

Understanding Mental Health Awareness, Access, and Barriers in Antigua and Barbuda

FINDINGS FROM A NATIONAL
PERCEPTION AND ACCESS SURVEY

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Executive Summary

This policy brief presents key findings from a national mental health perception and access survey conducted by WISH – the Wadadli Initiative for Self-care and Healing in October 2024. The survey gathered responses from 154 participants across Antigua and Barbuda and offers timely insight into public awareness of mental health, experiences of stigma, access to services, and priorities for reform.

Overall, the findings point to encouraging gains in public awareness and dialogue around mental health. At the same time, **66.2 per cent of respondents reported experiencing mental health challenges within the past year**, underscoring the gap between awareness and effective access to care. At the same time, respondents continue to face structural barriers to care, including affordability, limited service availability, information gaps, and persistent stigma. These challenges highlight the need for sustained policy attention, legislative reform, and system strengthening.

This policy brief is intended to support evidence-based decision-making and constructive dialogue among government, health institutions, civil society, and development partners. WISH recognises and acknowledges the progress made by the Government of Antigua and Barbuda in advancing health sector reform and mental health awareness, and stands ready to support further action, including the development and implementation of comprehensive mental health legislation.

Background and Purpose

Mental health remains a critical but under-resourced component of public health in Antigua and Barbuda. WISH undertook this survey to generate community-grounded evidence that can inform advocacy, programme design, and policy engagement. The purpose of this white paper is to translate survey findings into actionable insights for policymakers, health professionals, civil society organisations, and development partners.

Methodology

The survey was administered online between October 17 and October 21, 2024, with 154 responses collected. Questions addressed demographic characteristics, self-assessed mental health knowledge, comfort discussing mental health, awareness and utilisation of services, perceived barriers to care, recent mental health challenges, satisfaction with services, and priorities for improvement. Several questions permitted multiple responses to reflect the complexity of lived experiences.

This research was funded in part by the UNESCO X17 – Going Tigher Grant, supporting WISH’s mandate to strengthen community engagement, evidence-building, and mental health advocacy in Antigua and Barbuda.

