

Teenage depression rates more than double in four decades

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The prevalence of teenage depression in New Zealand has more than doubled since the 1980s, a new University of Otago-led study reveals.

The researchers used a unique two generation study involving 612

children born to 375 members of the Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Study (known as the Dunedin Study) to investigate [mental health problems](#) in both generations.

The study shows that 15-year-olds today are 2.5 times more likely to suffer from [depression](#) than their parents were at that age. Children of parents with [early onset](#) and persistent depression were found to be more than four times likely to be depressed at age 15 when compared with children whose parents had never been depressed. Children whose parents had only one episode of depression during their lives did not seem to be at greater risk.

Co-author Professor Bob Hancox, of the University's Department of Preventive and Social Medicine says that the evidence of a rise in [mental health](#) problems from the Dunedin study is particularly convincing because both generations were assessed at the same age using the same questionnaires.

"The rise in the prevalence of depression has major consequences for the current generation of [young people](#), but our findings also suggest that it could also affect the mental health of their children and subsequent generations."

The study shows that more work needs to be done on the causes and prevention of depression in young people and provides further evidence of an increase in mental health problems and psychological distress among young people worldwide, as documented in a report by Menzies and colleagues from Kōi Tū in September 2020.

"It is of further concern that the mental health and addiction inquiry, He Ara Oranga, found that our mental healthcare system is struggling to meet people's needs. This research was conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic and it is likely that young people's mental health problems are

even worse now," he says.

"This is everyone's responsibility. Governments need to fund research and follow the science. Health professionals, parents, teachers and everyone else need to be alert to the struggles that some young people are having.

"The finding that children of parents with early onset or persistent depression were more likely to be depressed suggests that effective support and treatment of those with depression would not only reduce the burden of suffering experienced by the individuals, but could also improve the well-being of future generations."

More information: Sara R. Jaffee et al. Early-onset and recurrent depression in parents increases risk of intergenerational transmission to adolescent offspring, *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* (2020). DOI: [10.1111/jcpp.13356](https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.13356)

Provided by University of Otago

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