



Centre for Migrant
and Refugee Health

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REVIEW AND SUMMARY ANALYSIS

Part 1 2021

The Impact of New Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) on Mental Health of Africans: South Sudanese in Victoria, Australia





Content

Pages

Acknowledgement.....	3
Overview.....	6
Background and context.....	9
CMRH Panel Summary of the analysis.....	9&15

For more information or to receive a future copy of the final report

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Page | 3

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Reference:

Chadhuol Mabor, Abur William, Chol Flora, Naam Cholhok, Naam Ajak, Baguot Lem, Majak Monica, and Marek Jerkuei 2020, *The Impact of New Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) on Mental Health of Africans: South Sudanese in Victoria, Australia*, Centre for Migrant and Refugee Health, Issue 1, volume 1, Victoria, Melbourne, Australia.

Acknowledgement

We want to thank CMRH panelists and the team who have summarized and compiled an online zoom forum discussion. The team comprised of Ms. Flora Chol, Ms. Ajak Naam, Ms. Cholhok Naam, and Mr. Mabor Chadhuol.

This report would not have been possible to disseminate and distribute to the communities, nongovernment, and government institutions without CMRH team efforts.

We would also like to acknowledge the Victorian Government for their generosity and sincere support in funding to carry out these discussions and continue support during and post COVID-19.



All about

Review and Summary Analysis

The Impact of New Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) on Mental Health of Africans: South Sudanese in Victoria, Australia

December 2020-January 2021

Key Definition

CMRH	Centre for Migrant and Refugee Health
SMCV	Sudanese Mothers Coalition in Victoria

Overview

The review and analysis reflect the summary of online zoom discussions by the CMRH staff, community members, and other stakeholders during COVID-19 pandemic between December 2020 and Jan 2021.

All direct quotes or viewpoints are excerpts from the zoom transcripts, and key panelists have sought permission to release the publication. The report presents discussions to the unique conception, perceptions, and attitudes of South Sudanese and other African communities towards COVID-19 and the impact of mental health prior, during and post COVID-19 recovery crisis.

There are comments and recommendations suggested by the panelists to the Centre for Migrant and Refugee Health, South Sudanese Community, and the Victorian Government to continue supporting the vulnerable communities beyond COVID-19 pandemic.

The forum was designed and supported by the CMRH for the community education on mental health prior, during, and post COVID-19. However, any views and recommendations in this review and analysis reflect the panelist's individual beliefs proposed for community consumption and needed support for the course of commitment and actions.

Thanks, you to all panelists for your insights and assistance provided by the Victorian Government to support the Centre for Migrant and Refugee Health to implement mental health project in South Sudanese Communities and other communities.



Community Mental Health Matters beyond COVID-19!



CMRH panelists and moderators



Mr. Mabor Chadhuol, Panelist



Dr. William Abur, Panelist



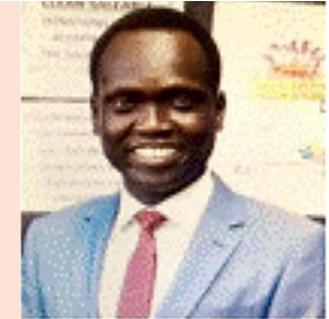
Ms. Cholhok Naam, Panelist



Mrs. Monica Majak, Panelist



Mr. Lem Baguot, Panelist



Mr. Jerkuei Marek, Panelist



Ms. Flora Chol, Moderator



Ms. Ajak Naam, Moderator

Background and context

The New Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) has inflicted negative thoughts, myths, and concerns that affect individuals and community perceptions and attitudes with conceivable or likely anxiety, and depression during COVID-19 lockdown and after lifting or easing restrictions by the Victorian Government.

There are psychological eruptions brought about by COVID-19, which were felt directly and indirectly across the world. The experiences of mental health issues have increased in Victoria's communities because of lockdown, loss of social connection and financial hardship during the pandemic. The panel discussed mental health:

- in South Sudanese context or perspective.
- De-stigmatization of mental health.
- The impacts of COVID-19 on the Mental Health of South Sudanese Community.
- The extent to which the community was impacted by mental health during and after COVID-19.
- The most vulnerable in our society.
- How to address mental health before it becomes an issue.
- The benefits of lifting or easing restrictions by the Victorian Government.
- The Victorian Government or Mental Healthcare specific service providers assistance for the South Sudanese Community with mental health during and after COVID-19.
- Advantages and disadvantages come because of government lifting or easing restrictions.
- The specific mental health coping strategies or interventions to utilize within our community.

