Burmese, Syrian, Thai, Afghan populations proficient in English.
- Transcription and qualitative thematic analysis via NVivo12.

Results and Discussion

Development of an explanatory model to understand the state of mental health and resilience in refugee adolescents resettled in Philadelphia high schools, combining data from key informant interviews and individual adolescent interviews.

The overarching components, full cohort themes, and subthemes were organized to create an explanatory model describing elements of the adolescent refugee resettlement experience to Philadelphia. Themes were categorized after analysis of key informant interviews and adolescent interviews separately to distinguish what the stakeholders believed were important in the resettlement experience versus that of the adolescents.

Identity

- Aspects of discovering self-identity are core to all adolescents.
- Added complexity of being a refugee in high school, learning to communicate effectively in English, understanding a new culture.
- Balancing preservation of family background with the new educational and cultural opportunities in America.

Vulnerability

- Rooted in adverse childhood experiences with history of trauma or violence, family demographics, and emotional experiences.
- Vulnerability goes beyond the past; continues into their post-settlement experience with stigma and discrimination, lack of English proficiency.
- Being aware of the vulnerable state of the youth is essential to identifying how to augment protective factors and provide supportive environments.

Resource Utilization

- Analysis showed many gaps in the availability of specific resources for the adolescents, but also under-utilization of the available ones.
- Community centers, schools, religion, and mentors are crucial resources for youth.

Responsibility

- Refugee adolescents have significant parental expectations and familial roles that may differ from other youth.
- Expectations about the future, educational success, contributing to the family that bear a great influence on their ability to assimilate.

Resilience

- Despite a background of adversity, many participants exhibited self-development and aspiration for the future.
- Discussions of emotional experiences and mental health were limited compared to emphasizing peer and external support systems.

Conclusion

Refugee adolescents resettled in Philadelphia high schools are faced with many unique experiences that make them vulnerable to adverse outcomes.

- A deeper understanding of resettlement experiences and protective factors in their personal, social, and cultural contexts provide avenues for specific interventions.
- Focused programming may help to foster resilience and support positive outcomes for youth and their families, but there are still gaps in utilization that need to be addressed.
- While themes may not be generalizable across all refugee populations, it is evident that more investigations are necessary to identify protective factors that can help to develop effective programming.
- Limitations include language or cultural barriers during interviews, possible coding and interpretation bias by having only two independent coders.

Future Directions

- Continue to increase awareness about mental health and resilience in the vulnerable refugee population.
- Understand how to encourage youth to utilize available resources and how to make targeted programming more accessible.
- Use data to conduct a formal evaluation of programming at Southeast by Southeast Community Center.