

Mapping UNSW Impact Global Development

Primary SDG	GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING
Broad theme	Mental health
Research	Measuring mental illness and trialling services for refugee and post conflict members of society
Impact region	PNG, Timor-Leste, Malaysia, Vietnam
Faculty	Medicine
School/Institute	School of Psychiatry; Psychiatry Research and Teaching Unit (Liverpool Hospital)
Academics	Professor Derrick Silove, Associate Professor Susan Rees, Dr Alvin Tay
Project partners	NHMRC, University of PNG, local NGOs in PNG, Alola Foundation Timor-Leste
	Malaysia: UNHRC, Johns Hopkins University, University of Malaysia, College of Surgeons (Ireland and Malaysia)
Related SDGs	1: No Poverty
	10: Reduced Inequalities

Funding pitch

The Psychiatry Research and Teaching Unit measures mental distress and psychosocial wellbeing among refugees and post conflict populations across the Asia Pacific, contributing to policy and services that improves mental wellbeing among refugees and encourages further service delivery.

The Challenge: Mental illness among refugees and post conflict populations not being addressed

Mental health is a key concern among refugees, the displaced, and those living in post conflict settings around the world. Insecurity, safety, separation from family, injustice, and disruption of cultures and identities are all factors that contribute to mental distress and disability. To what extent should governments and NGOs be providing psychotherapy for traumatic stress? Should they be investing in community mental health services or in psychosocial programs promoting social stability, employment and family harmony?

There is a lack of support for refugees living with mental illness in post conflict Bougainville and Timor-Leste, for West Papuan refugees in PNG, and for Burmese refugees in Malaysia and Bangladesh. Focussed on other priorities, governments and aid agencies are neglecting the mental health needs of these minority groups.

UNSW's solution: Measure mental disorders, trial interventions and evaluate outcomes

The Psychiatry Research and Teaching Unit at Liverpool Hospital specialises in mental health research among refugees and post conflict populations. In Timor-Leste, they undertook a survey of mental health in over a six-year period that accounted for upheaval in 2006/7. Results indicated a seven-fold increase in posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) cases and a five-fold increase in depression. With further funding, the PRTU could undertake a 12 year follow up. The team is also investigating the relationship between explosive

anger, cycles of violence and trauma in family settings, and the impact of partner violence on women and their children.

West Papuan refugees are dispersed throughout PNG, largely neglected by authorities and aid agencies. They live in insecure and deprived conditions with virtually no access to mental health services. The PRTU team surveyed West Papuan populations in Port Moresby and a remote border town (Kiunga) to identify mental health needs. They have shared their findings with authorities, the UN, and other agencies to promote the provision of services. In Bougainville the PRTU is working with local government to plan and provide mental health services for the local population.

The PRTU are working with Burmese refugees in Malaysia to identify their needs for mental health services. They surveyed three ethnic groups - Rohingya, Chin, and Kachin – and are trialling a therapeutic model that focuses specifically on the core experiences of refugees, comparing their intervention with a standard WHO stress management method. Early findings suggest both treatments have positive effects, with participants reporting the 'active' treatment is more tailored to their experiences and situation. The trial will finish early 2019. The UNHCR has expressed a desire to replicate the trial for the Burmese population in Bangladesh.

In the past, the PRTU team undertook the largest survey ever conducted among Vietnamese in Australia and in Vietnam. They found that refugees in Australia experienced more severe mental problems because of their exposure to trauma and displacement. Data from the project was used by other researchers and international agencies, such as the WHO, and by the Vietnamese Government in their planning of services.

The Impact: Deliver mental health services, improve the lives of the vulnerable

Through its research, the PRTU has demonstrated the need for governments and international aid agencies to devote more time and resources to mental health identification and services for the most vulnerable in society. Failure to do so leads to a multiplier effect where the trauma of one survivor impacts his or her family and the wider community, adversely affecting social development and future generations.

Through trials, interventions and planning, the PRTU is helping refugees to receive mental health treatment they would not have otherwise had access to. These interventions improve mental state and wellbeing, helping to reduce violence and trauma, conflict among families, and drug and alcohol use. They also promote unity, a greater sense of purpose, and empowerment. The PRTU is setting the standard for mental illness measurement and evaluation globally, influencing other studies and promoting better service delivery.

Researcher

Professor Derrick Silove has worked at UNSW for his entire academic career. He founded the first mental health research unit at Liverpool Hospital, the Psychiatry Research and Teaching Unit. The PRTU played a central role in developing the state-wide refugee mental health service (STARTTS), where he remains a Board Member and initiated a research-focused clinic in anxiety and traumatic stress. His team was one of three awarded the status of "Academic Research Unit" in the Southwest Sydney Local Health District in 2015.

Associate Professor Susan Rees leads global research in Australia, South-East Asia and Pacific regions, and in Africa. Her work includes pioneering mental health research and advocacy with West Papuan refugees and women affected by violence in Timor-Leste. For three years, she worked with the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Jakarta, and in the past she received an award for her research to support women and children in Timor-Leste from First Lady Kirsty Sword-Gusmao.

Dr Alvin Tay is a NHMRC Fellow in the School of Psychiatry. He designs and leads a program of research among Burmese, Rohingya, and other refugee groups in the Asia Pacific including PNG, Malaysia, and Bangladesh. He is currently working with UNHCR in piloting scalable mental health and psychosocial interventions for refugees in that region. Previously, he led and conducted research with refugees in PNG. His other research involved post-conflict populations in Sri Lanka and Timor-Leste.

Ben Falkenmire 25.06.18