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Dr. Jayanthi PP
Physical Education Director,
Government First Grade
College, Kushalnagar,
Karnataka, India

A study on promoting physical and mental well-being among the youths of government first grade colleges in Karnataka

Jayanthi PP

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Abstract

The transitional period of late adolescence and young adulthood places first-grade college students at an increased risk for physical and mental health challenges. This study examines key factors affecting the physical and mental well-being of undergraduate students in Government First Grade Colleges (GFGCs) in Karnataka, India. Drawing on survey data, literature analysis, and contextual insights, the article identifies prevalent health issues, evaluates institutional support systems, and proposes strategic interventions. The findings emphasize the importance of holistic health promotion that encompasses physical activity, mental health awareness, counseling services, and policy support. Recommendations for colleges include structured wellness programs, regular health screenings, mental health education, and community partnerships to enhance student well-being.

Keywords: Physical well-being, mental health, college students, Karnataka, Government First Grade Colleges, health promotion

1. Introduction

Adolescence and early adulthood represent critical stages of development characterized by rapid physical growth, cognitive maturation, and psychosocial transitions (Sawyer *et al.*, 2018) [6]. First-grade college students—typically between the ages of 17 and 20—enter environments that demand academic performance, social adaptation, and personal responsibility, often for the first time. These pressures can have profound implications on both physical and mental well-being.

In India, Government First Grade Colleges (GFGCs) serve large numbers of young adults from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, including rural and economically challenged populations. While access to higher education has expanded, institutional attention to student health and well-being has been inconsistent and under-researched. The situation in Karnataka—a state with a wide network of GFGCs—offers a pertinent case to explore systemic challenges and opportunities for promoting holistic health among college youth. This study aims to: (1) examine the physical and mental health status of first-grade college students in GFGCs of Karnataka; (2) identify key determinants of student well-being; and (3) propose evidence-based strategies that colleges can adopt to support student health.

2. Literature Review

2.1 College Youth and Physical Health

Physical well-being among college students has been linked to lifestyle behaviors such as diet, exercise, sleep, and substance use (Keating *et al.*, 2005) [5]. Regular physical activity is associated with improved cardiovascular health, strength, and mood regulation (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020) [9], whereas sedentary lifestyles and poor nutrition can contribute to chronic health problems.

Studies in Indian college contexts indicate high prevalence of physical inactivity and nutritional imbalance among students, with limited participation in sports or structured exercise (Singh *et al.*, 2019) [7]. GFGCs often lack adequate sports facilities and health promotion programs, exacerbating these challenges.

2.2 College Youth and Mental Health

Mental health conditions—such as anxiety, depression, and stress—are increasingly

Corresponding Author:
Dr. Jayanthi PP
Physical Education Director,
Government First Grade
College, Kushalnagar,
Karnataka, India

recognized as significant concerns among college populations. A systematic review by Auerbach *et al.* (2018)^[1] showed that nearly one in three college students globally experiences a common mental disorder. Factors including academic pressure, social stressors, and adjustment difficulties contribute to this burden.

Indian studies have reported rising anxiety and depression among youth, compounded by stigma and limited access to mental health services (Grover *et al.*, 2020)^[4]. In government college settings, resource constraints and lack of counseling services may further inhibit support for students in distress.

2.3 Institutional Role in Health Promotion

The Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (WHO, 1986)^[8] emphasizes the role of educational institutions in enabling health-promoting environments. Colleges are positioned to implement policies, facilities, and programs that support healthy behaviors and mental resilience. Successful interventions include regular health screenings, physical fitness activities, peer support groups, and accessible counseling services (Conley *et al.*, 2015)^[2].

Despite growing recognition of the need for holistic health promotion, there remains a gap in implementation, particularly in resource-limited government colleges. This study addresses this gap within the context of Karnataka's public higher education system.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative survey data with qualitative insights from focus group discussions and institutional observations.

3.1 Participants

A total of 320 first-grade college students enrolled in five Government First Grade Colleges in Karnataka were selected using stratified random sampling to ensure diversity in gender, academic discipline, and urban-rural residence.

