CHAPTER 4

Majuro, Republic of the Marshall Islands
4.1 Introduction

This Urban Centre Case Study discusses youth crime and violence in Majuro, Republic of Marshall Islands (RMI). The research team conducted focus groups discussions and interviews in Majuro with young people, government actors, village leaders and civil society organizations which provided the main basis for the findings. Additionally, a desk review of available reports and statistics was conducted. Drawing together these findings, this case study recommends a number of key actions to strengthen and support resilience among young men and women.

With an average age of just 19 years, RMI is one of the youngest nations in the Pacific. The National Youth Policy 2009-2014 acknowledges that the definition of youth is open to “legal, statistical, and cultural interpretation”, but it specifically targets young people aged 12 to 24 years old. This makes it much more focused than other youth policies in the region, which often cover people as old as 35 years. In the justice system, juveniles are classed as offenders aged inclusively between 14 and 17. Culturally, however, definitions of youth in RMI are related to their roles and responsibilities, for example: a person who is married, financially independent and/or has children is less likely to be considered a youth than someone who is older, still single and financially dependent on family.

Marshallese society is based on matrilineal lineage and cultural customs that promote the social kinship values that are directed at ensuring the well-being of all members. However, despite the strong commitment to taking care of one another in the community, the environment for the development of young people is limited due to a number of development factors such as a largely stagnant economy. Despite this the youth population continues to grow due to urbanization and a high birth rate, which is increasing the pressure on the country to deliver more education, employment and social services.

Nonetheless, many young men and women are playing positive roles in society through peer education, church-based youth groups, work, education, skills training and sports. There are young people and organizations doing inspirational work through vocational education and learning traditional skills. Efforts to revive aspects of traditional culture as a means to build resilience to crime and violence and to encourage positive roles in society by young people have been largely successful although they are only being implemented on a small scale. There are also genuine efforts to address substance abuse and gender based violence.
4.2 National Context

RMI has the second youngest population in the Pacific with a median age of just 19.2 years old. The total population of the country is just under 55,000 people, of which approximately 70 percent are under 29 years of age (Figure 4.1). Seventy-five percent of the population live in Majuro and Ebeye Islands, resulting in crowded living conditions. The average urban household has 7.6 members and the population density in Majuro is almost 2,500 people per square kilometer, indicating the crowded conditions.

Extreme poverty does not exist in the Marshall Islands although the proportion of people facing hardship does not appear to be falling and slow rates of increase in per capita Gross National Income (GNI) are not expected to translate into reduced levels of hardship. There are claims that particularly in urban centres such as Majuro, the Marshallese saying jake jobol eo or “no person will go hungry through sharing” is no longer guaranteed. In the 2008 Marshall Islands Millennium Development Goals Progress Report, the achievement of universal primary education, a reduction of child mortality, and an improvement of maternal health by 2015 are all reported to be “on track.” Progress on eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, promoting gender equality and empowering women, ensuring environmental sustainability and developing of global partnerships for development are reported to be “mixed” and only Goal 6 on “Combatting HIV/AIDS, Malaria and Other Diseases” is cited to be “off-track” (although the rate of incidence is still relatively low). An official Human Development Index (HDI) for the Marshall Islands has not been reported since 1998.

Marshall Islands currently enjoys a relatively high level of primary education for both girls and boys. In secondary schooling, a slight gender gap emerges; 12 percent of young men and only eight percent of young women complete their secondary studies. However, in the

---

71 EPPSO 2007.
73 EPPSO 2007.
74 Ibid.
76 In 1998 the Index is stated as 0.563 according to the Marshall Islands Chamber of Commerce at http://www.marshallislandschamber.net/mri.htm This would rank it 118th out of 169 countries as of 2007 although development levels would have most likely risen since then given the progress with the MDGs.
77 Government of RMI and UNDP 2009.
to 17 age ratio young women outnumber men in schooling (Figure 4.2).78 School dropout rates are a persistent problem, despite compulsory education until the age of 15. There is also the problem of “push out” in urban centres such as Majuro and Ebeye, where children are unable to attend school due to insufficient seats, even in primary schools. Even so, the literacy rate is high, with adult women slightly more literate than men at 95 percent and 94 percent respectively. Young women aged between 15 and 24 are also more literate than young men at 96 percent and 94 percent respectively.79

