Mental Health and Quality of Life in Keningau, Sabah.

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Kesihatan mental belia merupakan isu kesihatan awam yang semakin penting, khususnya di kawasan luar bandar dan separa bandar seperti di Sabah. Namun, kajian empirikal berkaitan tahap kesejahteraan psikologi belia di negeri ini masih terhad. Kajian ini bertujuan menilai tahap kesihatan mental dan kualiti hidup dalam kalangan belia di daerah Keningau, Sabah. Kajian kuantitatif ini melibatkan 93 orang belia dan menggunakan analisis deskriptif. Penilaian kesihatan mental merangkumi stres, kebimbangan, kemurungan dan risiko bunuh diri, manakala kualiti hidup diukur melalui domain fizikal, psikologi, hubungan sosial dan persekitaran. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa majoriti belia berada pada tahap kesihatan mental yang rendah hingga sederhana serta mempunyai kualiti hidup yang baik. Walau bagaimanapun, domain hubungan sosial dikenal pasti sebagai aspek paling lemah, dan sebilangan kecil belia menunjukkan risiko bunuh diri yang signifikan. Dapatan ini menekankan kepentingan intervensi kesihatan mental yang holistik, khususnya pengukuhan sokongan sosial dan persekitaran komuniti.

Kata kunci: Kesihatan mental; Belia; Kualiti hidup; Analisis deskriptif; Keningau; Sabah.

Youth mental health is an increasingly important public health issue, particularly in rural and semi-urban settings such as Sabah. However, empirical evidence on youths' psychological well-being in this region remains limited. This study aims to assess mental health status and quality of life among youths in Keningau District, Sabah. This quantitative study involved 93 youths and employed descriptive analysis. Mental health indicators included stress, anxiety, depression, and suicide risk, while quality of life was assessed across physical, psychological, social relationship, and environmental domains. The results indicate that most youths experienced low to moderate levels of psychological distress and generally good quality of life. However, social relationships emerged as the weakest domain, and a small proportion of youths were identified as having significant suicide risk. These findings underscore the importance of holistic mental health interventions that strengthen social support and community environments.

Keywords: Mental health; Youth; Quality of life; Descriptive analysis; Keningau; Sabah.

INTRODUCTION

Mental health is a vital component of overall well-being, particularly among youths who undergo significant personal, social, and career transitions (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). Young people aged between 15 and 30 years face multifaceted psychosocial stresses arising from educational demands, employment pressures, and complex social dynamics, which may manifest as depression, anxiety, and stress if not adequately addressed. Descriptive studies indicate that the majority of Malaysian youth exhibit a moderate level of mental health risk, signaling the need for targeted interventions (Institute for Youth Research Malaysia & UNICEF Malaysia, 2024; *Malaysian Youth Mental Health Index 2023*).

The *Malaysian Youth Mental Health Index 2023* (MyMHI'23), involving over 5,800 youth respondents, reported an overall score of 71.91 out of 100, reflecting a moderately satisfactory mental health status across seven domains including lifestyle, social support, and coping mechanisms. This provides an initial snapshot of patterns and influencing factors affecting youth mental health in the national context.

Regionally, the youth of Sabah recorded a slightly lower index score of 71.04, suggesting that Sabah's youth may experience similar but potentially more pronounced mental health challenges, possibly due to environmental constraints and limited access to mental health services.

Within this framework, a descriptive analysis focusing on youths aged 15–30 years in the Keningau district of Sabah is crucial for understanding the current mental health landscape at the district level. Descriptive approaches emphasize the characterization of patterns, distributions, and demographic correlates of mental health status, considering factors such as gender, education, employment, and social support. The findings are intended to provide empirical evidence for policymakers, social program designers, and mental health service providers to develop tailored interventions that better address the needs of Keningau's youth.

Prior research also suggests that mental health concerns among youth encompass not only mild stress but also moderate to severe symptoms of depression and anxiety, along with challenges in coping strategies, all of which can adversely affect productivity and quality of life (Samsudin et al., 2024; *MyMHI'23*).

In summary, descriptive measurement and reporting of youth mental health in Keningau play a foundational role in assessing the current situation, identifying at-risk groups, and laying the groundwork for deeper research or future targeted programming.

