

Research Briefing Notes

Making the Invisible Visible: Slow Violence, Mental Health and Resilience in Gaza¹

Summary

The aim of this project was to make the invisible and long-term effects of violence visible, i.e., to examine how violence affects Gaza's young generation in terms of their increasing vulnerability to mental health challenges, and how existing resilience networks could serve as a vehicle for better strategic intervention in mental health. Our main objective is, indeed, to give public and academic visibility to the mental health conditions of young people by; (1) collecting up-to-date data on the extent of mental health deterioration among Gazan youth; (2) giving visibility to personal, youth narratives; (3) analysing existing and varied mental health interventions; (4) developing a set of recommendations for future. Our contribution to the extant literature on this topic is that slow violence is both overlooked and too frequently invisible, often with consequences that are hidden yet ones that severely shape the mental well-being of young people in Gaza. We are inspired by the acknowledgement that mental health is a global health priority (Marquez & Saxena, 2016).

Consequently, our main research question is: How has Israel's slow violence in the Strip to date affected the mental health of Gazan young people? Three sub-questions will guide our study: (1) What is the status of the mental health of young people in the Gaza Strip today? (2) What are the coping strategies that Gazan youth employ to overcome their dire living conditions? And: (3) What are the required interventions from Gazan youth's and mental health professionals' perspectives?

Research Background

The interdisciplinary experience and networks of the team (Conflict Studies, Urban Health, Psychiatry) were used as frames for data gathering which involved a combination of qualitative, quantitative, and visual methods. Mixed methods are especially important in problematising the long-term impacts of violence on Gazan youth and their mental well-being. This approach is essential to capture the targeted participants' point of view. Mixed methods give a voice to study participants and ensure that our findings are grounded in participants' experiences. More specifically, the following tools were employed: (1) Desk review: revisiting the existing data related to Gazan youth mental health; (2) surveys: amongst 215 young people aged between 18-29 years, both men and women, across the 5 Gazan governorates. Surveys captured demographic data, socio-economic conditions and mental health status through a questionnaire; (3) interviews: amongst 05 youth interviewees and 03 Mental health specialists.

Key Findings

The core finding of this research is that Gaza and its youth are facing enormous and extraordinary challenges daily – and this is before the current situation. The report summarised the main findings concerning the impact of the current situation in Gaza on Gazan youth's mental health. On the other hand, resilience is present among the youth for various reasons, including hope, faith, social support,

¹ This research was completed a short time before October 7th.

and determination. All in all, the report found that the current disastrous situation in Gaza is not purely humanitarian; it is politically and economically driven. The Israeli occupation and the siege of Gaza, combined with very regular Israeli aggressions, alongside Palestinian internal political divisions, are the main reasons for Gazan youth suffering.

Findings and Key Implications for Policy Action or Further Ways to Address the Knowledge Gap

Below are some concrete recommendations that we identified regarding mental health interventions. These recommendations are not in the macro-level political sphere, but rather aim to improve the psychological and well-being of youth in the Gaza Strip:

Provide specialised mental health care: Young people meet various challenges and often, the existing, supportive mechanisms are not strong enough to address these challenges. The feelings of anxiety, worry, loss of hope, or depression can reach clinical thresholds impairing the “normal” functioning of the youth and making them vulnerable to suicide ideation (see: Middle East Eye, 2022). There is a need to support and further expand the services that offer psychotherapy and medications to people in need. The intervention could be at secondary and tertiary prevention levels.

Inhouse Counselling Units

Few universities offer counselling to students through in-house counselling units. Such units are run mainly by university lecturers from the faculty of psychology. The availability of these units needs to be mainstreamed across universities, and capacity-building programmes need to be provided to academic lecturers. The counselling units have a major advantage of being within the universities, thus easily accessible (for university students who manage to get to university) and, more importantly, are less stigmatising. In a few instances, the units were run in cooperation with more expert institutions like GCMHP. GCMHP also provides such services to the wide community through cooperation with local community-based organisations. This makes accessibility available also to women and children and reduces the stigma associated with visiting a mental health facility. Such services are important for international governments and NGOs to support.

Stress Management Interventions

There are several evidence-based interventions that could help young people overcome stress. Some of them are WHO-recommended interventions like Self Help Plus, (a group-based stress management course for adults), Problem Management Plus, a program which involves individual psychological help for adults impaired by distress in communities exposed to adversity, and Doing What Matters, a stress management program for coping with adversity. Mind and Body Interventions, or mind-body training (MBT), that is, health and fitness interventions that are intended to work on a physical and mental level such as yoga, tai chi, and Pilates, are also helpful. There are several organisations including national and international ones in the Gaza Strip that offer training on these self-help techniques. It would be worth adapting and applying these to university students and other youth. A good example of this is the work that began in 2023 by GCMHP on piloting Self Help Plus for the Gazan population. Self-help Plus (SH+) is a WHO-developed multimedia, guided, self-help stress management course delivered over a period of five weeks to groups of up to 30 people at a time. The course is suitable for anyone who experiences stress, wherever they live and whatever their circumstances. The intervention was applied to more than 150 people, most of them young. The intervention is being assessed for effectiveness and feasibility. Once this is proven, efforts will be made to build the capacities of more people to use this intervention.

Psychosocial Interventions

These are very important at the prevention level. They are activities based on the use of the arts, storytelling, sports, games, drawing, singing, etc. They can be applied at early ages, for children, as well as for adolescents. They have the advantage of being low-cost and are mostly group-based interventions. Plenty of national and international organisations provide such activities. However, they need to be more focused or structured when applied to young people. An example of such an intervention is the Eyes of Gaza artistic project, an intervention method using Arab Art Therapy. Youths and adults in Gaza painted walls with stories, ideas and questions, including those of children, who also participated in the project (Akut12016).

Psychoeducation

Psychoeducation is an important element and, in this case, aims at strengthening family support and social networks around young people. In many families, being a university student is the biggest (economic/financial) burden. Families might not be aware how students or unemployed graduates feel or think about that burden. Many local organisations conduct campaigns promoting certain important messages and addressing issues like gender-based violence and child mental health care. Sensitising such activities toward youth mental health is also important. They also reduce stigma towards mental illness and inform the population on means of finding support. Finally, it is important to encourage young people to overcome social stigma, and to speak up and talk about their challenges and feelings to give them the sense that they are in charge and can make a difference.

Key Policy Target Groups

Local government, local and international NGOs, United Nations agencies, urban-humanitarian professionals, academic community.

Authors' Contract Information

Haim Yacobi

Professor of Development Planning
The Bartlett Development Planning Unit (DPU)
UCL

Email: h.yacobi@ucl.ac.uk

Michelle Pace

Professor in Global Studies
Roskilde University

Email: mpace@ruc.dk

Yasser Abu Jamei

Gaza Community Mental Health Programme

Email: yasser@gcmhp.net

More About the Research

The project produced a full report, which includes a database of the guide [available here](#). We produced a short documentary on the co-learning process and a video of the public art installation. Both are available on the project [page here](#).

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