The rate of teenage pregnancy in RMI is one of the highest in the Pacific; in 2007, one in four young women aged between 15 to 19 years was pregnant or had already given birth to their first child.80 This is compounded by a high rate of sexually transmitted infections, which indicates the low rate of condom use and other contraceptives.81 Substance abuse is also a problem. The most common substance used in RMI is alcohol and tobacco, although betel nut, marijuana, kava/sakau, inhalants and other substances are also being used by young people. Related to alcohol consumption is the reported correlation it has with attempted suicide rates amongst young people in RMI. In 2008, there were a total of 10 suicides and 16 attempted suicides, with the data showing that it is more common amongst young men than young women.82

RMI is a matrilineal society, with children belonging to their mother’s lineage and having rights to use land which is owned by their lineage group.83 A popular local saying “au an kora ailen kein”, which means “these islands belong to the women”, captures this fact. Due to the high value of land and the strong spiritual connection to the land by Marshallese, land is a source of women’s influence in the community, and a foil to men’s dominance in executive positions in the political and business field. However, due to modern pressures of land scarcity and commercialization, women’s access to land and its associated power is being eroded and conflicts over land tenure are increasing.84

78 EPPSO 2007.
79 Ibid.
80 MIEPI 2010.
81 SPC and UNFPA 2006.
82 MIEPI 2010.
84 Stages et al 2008.
In 2007, married women were far less likely to be formally employed (35 percent) than men (80 percent), although it is generally recognized that women do most of the unpaid work of the household and are responsible for child rearing. Women generally are not discriminated against when applying for employment, especially in the private and non-government sectors. That said as of April 2009 there was only one female senator and cabinet minister in the Nitijela (parliament) and a clear minority of female government secretaries. RMI ratified CEDAW in 2006, but domestic violence is a serious issue (see Section 4.3 below for more details). There is generally equal access to education and health services for young men and women.

4.3 Young People as Victims and Perpetrators

For the most part young people living in Majuro provide and contribute to their country’s social, economic and cultural development. They use their skills and competencies in a diverse range of activities and settings and given the opportunity, they are grateful for meaningful and constructive way to express themselves. However, a number of young men and women face a range of challenges in accessing support and services from government, their communities and even sometimes their families, which would assist in empowering them to achieve their potential and effectively engage in society. One of the most significant challenges facing young people is the impact of crime and violence on their development. Some young people are also engaging in criminal activities, including theft, fraud and domestic violence.

Common Crimes

In 2010, there were ten young women under the age of 21 years charged with crimes ranging from drunk and disorderly conduct to fraud and malicious mischief. In the same time period, there were 606 young men under the age of 21 years charged. The top three offences were disturbing the peace, drunk and disorderly conduct, and various types of assault (Figure 4.3). Anecdotally, government workers in the justice sector identified the main types of crimes. (Figure 4.3)

Figure 4.3 Types of Crime by Young People Under 21 Years Old in 2010

Source: Public Safety 2011
crime as being drunk and disorderly behavior, disturbing the peace, vandalism and theft. Young men are far more likely to be charged with a criminal offence and engage more in criminal activities according to citation records. In 2009, the number of criminal citations attributed to young men aged between 16 and 21 outnumbered those of young women ten to one. Furthermore, there has been a 71 percent increase in the number of citations against young people from 2009 to 2010, with three offenders aged only 14 years old. The widespread involvement of alcohol consumption in the committing of crimes in Majuro was reported by all sectors including the police.

