

Policy brief:

Mental health and disability research priorities and capacity needs in Ghana

Key messages

- Peer-reviewed mental health and disabilities research has not increased since 2010, and the research agenda provides an important framework to help reverse this trend in the next 10 years
- Research in mental and disability in Ghana is urgently required and should focus on:
 - a) health systems strengthening and interventions development and implementation
 - b) how to scale-up of mental health and disability services
 - c) epidemiological questions to understand the consequences of stigma and social determinants of mental health
- More than 70% of disability and mental health studies from 2010-2020 have been conducted in Ghana's two biggest cities, Accra and Kumasi. Experts expressed need for geographically representative studies in disability and mental health in Ghana
- There is weak technical capacity for the conduct of disability research, global mental health research, and health economics modelling
- There is inadequate funding for mental health and disability research in Ghana, hence the need to increase research funding based on locally identified research priorities

Executive summary

Mental, neurological and substance use (MNS) conditions are key drivers of increased morbidity and mortality in the world over. These conditions are prevalent in low-and-middle-income countries (LMIC) with the burden increasing. However, most people living with mental health conditions do not receive the required treatment, and in Ghana the treatment gap is estimated to be around 98%¹. This huge gap is mostly attributed to low priority attached to mental health. This is also evident in the disparity in investment on mental health research. Research on mental health is integral to strengthening health systems and achieving sustainable development in LMIC. Developing a research agenda for mental health and disability is vital for achieving the sustainable development goals and reducing the treatment gap. Well-designed research priority-setting studies can be used to identify the most pressing mental health challenges and influence change.

We conducted a study to identify mental health and disability research priorities and capacity needs for Ghana. A mixed methods study comprising a rapid review, research priority ranking survey, and research capacity needs assessment survey was employed. The results showed that the top ten ranked research questions included: four questions addressing health systems; two questions on epidemiology; and four questions on interventions. All research questions were considered urgent and should be conducted in the immediate to short term (0–5 years). This research agenda provides an important framework to identify the most pressing mental health challenges and has the potential to significantly reduce the burden of MNS conditions and the wide treatment gap.

Introduction

Addressing the burden of mental, neurological and substance use (MNS) conditions is a concern that needs to be addressed globally. In Ghana, between 95–98% of people with a MNS condition do not receive treatment, which is known as the treatment gap. This gap exists partly due to the minimal policy attention that MNS conditions have been accorded. Research on mental health is integral to strengthening health systems and achieving sustainable development in low-and-middle-income countries (LMIC). Developing research agendas for mental health and disability is vital for achieving the sustainable development goals and reducing the treatment gap.

The role of research in addressing the existing gap in mental health treatment in Ghana cannot be over-emphasised. Ghana has passed a Disability Act in 2006 (Act

¹ Eaton J, Ohene S. Providing Sustainable Mental Health Care in Ghana: A Demonstration Project. In: Forum on Neuroscience and Nervous System Disorders; Board on Health Sciences Policy; Board on Global Health; Institute of Medicine; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. Providing Sustainable Mental and Neurological Health Care in Ghana and Kenya: Workshop Summary. Washington (DC): National Academies Press (US); 2016 Feb 25.

715 [25]) and the Act stipulates the establishment of a National Council on Persons with Disability (NCPD). A key function of NCPD is to promote studies and research on issues of disability and provide education and information to the public on issues of disability. However, a research agenda in mental health is yet to be developed to guide the conduct of research. A well-designed research priority-setting study can be used to identify the most pressing mental health research challenges and improve mental health outcomes. This calls for an urgent need to identify research priorities for mental health and disability in Ghana. The aim of this study was to identify mental health and disability research priorities in Ghana.

Methods

Two study designs were employed: first, a rapid review on mental health and disability research in Ghana over the last 10 years was conducted. The rapid review set out to identify relevant studies on mental health and disability conducted in or on Ghana over the 10 years from 2010 to 2020. Second a structured cross-sectional survey was conducted on priority mental health and disability research questions for the short, medium and long term. The cross-sectional survey was conducted over two stages involving multiple steps.