The discussion aimed to provide education to the community about mental health during and post COVID19. Furthermore, deliver the basis to establish evidence for the prevalence of mental health within South Sudanese Communities.

Therefore, it is equally essential for individuals in the family and community to understand the impact of mental illness and the available mental healthcare-specific services during the COVID-19 and beyond. Part 1 will be reinforced by the survey study being carried out by CMRH to help understand how the community would be provided with more social, physical, mental health, and economic support in the current unpredictable post-COVID-19 crisis recovery processes and possible future pandemics.

CMRH Panel Summary of the analysis

1. What is Mental Health in the South Sudanese context or cultural perspectives?

- The notion of mental health in the south Sudanese community is negatively framed, misunderstood with negative connotations, and taboos.

- Mental health is unclear in terms of definitions in various South Sudanese cultural groups. The attitudes towards mental health discourses are often dismissive of the community's issues.
- From the South Sudanese perspective, many of the community believe that there is no such thing as mental health or mental health illness. However, these belief systems stem from a lack of awareness and culturally and linguistically appropriate education.
- Today, many arguments have highlighted the correlation between the history of war and displacement and affect intergenerational trauma as a critical contributor to community members' various mental health challenges.

2. How do we destigmatize mental health in South Sudanese Community?

- Education and awareness will gradually change perspectives and better equip the community to recognize and appropriately respond to mental health issues that are holistically safe and culturally effective.
- A greater focus on advocacy for education and awareness will foster more discourses that will create a shift from mindsets of tabooing and labelling people with mental health illnesses as 'crazy' but rather focusing on wellbeing and narrowing down the definition of mental health.
- As a community, we need to create safe spaces for our people to come together and discuss mental health challenges in a way that is free from shame or judgement.

3. What are the impacts of COVID-19 on Mental Health of South Sudanese Community?

- The impacts of covid-19 on the South Sudanese have been quite broad as individuals within the community have responded to the virus and the government regulations differently.
- In no small COVID-19 has given the community significant insights on the state of those who are most vulnerable in the society, particularly the elderly, single mothers and those with large families living in households unsuitable for social distancing measures.
- There were a few governments supports services available to the community, due to a lack of knowledge on access points many vulnerable people within the community could not access and utilize the full extent of the support provided by the Victorian state government.

4. To what extent do you think the community was impacted by Mental Health during and after COVID 19? Who are the most vulnerable in our community and how do we address them before it becomes an issue?

- Firstly, the guidelines provided by the government in terms of public safety during lockdown were useful. The Correct use of masks and hand sanitizer and social distancing guidelines were helpful to the community.
- During the lockdown, our community's most vulnerable members proved to be mothers, single mothers, and grandmothers. In many ways, mothers bear a disproportionate burden in child-rearing and domestic duties. This burden is more entrenched in South Sudanese communities. Amidst the lockdowns, this divide was even more noticeable with the difficult task of undertaking homeschooling and the care of young children falling on mothers or grandmothers.
- Homeschooling throughout lockdown is difficult enough, add navigating new technologies, and it becomes significantly more challenging. Because many community members face language barriers, the task of learning new terminology and technology has further exacerbated. Without the language skills to confront these challenges, many in our community have effectively left behind.
- Studies undertaken at some point in and after the lockdown will give a more unambiguous indication of government successes and failures and allow for better management of similar situations in the future. However, it will be exceedingly difficult to determine the full impact in terms of mental health in the South Sudanese community. Being stripped of our social interactions, i.e., social events, culture day gatherings, has put a significant strain on our mental health. An increase in domestic and family violence outside of our homes has considerably impacted the segment of our community members.
- Stress has increased, and physical health has declined in the community during COVID19. Use of technology to access at home workouts and yoga to destress and keep physically fit during lockdown can help address these issues.
- Getting young children involved in physical health activities is also beneficial. Creating a specific helpline to our community, where one can access information regarding everyday day life could prove useful.
- Check-in on each other during the pandemic, communicate with vulnerable members. Those who are least likely to reach out are the most concerning.

