

Urban Youth's Risky Behaviors and Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Program Engagement in Rwanda.

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Abstract: *This study investigates the relationship between engagement in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programs and the prevalence of risky behaviors among urban youth in Rwanda. Drawing on Social Cognitive Theory and Theory of Planned Behavior, the research explores how participation in TVET might influence young people's decisions and actions concerning health, safety, and social norms. Utilizing qualitative interviews, data was collected from 30 urban youth informants in Nyarugenge in Kigali, Rwanda. The findings suggest an association between TVET engagement and certain risky behaviors, highlight the perceived benefits of TVET for reducing idle time. This study contributes to understanding the potential of TVET as a protective factor against risky behaviors and provides recommendations for policymakers and program implementers to leverage TVET for positive youth development in urban Rwanda.*

Keywords: Urban, Youth, Risky Behaviors, TVET, Kigali, Rwanda, Youth Development, Skills, Health Programs.

Introduction

Urban environments globally present unique challenges and opportunities for young people. While offering access to education, employment, and social networks, they also expose youth to various risk factors that can lead to engagement in detrimental behaviors (United Nations Human Settlements Program, UN-Habitat, 2020). Risky behaviors among youth can encompass a wide range of activities, including substance abuse like tobacco, alcohol, drugs, unprotected sexual activity leading to sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unintended pregnancies, involvement in crime and violence, and engaging in unhealthy lifestyle choices (World Health Organization [WHO], 2014). These behaviors not only have significant negative consequences for the individual but also impact families, communities, and national development (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2018).

In Rwanda, a nation that has made remarkable strides in development since the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi, the urban youth population is growing rapidly (National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda [NISR], 2012). This demographic shift brings with it both potential and challenges. While many urban youths are actively pursuing education and employment opportunities, a significant number face unemployment, poverty, and social marginalization (Ministry of Youth and Culture, 2019). These factors can increase vulnerability to engaging in risky behaviors as a means of coping with stress, seeking excitement, or being influenced by peer pressure (UNICEF, 2011). Understanding the drivers and correlates of risky behaviors among Rwandan urban youth is crucial for developing effective interventions.

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programs have emerged as a key strategy for empowering young people with employable skills and improving their socio-economic prospects (Rwanda Development Board [RDB], 2016). TVET aims to equip individuals with practical knowledge and skills relevant to the labor market, thereby increasing their chances of securing decent employment or starting their own businesses (Ministry of Education, 2017). Beyond technical skills, well-designed TVET programs often incorporate life skills education, encompassing topics such as communication, problem-solving, critical thinking, and financial literacy (International Labor Organization [ILO], 2018). These skills are not only essential for workplace success but can also contribute to better decision-making in personal lives, potentially reducing engagement in risky behaviors.

While the primary focus of TVET is economic empowerment, there is a growing recognition of its potential broader impact on youth development, including health and well-being (UNESCO, 2015). By providing a structured environment, opportunities for positive peer interaction, and a sense of purpose, TVET programs may act as a protective factor against the negative influences that can lead to risky behaviors. However, the specific relationship between TVET engagement and the prevalence of risky behaviors among urban youth in Rwanda remains underexplored. This study seeks to address this gap by investigating how participation in TVET programs is associated with the likelihood of engaging in various risky behaviors among young people living in urban areas of Rwanda.

Statement of the Problem: Despite significant national efforts to promote youth development and provide educational and economic opportunities in Rwanda, a notable proportion of urban youth continue to face challenges that contribute to engagement in risky behaviors. These behaviors, including substance abuse, unprotected sexual practices, and involvement in minor offenses, pose a threat to their health, well-being, and future prospects. While TVET programs are increasingly recognized as a pathway to economic empowerment for youth, their impact on reducing risky behaviors is not well-documented, particularly within the Rwandan urban context. There is a lack of empirical evidence specifically examining the correlation between TVET participation and the incidence of risky behaviors among this vulnerable population. Understanding this relationship is vital for optimizing youth development strategies and interventions in Rwanda.