3.2 Data Collection

3.2.1 Questionnaire Survey

A structured questionnaire assessed:

1. Socio-demographic characteristics
2. Physical activity levels
3. Dietary habits
4. Sleep patterns
5. Perceived stress levels using the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS)
6. Access to health resources

3.2.2 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

FGDs with students and faculty explored perceptions of well-being, campus support systems, and barriers to health promotion.

3.2.3 Institutional Observations

Facilities such as sports infrastructure, health clinics, and counseling services were documented.

3.2.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and chi-square tests to identify associations between lifestyle factors and health outcomes. Qualitative data were thematically analyzed to extract contextual insights.

Table 1. Summary of Key Survey Findings

Indicator	Category	Percentage
Physical Activity	Regular Exercise	42%
Physical Activity	Occasional Exercise	38%
Stress Level	High Stress	51%
Counseling Access	Not Available	Majority

5. Findings

5.1 Physical Health Indicators

- **Physical Activity:** Only 42% of participants engaged in regular physical exercise (≥ 150 minutes per week), with a significant gender disparity ($p < .05$). Most respondents cited academic workload and lack of facilities as barriers.
- **Diet and Nutrition:** A majority reported poor dietary habits, including frequent consumption of fast food and infrequent intake of fruits and vegetables.
- **Sleep Patterns:** Over 60% of students reported sleep duration less than 6 hours per night, associated with high academic demands.

5.2 Mental Health Status

- **Perceived Stress:** High stress levels (PSS scores > 20) were reported by 51% of students, with prominent stressors including academic pressure, family expectations, and future uncertainty.
- **Emotional Distress Symptoms:** Frequent symptoms of anxiety and mood disturbances were noted, especially during exam periods.

5.3 Institutional Support Systems

- **Sports and Recreation:** While all colleges had basic playgrounds, only two had structured physical fitness programs led by trained instructors.
- **Counseling Services:** None of the institutions had full-time mental health professionals. Counseling was offered informally through faculty mentors.
- **Health Education Initiatives:** Planned health awareness events were irregular and often dependent on external agencies.

6. Discussion

The findings highlight systemic gaps in promoting physical and mental well-being among first-grade college students in Karnataka. Low physical activity levels align with national trends reported by Singh *et al.* (2019)^[7], indicating the need for structured fitness promotion.

High stress and emotional distress levels reflect broader mental health challenges among Indian youth (Grover *et al.*, 2020)^[4]. The absence of formal counseling services in GFGCs underscores a critical gap in student support infrastructure.

6.1 Gender Disparities

Female students reported lower engagement in physical activity and higher stress levels than male students, consistent with earlier findings (Das *et al.*, 2021)^[3]. Cultural norms and safety concerns may contribute to such disparities, calling for gender-sensitive health promotion strategies.

7. Recommendations

Based on findings and best-practice literature, the following strategies are recommended:

7.1 Structured Health Promotion Programs

- Weekly physical activity modules, including fitness classes, yoga, and sports clubs.
- Partnerships with local health professionals for regular health screenings and workshops.

7.2 Campus Mental Health Services

- Establish counseling cells staffed with trained mental health professionals.
- Implement peer support networks and psycho education seminars.

7.3 Health Literacy and Awareness

- Integrate well-being modules into the curriculum to build awareness of lifestyle management.
- Host regular awareness campaigns focusing on stress management, sleep hygiene, and healthy eating.

7.4 Policy and Administrative Support

- Institutionalize health promotion as part of the college quality assurance framework.
- Secure funding from government schemes and partnerships with NGOs for wellness infrastructure.

7.5 Role of Institutional Environment

The college environment plays a decisive role in shaping health behaviors. Limited sports infrastructure and absence of wellness programs hinder opportunities for physical engagement. Likewise, the lack of structured mental health resources reinforces stigma and discourages help-seeking.

8. Conclusion

Physical and mental well-being are essential components of academic success and lifelong health. This study of first-grade college youth in Karnataka's Government First Grade Colleges reveals significant challenges related to physical inactivity, stress, and limited institutional support. Addressing these through structured health promotion, counseling services, and policy commitment can transform college environments into nurturing spaces for young adult well-being. Emphasis on equity-driven and culturally responsive initiatives will further ensure that all students have opportunities to thrive.

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