

## Title

# Analysis of mental health challenges faced by young people abusing crystal methamphetamine in Africa: A case of Harare Metropolitan Province, Zimbabwe

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## Abstract

Mental health and wellness are aspects of life that have increasingly become an issue of great concern among young people in Africa with special attention paid in Zimbabwe. Most of them are subjected to agonies of rampant unemployment, violence, school dropouts, drug abuse and alcoholism to mention but just a few. Some of the young people migrate from their rural homes to Harare the capital city in search of greener pastures and when they fail to get employment they resort to living and working on the streets of the big city. Some resort to drug and substance abuse as a way to help them cope with the stress that comes with struggling to sustain their livelihoods. Most of these youths now smoke crystal meth, which is known as *mutoriro*, however this drug comes with many defects on their mental well-being. The main objective of the study was to explore the dimensions of the mental health struggles encountered by youths abusing *mutoriro*. The researchers used a qualitative method with a descriptive multiple case study design to examine the well-being of the youths. Ten in-depth interviews with the participants were conducted in Shona (since some of them were illiterate). Three key informant interviews were also carried out. The data were transcribed, translated and thematically analyzed.

## Key words

mental health, young people, crystal methamphetamine, Harare Metropolitan Province, Zimbabwe

## Key dates

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### Indexing



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## Introduction

The study investigated the mental health challenges faced by young people abusing crystal meth which is popularly known as *mutoriro*. The objective of the study was to explore domains of the mental well-being of young people abusing crystal meth. An investigation of the impacts of drug abuse on the mental health of youths and the community's perception of mental wellness were made in order to achieve the outcomes of the study. Young people's concerns in their families, communities as well as their abilities to cope in difficult situations were also discussed. With regards to the study methodology, the researchers employed the qualitative approach, adopting a cross-sectional multiple case study design with basic data collection, management and analysis procedures. The article provides the background to the study, an outline of the methodology, a discussion of the study findings, conclusions and then implications.

## Background

Mental health can be defined as a state of well-being in which individuals discover their potential, cope with normal stresses of life, can work productively and are able to contribute to their communities, (World Health Organization, 2014). Mental wellness in Zimbabwe has always been a cause for concern since time immemorial but was often associated with supernatural attributes. Currently, mental health challenges faced by young people usually stem from substance induced psychosis this is due to the rampant drug abuse and addiction by the youth of today in Zimbabwe. Drug addiction is one of the coping mechanisms adopted by young people that help them go through the difficult times prevalent in today's Zimbabwean society such as unavailability of employment opportunities, gender-based violence, domestic violence, political crisis and many others. Crystal meth is one of the most abused drugs in Zimbabwe and it is well known as *Guka Makafela*, *Mutoriro* or *Dombo*. Crystal meth is also popularly known as *Satan*, *ice*, *tik* and *Mpukuru Mmiri* in Sudan, South Africa and South East Nigeria respectively. Most users of this drug use the smoking method and smokable drugs are highly addictive and more likely to cause problems when consumed in that manner as they reach the brain quickly, (Mugadza and Muvingi, 2021). The smoking of crystal meth usually results in acute intoxication which causes tachycardia, cardiovascular disturbances and behavioral problems such as impulsivity and violence, (Mugadza and Muvingi, 2021). Crystal meth has short-term and long-term effects on the health of its users such as hallucinations, hyperexcitability, permanent memory loss, depression and psychosis due to brain damage. Mugadza and Muvingi, (2021) further explain that the available legislation is not clear on its prohibition of the use of methamphetamine which is the scientific name for crystal meth though it has been determined that the drug is indeed very dangerous, (Mugadza and Muvingi, 2021). This gap in the available policy frameworks compromises the effectiveness of the criminal justice system. This is so because, regardless of the

drug being highly addictive the possessors, dealers and users stand a chance of escaping punishment if caught in possession or under the influence of the drug, (Mugadza and Muvingi, 2021). The crystal meth drug is also known as *Satan* among some of the Sudanese young people. There is need for legislature to clearly express against the use of crystal meth as unambiguous language leaves undesired room for offenders to try and build a defense during criminal proceedings, (Mugadza and Muvingi, 2021).