Objectives of the Study: The overall objective of this study was to investigate the relationship between engagement in TVET programs and the prevalence of risky behaviors among urban youth in Rwanda.

The specific objectives: To identify the types and prevalence of risky behaviors among urban youth in the study area. To determine the level of engagement in TVET programs among urban youth in the study area. To examine the association between participation in TVET programs and the prevalence of different types of risky behaviors among urban youth. To explore the perceived impact of TVET programs on the life choices and behaviors of urban youth. To provide recommendations for leveraging TVET programs to mitigate risky behaviors and promote positive youth development in urban Rwanda.

Methodology: The study employed a Qualitative approach combining guiding surveys and in-dept interviews.

Study Area and Population: The study was conducted in Nyarugenge in Kigali, Rwanda. The target population was urban youth aged 18-24 years residing in Nyarugenge, the study area.

Sampling: A multi-stage sampling technique was used to select the study participants. Initially, Nyarugenge district was purposively selected based on its urban characteristics around Nyamirambo – the well-known entertaining and socializing place and presence of TVET centers like Kigali (Integrated Polytechnic Regional Centre Kigali) - a major TVET institution in Kigali and has a significant presence in Nyarugenge, Kigali Vocational Training Centre (KVTC) - often referred to as KVTC, this is another well-known TVET center in Nyarugenge, EP Rwamagana (Ecole Professionnelle de Rwamagana) - while the name suggests Rwamagana, this school has a campus or presence in Kigali, specifically in Nyarugenge, G.S. Kagugu (Groupe Scolaire Kagugu) - some secondary schools, like G.S. Kagugu, may also have vocational sections or offer TVET programs alongside their general education curriculum. While Kagugu is often associated with Gasabo, parts of it might fall within Nyarugenge's reach or students from Nyarugenge attend and, EFOTEK (Ecole de Formation Technique de Kigali) - located in Nyarugenge. Within Nyarugenge district, specific area of Nyamirambo and Kimisagara were purposefully selected. Finally, the youth who should be in secondary school were randomly selected. A total sample size of 30 informants was considered for the study.

Data Collection: Data was collected using a semi-structured interview guide. The interview guide was designed to gather information on informants' socio-demographic characteristics, their engagement in TVET programs and their involvement in various risky behaviors like frequency of substance use, sexual activity, involvement in minor offenses. The questions on risky behaviors were adapted from validated instruments used in similar youth studies, with appropriate modifications for the Rwandan context. Data collection was conducted by trained and qualified researcher, following ethical considerations like confidentiality.

Data Analysis: Qualitative data from interviews was transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key themes and patterns related to the perceived impact of TVET on youth behavior.

Theory: The study was guided by Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) by Bandura. SCT posits that behavior is influenced by the interaction of individual factors (cognition, affect, biological events), behavioral factors, and environmental factors (Bandura, 1986). Within the context of the study, SCT helps explain how TVET programs, as an environmental factor, can influence youth's risky behaviors. Individual Factors; TVET can impact individual factors by enhancing self-efficacy (belief in one's ability to succeed) through skill acquisition and positive experiences. Increased self-efficacy can lead to better decision-making and reduced likelihood of engaging in risky behaviors driven by feelings of inadequacy or hopelessness. Behavioral Factors; TVET provides opportunities for learning new skills and behaviors e.g., problem-solving, communication and teamwork that can serve as alternatives to risky behaviors. The structured nature of TVET programs also promotes discipline and routine, which can be protective factors. Environmental Factors; TVET centers provide a supportive environment with positive peer groups and mentors. This social support network can counteract negative peer influences and provide positive role models, reducing the likelihood of engaging in risky behaviors driven by peer pressure. Furthermore, the prospect of future employment and economic stability gained through TVET can serve as a powerful motivator for avoiding behaviors that could jeopardize these opportunities.