The first stage involved a process of stakeholder mapping to ensure a broad range of respondents for the study. Stakeholders included Clinicians, researchers, academia, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in mental health and disability as well as policy makers. An online survey was then deployed to stakeholders to identify relevant research questions in mental health. The second stage involved stakeholders ranking the relevance of the research questions they identified in Stage 1. In order to explore current research capacity needs in relation to the identified research priorities in Ghana, a set of research domains were derived from a mental health research capacity needs assessment tool as part of the Emerging Mental Health systems in LMIC (Emerald) project² (REF). These questions were deployed to researchers or academia and the leadership of research or academic institutions.

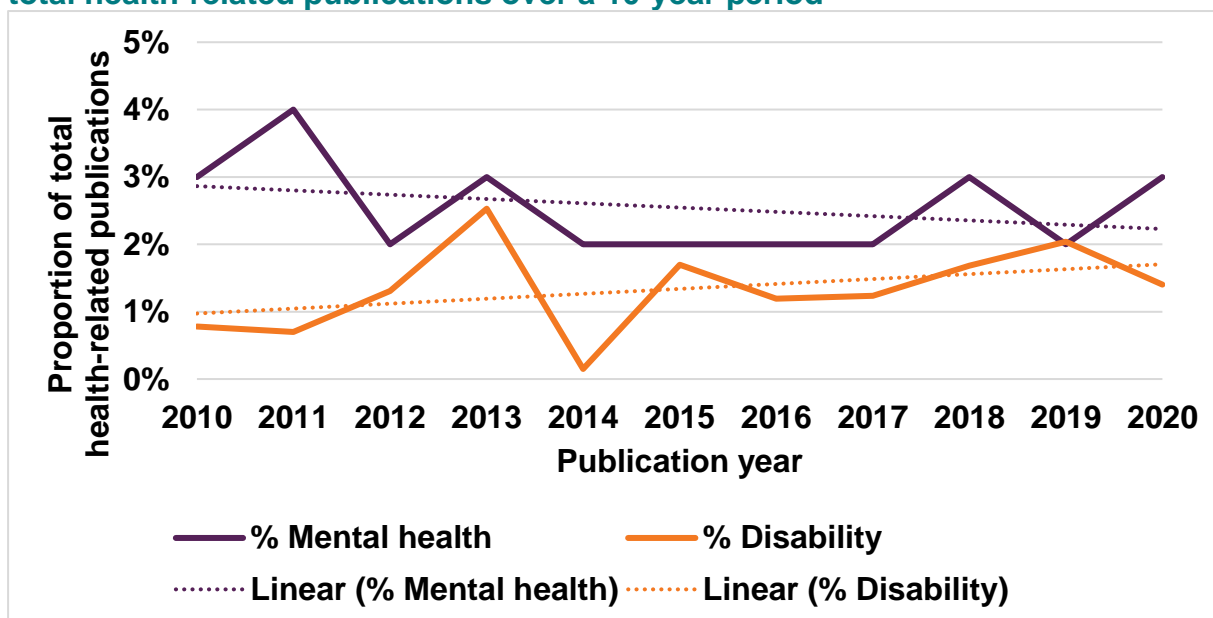
Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Ghana Health Service Ethics Review Committee (GHS-ERCO25/08/20) and King's College London Research Ethics Committee (LRS-20/21-20866).

² Semrau M, Alem A, Abdulmalik J, et al. Developing capacity-building activities for mental health system strengthening in low- and middle-income countries for service users and caregivers, service planners, and researchers. *Epidemiol Psychiatr Sci.* 2018;27:11–21. Epub 2017/10/03 <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/28965528/>