Demographic Overview

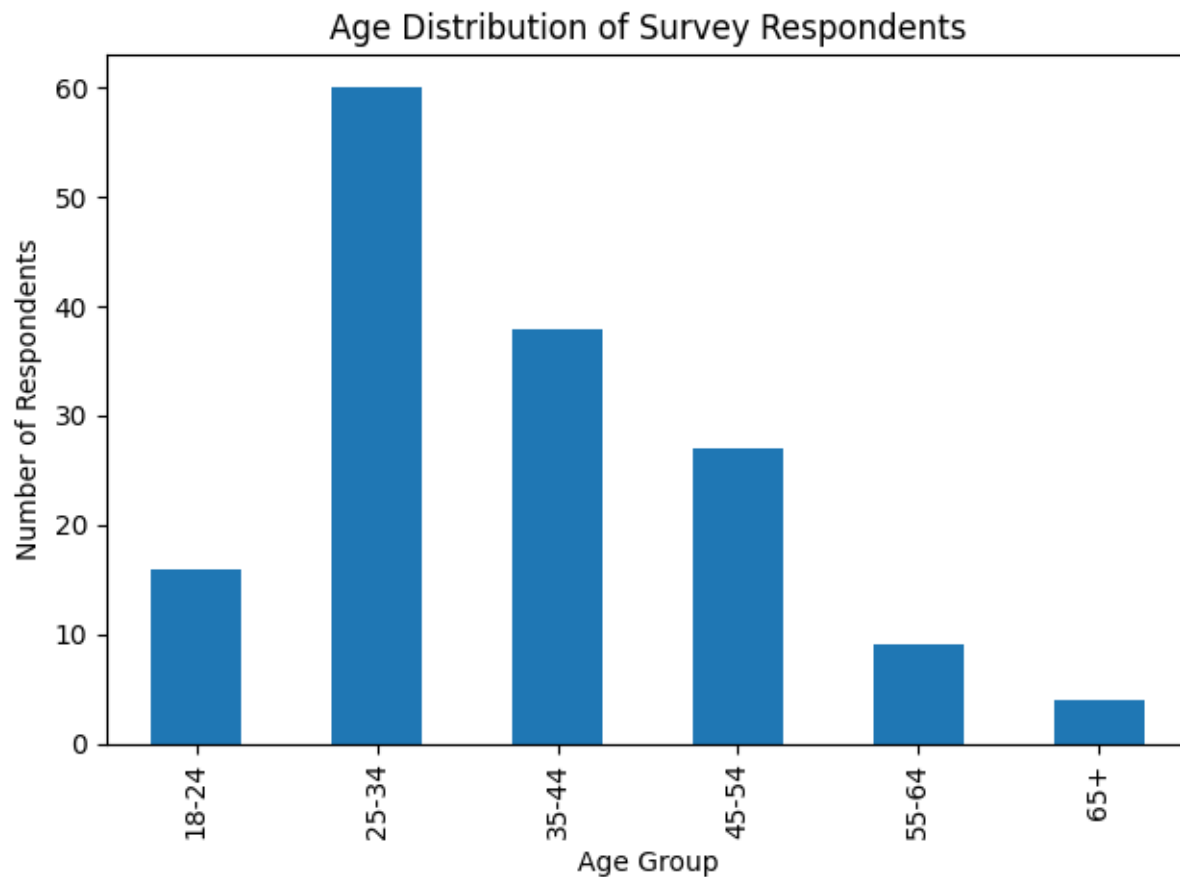


Figure 1. Age distribution of respondents.

The survey reflects strongest participation among adults aged 25–44, underscoring the relevance of mental health policy to working-age populations, workforce productivity, and family wellbeing.

Respondents were predominantly female, with women accounting for the vast majority of responses, alongside smaller representations of men and non-binary participants. The largest age group was 25–34 years, followed by 35–44 and 45–54. Younger adults (18–24) and older adults (55+) were represented in smaller numbers. Participants were drawn from multiple parishes, with the highest concentration from Saint John, followed by Saint George and Saint Peter, indicating broad geographic participation.