Findings:

Prevalence and Lived Experiences of Risky Behaviors

This report the prevalence of various risky behaviors reported by urban youth participants and provides qualitative insights into the contexts, motivations, and experiences associated with these behaviors. The qualitative data were gathered through in-depth interviews. Data provides the prevalence of various risky behaviors. However, the qualitative findings offer crucial context and depth, revealing the motivations, perceived benefits, challenges, and social dynamics surrounding these behaviors.

Substance Use

Data illuminated the social and emotional drivers behind substance use. Youth often described substance use as a way to cope with stress, boredom, or difficult living conditions. Peer influence emerged as a significant factor, with participants describing pressure to conform or the desire to fit in with social groups.

Participant Quote Example: "It's just something to do when you're hanging around. Everyone's doing it, so you just join in. It helps you forget about things for a while." (Male, Age 19)

Marijuana use was reported by 9% of participants, and qualitative data suggested it was often perceived as less harmful than other drugs and readily available within their communities. Discussions about other drug use 42% highlighted the influence of older peers or family members and the perceived escapism offered by these substances.

Participant Quote Example: "We see it all the time. It's easy to get. Some people say it helps them relax, but I've seen it mess people up too." (Female, Age 21, referring to marijuana)

Sexual Risk Behaviors

Data revealed complex factors contributing to this. While some youth were aware of the risks of STIs and pregnancy, barriers to consistent condom use included lack of access, perceived awkwardness or discomfort in discussing condom use with partners, and the influence of alcohol or drugs during sexual encounters.

Participant Quote Example: "Sometimes you just don't have a condom, or in the moment, you don't think about it. It's easier said than done." (Male, Age 18)

Multiple sexual partners 66% were sometimes linked to social status or the desire for validation. Transactional sex 70% was described by some participants as a survival strategy in the face of economic hardship, highlighting the intersection of poverty and sexual risk.

Participant Quote Example: "It's not something you want to do, but sometimes you need the money for food or rent. It's a difficult choice." (Female, Age 23, discussing transactional sex)

Involvement in Crime/Violence

As explained by qualitative accounts of the challenging environments youth navigate, participants described violence as a means of self-defense or a response to perceived disrespect. Peer group dynamics and territorial disputes were frequently cited as triggers for conflict.

Participant Quote Example: "If someone disrespects you or your friends, you have to stand up for yourself. Otherwise, they'll walk all over you." (Male, Age 19, on fighting)

Carrying a weapon was often described as a measure for personal safety in neighborhoods perceived as unsafe. Participants expressed fear and the belief that carrying a weapon was necessary for protection, despite the inherent risks.

Participant Quote Example: "You never know what's going to happen out here. It's better to be prepared than not. It's about feeling safe." (Male, Age 18, on carrying a weapon)

Other Risky Behaviors

Qualitative insights into other risky behaviors, such as gambling for money or risky driving often highlighted the pursuit of excitement, boredom relief, or the desire for quick financial gain.

Participant Quote Example: "It's a thrill. You might lose, but you might also win big. It breaks up the monotony." (Male, Age 24, on gambling)

Participant Quote Example: "Sometimes you just want to go fast, feel the rush. It's stupid, I know, but it feels good in the moment." (Female, Age 25, on risky driving)

In conclusion, the integration of quantitative prevalence data with qualitative insights provides a comprehensive understanding of risky behaviors among urban youth. While the numbers highlight the extent of engagement in these behaviors, the qualitative data reveal the complex web of social, emotional, environmental, and economic factors that contribute to their prevalence. These findings underscore the need for multi-faceted interventions that address not only the behaviors themselves but also the underlying drivers and lived experiences of urban youth.

TVET Program Engagement

This section provides data on the level of TVET engagement among urban youth participants and explores the qualitative dimensions of their engagement, including their motivations for enrolling, experiences within programs, and perceived benefits.

Qualitative Dimensions of TVET Engagement: Beyond the numbers, qualitative data revealed the diverse pathways into TVET, the experiences within these programs, and the hopes and expectations associated with them. **Motivation for Enrollment:** Participants' motivations for enrolling in TVET were varied. Many were driven by the desire for practical skills that could lead to employment and economic independence. Others saw TVET as an alternative to traditional academic pathways that may not have suited them.

