

Piloting Self-Help Groups for Alcohol Use Disorders in Saint Vincent/Grenadines

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ABSTRACT

Background: Although alcohol consumption is recognized as a global problem, little research to date explores treatment options for alcohol use disorders in developing nations. Given the scarce mental health resources available in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, community self-help programming for alcohol use disorders could potentially provide an important complement to the existing mental health services.

Objective: The aim of this study was to gather baseline data on knowledge and attitudes toward alcohol consumption among community members, and subsequently, to pilot self-help rehabilitation programs for alcohol use disorders, while determining factors that affect the feasibility and sustainability of such programs.

Methods: Focus groups were conducted in 3 communities to discuss community perceptions of alcohol use and the feasibility of self-help programs. Focus group findings guided the development and implementation of the self-help groups. A post-intervention focus group was held to determine the effectiveness and community-wide effect of the self-help programs.

Findings: Focus group participants agreed that alcohol consumption was a problem in Saint Vincent, leading to underage drinking and violence. Suggestions to encourage self-help meeting attendance included organizing group activities and providing visuals to illustrate alcohol's effects on health. Self-help group members were surveyed about their group experience. Of the 35 members surveyed, 77% said the group was very helpful, and 91% indicated that they would attend again. Postintervention focus group participants stated that individuals had reduced alcohol consumption after attending at least 1 self-help meeting.

Conclusions: Elements that contributed to the sustainability of self-help groups included strong local leadership from district health nurses as well as willingness of participants to seek support. However, efforts need to be made to increase community awareness of alcohol use disorders and its associated dangers. Our results suggested self-help programs to address alcohol use disorders are a feasible intervention in Saint Vincent that warrants further development, dissemination, and exploration.

Key Words: alcohol use disorders, global health, mental health, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, self-help

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INTRODUCTION

Health care systems in developing countries face considerable challenges in providing mental health care, as the poorest nations allocate less than 1% of their health budgets toward mental health.¹ Government spending for mental health care is disproportionately low relative to the

disease burden.¹ Alcohol use disorders (AUDs) make up a major component of the global mental health challenges, as more than 5% of the global burden of disease is attributed to substance use.^{2,3} AUDs refer to a spectrum of alcohol-related problems, ranging from misuse, to abuse, and dependence.⁴ Because mental health systems in many developing countries are underdeveloped, treatment options often are very limited.⁵ Although harmful alcohol consumption is recognized as a global problem, there is a dearth of research that explores treatment options for AUDs in low-resource settings. Limitations in health care resources in developing countries dictate the need for implementation of cost-effective interventions to lessen the burden of alcohol use on individuals and communities.

Saint Vincent and the Grenadines is a middle-income country located in the Eastern Caribbean and has a population of fewer than 110,000.⁶ The majority of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines' inhabitants live on the main island of Saint Vincent, while the