Assaults

During consultations there was a wide variety of opinions amongst participants about whether or not gangs exist in Majuro. However, government officials and young people agreed that physical fights that constitute assaults between groups of young men of different neighborhoods are common. Most fights occur because of verbal taunts, disagreements about intimate relationships and rivalry in sports. The participants are often drunk and fights usually include punching, kicking, stone throwing and using makeshift weapons such as wooden sticks. That said, the 2003 quantitative *Youth Risk Behavior Survey* on high school students in the Marshall Islands found that amongst young male students, almost one quarter had carried a weapon of some sort in the last month and nearly half of them had been involved in a physical fight within the last year. One third of female students had also been in a fight in the previous twelve months. It was reported that physical fights also occurred on school grounds, with 17 percent of students reporting to have been in a physical fight at school in the last 12 months and one in five having been threatened or injured with a weapon on school property in the last year. This indicates a substantive proportion of young men and women who are getting involved in violence – some are criminally charged whilst other might be victims of these attacks.

Drug Related Crimes

The *National Youth Policy 2009-2014* states: “Alcohol abuse is cited as one of the underlying causes of other issues such as domestic violence, juvenile crime, school drop-out, teenage pregnancy, and poor work performance.” This was corroborated by young people and other participants who reported that alcohol was seen to be the most prevalent drug and the strongest exacerbating risk factor for crime and violence. Fifteen percent of young men and 6.4 percent of young women began drinking before the age of 13. The Majuro District Court shows that within the period of 2007 and 2008, 296 young people were charged with ‘drunken underage’ and according to the MIEPI *2010 Substance Abuse Epidemiological Profile* this is an increasing trend. To add to this
the illegal sale of alcohol was flagged by a range of participants as a cause for concern. Better enforcement of liquor laws and a crackdown on under-age consumption of alcohol and other drugs such as marijuana would assist in decreasing young people’s involvement in crime and/or violence.

Domestic and Sexual Violence Crime

The 2007 Demographic and Health Survey reports that 30 percent of women have experienced physical violence in the home and almost one in four have experienced it in the last 12 months. The proportion of women who have experienced domestic violence is highest in the 25 to 39 age range; however one-in-three women between 15 to 19 years old are most likely to have experienced it in the last twelve months. More than half of divorced, separated or widowed women reported to have experienced domestic violence, suggesting that it might be a source of marriage breakdown. Approximately 90 percent of violence is perpetrated by husbands and/or boyfriends suggesting that men are often the perpetrators of violence in the home.96 Conversely, 12 percent of never-married women admitted to having initiated violence against an intimate partner.97

Sexual violence is also prevalent with one third of young women in the 15 to 19 year old cohort having experienced sexual violence.98 Moreover, seven percent of 15 to 19 year olds and 16 percent of women aged 20 to 24 years old had their first sexual intercourse forced upon them. In another survey, 29 percent of high school students reported to have been forced to have sexual intercourse. One in ten married women has been forced to have sexual intercourse by their husbands when they did not want to.99

96 EPPSO 2007.
97 Ibid. (pp. 261-264). This figure is expected to be a lower figure than reality due to women having to admit initiating violence against their husband as opposed to reporting violence against themselves. Furthermore, there was only one question on this issue as opposed to seven about report violence as a victim. This figure is for initiating violence not self-defence.
98 EPPSO 2007 Sexual violence is defined here as being forced to perform sexual intercourse or any other sexual act against one’s will.
99 Ibid.
While there has been an increasing awareness in RMI of domestic violence as a problem and recognition that it is a serious violation of human rights and a crime, it is still prevalent. Both civil society and the government claimed that it is often fuelled by alcohol and is still largely unspoken about in the community. According to government research literature, women in RMI are socialized to accept and tolerate domestic violence and for these experiences to remain unspoken. Civil society leaders and government officials stated that young people who have been direct victims and/or witnesses of violence in the home were more likely to become perpetrators of violence themselves. A number of respondents said that such young people were more likely to drop out of school and usually tried to solve problems through violence.

4.4 Institutional Responses in Support of Youth

A number of government initiatives that address the needs and challenges facing young people are working successfully in Majuro. However, there are still gaps and shortages of services which continue to impact on the ability of young people and their issues to be effectively managed and supported at various institutional levels. These gaps and shortages need to be addressed so as to achieve the full potential of young people.