Research Objective

Table 1: Measurement Scales of Instruments

Instrumen	Score Range	Classification
MPSS - `14	0 -14	Low Perceived Stress
	15 – 28	Moderate Perceived Stress
	29 - 56	High Perceived Stress
PHQ – 9	0 – 4	Minimal Depression
	5 – 9	Mild Depression
	10 – 14	Moderate Depression
	15 – 19	Moderately Severe Depression
	20 - 27	Severe Depression
GAD – 7	0 – 4	Minimal Anxiety
	5 – 9	Mild Anxiety
	10 – 14	Moderate Anxiety
	15 - 21	Severe Anxiety
SBQ-R	0 – 6	Lower Risk
	7 - 18	Clinically Significant Risk
QOL	0 – 33	Low
	34 – 66	Moderate
	67 - 100	High

This study aims to assess the levels of stress, anxiety, and depression among the population in Sabah, while identifying demographic and socio-economic factors that may influence variations in mental health across districts and communities; investigate suicide rates and patterns among Sabah's population, including psychosocial, cultural, and environmental factors that may affect suicidal risk and behavior across age groups; and assess the quality of life of youth in terms of thoughts, emotions, and motivation, in order to understand how mental health challenges such as stress, anxiety, and depression impact daily functioning, overall well-being, and life satisfaction.

(SBQ-R) assessed suicidal behavior, and a Quality of Life (QOL) scale evaluated cognitive, emotional, and motivational aspects. Each instrument has a specific scoring system with defined cut-off points to classify severity levels. The scoring ranges and corresponding classifications are presented in the table below.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design
This study adopted a quantitative survey research design to systematically examine mental health and quality of life among youths in Sabah. The selection of this design was guided by the research objectives, which focused on measuring stress, depression, anxiety, suicidal behavior, and overall quality of life. A cross-sectional approach was employed, as all data were collected at a single point in time from the selected sample. Data were gathered using a structured questionnaire, which incorporated validated instruments.

Research Instrumen
Research Instruments This research used a structured questionnaire distributed to respondents via Google Forms, shared through the WhatsApp application. The questionnaire was divided into several sections for clarity and organization.

Stress, Depression, Anxiety, Suicidal Behavior and Quality of Life Scale
The study measured mental health and quality of life among youths in Sabah using validated instruments. The Malaysian Perceived Stress Scale – 14 (MPSS-14) assessed perceived stress, Patient Health Questionnaire – 9 (PHQ-9) measured depression, Generalized Anxiety Disorder – 7 (GAD-7) evaluated anxiety, Suicidal Behaviors Questionnaire – Revised

Research Procedure
The research was conducted following a systematic procedure to ensure accuracy and reliability. Initially, the researcher identified the research problems and defined the specific areas of investigation. Subsequently, the population and appropriate sampling technique were determined to recruit eligible respondents for the study. The questionnaire was carefully developed to align with the research objectives and to incorporate the validated instruments used in this study. Certain items in the questionnaire were reverse-coded to maintain consistency in scoring and interpretation. Data were then collected from the respondents, thoroughly checked for completeness and consistency, and cleaned to minimize errors. The cleaned data were analysed using SPSS software to generate descriptive statistics. Following data analysis, the findings were interpreted and conclusions were drawn. Finally, the researcher provided a summary of the study and formulated recommendations based on the outcomes.

Result
Mean & Standard Deviation (SD) Analysis
This section presents the general overview of stress, depression, anxiety, suicide risk and quality of life (QOL) among respondents in Keningau area based on descriptive statistics focusing on mean and standard deviation values.

Overal, the mean score for stress was 25.61 (SD = 6.021). This indicates that the repondents generally experienced moderate levels of stress based on the MPSS interpretation scale. The moderate standard deviation suggests noticeable variability among youths in Keningau, although not excessively wide.

The GAD-7 (anxiety) score showed a mean of 4.71 (SD = 4.720), which reflects low overall anxiety levels among respondents. However, the standard deviation, which is nearly as large as the mean, suggests the presence of a subgroup experiencing significantly higher anxiety levels.

For depression, the mean score was 6.45 (SD = 5.235), reflecting mild depressive symptoms among participants. The relatively high standard deviation indicates that while many respondents had low symptoms, a portion reported higher levels.

For SBQ-R (suicidal risk), the mean score was 4.66 (SD = 3.048), indicating that the respondents were generally at low suicide risk, though variability across individuals still existed.

Under the Quality of Life (QOL) indicators, the Physical Domain recorded a mean of 3.88 (SD = 0.634), indicating positive physical health perception. The Psychological Domain scored 3.83 (SD = 0.686), suggesting good psychological well-being. The Social Relationships Domain showed a lower mean of 2.82 (SD = 0.699), suggesting moderate social relationship satisfaction and representing the lowest domain among all QOL components. The Environment Domain recorded 3.61 (SD = 0.677), reflecting good satisfaction with environmental conditions such as safety, accessibility of services, and availability of resources.

