

The University of Queensland

Medical School - Faculty of Health, Medicine and Behavioural Sciences- Herston

Masters of Mental Health 2025- Psychotherapy Thesis

What hinders engagement levels for African immigrants in mental health in Australia? What can be done to improve engagement?

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Introduction

In recent years, there has been a notable rise in the number of Africans migrating to Western countries, including Australia. According to Faulk et al. 2022 the 2016 census recorded 380,000 African immigrants, with the majority being refugees; specifically, 180,788 were resettled between 2009 and 2018. The authors also highlight that refugees often face mental health challenges because of resettlement factors, such as fleeing conflict, losing social connections, and navigating a new system post-settlement. This indicates a pressing need for access to mental health services.

Despite the growing population, understanding the mental health needs for African immigrants in Australia is currently under researched. The existing research predominantly focuses on African immigrants who are refugees and lesser on voluntary migrants. What is known is that the rate of seeking mental health supports among immigrants is low. This lack of engagement can lead to poor health outcomes as the people go untreated and this in turn impacting, work, family and social life (Meribe et al., 2025). Psychological stress, anxiety and depression are reported as being prevalent amongst African immigrants (Das et al., 2025). Research found that the immigrant communities have a higher number of involuntarily presentations to hospitals, psychosis and minimal contact with community based mental health services (Minas et al., 2013). A service provider stated that because of stigma the African migrants that they saw were taken to hospital involuntary (Meribe et al., 2025).

Method

The research method used is deductive in nature, focusing on established theories and frameworks. This approach enables a thorough examination of these theories to uncover meanings and narratives related to interpersonal and intrapersonal phenomena (Fife & Gossner, 2024). The research is guided by the Social Ecological Model which is a framework which acknowledges that a person's wellbeing is influenced by the dynamic interaction of personal traits, psychological elements, intimate relationships, community surroundings, and wider societal factors (Slimmen et al., 2024).

This scoping review took a systematic method following the Arskey and O'Malley framework to map the existing literature on what hinders engagement among Africans in Australia and strategies that can be utilised to improve engagement.

- Step 1 - Development of a research question
- Step 2 - Identifying relevant studies
- Step 3 – Study selection
- Step 4 -Charting the data
- Step 5-Collating, summarising and reporting the results

The approach used for data analysis was thematic analysis that used the Braun and Clarke 6 phase framework, which is defined as a research technique aimed at identifying and interpreting patterns or themes within a data set .



Figure 1: Thematic analysis

Study Aims

This scoping review aims to systematically explore the existing literature on what hinders mental health engagement among African immigrants in Australia. By synthesising findings from various studies, this research will identify gaps in knowledge and propose actionable strategies to improve engagement in mental health services. Ultimately the goal is to inform policymakers, healthcare providers, community organisations to create more culturally appropriate and accessible mental health supports for Africans in Australia.

The study aims to explore the barriers of African immigrants in supporting their mental wellbeing and what can be done to improve engagement. From the research it appears that there is existing literature which is minimal and observed that the current literature focuses mainly on refugees and less on voluntary African migrants, which highlights that there is a gap in literature Current literature suggests that further exploration of this topic is necessary. This underscores the importance of conducting a scoping study to consolidate and verify the work that has been accomplished to date.

The results of the scoping review reveal several intersecting barriers that hinder engagement levels in mental health services among African immigrants in Australia. The hinderances are influenced by social, cultural, economic and systematic factors that influence how the population engages in mental health services.

Results 1

Mental health is prevalent, but the population seeks support from family, friends , community and religious leaders

The study found that African immigrants in Australia leaned on their community, religious leaders and family for support this is consistent with literature in a study carried out in the United States by Nyanamba et al., 2024 reported the one of the main ways of African immigrants managing their mental health was through social support such as kinship, religion spirituality , participating in church as this is because it is a form of identity when they move to a new country and the socialisation is collective.

This means that African immigrants do seek help for their mental health just not in the mainstream way.

Quote

“We always talk about [stressful] issues as a family. That’s what I think helped us all the time, from when we first arrived in this country. We talk about what happened and then each person comes in and gives some support. We encourage family members to share their problems.”

Results 2

Lack of culturally appropriate , culturally sensitive services and language barriers.

Cultural insensitivity was a barrier to seeking help as the African immigrants want their values, beliefs to be acknowledged, the population expressed that as language comes into play which a barrier as they must repeat to be understood (Meribe et al., 2025).

Due to language barriers some parents a can rely on their children for translation (Abur & Mphande, 2019). This is reinforced by Acquah et al., 2016 at times people do not have the English words to express what they are feeling. Acquah et al., 2016 reported that at times families are not included in the mental health planning and told that the treatment is confidential.

Implications

The findings can guide mental health services to align their services to the populations needs and address the barriers; this will inform policy that will improve the barriers faced by this population as seen in the studies that they face intersecting barriers that make their needs complex. The research recommends that mental health policies need to be reviewed at federal level, government level, state level, organisation level to ensure effectiveness of service provision

The study will inform future research in the mental health field and help to cover the gap research in Australia and the world at large. The study will be a base as there are second generation immigrants who are youth may need early interventions who may have different barriers, ways of coping to the first generation who had traumatic experiences and were forced to relocate.

Conclusions

In conclusion there is need to improve the engagement of this population as we have the factors that hinder African immigrants are in engaging in mental health are complex as they have intersecting factors such as language barriers , stigma , their beliefs not aligned to the western model as they have a collective approach , lean on family friends , community and spiritual leaders for support. It is highly recommended to have community-based supports, peer work, groups, culturally competent workers, culturally appropriate services with funding from government to address socio-economics factor, reduce language barriers and in turn improve the wellbeing of this population and help break stigma.

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