Political Institutions’ Engagement with Youth

The Marshall Islands’ Nitijela is comprised of 33 senators, only one of which is a woman; although it is positive that she is a cabinet minister. Since 1979 women have had the right to vote and stand for election, but they have had limited success in being elected to the national parliament. The last few parliaments have had only a single female member. Notably, the legislative branch has historically been dominated by older male members of the Marshallese community, which has resulted in young people’s voices not regularly being heard at national decision-making forums. Despite this, there has as yet been no consideration of whether it would be useful to reserve any seats for young people in the national legislature.

It is important that young people are more actively engaged in the development of their communities and are brought in to be part of decision-making processes. The need for more opportunities for dialogue between young people and decision makers is essential so that positive contributions can be made and young people feel that they are a resource in the community rather than a burden. The continuation of the first Youth Nitijela in 2010 could be an effective methodology for raising political awareness amongst young people and developing their civic commitment. Likewise, leadership forums, roundtables with senators and schools outreach by the Nitijela itself could be considered. The Nitijela Health, Education and Social Affairs Committee could also be used by senators to consider youth issues in more detail.

Government Youth Policies


---

100 EPPSO 2007 and numerous interviews.
101 Ibid.
and research, and ten goals which include “an educated people”, “respecting culture and traditions” and “respecting individual freedom and fundamental human rights”, all of which are directly related to youth development.\textsuperscript{102} While Vision 2018 recognizes the high proportion of young people in the population, there is no particular focus or section on youth.

The development of the National Youth Policy (2009-2014) involved extensive consultations with a wide range of stakeholders.\textsuperscript{103} Overall, the National Youth Policy is a promising document that sets out priorities for youth, guiding principles and values, and a vision for youth development. It covers seven policy areas, with numerous and ambitious recommendations for actions in each area (Table 4.1). In the current Policy it is acknowledged that in relation to the previous policy drafted in 1998 that “although this policy and work program was the Government’s principle mechanism for promoting youth development, implementation has not progressed due to insufficient human and financial resources and a lack of awareness, ‘ownership’ and commitment by the service providers across the sector.”\textsuperscript{104} This lack of dedicated resources needs to be addressed, coupled with serious political will at the highest levels if the new policy is to live up to the expectations of stakeholders.

### Table 4.1 Key Issues and Actions in National Youth Policy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Issue</th>
<th>Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Young people, families and communities</td>
<td>Address issues that exist between youth, their families and communities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education and training</td>
<td>Improve and strengthen formal, informal and non-formal education and training for young people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career development, employment and livelihood</td>
<td>Expand livelihood opportunities through provision of a wide range of targeted vocational and employment preparation and life skills training.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health and social services</td>
<td>Improve and strengthen health programmes and social services for young people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural heritage and creative arts</td>
<td>Foster the Marshallese culture among young people and to use culture as a way to address the other social and economic issues faced by the communities and young people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports and leisure</td>
<td>Promote personal development of youth through increased opportunities for sports and recreational activities.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Youth machineries and youth development programmes promote greater support, strong leadership, adequate resources and cooperation and partnership between government, NGOs, communities and young people to realize the aspirations of young people.

### Youth Institutions and Key Organizations

The Marshall Islands Youth Advisory Board was initially established in 1986 to review the National Youth Policy and ensure that the Policy is integrated throughout other national initiatives and plans by government and civil society.\textsuperscript{105} The Youth Services Bureau, which is hosted by the Community Development Department within the Ministry of Internal Affairs, is now the main government office charged with coordinating initiatives and developing

---

\textsuperscript{102} RMI 2001:38-43  
\textsuperscript{103} MIA 2010.  
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid:7.  
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid.
policy for youth. This includes the *National Youth Policy 2009-2014*, which was endorsed by Congress in December 2010.

The Marshall Islands National Youth Congress (MIYC) was established in 1998. It aims to increase the participation of young people in national and local development, enrich and enhance the lives of young people and empower local youth councils. Alongside the Youth Services Bureau the MIYC assists in organizing annual national youth week events, provides training in response to the identified needs of youth groups and engages with community youth coordinators within local youth groups. At present the MIYC is receiving capacity building assistance from the Pacific Youth Council and it aims to continue working in mobilizing funds and supporting young people in RMI.

