

National study shows 1 in 5 children meet criteria for a mental disorder across their lifetime

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Mental disorders in children are often difficult to identify due to the myriad of changes that occur during the normal course of maturation. For the first time, researchers at the National Institute of Mental Health have reported on the prevalence data on a broad range of mental disorders in a nationally representative sample of U.S. adolescents, which show that approximately one in five children in the U.S. meet the criteria for a mental disorder severe enough to disrupt their daily lives.

The prevalence of the [mental health](#) disorders as well as the notable link between parental mental health issues and their teen's disorders are the subject of the article by Merikangas and colleagues in the October 2010 issue of the *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* (JAACAP).¹

In the article titled "Lifetime Prevalence of Mental Disorders in U.S. Adolescents : Results from the National Comorbidity Study–Adolescent Supplement (NCS-A).," Dr. Merikangas and colleagues examined the lifetime prevalence, severity, and comorbidity of DSM-IV mental health disorders across broad classes of disorders. The NCS-A is a nationally representative, face-to-face survey of 10,123 adolescents aged 13 to 18 years in the continental United States.² Diagnostic assessment of DSM-IV mental disorders were measured using a modified version of the World Health Organization (WHO) Composite International Diagnostic Interview.

The researchers found that anxiety disorders were the most common condition (31.9%), followed by behavior disorders (19.1%), mood disorders (14.3%), and substance use disorders (11.4%), with approximately 40% of participants with one class of disorder also meeting criteria for another class of lifetime disorder.

Strikingly, the overall prevalence of disorders with severe impairment and/or distress, marked by interference with daily life was over one in five children, or 22.2%.

The authors note, "The prevalence of severe emotional and behavior disorders is even higher than the most frequent major physical conditions in adolescence, including asthma or diabetes, which have received widespread public health attention."

In an era when funding allocations for science are being reduced, evaluation of nationally representative samples of children and adolescents are critical in providing the necessary information for establishing priorities for prevention, treatment, and research.

In conclusion, Merikangas and colleagues state, "The present data can inform and guide the development of priorities for future research and health policy by providing previously lacking prevalence estimates in a nationally representative sample of U.S. adolescents, as well as the individual, familial, and environmental correlates of mental disorders. Prospective research is now needed to understand the risk factors for [mental disorder](#) onset in adolescence, as well as the predictors of the continuity of these disorders into adulthood."

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More information: The study is published in the *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* and online at www.jaacap.org

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2. Merikangas KR, He J, Burstein M, Swanson SA, Avenevoli S, Cui L, Benjet C, Georgiades, Swendsen J. Lifetime prevalence of mental disorders in U.S. adolescents : Results from the National Comorbidity Survey Replication–Adolescent Supplement (NCS-A). *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*. 2010; 49:980-989.

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