Mental Health Knowledge and Information-Seeking

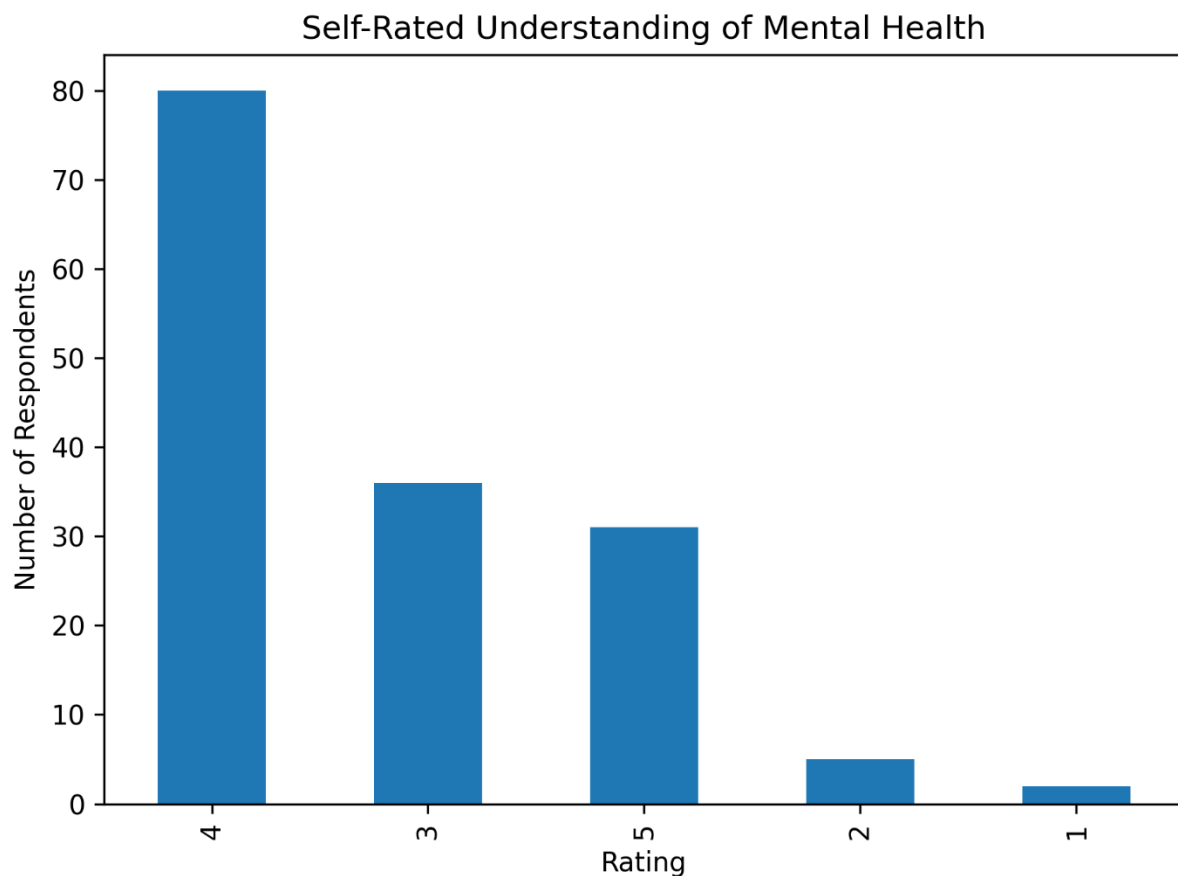


Figure2. Self-Rated Understanding of Mental Health

Most respondents rated their understanding of mental health as moderate to high. A strong majority reported having previously sought information about mental health. The internet emerged as the primary source of information, often supplemented by books, magazines, friends and family, and healthcare professionals. This reliance on informal and self-directed information channels highlights both strong interest and gaps in structured, accessible public education.

Comfort Discussing Mental Health

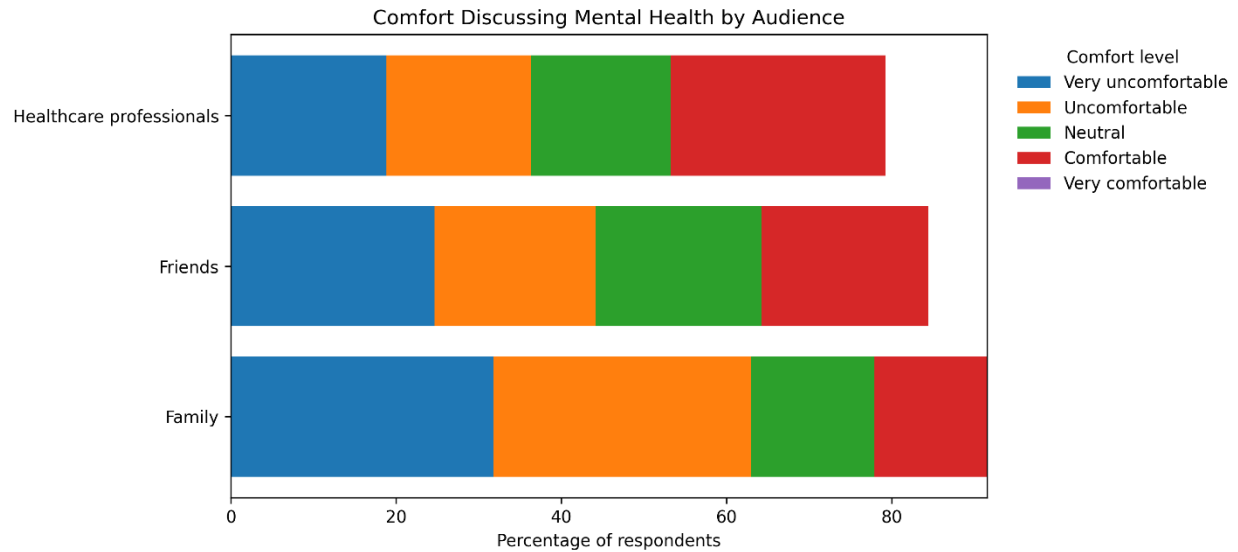


Figure 3. Comfort Discussing Mental Health

Respondents expressed varying levels of comfort discussing mental health depending on the audience. Comfort levels were generally higher with friends and healthcare professionals than with family members. This suggests that while peer networks may offer relative safety for disclosure, family contexts can remain challenging, likely reflecting generational attitudes, stigma, and cultural expectations.

