

Mental Healthcare Accessibility in Virgin Gorda

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Abstract

The research project focused on investigating mental health care accessibility, needs and existing obstacles in accessing care delivery on the island of Virgin Gorda, in the British Virgin Islands. Virgin Gorda is a geographically isolated island with an estimated population of approximately 3,500 residents. The data for this study were collected using a mixed methods approach. The approach combined data from a survey conducted among 50 questionnaire participants and qualitative interviews with 20 informants (mental health professionals, community leaders, and mental health patients). The findings of the study revealed some major challenges for residents in their efforts to access mental health care, such as limited access to specialized care services, financial barriers, stigma, cultural misconceptions about mental health, transportation hurdles in accessing mental health services, and inadequate resources/infrastructure. Highlighted in the findings was the need for combining the existing mental health services with primary health care services on the island to enhance mental health care delivery. Also, there was a need for the expansion of community outreach programs to increase awareness and reduce the impact of stigma and cultural misconceptions about mental health. Some major recommendations included in the study were increasing the allocation of mental health resources on the island to fall in line with the existing Mental Health Act [2014] of the British Virgin Islands and enhancing the frequency of mental health services provided on the island. It is hoped that by giving priority to these recommendations, improvements in mental health service delivery and outcomes may be realized, thereby providing a pathway for strengthening mental health care in Virgin Gorda. Of notable significance, the findings of the study offered insights for enhancing mental health care delivery for similar, geographically isolated island communities like Virgin Gorda.

Keywords: Accessibility, Mental Health, Primary Care, Stigma, Virgin Gorda.

Introduction

Mental health care is a significant component of the overall well-being of individuals of any population. However, for small, geographically isolated island communities like Virgin Gorda, this service is not often fully accessible. Systemic, cultural, financial, and other logistical hurdles often hinder effective mental health service delivery.

For residents of Virgin Gorda, major gaps exist in accessing comprehensive mental health care. Residents requiring the service of mental health specialists often experience travel

obstacles in journeying to the mainland of Tortola - high transportation costs, long travel times, and major disruptions to their daily routine. These challenges ultimately result in delayed or missed treatment opportunities. Although monthly visits by psychiatrists to the island are incorporated into primary health care services, these are inadequate in addressing the growing needs of the community.

Tailored, innovative solutions are therefore needed to help improve mental health care on the island. Enhancing the incorporation of mental health care into primary health care on the island is one such solution that stood out in

the research. This initiative has proven effective in similar settings, as pointed out in the study. However, this must be combined with increases in funding, trained mental health professionals, and improvements in education to address the impact of stigma and cultural misconceptions about mental health, thereby improving service delivery on the island effectively [4, 5, 6].

By evaluating mental health service accessibility, assessing mental health needs, and identifying the existing barriers and gaps in mental health delivery in Virgin Gorda, the study aims, through the proposed solutions, interventions that can be taken to address the unique needs of Virgin Gorda. Additionally, a framework can be obtained, through the

insights provided, to overcome the many challenges to mental health care in similar island settings [7].

Materials and Methods

To evaluate mental health service accessibility in Virgin Gorda, a mixed-Methods approach was used to obtain the relevant data. Virgin Gorda lacks adequate mental health resources and specialized facilities. Although a local clinic provides basic services for residents, those requiring advanced care must travel to mainland Tortola, a journey fraught with financial and transportation challenges for residents.

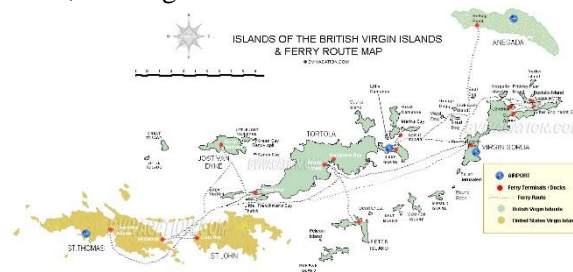


Figure 1: This Map Clearly represents Virgin Gorda's Location Relative to Tortola and the Surrounding Islands. It highlights the Relative Locations, Sea Routes, and Logistical Challenges.