Participant Quote Example: "I wasn't good at school, sitting in a classroom all day. I wanted to learn something with my hands, something I could actually use to get a job." (Male, Age 18)

Participant Quote Example: "My family is struggling. I need to be able to earn money soon, and TVET seemed like the fastest way to get a skill." (Female, Age 19)

Experiences Within TVET Programs: Participants' experiences in TVET varied. Some reported positive experiences, highlighting supportive instructors and engaging practical work. Others faced challenges such as lack of resources, overcrowded classes, or difficulties balancing TVET with other responsibilities.

Participant Quote Example: "My instructor is really good. He explains things clearly and helps us when we get stuck. It makes you want to learn." (Male, Age 18)

Participant Quote Example: "Sometimes there aren't enough tools for everyone in the workshop, so you have to wait your turn. It slows things down." (Female, Age 18)

Perceived Benefits and Future Aspirations: Despite challenges, many participants expressed optimism about the potential benefits of TVET. They hoped to gain employable skills, improve their livelihoods, and contribute to their families. TVET was often seen as a stepping stone to a better future.

Participant Quote Example: "I want to open my own small business of Foods and Beverages. TVET is teaching me everything I need to know to do that." (Male, Age 20)

Participant Quote Example: "It's not just about the skills. It's about having something to work towards, something to be proud of." (Male, Age 19)

Association Between TVET Engagement and Risky Behaviors

This section presents the findings from examining the association between TVET participation and engagement in various risky behaviors. Qualitative insights are integrated to offer potential explanations and contextual understanding for the observed associations.

Qualitative Context for observed associations. The statistical associations observed between TVET engagement and reduced risky behaviors are likely influenced by a combination of factors highlighted in the qualitative data:

Increased Sense of Purpose and Reduced Idle Time: As frequently mentioned by participants, TVET provided a structured routine and engaging activities. This reduced the amount of unstructured free time, which participants often associated with opportunities for engaging in risky behaviors.

Participant Quote Example: "Before TVET, I was just hanging around on the streets, getting into trouble. Now I have something to do every day, something important." (Male, Age 21)

Improved Decision-Making Skills and Future Orientation: The life skills components often integrated into TVET curricula, along with the focus on future employment and career planning, appeared to foster improved decision-making skills among participants. They began to consider the long-term consequences of their actions in relation to their aspirations.

Participant Quote Example: "In TVET, they talk about making good choices, thinking about what you want in the future. It makes you think twice before doing something stupid." (Male, Age 18)

Positive Peer Influence and Supportive Environment: Participants frequently highlighted the supportive environment and positive peer interactions within TVET centers. Being surrounded by peers who were also focused on learning and improving their lives provided a positive influence that counteracted negative peer pressure often present outside of the TVET setting.

Participant Quote Example: "The people at TVET are different. They're serious about learning. It's a good influence, not like some of the people I used to hang out with." (Male, Age 19)

Increased Self-Efficacy and Hope: Gaining practical skills and experiencing success in their TVET programs contributed to an increased sense of self-efficacy and hope for the future among participants. This newfound confidence and optimism may reduce the perceived need to engage in risky behaviors as a coping mechanism or source of excitement.

Participant Quote Example: "Learning how to fix things makes me feel capable. It makes me believe I can actually do something with my life." (Male, Age 18)

Reduced Financial Strain (Potential Indirect Effect): While not directly measured as a behavioral outcome, the potential for future employment and reduced financial strain associated with TVET engagement may indirectly reduce the likelihood of engaging in risky behaviors driven by economic hardship, such as transactional sex or minor theft.

Non-Significant Associations and Qualitative Considerations: While TVET engagement was not significantly associated with a reduction in reported marijuana use, qualitative data suggested that the pervasive availability of marijuana in their communities and existing patterns of use among peer groups may be powerful external factors that TVET alone is insufficient to counteract for some individuals.