Perceived Stigma

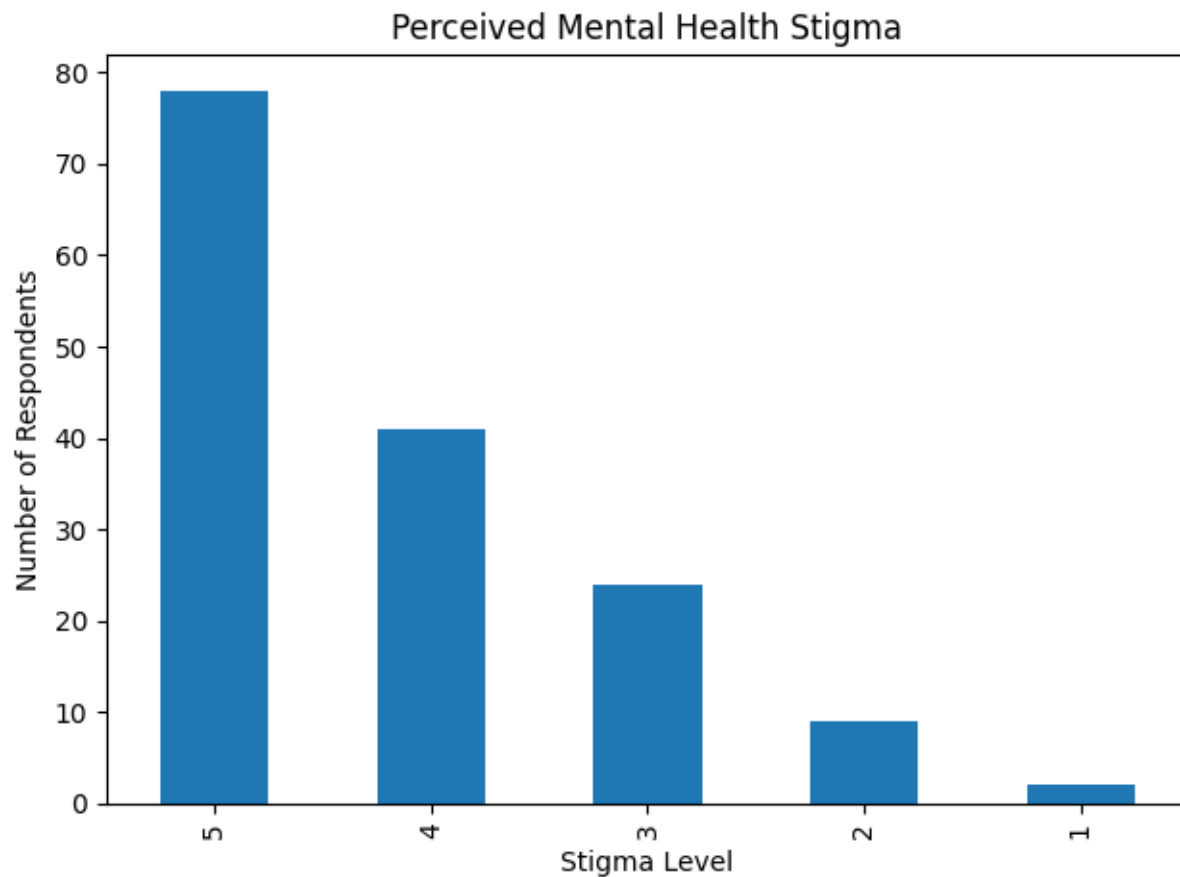


Figure 4. Perceived stigma surrounding mental health.

77.3 per cent of respondents rated mental health stigma as high or very high, reinforcing the need for sustained public education, rights-based protections, and culturally responsive anti-stigma initiatives.

Mental health stigma remains a significant concern. Many respondents described mental health in Antigua and Barbuda as moderately to highly stigmatized. This perception aligns with reported reluctance to seek help and reinforces the need for sustained anti-stigma campaigns that go beyond awareness to actively challenge harmful narratives and social norms.