(Source: BVI Vacation 2024)

Data collection involved the use of two methods. Quantitative data were obtained through a questionnaire survey administered to 50 participants aged 18 and older. The questionnaire aimed to capture demographic details, the prevalence of mental health issues, perceptions about service accessibility, and the existing barriers and gaps in accessing services. Twenty key informants provided qualitative

data through semi-structured interviews. The informants consisted of mental health professionals, community leaders, and individuals who had either experienced or were experiencing mental health challenges. The interviews provided deeper insights into systemic, cultural, and logistical challenges to mental health care delivery on the island.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Characteristics	Frequency
Age 18-25	10
Age 26-40	15
Age 41-60	15
Age 60+	10

Male	25
Female	25
Employed	35
Unemployed	15

(Source: Study Data)

The data obtained for the study were analyzed using a combination of statistical and thematic methods. The quantitative data were coded and SPSS tool was used to identify trends in the data. This helped to provide a summary of the prevalence of mental health conditions and service utilization among respondents. Thematic analysis was applied to the qualitative data, to extract recurring themes and major insights related to the challenges. Recommendations were given, with the aim of improving service delivery on the island.

By combining these two methods, the study presented a comprehensive understanding of the various challenges faced by residents and proffered useful insights for enhancing mental health care in Virgin Gorda.

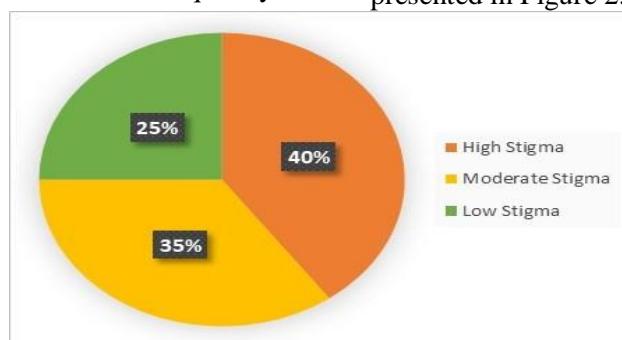
Results

The findings of this study revealed significant gaps and challenges in addressing mental health care accessibility in Virgin Gorda. A major issue that stood out among the findings was the limited availability of specialized mental professionals on the island. Residents needing specialized care frequently

had to rely on services provided on the mainland. This situation meant time-consuming and costly travel to access such. This often resulted in non-compliance to treatment plans and delayed or missed appointment opportunities for care among residents, ultimately discouraging them from seeking the care they needed. As revealed in the findings, the financial and logistical issues related to transportation were particularly challenging for the vulnerable residents - the elderly and those with limited finances.

Stigma and cultural misconceptions surrounding mental health were recurring themes emerging from the findings of the study. Participants pinpointed that these prevailing, negative attitudes often discouraged individuals from utilizing services or openly discussing their mental health issues. It was highlighted that stigma and its impact not only affected mental health service utilization but also compounded feelings of isolation among patients, resulting in many having their health situation left untreated.

A graphic illustration of this response is presented in Figure 2.



(Source: Study Data)

Figure 2: The Pie Chart showing the Number (percentage) of Participants who Reported Stigma as a Significant Impediment to Seeking Care.

Virgin Gorda’s lack of appropriate mental health infrastructure and resources was another major shortcoming that was highlighted in the study’s findings. Though capable of providing basic care, the local clinic lacks the capacity to address complex mental health needs. There is

no dedicated mental health facility on the island and visiting mental health specialists are only able to provide limited support through infrequent clinic visits. This situation has, therefore, contributed to worsening mental health conditions among residents.