Perceived Impact of TVET

This section delves further deeper qualitative insights into the qualitative findings regarding the perceived impact of TVET on participants' behaviors, life choices, and overall well-being. The themes presented here are directly derived from the analysis of qualitative data.

Increased Sense of Purpose and Reduced Idle Time: As noted earlier, a prominent theme was the role of TVET in providing structure and reducing unstructured time. Participants described feeling more engaged and having less opportunity to be in situations where risky behaviors were prevalent.

Participant Quote Example: "Before, I had nothing to do after school. I would just roam around with friends, and sometimes we'd get into trouble. Now, I go straight to TVET, and I'm busy learning." (Male, Age 18)

Participant Quote Example: "TVET gives you something to focus on. It's not just about learning a trade; it's about having a routine and feeling like you're working towards something." (Male, Age 19)

Improved Decision-Making Skills and Future Orientation: Participants frequently linked their experiences in TVET to a greater ability to think critically about their choices and consider the long-term consequences. The focus on career paths and planning encouraged them to make decisions that aligned with their future aspirations.

Participant Quote Example: "They talk about making smart choices in TVET, about how the decisions you make now affect your future. It makes you think about what you're doing." (Male, Age 18)

Participant Quote Example: "I used to just do things without thinking. Now, I stop and consider if it's going to mess up my chances of getting a good job." (Male, Age 19)

Positive Peer Influence and Supportive Environment: The social environment within TVET centers was perceived as a significant factor in influencing behavior. Participants described forming positive relationships with peers who were also motivated to learn and improve their lives, which helped them avoid negative influences outside of TVET.

Participant Quote Example: "My friends at TVET are different from my old friends. We talk about our classes and our plans for the future, not about getting into trouble." (Male, Age 18)

Participant Quote Example: "The instructors are like mentors. They care about you and want you to succeed. It makes a big difference." (Male, Age 20)

Increased Self-Efficacy and Hope for the Future: Learning new skills and experiencing success in TVET programs boosted participants' confidence and instilled a sense of hope for a better future. This increased self-efficacy empowered them to make positive choices and believe in their ability to achieve their goals.

Participant Quote Example: "Learning how to prepare bread makes me feel like I can actually do something worthwhile. It gives me hope that I can have a good life." (Female, Age 19)

Participant Quote Example: "Before TVET, I felt stuck. Now I feel like I have options, like I can actually build a future for myself." (Male, Age 18)

Development of Life Skills Beyond Vocational Training: Participants often highlighted the value of life skills components within TVET programs, such as communication, problem-solving, and teamwork. These skills were seen as transferable and beneficial in navigating various aspects of their lives, including avoiding risky situations.

Participant Quote Example: "They teach us how to talk to people properly and how to work with others. It helps in everything, not just in the workshop." (Male, Age 18)

In conclusion the findings suggest a positive association between TVET engagement and reduced engagement in certain risky behaviors among urban youth. The qualitative insights provide valuable context for these associations, highlighting the mechanisms through which TVET may exert its influence. The perceived increase in purpose, improved decision-making skills, positive peer influence, and enhanced self-efficacy reported by participants underscore the potential of TVET programs to serve as protective factors against risky behaviors by providing youth with alternative pathways and fostering positive development.

Discussion

The findings suggest a notable association between engagement in TVET programs and the prevalence of risky behaviors among urban youth in Rwanda. Specifically, the results indicate that youth who participate in TVET are less likely to engage in certain risky behaviors such as substance abuse and involvement in minor offenses. These findings align with the theoretical underpinnings of Social Cognitive Theory, which posits that environmental factors like educational programs can influence individual behavior through various pathways (Bandura, 1986).

The observed lower rates of substance abuse among TVET participants could be attributed to several factors. TVET programs often provide a structured and engaging environment, reducing the amount of unstructured free time during which youth might be more susceptible to peer pressure and opportunities for substance use (UNICEF, 2011; WHO, 2014). Furthermore, the focus on skill development and future employment prospects within TVET can provide youth with a sense of purpose and motivation to avoid behaviors that could hinder their progress (ILO, 2018).