Key findings

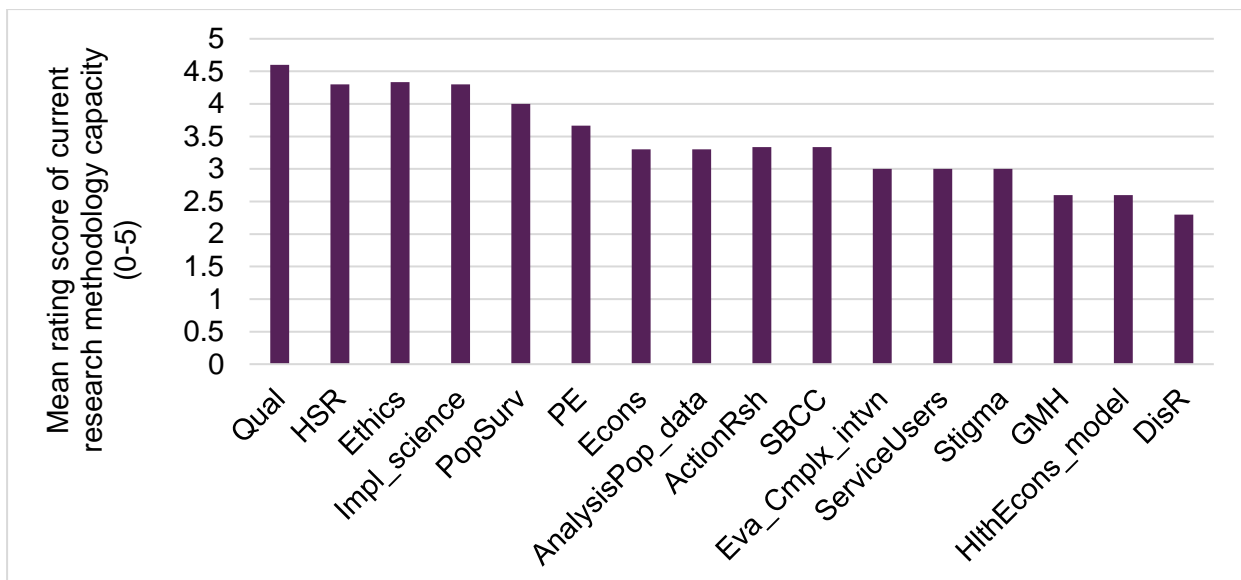
- Out of the 375 articles included in the review, 232 (62%) of the articles were on mental health while the remaining 143 (38%) were on disability
- As shown in Figure 1, although there was an increase in the number of mental health and disability studies conducted over the 10-year period (2010 to 2020), there has been a general decline in reported studies on mental health and disability as a proportion of total health-related research publications
- Few studies researched on issues of stigma and discrimination (7.6%), and no reported research was conducted on the implementation of policies and rights of persons with disabilities as stipulated in the 2006 Ghana Disability Act
- A small number of studies had also focused on caregivers as the primary subjects (n=25, 17%) and their role in providing care for persons with disabilities. In terms of gender, 130 (91%) of the articles included both men and women
- More than 70% of disability and mental health studies from 2010-2020 have been conducted in Ghana's two biggest cities in Accra and Kumasi

Figure 1: Mental health and disability research publications as a proportion of total health-related publications over a 10-year period



- The top ten priority research questions focused on health systems and interventions research with specific questions on scale-up of mental health and disability services. Experts also prioritised epidemiological questions to understand the consequences of stigma, and social determinants of mental health (Table 1)
- All of the top ten research questions were considered urgent and should be conducted in the immediate and short term (0–5 years)
- Research on depression (17.5%) was most prioritised, followed by substance use disorder (12.5%), epilepsy (10%), bipolar disorder (7.5%), and schizophrenia (5%)
- Research questions around human resources for mental health services delivery were ranked highly. Themes such as the role of cadres of mental health professionals, and the role of community mental health officers in providing mental health services were identified as important research priorities
- Capacity for disability research, global mental health research, and health economics modelling was weak

Figure 2: Distribution of mean Research Capacity score by research domains



Key:

Qual: Qualitative Research; HSR: Health Services Research; Ethics: Ethical conduct of research; Impl_science: Implementation science; PopSurv: Population Level Surveys; PE: Public engagement; Econs: Economic Evaluation; AnalysisPop_data: Analysis of complex population datasets; ActionRsh: Action Research; SBCC: Social and Behaviour Change Communication; Eva_Cmplx_intvn: Evaluation of Complex Interventions; ServiceUsers: Empowering service users in research; Stigma: Research on stigma and discrimination; GMH: Global Mental Health Research; HlthEcons_model: Health economics evaluation; DisR: Disability Research.