Table 2: Illustration of the Distribution of Mental Health Conditions Prevalent on the Island

Condition	Frequency
Anxiety	18
Depression	20
Substance Abuse	8
Schizophrenia	4

(Source: Study Data)

Table 3: Summary of Key Findings

Barrier Type	Description
Logistical	High transportation costs, reliance on mainland services
Cultural	Stigma and negative perceptions hinder utilization.
Systemic	Lack of funding, inadequate infrastructure, and staffing shortages

(Source: Study Data)

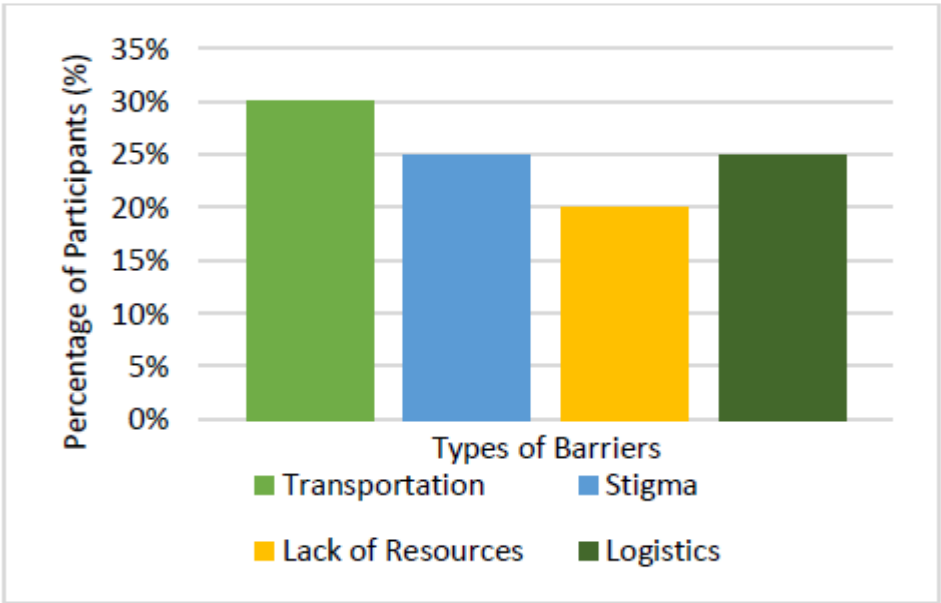


Figure 3: Bar Chart Displaying Barriers to Mental Health Service Delivery
(Source: Study Data)

Enhancing service accessibility, reducing stigma and its impact, and improving infrastructure were some of the major recommendations that emerged from the findings. Collectively, these highlight the urgent need to improve Virgin Gorda's mental health landscape.

Discussion

Mirroring closely with global research projects addressing mental health care, the study presented prevalent systemic, cultural, and logistical impediments that are commonplace in most isolated, small island communities when accessing mental health care. Among the many challenges identified in Virgin Gorda's mental health care environment is the lack of sufficient mental health specialists (psychiatrists, counselors). This is echoed in the report of the Health Systems Profile for the British Virgin Islands [8], which stated that the Caribbean has one of the lowest densities of mental health professionals globally. Similarly, the Journal articles, *A Call to Action to Address Rural Mental Health Disparities* [9] and *Quality Assessment of Primary Care for Common Mental Disorders in Isolated Communities: Taking Advantage of Health Records. Rural and Remote Health* [7] highlighted the scarcity of health providers in small island and rural regions as a critical issue impacting service delivery.

Inadequate mental health infrastructure and limited resources were among the systemic challenges highlighted in the findings of this study also. These shortcomings directly impact the level of satisfaction experienced by patients when accessing care. Respondents expressed mixed levels of satisfaction with mental health services on the islands. Many cited gaps in availability and quality, hence their requests for expanding service availability, increased community awareness programs, peer support groups, an exclusive mental health center to aid support for individuals in recovery and long-

term treatment, and increased funding for mental health care.

These suggestions from respondents align with global best practices addressing mental health care. For instance, the Caribbean Public Health Agency published one of their articles that emphasized integrating mental health care into broader health systems and giving priority funding for community-based services to address resource gaps [13]. This is also consistent with the findings from the articles of Morales et al. and Salinas-Perez et al., who advocated for community-based care models and telemedicine to bridge resource gaps [9, 11]. At the regional level, the Caribbean Public Health Agency also indicated the need to integrate mental health services into primary health care services as an initiative to enhance accessibility and satisfaction [13]. This was also a key highlight in a report by the Pan American Health Organization, addressing the need to integrate mental health care into primary health care settings as one of the interventions to enhance care delivery in the region since this initiative had proven effective in similar settings where it was implemented [8].