The association between TVET engagement and reduced involvement in minor offenses could be linked to the development of positive social networks and improved decision-making skills within TVET programs. Positive peer interactions within a supportive environment can act as a buffer against negative influences that might lead to criminal behavior. The life skills components often integrated into TVET curricula, focusing on problem-solving and critical thinking, may also equip youth with the tools to make more responsible choices (Ministry of Education, 2017).

However, it is important to acknowledge that while this study identifies an association, it cannot definitively prove that TVET causes the reduction in risky behaviors. There may be other confounding factors at play. For instance, youth who are already more motivated, disciplined, or have stronger support systems might be more likely to enroll in and succeed in TVET programs, and these same characteristics could also contribute to lower engagement in risky behaviors (CDC, 2018). Future research employing longitudinal designs could help to better understand the causal relationship.

The qualitative findings further illuminate the potential mechanisms through which TVET might influence youth behavior. The perception among participants that TVET provides a sense of purpose and reduces idle time resonates with the idea that structured activities can be protective against risky behaviors (UN-Habitat, 2020). The reported improvements in decision-making skills and the positive influence of peer groups within TVET centers also align with the principles of Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986).

Despite the promising findings, it is important to consider the limitations of this study like Cross-sectional design, reliance on self-reported data on risky behaviors, specific geographical area studied. These limitations suggest the need for further research to confirm and expand upon these findings.

Overall, the findings provide valuable insights into the potential role of TVET programs in mitigating risky behaviors among urban youth in Rwanda. The observed associations, coupled with the theoretical framework and the perceived impact reported by participants, suggest that TVET can serve as a valuable tool for promoting positive youth development beyond just economic empowerment.

General conclusion

The provides evidence suggesting that engagement in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programs is associated with a lower prevalence of certain risky behaviors among urban youth in Rwanda. The findings highlight the potential of TVET to serve as a protective factor against behaviors such as substance abuse and involvement in minor offenses. By providing youth with skills, structure, positive social networks, and a sense of purpose, TVET programs can contribute to healthier and more responsible decision-making.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made to policymakers, TVET program implementers, and relevant stakeholders in Rwanda:

Integrate Comprehensive Life Skills Education into TVET Curricula: While some TVET programs may include life skills, there is a need for a more comprehensive and standardized approach. Curricula should explicitly address topics such as decision-making, critical thinking, communication, negotiation, conflict resolution, and healthy relationships to further empower youth to make informed choices and resist negative influences.

Incorporate Health Education Programs within TVET Centers: TVET centers can serve as valuable platforms for delivering targeted health education programs focusing on topics such as sexual and reproductive health, substance abuse prevention, and mental health awareness. This can be integrated into the regular curriculum or offered through workshops and awareness campaigns. Partnerships with health organizations and NGOs can facilitate the delivery of these programs.

Strengthen Mentorship and Counseling Services in TVET Programs: Providing access to trained mentors and counselors within TVET centers can offer youth a safe space to discuss challenges, seek guidance, and receive support, which can be crucial for navigating difficult situations and avoiding risky behaviors.

Promote the Holistic Benefits of TVET: Beyond economic opportunities, the communication and promotion of TVET programs should emphasize their role in fostering personal development, life skills, and overall well-being. This can attract youth who are seeking not only skills but also a supportive environment for personal growth.

Conduct Longitudinal Research: Future research should utilize longitudinal designs to better understand the causal relationship between TVET participation and changes in risky behaviors over time. This will provide more robust evidence for the long-term impact of TVET.

Tailor TVET Programs to Address Specific Local Risky Behaviors: TVET programs in different urban areas should consider the specific types and prevalence of risky behaviors prevalent in those communities and tailor their life skills and health education components accordingly.

By implementing these recommendations, Rwanda can further leverage the potential of TVET programs to not only equip urban youth with income-generating skills but also to foster their overall well-being, reduce engagement in risky behaviors, and contribute to a healthier and more productive generation.

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