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“Navigating Stress and Stigma: Community Perspectives on Mental Health Challenges Among College Students in Sacramento County”

Background/Purpose: College students face rising rates of anxiety, depression, and stress, worsened by academic pressure, social isolation, and inequities in care access. Despite campus services, many remain underserved due to stigma, fragmented support, and limited community integration.

Goals: This study explores barriers to mental health care for Sacramento County college students and identifies community-informed strategies to improve access, engagement, and equity.

Methods: Using a participatory qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 22 stakeholders, including campus counselors (n=6), peer mentors (n=6), faculty advisors (n=5), and nonprofit coordinators (n=5). Interviews examined challenges, service gaps, and potential interventions and were thematically analyzed.

Results: Stakeholders reported fragmented referrals, low resource awareness, and stigma. Peer mentors noted preference for informal support; faculty cited inconsistent training. Structural barriers, such as cost, availability, transportation, further limited access. Suggested strategies included embedding mental health support in academic and social structures, expanding peer-led programs, and improving campus-community coordination.

Conclusions: Disparities reflect structural, social, and cultural factors. Community-informed, integrated, peer-supported interventions can reduce barriers and enhance equity. Context-specific programs leveraging campus-community networks are critical to improving access and reducing stigma.