Awareness and Access to Services

Awareness of Mental Health Services in Antigua and Barbuda

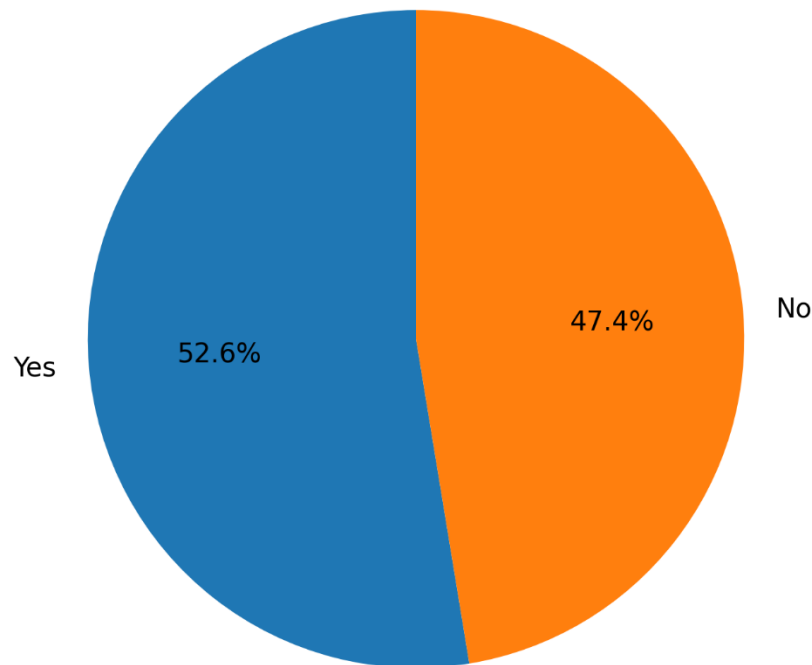


Figure 5. Access of Mental Health Services in Antigua and Barbuda

While **52.6 per cent of respondents reported awareness of existing mental health services**, fewer reported having attempted to access them, highlighting persistent access barriers. Among those who did seek services, ease of access varied widely, pointing to inconsistencies in availability, referral pathways, and user experience. This disconnect between awareness and utilisation suggests that knowledge of services alone is insufficient without affordability, geographic reach, and system responsiveness.

Barriers to Care

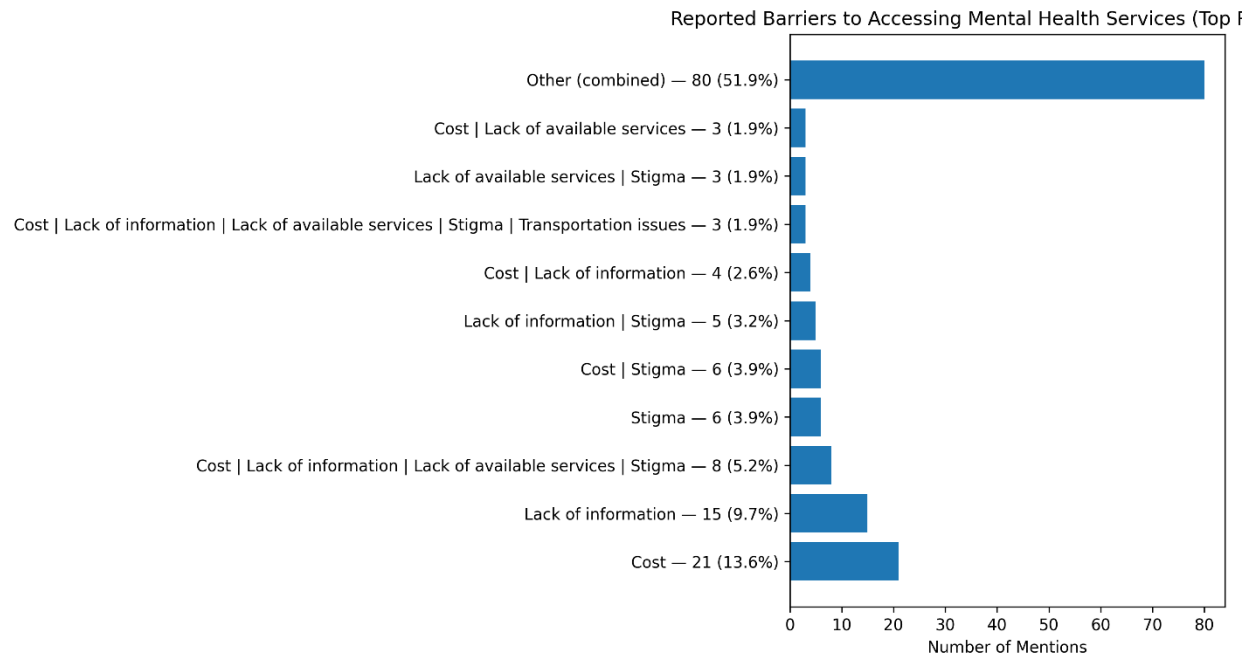


Figure 6. Barriers to Care

The most frequently cited barriers to accessing mental health services included cost, lack of information, limited availability of services, stigma, and transportation challenges. **Cost alone was identified by 13.6 per cent of respondents**, with many reporting multiple, overlapping barriers. These barriers often intersect, compounding their impact. For example, individuals who recognise a need for support may still be unable to act due to financial constraints or uncertainty about where to go.