## Theoretical framework

This study has adopted Ubuntu theory as a theoretical framework guiding this research. The Ubuntu theory is the theoretical framework underpinning the study. Ubuntu philosophy has its roots in African thinking, (Mugumbate and Chereni, 2019). Chikoko and Rugaranganda (2020), define ubuntu as a collection of values and practices that African people view as making people authentic human beings. Regardless of the variations in the nuances of these values and practices across ethnic groups they all point to one thing, that is an authentic individual is part of a larger and more significant relational, societal, communal, environmental and spiritual world, (Chikoko and Rugaranganda, 2020). Mayaka and Truell (2021) are of the view that ubuntu is based on generic life values of equality, collectiveness, justice, responsibility, love, respect, trust integrity, unselfishness, sharing, caring and social change. Ubuntu emphasizes on inclusivity of everyone in the community, their responsibility of individual community members to others and to the well-being of the environment to ensure sustainability, (Mayaka and Truell, 2021). The ubuntu perspective needs to be adopted when reaching out to the victims and survivors of ill mental health. In most African societies mental health challenges are frowned upon and there are unacceptable as an individual suffering from mental illness is thought to be bewitched, under a spell or cursed by either God or ancestral spirits. In most African communities a mentally ill person is often thought to be possessed by evil spirits. Mental illness is largely taboo in Africa. The principles of the ubuntu philosophy ensure that people with mental health challenges need to be supported and cared for by their families and the community at large, (Engelbrecht and Kasiram, 2014). Ubuntu is viewed as a deeply human, meaningful way of life and an original cultural method of mental health promotion, (Makunga et al, 2012).

The Ubuntu theory emphasizes on the essence of interconnectedness, common humanity and the responsibility of individuals to each other, (Nussbaum, 2003). The engagement of young people in drug abuse can be attributed to the negligence of the young people's welfare by their family members, community and government. There is need for these three institutions to look after young people so that these youths are able to return back to them by being responsible individuals.

## Methodology

The paper employed the qualitative data collection method. Purposive and snowball sampling were employed by the researcher to identify and select those with the capacity of providing relevant information with regards to the research question the researcher seeks to address. The research considered the views of four young women and six young men who are crystal meth addicts. It is of paramount importance to note that the researchers adopted the San Code of Research Ethics. The research was carried out in accordance with the San Code of Research Ethics in that the research was honest as the research study was clearly explained to the participants. The researchers ensured that the identities of the research were kept private and confidential. The researchers were respectful towards the participants as there was an engagement of the participants and the researchers prior to the research, (South African San Institute, 2017). The section for caring for the research participants demands that care be shown to the welfare of the participants in that the research did not expose the participants to any form of harm. Three key informants which include a psychologist, psychiatrist and a social worker were also interviewed by the researchers. These are the people who in one way or the other have interacted with young people who are victims and survivors of mental health problems on multiple occasions and so they happen to have reasonable knowledge that can assist with achieving the research objectives. Data were collected, transcribed, translated, coded and thematized. Themes were identified, cross-checked with original data and data was discussed according to the notes and memos that were gathered during the interviews. The researchers used pseudo names to hide and keep the identities of the participants private and confidential.

### Study area

Harare Metropolitan Province is in the northeastern part of Zimbabwe. Harare is the capital city of Zimbabwe and a province unto itself and is located in the Mashonaland region. The province is divided into four districts. It is also the country's most populous province and also Zimbabwe's leading trade center, communications center, political, financial and commercial center. It should not be ignored that the province also has a high rate of criminal activities such as arm robbery, drug trafficking, drug peddling and drug dealing. Such criminal activities which involve illicit drugs have had a major impact upon the mental wellbeing of many Zimbabwean young people.

### Ethical consideration

Research is required to be in tandem with the needs of the local people and should improve their well-being, (South African San Institute, 2017). The consent of the participants was required to carry out the research. The researchers respected the privacy of the participants as stipulated by the San Code in that pseudo names were given to participants to help conceal their real identities, (South African San

Institute, 2017). The objectives and the significance of the research were discussed with the focus group discussions, individual participants and key informants.

## Findings

### Demographic profile

The participants enrolled in the study were ten young people who are crystal meth addicts between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five years old. There were four young women and six young men and it should be noted that these participants differed in their levels of education. Four of the participants were university graduands, whilst the remaining six were school dropouts. All the participants shared different backgrounds. The participants' levels of education ranged from grade seven to degree certificate attainment.