**Justice Institutions and Policies**

The Ministry of Justice, the Office of the Attorney General, and Public Safety are all part of the justice system in RMI. However, the justice system has limited capacity and resources to effectively carry out its priorities in terms of juvenile offenders. Some basic protocols exist for the handling of juveniles (defined as young people 17 years old and younger), however further assistance and work needs to be undertaken particularly in the area of legislation, juvenile facilities and rehabilitation programmes.

Police are usually the first point of contact for young people involved in crime and violence. For common crimes such as drunken and disorderly behaviour, a juvenile police investigator will meet with the young person’s parents and the young person in question. They may be simply given a warning and parents are then expected to follow up by disciplining the young person. If on probation, young people are required to report monthly. Counselling is available and referrals may be made to the *Waan Aelon in Majel* (WAM-Canoes of the Marshall Islands) programme, which also includes Alcoholic Anonymous sessions. WAM recently completed a jail-based “In-Reach” programme, in coordination with relevant government agencies. The programme ran for six weeks and featured counseling, rehabilitation, and vocational and life skills training. It is considered as a civil society initiative that has been very successful and should be considered for additional support and funding.

---

Bringing juveniles to trial is a route taken only for serious offenders. There are currently no special facilities in RMI for juvenile trials. It was understood that in August 2010 there was approximately four juveniles in detention. However there is also no special section within the prison for juveniles. A cell behind the central police station reception is used to house juveniles, as it is separate from the adult’s section of the prison. Because there is no special youth recreation area, juveniles mix with adults during this time. Bathroom facilities are also shared. Renovations to the prison were underway as of August 2010, but special juvenile facilities will not be part of the new structure. Noting that there are usually only a small number of juveniles being held in detention, the cost of providing separate facilities should be relatively low and should be considered by Government to ensure basic international standards for the care of juvenile offenders.

It was reported that traditional justice systems are no longer used in Majuro but a number of participants suggested reinvigorating such practices and incorporating them in to the formal justice system. Consideration would have to be given to ensuring that opportunities for abuse of traditional justice systems are kept in check.

4.5 Supporting Young People: Reducing Risk and Increasing Resilience

Risk and resilience factors coexist to create a context in which young men and women are more or less likely to engage in crime and/or violence. Risks reported by young people during consultations include lack of opportunities to constructively contribute to society, learn new skills and inadequate parental support. Involvement in formal activities designed for youth, such as church groups, volunteering, and a guiding and supportive family environment were all identified by participants as resilience factors that deter young people from crime and violence. These factors and more will be identified in the following section to assist policy-makers and stakeholders to identify priority strategies to address youth issues.

Growing the Employment Opportunities for Youth

The Compact of Free Association with the United States is the main source of GDP and accounted for 61 percent of the 2010 national budget. The public sector is the largest employer in the Marshall Islands employing around 41 percent of the formal sector workforce. Coastal fisheries and subsistence agriculture were traditionally a major source of income for most people, but for a large number of people currently living in the urban centres this is no longer an option. Other sources of employment are in agriculture, primarily subsistence based, as well as commercial coconut and breadfruit plantations; however these are not based in the urban centres of Majuro and Ebeye. Small scale industry includes tuna processing, copra, coconut oil, ornamental clams/coral, and handicrafts. Tourism employs about ten percent of the formal workforce. Unemployment is estimated to be 36 percent, with growth rates of the working age population outpacing job growth rates, leaving many young people unemployed. The fact that approximately two thirds of young people are estimated to be out-of-work is a major source of social tension.

“My parents want me to be a doctor but I’m not interested and not clever enough. I want to learn more about making canoes”

Young woman

107 U.S. Department of State 2010
110 RMI and UNDP 2009
111 Ibid.
During consultations, young people and civil society stated that the effect of unemployment often results in low self-esteem, which makes them more susceptible to substance abuse and violence. Young people claimed that employment would help them become more responsible and proud participants in their community. Entrepreneurial aspirations among young people were also mentioned as an area in which the Government could provide support. When questioned about this, young people responded that the ability to rely on other family members for basic needs reduces the incentive for young people to create employment opportunities for themselves.