Mental Health Challenges and Help-Seeking

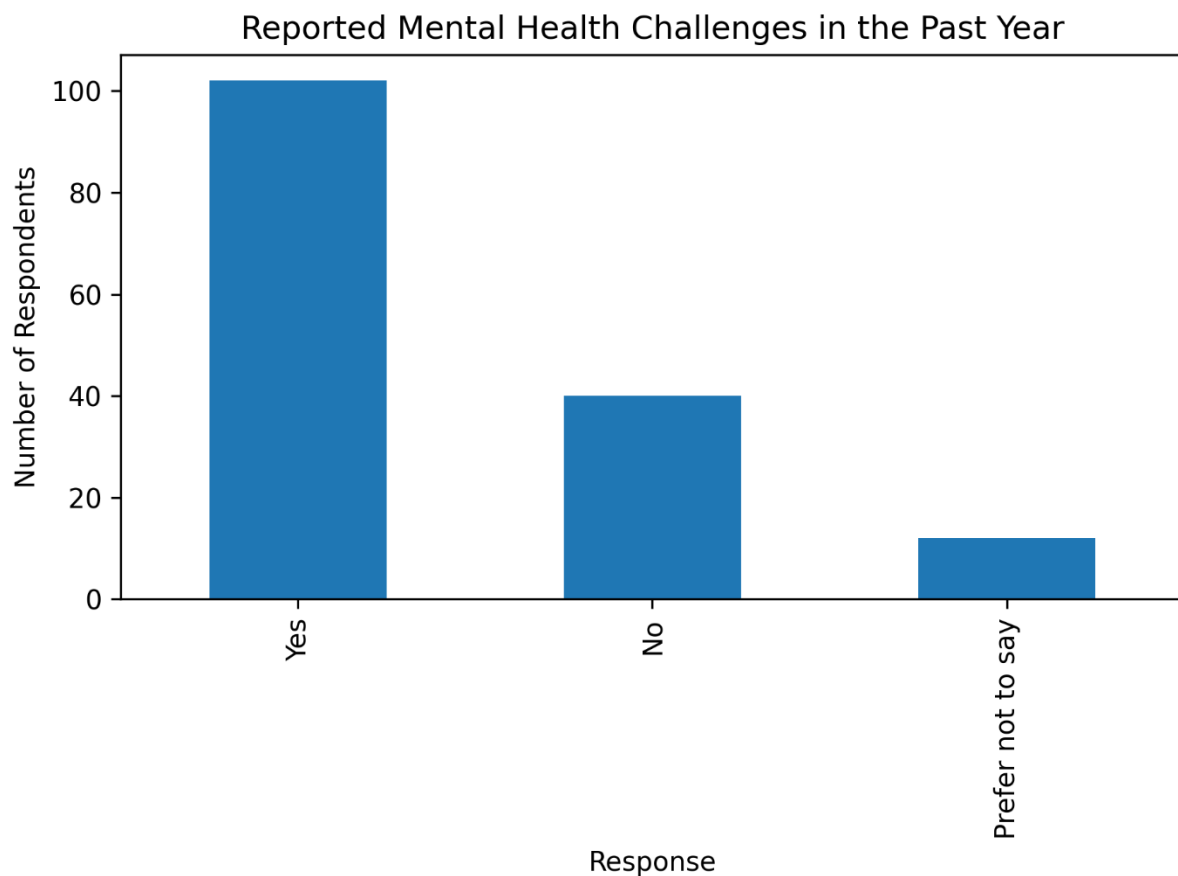


Figure 7. Mental Health Challenges and Help Seeking

A notable proportion of respondents reported experiencing mental health challenges within the past year. Among those individuals, only some sought professional help. Counsellors were the most commonly consulted professionals. Satisfaction with received care varied, with responses spanning low to high satisfaction, indicating uneven quality of care and differing expectations or outcomes.