### The mental health challenges and effects of crystal meth addiction on the mental health of young people

#### Hallucinations

*When I was still a drug addict some time in 2017, I remember I used to hear voices and see stuff that other people could not see. I sort of like lost my mind during that period. I was crazy. It was so bad that my father took me to a rehab facility. That's how I was able to quit drugs (Ronald).*

*I used to work on the streets as a sex worker and as you all know this kind of occupation is not easy. So, whenever I smoked mutoriro I became bold however, the boldness did not last long. I began to hear voices that no one could hear. Usually, the voices instructed me to hurt or kill my clients. Sometimes I would really try to fight and resist the persuasion but one day I gave in and struck one of my clients with an empty beer bottle. My neighbors heard a scream and rushed in. I was then arrested for attempted murder and intoxication. It was not easy living without the drugs and alcohol (Charity).*

The above quotes from the participants are a reflection of the consequences of smoking crystal meth among Zimbabwean youths. *Mutoriro* is widely abused among many young people in Africa. Most of the drug's victims and survivors have been subjected to hallucinations.

#### Substance induced depression

*I started using crystal meth when I was 17 in the year 2016 because I was being bullied at school. I began to experience substance induced depression. I felt empty and anxious. I was always sad and unhappy. I began withdrawing from spending my time with family. I had no friends at the time and so I was always in isolation (Rebecca).*

The abuse of crystal meth by young people negatively affects and disrupts their social functioning. From the above quote one can perceive the preferences of young people to

withdraw from any social gatherings. They begin to desire to be in isolation that to be surrounded by people. Being surrounded by other people will begin to make them feel uneasy.

### **Substance induced psychosis**

*My journey was not easy from the moment I started smoking crystal meth, fighting the addiction and becoming free. I started using the drug because of peer pressure. The addiction affected my way of thinking and doing stuff. I would smell, see and even hear sounds others were not aware of. I was often confused...it is more like I was disconnected from reality. I had lost it. My family did not know how to help me, so they took me to an Apostolic sect for prayers because they thought it was supernatural. They suspected that I was bewitched (Nyarai).*

Smoking *mutoriro* can be very dangerous. The quote above shows that *mutoriro* is a very dangerous threat to one's well-being. It is very difficult for *mutoriro* drug abusers to give up on the drug and begin to adhere to healthy lifestyles. Some of the youth who experiences the substance induced psychosis did not make it. They lost their lives to this drug.

### **Drug induced memory loss**

*My late brother used to smoke, inhale and eat any type of drug. He used cocaine, marijuana, he drank bronchlear which is known as bronko and also crystal meth. Being a drug addict, he experienced multiple health challenges with permanent memory loss being one of them. He would forget important and simple stuff so much so that we used to remind him about simple stuff during a conversation. – Rutendo (sister of the deceased Tapiwa who was a drug addict).*

*Mutoriro* is a drug that gives you temporary gratification. Its consequences are permanent for example mental health challenges such as memory loss. *Mutoriro* can really damage an individual's mental well-being, it damages one's mind. The above quote shows that its damage cannot be reversible for some of its victims.

### **Hyperexcitability**

*I work as a tout, a hwindi at the main bus terminus in Mbare so I used to smoke crystal meth for energy and boldness. We get *mutoriro* from light bulbs. We extract the material using a straw. Passengers and the public are rude whenever we approach them, they usually mistake us for rogues so I took crystal meth to maintain my confidence. Whenever I am insulted, I always managed to fight back. Until one day when the drug almost killed me. I experienced some extreme seizures whilst at the terminus and when I was rushed to the hospital the doctor explained to me that I should not take crystal meth because I am epileptic. It was difficult at first but with time and my family's support I quit using it. - Kuda*

*Mutoriro's* self-confidence is temporary. It messes up with an individual's brain and make them think they are enough when they are not. It fools its victims.

### **Unpredictable and violent behavior**

*I have been arrested a couple of times for indecent assault. This is actually embarrassing to talk about when I am sober (Tinotenda).*

*I work as a tout around here so smoking crystal meth is normal amongst us but then it has disadvantages. I tend to get aggressive when I smoke. I remember fighting with my father after he confronted me about it. I beat him so hard that I was chased away from home. I have tried reconciling with my family but to no avail. I messed up, no one wants to associate themselves with me anymore. I was given an ultimatum to quit the drugs first and come home. But they are not serious, I cannot do that. I am in a toxic relationship with my boyfriend. We have two children together but they stay with my parents. My parents took the children from us because we are always fighting, smoking and drinking. My husband was once arrested for domestic violence but I dropped the charges because we love each other. It's those jealous people who do not want to see us together, they bewitch us! (Kundai).*

*Mutoriro* is a drug that may cause young people to exhibit violent behavior. This may result in them the young people hurting themselves and those around them. *Mutoriro* can cause its smokers to damage healthy relationships with family and community members.