Overall, the descriptive findings indicate that respondents in Keningau generally report low to moderate levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. Meanwhile, their quality of life is rated from moderate to high, except for the social relationships domain which recorded the lowest score.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics (Mean and Standard Deviation N=93)

Variable	Mean	SD
Stress	25.61	6.021
Depression	6.45	5.235
Anxiety	4.71	4.720
Suicide Risk	4.66	3.048
QOL Physical Domain	3.88	0.634
QOL Psychological Domain	3.83	0.686
QOL Social Relationships Domain	2.82	0.699
QOL Environment Domain	3.61	0.677

Stress Level Among Youth in Keningau
Table 3 presents the frequency distribution of stress level among the study respondents (N=93). Out of the total 93 respondents, 12 individuals (12.9%) experienced low perceived stress, while the majority, 61 individuals (65.5%) were at a moderate stress level. Meanwhile, 20 individuals (21.5%) were reported to have high perceived stress. This distribution indicates that most respondents experienced moderate stress, and the proportion of respondents with high stress is still significant, requiring attention in mental health intervention.

Table 3: The Stress Level Among Youth in Keningau

Stress Category	n	%
Low Perceived Stress	12	12.9
Moderate Perceived Stress	61	65.6
High Perceived Stress	20	21.5
Total	93	100

Anxiety Level Among Youth in Keningau

Table 4 presents the frequency distribution of anxiety levels among the study respondents (N=93). Out of the 93 respondents, the majority 65 individuals (69.9%), experienced minimal anxiety. Next, 19 respondents (20.4%) were classified as having mild anxiety, while 5 individuals (5.4%) reported moderate anxiety. Only 4 respondents (4.3%) experienced severe anxiety. This distribution indicates that most respondents were at low levels of anxiety (minimal or mild), whereas higher levels of anxiety (moderate to severe) were less common among the study participants.

Table 4: The Anxiety Level Among Youth in Keningau

Anxiety Level	n	%
Minimal Anxiety	65	69.9
Mild Anxiety	19	20.4
Moderate Anxiety	5	5.4
Severe Anxiety	4	4.3
Total	93	100

Depression Level Among Youth in Keningau

Table 5 presents the frequency distribution of depression severity among the study respondents (N=93). Out of the total 93 respondents, the majority 54 individuals (58.1%) experienced minimal depression. Next, 22 respondents (23.7%) were classified as having mild depression while 14 individuals (15.1%) reported moderate depression. Only 2 respondents (2.2%) experienced moderately severe depression, and one respondent (1.1) was reported to have severe depression. This distribution indicates that most respondents were at low levels of depression (minimal or mild), whereas higher levels of depression (moderate to severe) were less common among the study participants.

Table 5: The Depression Level Among Youth in Keningau

Depression Level	n	%
Minimal Depression	54	58.1
Mild Depression	22	23.7
Moderate Depression	14	15.1
Moderately Severe Depression	2	2.2
Severe Depression	1	1.1
Total	93	100

Suicide Risk Among Youth in Keningau

Table 6 presents the frequency distribution of anxiety levels among the study respondents (N=93). Out of the 93 respondents, the majority 65 individuals (69.9%), experienced minimal anxiety. Next, 19 respondents (20.4%) were classified as having mild anxiety, while 5 individuals (5.4%) reported moderate anxiety. Only 4 respondents (4.3%) experienced severe anxiety. This distribution indicates that most respondents were at low levels of anxiety (minimal or mild), whereas higher levels of anxiety (moderate to severe) were less common among the study participants.

Table 6: The Suicide Risk Among Youth in Keningau

Suicide Risk Category	n	%
Lower Risk for Suicide Behavior	78	83.9
Clinically Significant Risk for Suicide Behavior	15	16.1
Total	93	100

Quality of Life Domains
Analysis of Physical Domain in Quality of Life

Out of 93 respondents, 74 individuals (79.6%) fell under the High category, indicating that most PhD respondents perceive their physical health as good, capable of performing daily activites smoothly, and experiencing minimal health related disruptions. 18 respondents (19.4%) were in the Moderate category, suggesting that a small proportion experience minor physical limitations. Only 1 respondent (1.1%) was in the Low category, indicating more significant health issues. Overall, the findings reflect that respondents tend to have good physical well-being and daily functioning.

Table 7: Frequency Distribution of Physical Domain in QOL

Physical Category	n	%
Low	1	1.1

	18	19.4
Moderate		
High	74	79.6
Total	93	100

Analysis of Psychological Domain in Quality of Life

According to Table 8, most of the youth in Sabah demonstrate a high level of psychological quality of life. Out of 93 respondents, 67 individuals (72%) fall under the High category, indicating that most youth perceive their mental well-being as goodm able to manage daily stress and maintain emotional stability. 25 respondents (26.9%) are in the Moderate category, suggesting that a portion of youth experience moderate psychological stress or emotional challenges. Only 1 respondent (1.1%) is in the Low category, indicating more significant psychological issues. Overall, the findings suggest that most youth in Sabah have positive psychological well-being.