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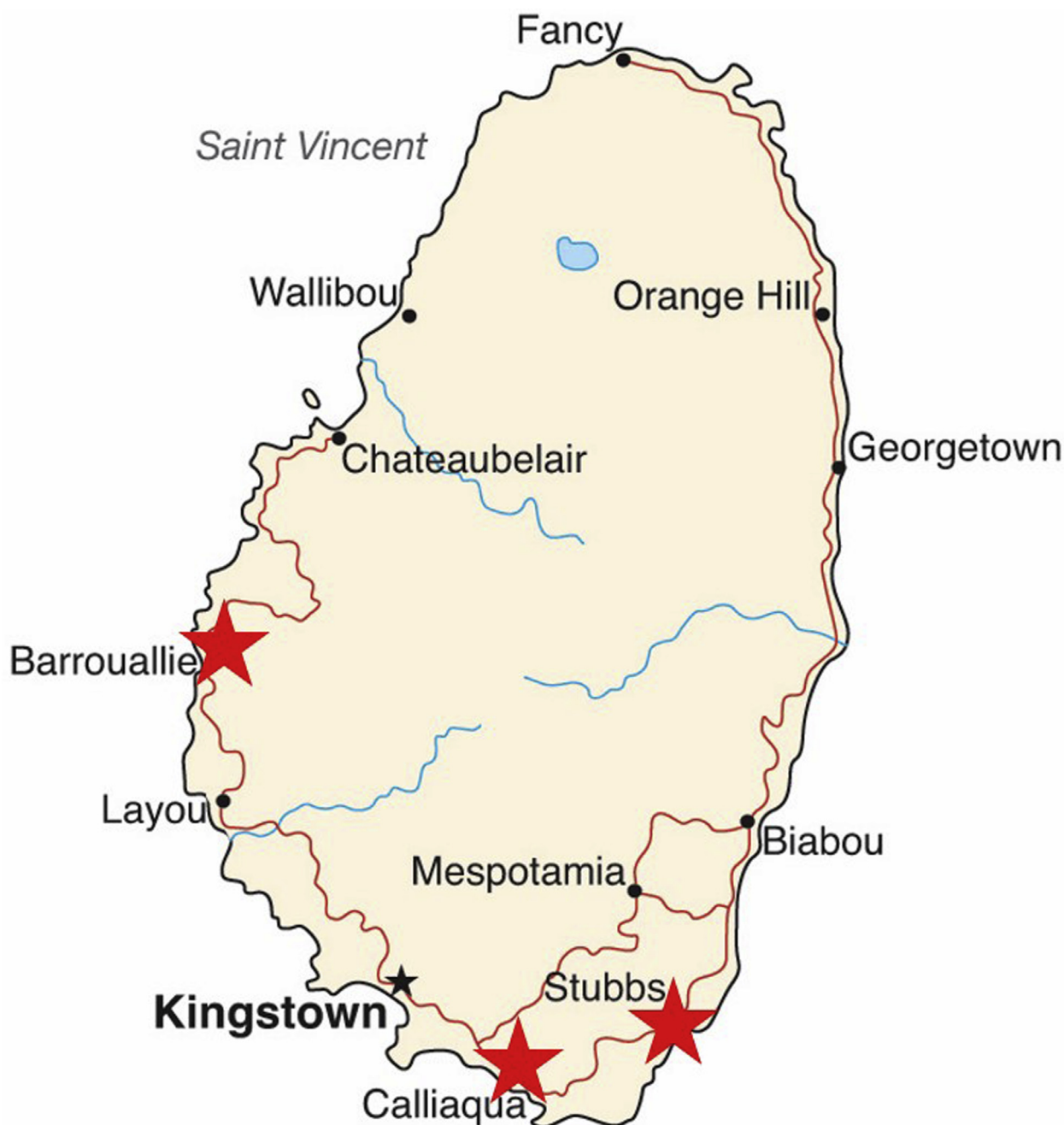


Figure 1. Map of Saint Vincent (the Grenadines excluded) indicating the pilot communities of Barrouallie, Calliaqua, and Stubbs. © Map Resources.

32 islands that make up the Grenadines are less populated.⁶ In 2004, there were 4.1 deaths from AUDs per 100,000 people in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, which is nearly double the rate of the United States and among the highest rates worldwide.⁷ Meanwhile, a 2009 World Health Organization report found that substance use problems were second only to schizophrenia as reasons for inpatient and outpatient psychiatric care in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines.⁶ Thus, there is a great need to address AUDs as a major facet of the mental health challenges in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines.

The citizens of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines have access to a sprawling public health system consisting of 39 district health centers organized into 9 districts.⁸ On the other hand, it has a highly centralized public mental health system based around the country's only psychiatric hospital, the Mental Health Center near the capital of Kingstown. The Mental Health Center itself is a largely custodial 160-bed facility that is overcrowded with more than 200 patients.⁹ Given the scarce health and mental health resources available in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, community-based self-help programming for AUDs could potentially provide an

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