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Australian youth depression rising at alarming rates, especially for young women

by Black Dog Institute



Researchers have highlighted **the increasing rates of depression—particularly among young women**—in a report launched today showing depression rates have more than doubled over the past 14 **years in adolescent girls.**

The report "Turning the tide on depression: A vision that starts with Australia's youth" looks at depression—a serious mental health condition which impacts people's lives and well-being—across four groups: children; adolescents; young adults; and young First Nations peoples.

"Depression has become more common in adolescents and young adults over the past decade. There are also worrying signs of an increase in depressive symptoms in children since the COVID-19 pandemic," warns Professor Sam Harvey, Executive Director and Chief Scientist of the Black Dog Institute.

"This report calls for expanded support and a more holistic approach for future work to prevent and treat depression. The research and analysis in this report shines a light on what we need to begin doing to turn the tide on these rising rates of depression."

As well as looking at trends in depression prevalence over recent years, the report looks at how the lives of children, adolescents and young adults have changed in the last two decades, and whether certain changes may be increasing their risk for depression. Key changes identified include more precarious employment, greater financial strain, experiences of cyberbullying, and social isolation.

Some of these changes were identified as being particularly important for certain age groups. For children, decreased physical activity, poor sleep and greater family stress may have contributed to increased depressive symptoms during the pandemic.

For adolescents, poor sleep, loneliness, and a lack of supportive social networks were highlighted as possible contributing factors. New data also examined the complex relationship between screen time and adolescent depression.

Young adults at higher risk for depression included those who experienced financial strain and loneliness, with women, international students and LGBTQIA+ young adults being particularly vulnerable.

"Compared to previous decades, young adults today face increased financial pressure, greater competition for entry level jobs, more complex tertiary education pathways, and increased loneliness," said Dr. Alexis Whitton, Research Fellow, and Psychologist at the Black Dog Institute. "These risk factors are often more pronounced for young women."

First Nations youth were highlighted as being at particularly high risk, although the exact level of risk was difficult to determine as the measures used to diagnose and monitor depression were often unsuitable for use with First Nations peoples. The report calls for the development of culturally relevant tools, as well as a greater involvement of First Nations peoples in the design and delivery of mental health services.

Key data from the report

Children (under 12)

- Australia lacks recent data on depression in children. The most recent data, which is from 2013–14, shows that rates of depression among children were 1.6% for girls and 1.2 % for boys.
- A rapid review and meta-analysis carried out by the Black Dog Institute examined whether rates of depression in children have risen in recent years. The results showed that although rates of diagnosed depression have not increased in children over the past two decades, there was an alarming spike in depressive symptoms during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- During the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic around 23.4% of children showed clinically significant depressive symptoms.
- Sleep may have played a role. Around one-third of children aged 8 to 11 reported worse sleep quality during the COVID-19 restrictions than before, and these changes in perceived sleep quality were associated with poorer well-being.

Professor Jennie Hudson, Director of Research for the Black Dog Institute says, "Depression in children often goes unrecognized and this lack of early intervention can have lifelong consequences. A variety of factors—from genetics, puberty, and lifestyle factors, to parenting styles and family stress—can contribute to depression in children."

"Factors contributing to increases in depressive symptoms in children during the COVID-19 pandemic may include increased demands on parents during this period (including financial stress), as well as changes to the child's routine such as physical activity, sleep patterns, and social activity," said Professor Hudson.