Table 8: Frequency Distribution of Psychological Domain in QOL

Psychological Category	n	%
Low	1	1.1
Moderate	25	26.9
High	67	72.0
Total	93	100

Analysis of Social Relationship Domain in Quality of Life

According to Table 9, most youth in Sabah fall under the Moderate category for the social relationship domain, with 61 respondents (65.5%). This suggest that the majority have moderate social connections, possibly having some social support but still facing challenges in maintaining optimal interpersonal interactions. 24 respondents (25.8%) are in the Low category, indicating that a portion of youth lack adequate social support or face difficulties in building interpersonal relationships. Only 8 respondents (8.6%) fall under the High category, representing a small group with strong social networks and satisfactory interpersonal relationships. Overall, the findings inidicate that social relationships among youth in Sabah are generally moderate, with a minority experiencing limited social support.

Table 9: Frequency Distribution of Social Relationship Domain in QOL

Social Relationship Category	n	%
Low	24	25.8
Moderate	61	65.6
High	8	8.6
Total	93	100

Analysis of Environment Domain in Quality of Life

As shown in Table 10, most youth in Sabah rated their environmental domain as High with 65 respondents (69.9%). This suggests that the majority are satisfied with their surroundings including access to facilities, safety and overall environmental quality. 27 respondents (29.0%) fall under the Moderate category, indicating that some youth face certain environmental challenges. Only 1 respondent (1.1%) is in the Low category, reflecting serious environmental issues for that individual. Overall, these findings suggest that most youth in Sabah experience good environmental quality.

Table 10: Frequency Distribution of Environment Domain in QOL

Environment Category	n	%
Low	1	1.1
Moderate	27	29.0
High	65	69.9
Total	93	100

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate varying levels of stress, anxiety, and depression among youth in Keningau. Approximately 65.5% of respondents experienced moderate stress, 69.9% had minimal anxiety, and 58.1% had minimal depression. This suggests that although most youths do not experience extreme stress, moderate stress is prevalent and may affect academic performance, emotional well-being, and social interactions (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Higher levels of anxiety and depression were less frequent, with only 4.3% reporting severe anxiety and 3.3% experiencing moderate to severe depression. This implies that most youths possess effective coping mechanisms to manage stress and emotional challenges. Regarding quality of life, physical

(79.6%) and psychological (72.0%) domains were high, while social relationships (65.5%) were moderate, highlighting the need for stronger social support (Compas et al., 2017).

Moreover, although overall suicide risk was low (83.9% at low risk), 16.1% had clinically significant risk, indicating a need for early intervention and continuous mental health monitoring. These findings underscore the importance of understanding the interactions between stress, anxiety, depression, and quality of life to develop comprehensive youth support strategies.

Implications
This study has several important implications. Academically, it provides empirical evidence on stress, anxiety, depression, and quality of life among youths in Sabah, serving as a foundation for future research.

From a policy perspective, these findings highlight the need for mental health policies focused on prevention and early intervention, particularly in rural communities. Clinically, high-risk youths require regular psychological assessment, targeted interventions, and counseling.

Additionally, holistic quality of life development including physical, psychological, social, and environmental well-being can help youths manage stress and life challenges effectively, reducing the risk of depression, anxiety, and suicidal behavior.

Recommendations
Based on the findings, several recommendations are proposed. Firstly, schools and communities should strengthen psychosocial support programs, including counseling, stress management, and mindfulness training, to address prevalent moderate stress levels.

Secondly, social and sports activities can enhance interpersonal relationships, particularly for youths reporting low to moderate social connections. Thirdly, youths at clinically significant suicide risk should receive comprehensive psychological assessment and immediate interventions such as individual counseling and mental health helplines.

Fourthly, raising awareness about the importance of holistic quality of life, including physical, psychological, social, and environmental well-being, can help youths manage stress effectively and improve overall well-being.

CONCLUSION
Overall, the study found that most youths in Keningau experienced moderate stress, minimal anxiety, and minimal depression. Although moderate stress was the most prevalent, this indicates that most youths are able to manage daily challenges, yet additional support is necessary to prevent escalation into severe stress. The overall suicide risk was low (83.9% at low risk), but 16.1% of youths had clinically significant risk, highlighting the need for immediate and targeted psychological interventions.

Findings regarding quality of life indicated high levels in physical and psychological domains, suggesting that most youths perceive themselves as physically healthy and capable of managing stress and emotional challenges effectively. In contrast, the social domain was moderate (65.5%), indicating the need for strengthened social networks and interpersonal support to enhance social well-being. The environmental domain was also high (69.9%), reflecting youth satisfaction with safety, access to facilities, and overall environmental quality.

In conclusion, while the majority of youths exhibit positive mental and physical well-being, a minority at high risk requires special attention. This study underscores the importance of integrated interventions, including counseling programs, social activities, stress management training, and periodic psychological assessment. A holistic approach encompassing physical, psychological, social, and environmental well-being is essential to enable youths to cope effectively with daily stressors, reduce the risk of depression, anxiety, and suicidal behavior, and ultimately enhance overall quality of life.

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