

Abuse as a child brings a lifetime burden—study finds a third of self-harm due to abuse

November 17 2015

Child maltreatment contributes up to a third of depression, self-harm and anxiety, the first Australian study to calculate the burden of child abuse on society has found.

Professor Michael Dunne, program leader QUT Children and Youth Research Centre, said child abuse was the most significant preventable cause of [mental health problems](#) in adults.

He said the recently published report which he co-authored was the first to bring together evidence from 23 separate studies of the effects of maltreatment experienced as a child in Australia.

The burden of child abuse in Australia is the subject of panel discussion at the Prevention of Violence against Children symposium at QUT this week (November 17-18), organised by the Children and Youth Research Centre.

"Child maltreatment is a term that encompasses the main types of abuse - sexual, physical and, emotional - [child neglect](#) - and these experiences are highly interrelated," he said.

"Before this research, only the burden attributable to [childhood sexual abuse](#) had been estimated in Australia.

"This study examined the influence of child maltreatment upon the development of depressive and anxiety disorders among both [children](#) and adults, and found the long-term effects were greater for women.

"Overall, we estimated for females 33 per cent of self-harm, 31 per cent of anxiety and 23 percent of depression was attributable to child maltreatment.

"For males, the burden is 24 per cent of self-harm, 21 per cent of anxiety and 16 per cent of depressive disorders."

Professor Dunne said that, for both girls and boys, experiencing at least one form of severe [child maltreatment](#) could double the risk of developing mental [health problems](#) and increase the risk of self-harm, suicidal thoughts and attempts.

"Internationally and in Australia, we are seeing clear evidence that [child abuse](#) is the most significant preventable cause of [mental health](#) problems that emerge in adult years," he said.

"In comparison to many countries, Australia is doing well in our efforts to prevent and respond to abuse and neglect. However, much more work needs to be done.

"QUT's Children and Youth Research Centre will hold the Prevention of Violence Against Children: Research, Policy and Practice Symposium on Tuesday and Wednesday this week at the Gardens Theatre foyer on Gardens Point Campus.

The symposium takes a three-pronged approach across research, policy and practice to examine and discuss critical issues concerned with:

- Violence against children and its prevention, drawing on both

global and local perspectives

- Effective prevention systems and policies
- Innovations in prevention and intervention from interdisciplinary and cross-sector standpoints.

More information: Sophie E. Moore et al. Burden attributable to child maltreatment in Australia, *Child Abuse & Neglect* (2015). [DOI: 10.1016/j.chiabu.2015.05.006](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2015.05.006)

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