

# Many asylum seekers suffer from depression and anxiety symptoms

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Up to 40% of the adults who have sought asylum in Finland are told that they are suffering from major depression and anxiety symptoms. More than half of both the adults and children reported having experienced at least one shocking, possibly traumatic event, such as being subjected to violence.

The results are from a recent study by the Finnish National Institute for Health and Welfare, where a [medical examination](#) was performed on and interviews made with more than a thousand [asylum seekers](#) who had just arrived in Finland. So far, the study is the most extensive population study concerning the [health](#) of asylum seekers both at a national and international level.

"Over 60% of asylum seekers coming from Sub-Saharan Africa had depression and anxiety symptoms—the percentage is higher than among asylum seekers from other areas. The same group had also had the highest number of shocking experiences before coming to Finland. For example, 67% of men from Africa reported having experienced torture and 57% of women reported experiences of sexual violence," says Anu Castaneda, Research Manager from the National Institute for Health and Welfare.

According to her, it is, therefore, important to support the mental health and functioning capacity of asylum seekers already at the reception stage.

"This may be effected by supporting meaningful everyday life and activities of asylum seekers, as well as by providing counselling and discussions and information on [mental health](#) and by investing in the smooth operation of referral paths. It is particularly important to support the welfare of children and families."

## **Women's health weaker than men's in many respects**

A larger share of women than men, 49% in all, reported having a long-term illness or health problem, such as musculoskeletal condition, diabetes or respiratory disorder. When arriving in Finland, one in ten of the studied women was pregnant.

On the other hand, men had more injuries caused by accidents and violence, their share being as high as 55%. Men also smoked cigarettes more often than women, their share being up to 37%.

In many areas of health, the situation of those coming from the Middle East and from Africa in particular was weaker than that of asylum seekers from other parts of the world.

"It would be advisable to disseminate more health-related information to asylum seekers in an understandable and easy-to-approach form," says Natalia Skogberg, Project Manager from the National Institute for Health and Welfare.

According to the study, the asylum seekers had problems in many other areas of health as well, such as oral health. Most of the asylum seekers under the age of 18 had never been to a dentist before coming to Finland.

## **Alcohol and substance use rare among asylum seekers**

On the other hand, some of the findings were quite positive with respect to health. For example, 85% of adults seeking asylum told that they do not use any alcohol, and only a few per cent were drinking to get intoxicated. Use of other substances was also rare among other asylum seekers. Furthermore, very few of those studied showed symptoms of infectious diseases.

"The results of the study are important particularly as we want to develop our activities by which we respond to the health needs of asylum seekers," notes Olli Snellman, Head of Section from the Finnish Immigration Service.

"Based on the results, we are in the process of updating and developing the initial medical examination model applied to asylum seekers, to be adopted in all reception centres around Finland."

The purpose of the study was to produce comprehensive information on the health and welfare of adults and minors who had sought [asylum](#) in Finland in 2018 and their need for services in Finland.

Provided by National Institute for Health and Welfare

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