



Mental health

About 7% of UK children have attempted suicide by age of 17 - study

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About 7% of children have attempted suicide by the age of 17 and almost one in four say they have self-harmed in the past year, according to a paper in the British Journal of Psychiatry, and experts say the figures could rise as a result of the pandemic.

The figures come from analysis of [the millennium cohort study](#), which follows the lives of about 19,000 young people born at the start of the millennium in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The report says that when the 17-year-olds from the cohort were asked if they had ever hurt themselves “on purpose in an attempt to end your life”, 7% replied yes. When asked if they had self-harmed during the previous year, 24% responded that they had.

The data, which is nationally representative, can be extrapolated to the UK population to give figures of 52,427 17-year-olds having attempted suicide at some point in their lives and 170,744 having self-harmed in the previous 12 months before Covid hit.

Psychiatrists say the figures reflect a trend they are witnessing, demonstrating the challenges faced by young people. They warn that coronavirus and its fallout will probably make matters worse, and urge investment now in services for young people experiencing mental health problems.

Dr Bernadka Dubicka, chair of the the Royal College of Psychiatrists' child and adolescent mental health faculty, described the findings as part of a "really concerning trend" that they had been seeing for a long time. She said data showed there had been an increase almost every year in the numbers of teenagers injuring themselves deliberately.

One of the study's authors, Dr Praveetha Patalay from University College London, said: "Our study highlights large inequality in these adverse mental health outcomes at age 17, with women and sexual minorities being particularly vulnerable, potentially reflecting the greater disparity in the pressures they face, and highlighting the need for support that is sensitive to the challenges experienced by them during adolescence."

She added: "There is definitely a need to provide more, better and earlier support for young people to prevent their mental health difficulties from getting so severe, but equally we really need to think about why young people today are struggling so much."

Dubicka said data from NHS Digital showed that 41% of all admissions to hospital for self-harm were teenagers. "What we are seeing year on year clinically is more young people presenting self-harm in A&E and admissions to paediatric beds and mental health units."

She said there was not enough research into why this was happening but, based on her work, she felt that austerity and poverty were leading to more people experiencing difficulties.

"So we have widespread societal driving factors which are most certainly impacting on children. The other issue is education has been a huge stress for young people," she said, adding that a general rise in mental health problems was contributing to a rise in self-harming.

"I think it's important that all children are able to thrive in the education system. We know 50% of young people make it to university and another 50% don't, and within

that group there are lots of disadvantaged children with learning difficulties or autism or looked-after and traumatised children. We need equal chances for all children,” she said.

The report said: “Age 17 marks an important age before many key life transitions, including the ending of compulsory education and moving away from home. With the ending of support from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) around this critical age, many young people fall through the gaps between CAMHS and adult mental health services, potentially further worsening outcomes at the precise time when support is most required. These findings underline the urgent mental health support need in this generation.”

Dubicka said it was important the government sped up plans for mental health support teams in schools. She said self-harm was a way of manifesting distress for those who found it harder to verbalise. “Some children are demonstrating distress and hurting themselves and that comes from low self-esteem, failure and self-hatred.”

Social media could also be a toxic environment for some young people and have a big impact, she said. “Children and young people need tools to be able to manage social media and the internet safely and parents need tools and support to monitor what their children are doing online.”

In 2018, 759 young people took their own life in the UK and Republic of Ireland, data shows. In the UK, suicide rates among young people have been increasing in recent years. The suicide rate for young females is now at its highest rate on record.

Dubicka said the pandemic was likely to have a big impact on mental health, and they were already seeing the impact. She said more trained specialists were needed to meet demand.

“It’s important that we train more child psychiatrists and more people to work in children’s and adolescent mental health services,” she said. “I am hugely concerned about the impact of the pandemic ... we know there has been a rise in referrals. In autumn last year demand was the highest it’s ever been.”

Claire Murdoch, NHS England’s national mental health director, said: “The NHS continues to support young people’s mental health with treatment continuing during the pandemic, including phone and video consultations, online support with services like Kooth, as well as face-to-face appointments and mental health support teams in schools.”

A government spokesperson said: “Early intervention and treatment is vital, and we are providing an extra £2.3bn to help an additional 345,000 children and young

people access NHS-funded services or school and college-based support.

If you are a young person in the UK struggling with your mental health, advice and support is available on the [YoungMinds website](#), including information about how to get help. For urgent support, contact the YoungMinds Crisis Messenger by texting YM to 85258. YoungMinds' free helpline for parents is on 0808 802 5544 from 9.30am to 4pm, Monday to Friday.

In the UK and Ireland, Samaritans can be contacted on 116 123 or email jo@samaritans.org or jo@samaritans.ie. In the US, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is [1-800-273-8255](tel:1-800-273-8255). In Australia, the crisis support service Lifeline is 13 11 14. Other international helplines can be found at www.befrienders.org.

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