## **Discussion**

*Mutoriro* has become a popular drug among many African young people in the continent. It should be noted that *mutoriro* or *dombo* is very harmful to its smokers' mental health as it can result in substance induced psychosis, memory loss, hallucinations and many other mental health problems. Many African countries' governments are carrying the burden of looking for ways on how drug and substance abuse can be effectively dealt with. It should be noted that the application of the Ubuntu philosophy is relevant in as far as addressing drug and substance abuse is concerned.

### **The relevance of Ubuntu philosophy in addressing drug and substance abuse**

Chikoko and Rugaranganda (2020) define ubuntu as a collection of values and practices of African people that make people authentic human beings. It is further emphasized that it is the community's responsibilities to fulfill the needs of children and young people, (Chikoko and Rugaranganda, 2020). Most of the young people who indulge into drug and substance abuse in Africa are individuals who are subjects of abject poverty in the sense that they lack access to educational information about the dangers associated with substance abuse, they are unemployed, they are exposed to violence, abuse and many other challenges. Drug and substance abuse is their way of coping with challenges. The Ubuntu approach is relevant in reaching out to the young



people in drug and substance abuse as it stresses on morals and social conduct, (Chikoko and Ruparanganda, 2020). Morals provide individuals with guidance in doing what is right and acceptable for their own sake and the sake of their communities, (Mbiti, 1975). Ubuntu philosophy stresses on individuals being morally upright people as this can enable them to enjoy the virtues of that society appreciates and seeks to preserve such as bravery, self-control, justice, love, friendship and compassion to mention but just a few, (Mbiti, 1975). The adoption of the Ubuntu philosophy encourages the preservation of the African ways and beliefs that is *kuchengetedza tsika dzedu nemagariro sevanhu vechivanhu* in Zimbabwean Shona language. Young people who indulge in drug and substance abuse are viewed as disobedient and disrespectful according to the Ubuntu philosophy and so they will need to be punished, (Chikoko and Ruparanganda, 2020). Corporal punishment is believed to be an effective and efficient mode of disciplining most of African youths, this mode of punishment involves thrashing with either a stick or belt or slapping.

Young people who are based in the diaspora and also the ones living in their native countries in Africa need to visit their rural homes and to socialize with their kinsmen for them to have an orientation of their roots. For most African people are defined by their roots, their communities and respective cultures to which they belong. An African individual is made by their society and they too are responsible for building up their community as the Ubuntu philosophy stresses that I am because we are. Which is derived from a South African phrase, “Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu,” which means a person is a person through other people.

#### **The vulnerability of youths abusing crystal meth to substance induced mental health problems (psychosis, depression, hyperexcitability, memory loss and hallucinations)**

The abuse of crystal meth causes brain damage which in turn results in mental health problems such as psychosis, depression, hyperexcitability, memory loss and hallucinations. These mental health problems are an obstacle to a healthy life style and bright future for the young people. Adjorlolo and Setordzi (2021) define psychosis as a mental disorder that involves disorganized behaviors and thought processes. The study revealed that many young people who abuse crystal meth in Zimbabwe have experienced substance induced psychosis. Young people turn to smoking crystal meth as a coping mechanism amidst times of adversity. Most of these young people lack skills that can help them cope stressful situations, (Abur and Mphande, 2019). In Zimbabwe young people are affected by the high rates of unemployment as there are no jobs readily available for young graduates. The country is going through an extreme economic crisis which has resultantly made both the educated and illiterate young people very poor as they lack sources to help them generate some form of income to sustain their livelihoods.

Zimbabwean youths are also victims of domestic violence. Domestic violence happens to traumatize its victims and so the young people prefer going through the struggle of domestic violence with the help of crystal meth. The study findings show that the drug energizes them and makes them bold as they would have lost their self-esteem. However, the crystal meth addiction has immense negative effects such as hallucinations, hyperexcitability, depression and permanent memory loss. These effects limit their chances of having a bright future and serving their communities effectively. In order to address the problem of substance abuse and mental health problems respective communities in Zimbabwe need to adopt the ubuntu ideology. Shutte (2001) has it that the concept of ubuntu involves the comprehension of what it is exactly to be human and the need for humans to grow and find fulfillment, This, will help instill resilience in the young people in such a way that they will not resort to drug addiction as a coping mechanism.