5. Do you think lifting or easing restrictions by the Victorian Government have assisted in community mental health? if yes, then in what ways? If no, tell us your view...

- People were so disconnected during COVID-19 pandemic and easing or lifting restrictions was an excellent opportunity for people to move freely.
- Many people were free and can move across suburbs such as Sunshine and St. Albans.
- There is a decreased domestic, and family violence in the community during easing or lifting restrictions by the Victorian Government. Although there are elements of challenges that COVID-19 have shown us. The challenges require to be addressed, such as stress and depression. For example, the Centre for Migrant and Refugee Health and the Victorian Government have provided education and awareness in most COVID-19 issues.
- The Victorian Government's opportunities are good, and the Government has better intentions for South Sudanese Communities and other Africans living in Victoria. The Government in Victoria State is open to minorities, and they can help when needed.
- On the other hand, people were frightened about the infection rates because one never knows who is infected or who is not. For example, going to parties could risk the life of people.
- The Government has worked hard as they were giving a lot of instructions to provide public health measures. The Government have provided enough funding during COVID-19, and people were able to access food. For example, Mrs. Monica and her team's work safe the community during COVID-19 with a culturally appropriate and understanding incorporating Kombo (South Sudanese Traditional Broth/Soup) into English Dictionary during COVID-19 pandemic. That was an excellent work that deserved a great appreciation.
- Hon. Dan Andrew is a great leader, and he has tried to make sure the population is safe.

6. Do you think the Victorian Government or Mental Health specific service providers helped the South Sudanese Community with mental health during and after COVID 19?

- Yes, the government has, in many ways, helped during COVID 19 lockdown. For example, the VIC government provided funding to an organization run by Monica Majak (Sudanese Mothers Coalition) to help fund its food distribution program. With the first wave of COVID 19, the South Sudanese community was dealing with many issues. Job losses and money shortage made it near impossible to gain access to everyday items, including food. University students who relied heavily on a steady income and government assistance were stripped of these benefits.
- The Sudanese Mothers Coalition stepped in and provided food for these people in a time of great need as did many other community organizations.

- Australia is a multicultural country that assists most ethnicities, religious groups and other minorities by supporting them through widely available funding during the pandemic. We need to take advantage of these opportunities. The community needs to come together, organize, and unite to serve our community better.
- Regarding policy and community management, the government is well-intentioned, but a better approach needs to be established. Utilizing the knowledge of and engaging directly with community leaders can lead to better policymaking.
- In saying the above, lack of proper organization and leadership creates missed opportunities for the South Sudanese community. An organization like the Sudanese mothers' Coalition, which was able to obtain funding and achieve tangible change in our community, is a model for what is needed.
- Organizing as a community, working in conjunction with similar organizations and like-minded community members is a more viable road to success. A holistic approach that serves specifically for our community will also benefit us in the long term.
- Like Lifeline, mental health helplines, which cater to the broader community on issues like depression and anxiety, could provide a policy framework for emulation. Organizations, like Beyond Blue, have access to appropriately trained staff. The replication of these models in our Community-based centres is crucial.
- Cultural understanding is an integral aspect when engaging with any community. The South Sudanese community is no exception. Understanding the specific needs of care for the South Sudanese community and providing access to tools and training can help us address these needs.

7. What are advantages and disadvantages as the result of government lifting or easing restrictions?

Advantages

- Social life return to normal.
- Those who have employments can return to their workplaces. Some were a relieved for some to learn that they are maintaining their position.
- The efforts by the Victorian Government in managing the spreads and contained COVID-19 in the second wave is imperative. The strategies by the Government were a relief for many in the community.
- Programs that encourage people to work must be made shareable by all community leaders.

Disadvantages

- Racism and discrimination were high, and the South Sudanese community was overrepresented in issuing the fines by Victoria Police.