The National Training Council (NTC) is committed to “building skills and work ethics through innovation, training and partnership.” The NTC has a history of fulfilling this objective for almost 20 years through the provision of vocational and other training programmes, arranging apprenticeships and assisting trainees to find employment. Its main target audience is unemployed young people between the ages of 15 and 24. Its areas of focus include not only technical and vocational skills training, but also basic education and life skills to improve youth employability. The NTC utilizes a range of training providers such as the College of the Marshall Islands (CMI), University of the South Pacific and WAM. It also develops the work ethic of young people and strengthens the TVET policy environment.\footnote{NTC 2010a; NTC 2010b.}

NTC’s “Accelerated Boot Camp (ABC) Tool Box” programme runs out of CMI for ten weeks at a time. It provides a comprehensive approach to supporting young men and women to become more productive, through the provision of life skills (such as mathematics, English, and work ethics), health education (exercise, nutrition, diet), and basic vocational skills such as carpentry, motor repair and electric wiring. Although widely recognized and generally viewed favorably, one donor expressed concern about the ABC Tool Box programme shifting its initial aim away from supporting unemployed youth-at-risk to find employment, towards boosting the skills of high school graduates who cannot quite meet the academic standard to enter into CMI.\footnote{NTC 2010a; NTC 2010b.}

Improving the Quality and Relevance of Education

Another high risk factor stated by young people, government and civil society was school disengagement or ‘drop-out’ which left them with low employability. The reasons behind drop-out as cited by young people and civil society are manifold: lack of sufficient places within schools at the higher levels of formal education; lack of interest; difficulty in paying school costs; and early pregnancies. A 2003 study also found that almost one third of students had not gone to school sometime in the previous month because they felt unsafe at school or on their commute to school, suggesting that violence may be another factor in school drop-out.\footnote{Balling et al 2003.}

The focus of the educational system on academic credentials rather than vocational education and skills training is also an issue. The education system is geared toward managerial and/or administrative work for which there are limited opportunities, even for high school and college graduates. This is compounded by the stigma attached to vocational work such as plumbing, motor repair and electrical wiring. Participants mentioned that parents generally aspire for their children to become government or private sector employees due to the perceived status that these positions hold. However, the challenge to receive a higher education is often difficult and support structures such as tutoring for young people who might be struggling with their workload are often not in place forcing a number of students to drop-out.
CMI is considered the main post-secondary institution in RMI offering certificate and degree programmes in various fields and at different levels. The Ministry of Education’s National Vocational Training Institute offers vocational training, with the support of NTC. WAM also offers some vocational training courses. However, the quality and relevance of the educational framework for these institutions require further analysis and research.

Finally, relevance and quality of education continues to be seen as a key issue that needs to be addressed in the Marshall Islands. During consultations, a number of civil society leaders, government officials and young people claimed that there needs to be a greater emphasis on vocational skill development and wider acceptance in society of vocational trades as a legitimate and valuable career path.

**Tackling Substance Abuse**

Substance abuse, together with unemployment, was the most commonly raised risk factor mentioned throughout consultations. The 2009 Youth Risk Behavior Survey found that 41 percent of high school students had at least one drink of alcohol on one or more days prior to the survey. The occurrence was higher amongst young men (53 percent) than young women (31 percent). This study also showed that the issue of ‘binge drinking’ was a concern, showing that 29 percent of high school students consumed five or more alcoholic beverages in a row.

The urban centres of Majuro and Ebeye are singled out in the current National Youth Policy as places where youth binge drinking is commonplace. The large number of outlets selling cheap alcohol to youth outside of legal hours was mentioned by several government officials as one of the causes for alcohol abuse and binge drinking. The production of jemanin or home-brew was also reported by participants to be harmful and in need of attention. Police claimed that 90 percent of crimes committed by young men and women were done under the influence of alcohol. Other problems identified relating to alcohol was the negative mental and physical health effects, family problems caused or exacerbated by alcohol including domestic violence, fighting amongst individuals and groups, and financial hardship.

The use of illegal drugs was also mentioned during consultations. This included marijuana, inhalants and other drugs. However, the most common was marijuana. More than three times as many young men (31 percent) than young women (nine percent) reported ever using marijuana. Approximately twice as many young men as young women had also used other substances such as methamphetamines. In consultations also participants confirmed that there is greater substance abuse by young men than by young women.