Priorities for Improving Mental Health Services

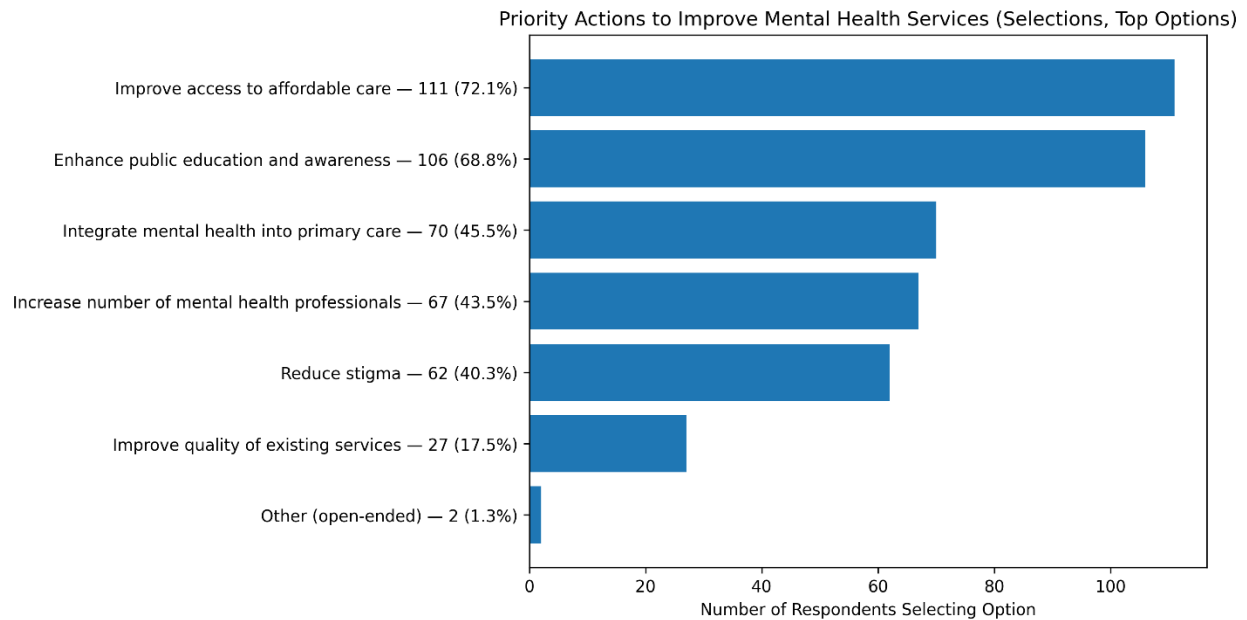


Figure 8. Priorities for improving Mental Health Services

When asked to identify priority actions for improving mental health services, respondents most frequently selected increasing the number of mental health professionals, improving access to affordable care, and enhancing public awareness and education. These priorities reflect both supply-side and demand-side needs, pointing to the importance of system-wide reform rather than isolated interventions.

