

Understanding and Responding to Harmful Alcohol Use in a Refugee Community

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Agenda

- Background
- Methods
- Discussion and application

Growing Awareness of Harmful Alcohol Use

- Increasing concern with chronic illness in refugee populations (Strathadee et al., 2009; Spiegel et al., 2010)
- Globally, 4% of deaths are alcohol related (Rehm et al., 2009)
- Documented relationship between PTSD and substance use (Debell et al., 2014)
 - Refugees may be 10 times as likely to have PTSD as non-refugee populations (Fazel et al., 2005)
- Anecdotal evidence

Limited Epidemiological Evidence

- Some substance use documented in displaced populations, but lack of comparative data
 - Khat use in Somalia (Odenwald et al., 2005)
 - Opioid/heroin use in Afghani refugees in Pakistan (Strathadee et al., 2003)
 - Benzodiazepine use in Bosnia (Bjelosevic et al., 2003)
- Alcohol use is a factor in
 - Suicide (Bosnar et al., 2004)
 - Gender based violence (Ondeko et al., 2004)
 - Increased HIV-risk (Strathadee et al., 2003)
 - High levels of poverty (Bhui et al., 2007)

Limited Academic Knowledge

- Risk factors for alcohol use in displaced populations include:
 - Male gender
 - Exposure to war trauma
 - Prolonged displacement
 - Co-existing mental health problems (Ezard, 2012)
- Limited understanding of social, cultural, political, and economic factors
- Almost no tested interventions

Harmful Alcohol Use Occurs in a Complex Context

- Protracted camp settings
- Lack of culturally relevant public health messaging
- Lack of mechanisms in camps to manage substance use
- Little understanding of social cohesion aspects of alcohol use
- Patterns of use and related factors differ depending on geographic context (home country, country of origin, and country of resettlement)

The Karen



- Largest minority ethnic group in Burma
- Fighting for autonomy since independence in 1948
- Refugees began fleeing to Thailand in large numbers in the 1980s
- There are currently about 110,000 refugees in 9 camps on the border
- Refugees from Burma began resettling in the US in the early 2000s and there are about 10,000 Karen in Minnesota

Study methods

- Qualitative inquiry: blend of critical ethnography and phenomenology
- Two study sites: US and Thailand
- Interviews and focus groups with 62 people
- Demographics
 - 65% male
 - Age 23 to 71 years old
 - Average time in camps: 12.8 years
 - Average time in US: 2.7 years

Five Important Findings

- Reasons for and consequences of alcohol use
- Broken culture and alcohol use
- Communal thinking and alcohol use
- Violence and alcohol use
- Political context of alcohol use

Reasons and Consequences

- There are both appropriate (cultural) and inappropriate (displacement) reasons for alcohol use, which lead to appropriate and inappropriate consequences
 - So first reason is because most Karen people, by the traditional way... use because of the culture... and they have a kind of rule, how to use in the culture.
 - I started using alcohol when my brother, my father and my sister died. I used it to feel happy. I used it to stop thinking. It made me stop thinking... People have a bad feeling and they want to fix that feeling.

Broken Culture

- Culture is broken during displacement and this leads to increased alcohol use and an abuse of culture
 - Life changes, everything changes when people leave Karen State... they are exposed to a different kind of environment... There is no work, they are not busy like they were at home so they use alcohol to reduce the stress and the boredom and lack of opportunity or future... it is hard for the community to be strong together because of so much change and different people all together. So they use too much.

Following Their Hearts

- People who drink over the limit are following their hearts and not thinking about their family and community
 - They have no sympathy or empathy to other people. Some people believe that one day everybody will die even [if they] drink or not drink. So this means they have no future hope, no future life. [And] those people who stop [drinking]..., maybe one day their mind or their decision change and they understand about their family and then they have a kind of empathy to other people. And then so... they will think for their children's future. So... OK, so I should stop for my children. So some people will have a strong decision. OK, I will stop.

Violence and Fighting

- Violence is a negative consequence of alcohol use and is related to feeling fear and powerlessness because of conflict and displacement
 - He has something in his heart but he cannot open so they drink together and when they drunk he will hit him so hard.
 - Some of them they are used to that attitude, if they get drunk they want to get in fight. By drinking alcohol they get rid of fear.
 - Because after you drink you feel brave, active, like kind of aggressive. Like doing without any consideration.

Political Context

- The political context of Karen displacement influences patterns of alcohol use
 - Friendship mean is, like... you have to deal with so many kind of people, like you have to meet with Burmese government and all people like that, um, to build up friendship you will buy them alcohol and drink together then you became like closer and you become a friend, so it's easier for you to deal with. For your own safety.

Different Use in Different Contexts

- Resettlement brings new problems
 - Legal issues
 - Complex treatment systems
 - Western assumptions about prevention exposure
 - Religious and community leadership

Putting Knowledge to Use

- Development of culturally and linguistically relevant outpatient group treatment program for harmful alcohol use for Karen people
 - Emphasis on education
 - Reduce system complexity
 - Integrated care
 - Trauma informed
 - Importance of community support
 - Involving leaders
 - Collateral information at intake
 - Organic curriculum and “deep adaptation”

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