Adolescents

- Depression is almost three times more common in adolescents as it is in children, with the most recent Australian estimates from 2013–14 indicating a prevalence of approximately 5%.
- **Rates of depression among adolescents are rising.** Data from the US shows that between 2008 and 2020 the percentage of adolescents aged 12–17 who reported having experienced at least one major depressive episode in the past 12 months more than doubled, from 8.3% in 2008 to 17.0% in 2020. This increase was especially pronounced among adolescent girls.
- In 2019, the Black Dog Institute launched **the Future Proofing Study**, **which is now the most comprehensive cohort study of adolescent mental health in Australia.** New data from this study shows that teenagers who identify as gender or sexuality diverse are at higher risk for depression than cisgender, heterosexual teens. **Approximately 40–60% of gender and/or sexuality diverse teens report clinically significant symptoms of depression,** compared to 7–20% for cisgender, heterosexual teens.
- Data from the Future Proofing Study also showed that **screen time and depression were linked, particularly in teen girls.** However, analyses revealed that none of the assumed factors—such as negative social evaluation from social media use, greater changes in peer relationships, cyberbullying, or sleep disruption—explained why depression and screen time were more strongly linked in teen girls than boys. The researchers raise the possibility that the direction of the relationship may be reversed—**depressed girls may turn to digital media as a way of coping.**
- Students' top concerns were school and academic performance, COVID-19, social relationships, and mental health.

Associate Professor Aliza Werner-Seidler from the Black Dog Institute said, "Adolescents with clinically significant symptoms of depression showed greater difficulty with daily functioning. When compared with non-depressed adolescents, depressed adolescents were three times more likely to have difficulty participating in schoolwork and social and physical activities and were five times more likely to have difficulty performing daily self-care tasks."

"The possibility that depression leads to increased screen use rather than the other way around needs to be examined using longitudinal data—something we will investigate as the Future Proofing Study progresses," said Dr. Werner-Seidler. "At this stage, we do not have conclusive evidence as to the nature or direction of the relationship between screen time and depression."

Young adults

- Data from the 2021 Census showed that the highest proportion of individuals with a chronic mental health condition occurred in those aged 20–24 (12%) and 25–29 (12%).
- In the past 14 years, there has been a 72% increase in the prevalence of depression in Australia's young adults.
- The gender gap in depression prevalence among young adults has more than doubled in the past 14 years, driven by a more rapid increase in depression prevalence in young women than in young men.

New data from the Black Dog Institute indicates that certain young adults have mental health needs that are more likely to go unmet.

- Data on university students who sought help via a new digital mental health intervention, "Vibe Up," showed that more than half with a mental health diagnosis were not receiving regular care from a mental health professional.
- The lack of regular contact with a mental health professional was especially evident for university students from the LGBTQIA+ community, highlighting the need for more inclusive health services for this community.
- Over 40% of university students said that they felt lonely often or all of the time, and loneliness was linked to more severe levels of depression.
- University students who perceived themselves as being less financially secure had more severe levels of depression.

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"Despite having increased risk for depression, few international university students sought help for their mental health through either a digital intervention or through a university health service. This indicates that international students may experience additional barriers, such as stigma, that prevent them from seeking mental health care when needed," says Dr. Whitton.

First Nations youth

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples collectively make up 3.5% of the Australian population. First Nations youth experience suicide at far greater rates than the general population yet their voices continue to go unheard.
- The burden of disease, including mental health problems, experienced by First Nations peoples has not improved despite federal government initiatives and investments over the past decade.
- Disturbances in social and emotional well-being are increasing, rather than decreasing, for young First Nations peoples.
- There is no singular tool available to measure all aspects of First Nations youths' social and emotional well-being, so much more work is warranted in this area. In the meantime, a variety of culturally responsive measures should be used to screen for social and emotional well-being disturbances among First Nations youth.
- The Black Dog Institute launched iBobbly—the world's first suicide prevention app targeted towards First Nations youth aged 15 years and over. Together with the Black Dog Institute, the project group designed the iBobbly app, then trialed it with 61 First Nations youth located in the Kimberley region. Research shows positive impacts from its use

amongst First Nations youth, and suggests that digitally delivered interventions may be one pathway to well-being support for First Nations youth, particularly those in remote regions.

Dr. Clinton Schultz, Director, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Strategy, Black Dog Institute said, "Government attempts to ease the burden of disease experienced by First Nations people have historically failed, and continue to fail due to a lack of awareness and acceptance of First Nations perspectives of well-being."

"Social and emotional well-being for First Nations peoples continues to be a complex topic that is largely misrepresented by government policy and intervention design, and this warrants further investment and investigation," said Dr. Schultz.

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