Digital Mental Health Opportunities

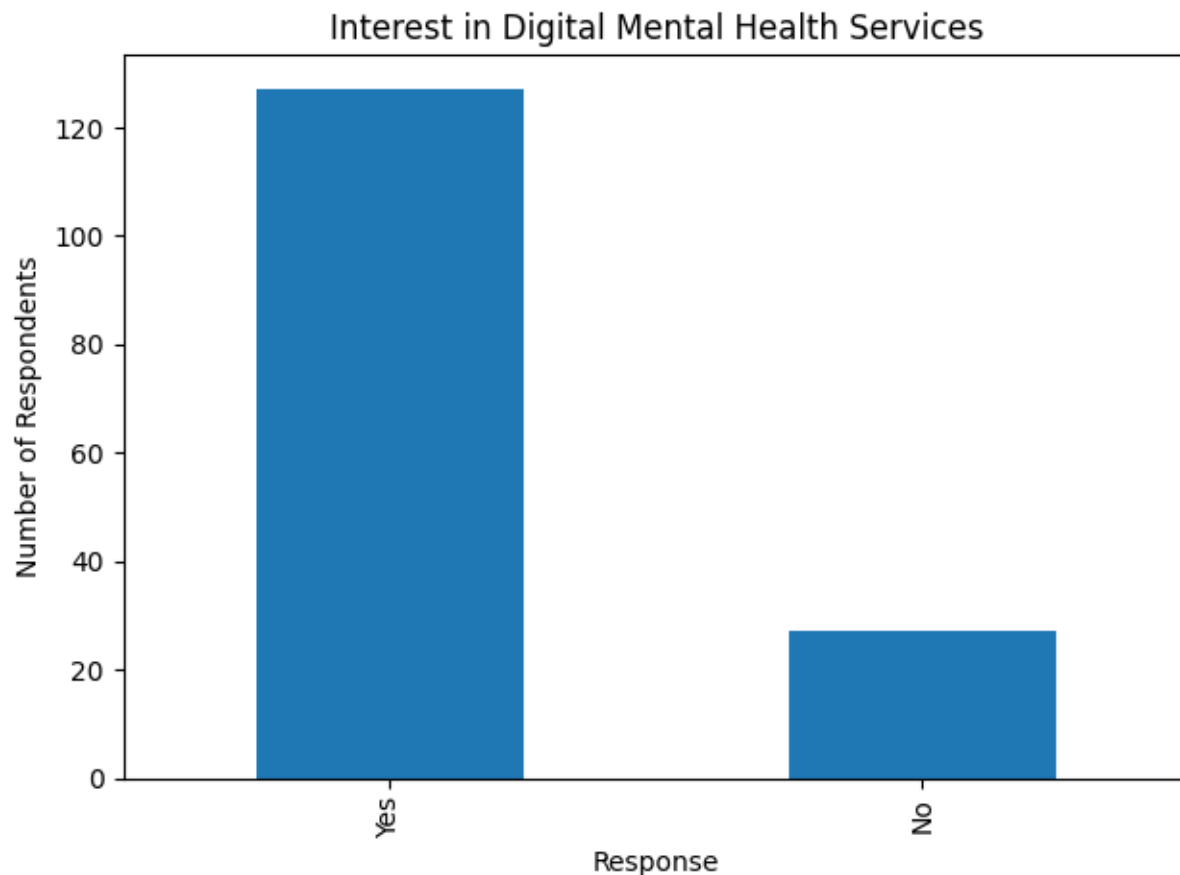


Figure 9. Interest in digital mental health services.

82.5 per cent of respondents expressed interest in online or mobile app-based mental health services, highlighting strong public support for blended care models that complement in-person services.

There was strong interest in online or mobile app-based mental health services. This finding signals an opportunity to expand access through digital tools, particularly for younger populations and individuals facing transportation, stigma, or scheduling barriers. Digital solutions should complement, not replace, in-person services and be designed with privacy, cultural relevance, and accessibility in mind.

Key Implications

The findings reflect a country at an important inflection point in its mental health journey. Increased public awareness and willingness to engage signal the positive impact of recent efforts by government, civil society, and health professionals. However, demand for services is outpacing system capacity, and the absence of comprehensive, modern mental health legislation limits coordinated responses, accountability, and long-term planning.

Strengthening mental health outcomes in Antigua and Barbuda will require integrated action across policy, service delivery, workforce development, and public education, supported by clear legislative and regulatory frameworks.

Recommendations

1. Advance comprehensive mental health legislation that protects rights, improves access, and establishes clear standards for care, in alignment with regional and international frameworks.
2. Continue to strengthen the mental health workforce through targeted training, recruitment, and retention initiatives.
3. Expand affordable and accessible mental health services within both public and private health systems.
4. Enhance coordinated public education and anti-stigma initiatives, building on existing government and civil society efforts.
5. Invest in digital and community-based mental health services as part of a blended care model.
6. Institutionalise regular data collection and monitoring to inform policy, evaluate progress, and guide resource allocation.

Conclusion

The survey findings underscore both progress achieved and work still required to ensure equitable, accessible, and rights-based mental health care in Antigua and Barbuda. Public awareness has grown, and important steps have been taken by government to elevate mental health within national health discourse. Yet persistent barriers to care and unmet demand highlight the urgency of further reform.

WISH – the Wadadli Initiative for Self-care and Healing affirms its commitment to working collaboratively with government, health institutions, and partners to support legislative development, service expansion, and community-based solutions. With continued leadership, investment, and partnership, Antigua and Barbuda can advance toward a stronger, more inclusive mental health system that leaves no one behind.

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