

Poor mental health, suicidal thoughts and school closure stress felt among teens during COVID-19 pandemic

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Credit: Petr Kratochvil/public domain

Two in five young people experienced mental health problems and one in five had suicidal thoughts during the COVID-19 pandemic last year in Australia, according to a new study.

School closures also saw four in five teenagers report an increase in school-related stress, three in four feeling overwhelmed and needing more support from teachers and four in five thinking the pandemic had a [negative impact](#) on their academic results.

The survey by the Murdoch Children's Research Institute (MCRI) found more accessible, affordable, and flexible mental health care options for young people were urgently needed as many didn't have access to adequate support in 2020.

A Mothers' and Young People's sub-study surveyed 267 participants aged 14-17 years between June and September 2020 during Victoria's second lockdown.

MCRI researcher Dr. Ali Fogarty said while feeling flat, irritable, and tired were often normal reactions to the lockdown, these symptoms were more serious for a considerable number of young people.

The study found two in five young people had depression and/or anxiety symptoms and one in five experienced thoughts of suicide, every or most days.

Dr. Fogarty said Australia's [mental health system](#) had been under strain for some time and families faced many barriers to seeking help.

The study found two in three young people experiencing mental health symptoms had not spoken to a health professional during the second lockdown. Of the young people reporting depressive or anxiety symptoms, just one in three had talked to a counsellor or psychologist,

one in ten had used a mental health phone support line, and just 4 percent had spoken to their GP about how they were feeling.

"Despite high rates of mental health problems, many young people experiencing depression or anxiety did not have access to adequate mental health support," Dr. Fogarty said. "Many were not engaged with support because of waiting times to see school counsellors and psychologists, lack of a private space at home to talk via telehealth and fears and worries about the process of talking to a health professional."

MCRI Professor Stephanie Brown said since the second lockdown in Victoria the impact on mental health and [family relationships](#) were continuing.

"With most [mental health problems](#) emerging before the age of 18 years, adolescence represents an important time for early intervention to prevent difficulties persisting into adulthood," she said.

Professor Brown said although helplines provided an essential role in helping people in crisis, most young people within our study experiencing thoughts of suicide were not utilising this support, more options were needed for immediate short- and longer-term support and affordable mental health care prioritised.

She said schools and public health campaigns also played a vital role in normalising reactions to stress, alerting young people to avenues for seeking support and reducing stigma associated with mental health difficulties.

"Schools are a critical source of information and support for parents and young people and need to be adequately resourced to support families coping with public [health](#) crises," she said.

Professor Brown said importantly the study also found for some young people there were positives that came out of the pandemic.

"More than half of [young people](#) found remote learning less stressful than attending school as it was easier to concentrate, they had more quality time with family and spent more time outdoors and engaging in exercise," Professor Brown said.

Two policy briefs were created summarising study results. To view the briefs, visit www.strongerfutures.org.au/mothers-and-young-peoples-study

Provided by Murdoch Children's Research Institute

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