Table 1: Top 10 priority research questions and their thematic areas for Ghana

Thematic area and research questions
<p>Health systems, policy and mental health and disability legislation studies in order to unpack human-rights issues and their impact on mental health and disability; and integrate mental health in primary health care</p> <p>How can we scale up mental health and disability services in Ghana?</p>
<p>Design and evaluation of intervention studies, including economic evaluation</p> <p>What are the ways of improving working conditions for mental health professionals in Ghana?</p>
<p>Design and evaluation of intervention studies, including economic evaluation</p> <p>What livelihoods and psychosocial support activities are most appropriate and effective for people with disabilities?</p>
<p>Design and evaluation of intervention studies, including economic evaluation</p> <p>What interventions and educational programmes will aid in improving mental health literacy to reduce stigma and protecting the rights of people living with mental illness and disabilities?</p>
<p>Epidemiological studies on incidence and prevalence of mental health conditions and to identify how mental health conditions emerge, what makes people more susceptible or resilient than others, and the consequences of mental health conditions</p>
<p>Health systems, policy and mental health and disability legislation studies in order to unpack human-rights issues and their impact on mental health and disability; and integrate mental health in primary health care</p>
<p>Health systems, policy and mental health and disability legislation studies</p> <p>What are the causes of stigma and discrimination against people with mental illness and what steps can be taken to address it?</p>
<p>Epidemiological studies on incidence and prevalence of mental health conditions and to identify how mental health conditions emerge, what makes people more susceptible or resilient than others, consequences</p> <p>How does extreme poverty and other social determinants (including domestic abuse, childhood adversity) exacerbate mental health conditions in Ghana?</p>
<p>Design and evaluation of intervention studies, including economic evaluation</p> <p>What are the benefits and challenges of delivering mental healthcare through community-based care instead of institutional care and what impact does the removal of institutional care have on mental healthcare in Ghana?</p>
<p>Health systems, policy and mental health and disability legislation studies in order to unpack human-rights issues and their impact on mental health and disability; and integrate mental health in primary health care</p> <p>What is the importance of community mental health officers in mental health delivery?</p>

Policy recommendations

Government

- Government agencies such as the Mental Health Authority and the National Development Planning Commission could use the findings from this study to develop policies that support the implementation of a national mental health and disability research agenda in Ghana
- The Ministry of Health (MoH) could prioritise and invest resources in mental health research to provide strategies for scaling up mental health services nationwide. For example, the ministry could increase the financial capacity of the three Ghana Health Service health research centres, strategically located across the three main ecological belts of Ghana viz. Savannah, Middle, and Southern. This will also help to address the uneven mental health and disability research activity in Ghana
- There is need for more local funding of mental health and disability research. One way to address this is to implement the mental health Act 846 in order to establish a fund for research
- MoH training institutions for mental health professionals should include research methods and scientific writing in the curriculum
- Given the link between MNS conditions and human rights violations, Government should prioritise the development of mental health and disability policy and legislation with a focus on human-rights to curb human rights abuse

Research and academia

- Universities, particularly schools of public health should take up and convene formal training programmes and courses in mental health and disability research
- The three Ghana Health Service health research centres should include mental health and disability research in their research portfolios. The centres should make mental health research attractive to young researchers; promote strategies for acquiring research grants and for developing and sustaining researchers' careers

Non-governmental organisations or civil society organisations

- NGOs/CSOs in mental health and disability work should include research in their activities and build capacities of key staff to conduct research

Funders or multilateral organisations

- Funders could be guided by the priority research areas and institute funding schemes that promote such research

Conclusion

The empirical findings from this study show clearly what areas of research are important for mental health and disability issues in Ghana. Specific recommendations have been proffered to help improve research activity and reduce the burden of MNS conditions, and the wide treatment gap in Ghana.

Reference

Weobong, B., Ae-Ngibise, K., Mwangi, G., Sakyi, L., & Lund, C. (2022). Mental health and disability research priorities and capacity needs in Ghana: findings from a rapid review and research priority ranking survey. *Global health action*, 15(1), 2112404 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/16549716.2022.2112404>

Appendix 1: List of abbreviations

Acronym	Description
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
LMIC	Low-and-middle-income countries
MNS	Mental, neurological and substance use
MoH	Ministry of Health
NCPD	National Council on Persons with Disability
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation



For further information contact us:

Address: No.6 Asoyi Crescent, East Legon, Accra

Email: info@ghanasomubi.com

Website: <https://www.ghanasomubi.com>



@ghanasomubi



@ GhanaSomubi