

Large UK study shows teenage girls far more likely to self-harm

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Teenage girls are suffering far worse mental health and wellbeing issues than boys, according to a major new study published in the peer-reviewed journal *Research Papers in Education*.

The findings based on more than 11,000 UK teenagers found that around 15% (approximately 1,650) reported [self-harm](#) in the last year. Among them more than seven in ten (73%) were girls—more than double the rate for boys (27%).

One in ten teenagers reported depressive characteristics and low mood and, among them, [teenage girls](#) were significantly more likely to experience negative moods (78% vs 22%). Similar trends are seen in reports of happiness and self-image. A quarter of teenagers felt completely unhappy with girls nearly doubling the rate (63% vs 37%). Over a quarter of young people reported a low sense of their own value including poor self-image, with girls being over three times more likely than boys (79% vs 21%).

The University of Warwick study suggests 14-year-old girls have become the new high-risk group, and this is linked to gender inequality such as sexist notions around body type. Poverty is another significant factor—the study found teenagers from families earning the least were significantly (48%) more likely to report low life satisfaction than those from the wealthiest homes.

This has implications for policymakers on how to tackle an increase in [mental health issues](#) among young people, especially females in mid-adolescence.

The researchers criticise current approaches which make schools responsible for supporting children with mental [health](#) issues, without providing sufficient resources and training. They are calling for prevention strategies based on an understanding of societal trends and triggers, such as wealth inequality and sexism.

"Current policy places the onus to resolve inequality on individuals, such as young people, teachers and parents," says lead author Dr. Dimitra

Hartas from the Centre for Education Studies, at the University of Warwick.

"Young people respond by focusing more on the self and less on the societal structures likely to promote mental ill health. Girls and young women tend to internalise systemic problems and blame themselves.

"A good starting point for appropriate public health and education strategies is to understand the pernicious consequences of gender inequality and poverty for young people's wellbeing."

The study's aim was to examine the impact of socio-economic status, gender, parenting, interactions with peers and social media use on mental health and wellbeing.

They analysed data collected in 2015 by the Millennium Cohort Study, a major research project into children's lives. Questions included how often teenagers self-harmed, their closeness to their parents, how often they were bullied or bullied others, and the number of hours spent on social media.

In addition to gender, bullying and social media also had negative consequences for 14-year-olds. Those bullied most days or once a week were ten times more likely to report negative feelings than teenagers who were seldom victims. Young people spending less than two hours a day online were 37 per cent less likely to report lower life satisfaction than those spending five or more hours.

The study also identifies links between positive parenting and good mental health. Self-harm and negative outlooks decreased in boys and [girls](#) who were emotionally close to their parents, and whose mothers and fathers always knew their children's whereabouts.

An explanation could be, says Dr. Hartas, that vigilant parents are more likely to alert children to the possibility of risk and violence. As parental influence declines, relationships with young people the same age become more important —meeting friends often out of school or playing with them unsupervised was found to have a positive impact on mood and outlook.

One of the limitations of this study is its reliance on [young people](#)'s self-reports rather than measures derived from diagnostic interviews, especially with regard to depressive feelings and moods.

Also, the authors state, an "absence of a general sense of wellbeing should not equate with mental health problems".

More information: Dimitra Hartas, The social context of adolescent mental health and wellbeing: parents, friends and social media, *Research Papers in Education* (2019). [DOI: 10.1080/02671522.2019.1697734](https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2019.1697734)

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