Research conducted in the Caribbean also pinpointed the numerous existing obstacles being encountered in delivering mental health care. "Lack of resources, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient preventative programs" were cited as some significant challenges [12].

These align with the challenges outlined in the WHO AIMS report, which identified funding constraints and insufficient resources as major impediments to mental health care in the British Virgin Islands [14].

Additionally, the findings of this study identified stigma as another significant obstacle for residents to accessing mental health services on the island. Respondents indicated that they were reluctant to seek care due to their fear of judgment. This finding was consistent with Gallimore et al., who indicated that stigma in

many Caribbean cultures significantly diminishes help-seeking behavior among mental health patients [1]. This was also consistent with findings of research work by Guizman-Ruiz, Y., who pointed out that more than 70 percent of individuals in the Caribbean requiring mental health care avoid seeking service due to stigma [15]. Mental health research by Setoya and Kestel, Salinas-Perez et al., and Morales et al. also highlighted stigma as a mitigating factor for patients in accessing mental health care [9-11].

Another challenge emerging from the findings was the misconception brought about by cultural norms and taboos prevalent in Virgin Gorda's society - where mental health issues were often misunderstood and seen as personal failings or spiritual issues in patients. This, according to respondents, resulted in an unwillingness to seek treatment. The articles by Guizman-Ruiz, Y, and Mascayano et al. emphasized in their research that such cultural beliefs delayed treatment outcomes [15, 16]. Hence the need for culturally sensitive interventions. Such would be of benefit to the island, helping to foster a more supportive mental health environment.

The data collected on the study revealed that geographical and logistical issues related to transportation were prominent among the challenges for residents of Virgin Gorda in accessing quality mental health care. Similar studies that have been conducted in geographically isolated settings have noted the

impact of these barriers as impeding factors in mental health service utilization [2]. Research in Canada and Australia has indicated that isolated regions often face a lack of nearby facilities and depend on travel for specialized care, exacerbating mental health inequities [11]. Literature addressing mental health care in rural and remote communities globally, e.g.: [9, 11, 17, 18] emphasized the importance of addressing transportation and logistical barriers if care is to be easily accessed.

Though some significant recommendations were proffered as practical solutions to the challenges highlighted in the study in relation to mental care access by residents of Virgin Gorda, further research is needed to assess the feasibility of telemedicine as a boost to overcome the geographical obstacles pinpointed. So too, there is a need to further explore the effectiveness of targeted outreach programs, particularly for vulnerable groups, such as the elderly and low-income residents. The results emanating should provide valuable insights for policy development on the island.

This study has, however, provided valuable insights that are consistent with literature addressing mental health care access and delivery in resource-constrained, isolated, small island settings. It has offered recommendations for enhancing accessibility and equity in service delivery for Virgin Gorda and similar communities grappling with mental health care challenges.

Table 4: Policy Recommendations and Action Plans

Recommendation	Stakeholders	Timeline
Integrate mental health into primary care	Local Clinics, Ministry of Health	1-2 years
Implement community outreach programs	Community Leaders, NGOs	6-12 months

Develop telehealth services	Health IT providers, Ministry of Health	2-3 years
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(Source: Study Data)

Conclusion

This research has provided an in-depth presentation of the significant barriers to mental health care delivery in Virgin Gorda, an island of the British Virgin Islands group. Some of the barriers presented included logistical challenges resulting from transportation shortcomings, the negative impact of cultural misconceptions and stigma about mental health for patients, the impact of limited resources, and inadequate infrastructure in accessing care. Addressing these challenges is paramount if residents' access to care and overall well-being are to improve. The need to integrate mental health care services into primary health care service settings and implement initiatives at the community level to raise awareness to fully educate residents about mental health, are strategies which should help overcome these challenges.

Finally, the findings of this study not only provided practical recommendations for Virgin Gorda but also proffered insights that can be

applied to mental health settings in similar, geographically isolated island communities. Going forward, it is recommended that initiatives for implementing tele-health models and stigma reduction campaigns should be considered to expand access to building a supportive mental health environment in communities which are experiencing challenges. By addressing these systemic, cultural, and logistical obstacles, the research underscored the necessity of providing accessible, equitable mental health care for all individuals.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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