

Adolescent health undervalued and under-invested across the globe

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Melbourne's Murdoch Children's Research Institute, in partnership with Harvard Medical School, has discovered that adolescent health programs across the developing world receive only a tiny share of international aid, even though young people make up 30 per cent of the population of low-income countries.

Published in *JAMA Network Open*, researchers from the US and Australia examined how much international donors spent on youth health projects in 132 low-income countries over the 14 years from 2003 to 2015. (89 per cent of the world's adolescents live in low and middle income countries.) Co-author University of Melbourne Prof George Patton, from MCRI's Centre for Adolescent Health, said the research found that only 1.6 per cent of global investments in health over those 13 years were spent on projects for adolescents even though adolescents account for 12 to 13 per cent of disease burden in the developing world. "Of the little invested, most funds go to adolescents indirectly through programs for HIV particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. However a large number of young people in low-income countries are being disabled as a result of depressive disorders, self-harm and [car accidents](#)," he said.

Prof Patton said these youth challenges received almost no investment, yet expenditure in neglected areas such as mental health and car accidents would bring huge benefits for adolescents—for their [future health](#), their productivity and the healthy growth of their children. "The international donor community has been 'asleep at the wheel' in failing to keep pace with changing demography and health needs," Prof Patton

said. "Despite supporting the UN's 'Global Strategy for Women's, Children's and Adolescents Health', international investment from agencies have so far failed to make serious investments in the world's young people." Adolescence lays a foundation for future health, quality-of-life and economic productivity. And it is therefore remarkable that this group has been so undervalued in international development."

Study senior author Chunling Lu, assistant professor in the Department of Global Health and Social Medicine at Harvard Medical School, said the world now has the largest group of adolescents in human history. "Considering how important [young people](#) are for the future wellbeing and economic development of low- and middle-income countries, international donors need to reconsider both the levels and the patterns of investments that they are making," Dr. Lu said.

More information: Zhihui Li et al, Global Development Assistance for Adolescent Health From 2003 to 2015, *JAMA Network Open* (2018). [DOI: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2018.1072](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2018.1072)

Provided by University of Melbourne

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