- The previous stereotypic tendencies impacted on South Sudanese as a community as the Chinese community was targeted. Racism and discrimination made national news and spread fear among our community as a result.
- Socializing has become a concern around spread prevention. Some community members are cautious and continue to wear masks.
- Covid-19 has impacted upon women who are running small enterprises, it is encouraged that the community stand behind them. The community members should be educated about services providers that specifically aim to supportive of small businesses to help them rebrand if need be.
- Fear and paranoia have not been addressed, easing the stress and anxiety levels developed during the Covid-19 isolation period will set the community at a disadvantage. This stress levels developed from the lack of understanding of what the virus entails, it almost becomes stigma to be known to have tested positive to the virus.
- Post-traumatic stress of Covid-19's impact will need to be dealt with, especially for those who lost loved ones during the pandemic, otherwise they will suffer unnoticed long-term effect of stress.

8. What are specific mental health coping strategies or interventions to utilize within our community?

- The consensus is that the Victorian Government has dealt with the pandemic to the best of their ability. Government wastes no time in developing ways to help the community. Supporting materials were made accessible online for all Victorians, and these documents were in the form of brochures or links that can be accessed through telephones and computers. The handouts include strategies on managing stress and anxiety, relationships and parenting during isolation, educating children at home, managing finances, and managing stress in children.
- With the impact of covid-19 felt so prevalently in the community, many people have developed various individualized coping mechanisms. The following are various activities that can help in coping; reading, attending gymnasium, yoga, and socializing with loved ones we strongly connect with people. It is the stress and anxiety that individuals do not compromise but prioritize their mental health and wellbeing. The community is encouraged to narrow matter down to make them more manageable. The efforts will lead to targeting the correct service providers to assist in pressing issues.
- A Multicultural Actions Victoria Sport by the Centre for Migrant and Refugee Health discussed forming a cycling group for men, which will encourage men to participate on the weekends.
- Return to practicing the cultural dances and ceremonies, but in a Covid -19 safe manner. The safety measures to be taken to meet the State Health Authorities' standards. Such as social distancing, the ratio of people, for squares meter. It is essential to notice that these factors are subject to change, depending on the Health Authorities' updates.

- Contacting telephone services such as the Helplines, Beyond Blue for counselling is incredible to encourage those who speak English fluently. The services then leave individuals with language barriers in a grey, dangerous, and challenging area. However, with services Centre such as CMRH and Mother's Coalition, those individuals may soon access tailored counselling programs sensitive to their culture and contextualized services in their languages.

Other questions posted by audiences

Guest Question: "I would love to hear about how we can link services to the community, elders and youth? How do you think we as a community can spread information more effectively?"

- Creating one link to access information regarding health and other events in the community would be beneficial. The church is another example. As the South Sudanese are heavily involved with Christian organizations, it is much easier to approach people at church events and spread critical information.
- Regarding our youth, social media is a great tool. Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat are predominantly youth-based. Utilizing the social media networks mentioned can help us better connect with youth, understand their needs, and provide the assistance accordingly.

Guest Question: "How do we communicate with vulnerable members of our community? such as people who have entered or have been released from prison."

- A disproportionate number of members in our community are finding themselves in this position [incarceration]. With the correct government and community organization supports, especially on our part as community leaders, we can better address this specific vulnerable segment of society. Incarceration is often shrouded in guilt and shame; nonetheless, these people deserve a chance to reintegrate back into our community.
- An excellent service that we would like to see in our community is a mentorship program. Mentoring, be it through university or everyday life, has proven beneficial in other organizations. Ordinary counselling from a mature qualified youth leader who has lived experience can provide guidance and support to these young people.
- Destigmatizing the shame of imprisonment when it comes to minor offences is a broader issue. But for our community, we must let newly released members know that we are here for them, and we are open to their return.
- An honest approach can create unity when dealing with this issue. Stripping away the guilt and shame that surrounds imprisonment will also bring about tangible change. We cannot allow these members of our community to fall through the cracks. Linking rehabilitation services and community organizations can build a bridge towards that change.

- Working together to put our best foot forward when asking for funding or working with people outside of the community will benefit us and bring about more incredible connections and networks. The collaboration and cooperation will help the South Sudanese community through this pandemic and long-term community cohesion.

Thanks for taking time to reading this review and summary analysis from the zoom discussions by the CMRH and other community members on the panel.

Page | 15

We appreciate your time in advanced.

Note: This discussion will be proceeded and inform further by ongoing survey being carry out by the CMRH

Please, you may send your comments or recommendations to:



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