#### **Discrimination and stigmatization of crystal meth addicts with mental health problems**

Mental health problems and substance abuse are associated with discrimination and stigmatization of its subjects. Abur (2020) has it that there is no pride in discussing mental health issues among African youth because of stigma. Drug addiction is an example of deviant behavior in most Zimbabwean societies, so youths who indulge in substance abuse are usually frowned upon by other community members. When these youths begin to experience mental health problems as a result of substance abuse, they are often isolated by their families and community members. In many rural regions in Africa family and community members tend to cast out persons with mental disorders are associated with God’s and ancestral spirits’ wrath, (Abi, 2019). Abi (2019) further explains that mental disorders are associated with metaphysical causes in African communities and so it is logical to look for a metaphysical cure, this then explains ancestral rituals which often take place in voodoo temples and shrines as the affected person will be taken to traditional healers and priests for treatment, (Abi, 2019).

Young people afflicted with mental illness in Zimbabwe are not allowed to marry because other families would not want their descendants to be affected by the same problem. These people are often deprived of their right to marry and having a family. Young people with substance induced mental disorders are also sent to mental health institutions by their families for treatment. Some families do this as a genuine gesture of seeking help for the mentally ill individual whilst others do it to get rid of the mentally challenged individual. Some of the young people with these challenges are often tied up and locked away in lonesome rooms by their families, this is because they will be regarded as “mad” or “crazy” individuals. They are restricted to go anywhere or to move. Such inhuman treatment only worsens their trauma and mental health problems. Dolamo (2013) explains that in African communities the most important value which has been derived from the ubuntu concept observes that no person should exist in isolation or be excluded from the web

of life. Most of the young persons with mental disorders are often stripped off of their dignity, inherent worth and are also treated with immense disrespect. Some of youths with substance induced mental disorders are often thrashed by ropes, belts, whips and sticks and called derogative names. Community and family members need to be compassionate and loving towards the young people with mental health problems. The ubuntu ideology needs to be incorporated when dealing with youth afflicted with mental disorders. Some of the young people may even die from both the maltreatment and lack of appropriate treatment for the mental disorders. Manyonganise (2015) has it that ubuntu is humanness and this humanness is revealed when a person is welcoming, respectful of the dignity of others, compassionate, caring and empathetic. Kasomo and Maseno (2011) explain that the concept of ubuntu values dignity, equality and existence of all individuals.

## Implications of the study and recommendations

The study is going to provide policy makers with insight as to how substance and drug abuse can be dealt with so as to ensure prevention of substance induced psychosis and many other mental health problems that occur as a result of drug abuse. Social workers and other service providers are going to benefit from the study as well as it unfolds the nature of mental health challenges among young people caused by abusing crystal meth. The study also provides insight on the effective treatment that can be administered to young people with substance induced mental health problems.

The study recommends that awareness campaigns about mental health and substance abuse be staged every month in Zimbabwean communities. These awareness campaigns will help with educating young people about the dangers of substance abuse for example the how substance abuse can cause brain damage. Community members such as parents and leaders need to be educated on how they can handle an individual with a mental disorder to avoid maltreating persons with mental health challenges. Awareness campaigns about domestic violence and how it can lead to substance abuse which in turn causes mental health problems.

Communities need to come up with self-help projects that the unemployed young people can engage in to help generate income. These self -help projects will help keep them occupied and also resist the urge of taking illicit drugs.

Policy makers need to avoid vagueness in policy instruments that are against the use and trading of illicit drugs. This will result in effective law enforcement and a decrease in crimes that occur as a result of intoxication.

## Conclusion

The study concluded that young people who are abusing crystal meth are experiencing immense substance induced

mental health challenges. The Zimbabwean government needs to improvise on how drug abuse can be prevented and also the government needs to provide platforms that educate youths on the dangers of drug addiction and mental wellness. Social workers can play an important role by influencing policies to avoid vagueness with regards to prohibition of illicit drugs and also ensuring the safety of young people who have substance induced mental disorders. Social workers can help to ensure that they are treated with compassion and respect. The treatment administered to the young people should be dignified and should reinforce their self-worth. Young people need to be resilient to help them cope in difficult situations and not turn to drug addiction as an alternative.

### Declaration

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