Fortunately, there is already a strong recognition of the problem of substance abuse in RMI. In a 2009 survey, 94 percent of respondents thought substance abuse prevention efforts need to be expanded. Moreover, youth themselves acknowledge the issue, with young people under 25 years of age more likely to regard substance abuse as a serious problem. On a scale of one to ten, respondents rated eight the importance to their community of preventing substance abuse among youth age 15 to 25.

---

115 Substance abuse covers abuse of alcohol, tobacco, inhalants, betel nut, kava/sakau, hard drugs, marijuana, and other soft drugs.
116 2009 Youth Risk Behavior Survey.
117 Balling et al. 2003.
118 Brobrae Project 2010.
It is positive that there are already a number of programmes being implemented in RMI which are making an impact to address substance abuse. Back in 2002, the Marshall Islands Ministry of Finance was put in charge of administering a grant for Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment from the US Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. From this grant a number of initiatives are funded; The Bobrae Project, which will run from 2009 to 2013, provides grants to local organizations to fulfill the following three aims:

- Reduce the onset and reduce the progression of substance abuse, including childhood and underage drinking;
- Reduce substance-abuse related problems in communities; and,
- Build prevention capacity and infrastructure at the state and community levels.

A number of civil society organizations receive grants from the Bobrae Project. One of the most successful programmes is Youth to Youth in Health, which runs a range of programmes for young people at-risk. It works specifically on substance abuse prevention on the ground. It runs activities from a youth health centre centrally located in Majuro. Two peer educators work at the youth centre assisting with substance abuse prevention programs. The Youth SMART programme run by Youth to Youth in Health targets school children aged six to 15 that are out of the formal school system. It focuses more on prevention and its ultimate aim is to get young people back into the formal school system as a way to prevent substance abuse.

Finally, a community based organization called Marshall Islands Epidemiology and Prevention Initiative (MIEPI) also works on substance abuse prevention, planning, and epidemiological surveillance. Through extensive data collection, MIEPI produces reports of research findings and makes policy and programming recommendations to government. They also undertake educational campaigns in relation to the sale of alcohol and tobacco to minors, reporting good traction amongst community members and merchants.

**Opportunities for Meaningful Activity**

Young people reported that it was not just lack of employment that undermined their self-confidence and self-esteem, but also opportunities to engage in other meaningful activities. Although there are some opportunities with church groups and civil society, not all young people were aware of these opportunities nor were they necessarily interested. A number of young people expressed their disappointment at the limited sporting facilities and organized sporting events. Others wanted more chances to learn job and vocational skills through non-formal educational channels. Avenues of expression through crafts, music and arts were also suggested by young people. Without meaningful activities young people are more susceptible to becoming involved in negative behaviors.

Involvement in projects targeting young people was seen to increase resilience. In interviews with participants who were involved in such projects, many reported that they had been able to change former negative behavior patterns, such as smoking and binge drinking. They also developed goals that they aspired to and stayed away from violence due to the fact that they were now perceived as role models. Although facilities are limited, playing sports such as basketball and volleyball are popular activities for young people to stay healthy and develop leadership, friendship and teamwork skills. Access to such activities and facilities were mentioned by young people to be a constructive way to support them and stay away from crime and violence.

120 WUTMI 2010
121 UNAIDS 2010.
As noted earlier, WAM is a particular civil society initiative that has been very successful. WAM provides both "cultural strengthening" and vocational skills training through "long-standing elements of Marshallese culture – canoe building, traditional and contemporary boat building, sailing and navigation, woodworking and weaving." WAM’s main programme is a six-month “Traditional, Vocational and Life Skills Training” programme which is implemented with support from the NTC. As well as learning traditional canoe building and carpentry, trainees receive counseling and Alcoholics Anonymous sessions as well as life and job skills. They also have a programme researching and promoting traditional navigation and a six-week summer programme for basic vocational skill building and civic education. Usually, around one third of participants in most programmes are young women.123 Participants are a mixed group, ranging from young people in college to high school drop outs.

As with other Pacific island nations, the church also plays a pivotal role in society. The church was mentioned by several young people as a place where they could find guidance and meaning in their lives. Through the church, young people are involved in religious activities such as bible study, choir, and prayer groups. There are also many church-based youth groups which are often led by young people themselves. Involvement in church youth groups helped a number of young people to find direction and to give up or reduce negative behaviors. They were also able to get guidance from church leaders.

**Family Challenges**

The importance of the family in Marshallese culture is highly valued, including family kinship networks, traditional customs and the passing on of customary values to the next generation.122 However, changing structure and roles within the family, especially the extended family, have left young people with less support and less access to trusted family members when they are anxious or troubled. Today the extended family’s role is less prominent and parents play a greater role in disciplining or advising their children124. However,
young people reported that they do not feel comfortable talking to their parents about many issues and problems. Some also felt that they did not have access to uncles, aunts, and grandparents that could play the role of confidante, counsel or advisor.

A number of participants stated that families are also being separated by migration, especially to the urban centres of Majuro and Ebeye and the US. The impact on children and young people that have been left behind is yet to be fully understood. However, it was anecdotally considered that young people are suffering from these separations and are often perceived to be more at risk due to the lack of supervision and guardianship from extended family members who are in charge of their care. These changes mean that young people have less access to trusted guidance, less discipline and authority, lower self-esteem, more vulnerability to peer pressure, and are more susceptible to turning to groups of friends with similar issues to find belonging. For both young men and women this leads to an increased chance of becoming involved in crime, violence, early sexual activity and/or substance abuse.

**Societal Challenges**

Young people participating in this study identified peer pressure as a push factor for involvement in crime and violence. Some young people found it hard to say “no” to being involved in drinking sessions and often subsequent violent or risky behavior even if they felt it was wrong. Some of these behaviors included having unprotected sex under the influence of alcohol, property damage and physical fights with other peers. However, it was also stated that peer pressure could also be a positive influence on young people and examples of young people who participate in peer to peer education was particularly highlighted.

Law and justice sector officials also commented on the influences of criminal deportees arriving back to Majuro from Guam and the United States mainland. These individuals are said to be mainly young men who are perceived to have “wasted” their opportunities abroad. Some of the young men are reported to have been affiliated with gangs in the United States whilst other committed crimes that constituted their removal from the countries abroad. Law and justice officials raised this as a concern due to the fact that is not widely known what the recidivism rates of these young people are and also the implications of their arrival on the local community has not been fully understood.

Rapid urbanization from rural-urban migration was another issue that was mentioned as a possible risk factor by stakeholders. Young people and families usually migrate to Majuro and Ebeye Islands in the hope of better economic, educational and health care service prospects. However, upon arrival to these urban centres they are faced with over-crowded housing, less traditional village support mechanisms, and limited employment opportunities. These issues are causing social tension through upheaval in family structure and roles, as well as the pressure on services and infrastructure to cater for the influx of people to urban centres. The impact on the lives of young people varies, but anecdotally many young people feel disheartened and engage in high-risk behaviors as a way to cope.
4.6 Conclusions and Recommendations

Given the large and continually expanding population of young people in Marshallese society, the government and development partners need to tackle youth issues more vigorously. The future cost of not providing support and opportunities to the current generation of youth as they transition into adulthood will be much higher than if concrete and sincere policies and programmes are put in place now. Please note that a number of the recommendations in the Pacific Overview and Regional Recommendations chapter are relevant to Majuro as well.

Recommendations

• Expand places for vocational training and align them with emerging needs domestically and abroad.
• Implement priorities in the National Youth Policy 2014 to capitalize on its recent endorsement.
• Expand cooperation between justice system institutions and civil organizations such as NTC and WAM to place youth in conflict with the law into programmes developing vocational and life skills.
• Continue support to the MIEPI programme in tracking trends in substance abuse as a basis for policy and programme development.
• Develop and enact specific legislation for youth offenders.
• Support to the reintegration and resettlement of criminal deportees.
• Explore possibility of reinvigorating traditional justice practices as part of the formal justice system.
References


