

Parents are concerned about more frequent signs of depression and anxiety in their kids

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Depression and anxiety symptoms among Singaporean youths have resulted in them missing on average 190 hours—or 24 days—of school, according to a survey of parents in Singapore by Duke-NUS Medical

School and the Institute of Mental Health (IMH). The survey also found that these youths' school performance dropped by an estimated 63%. The research is published in the journal *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health*.

While youths missed an average of 24 days because of their symptoms, 13% of them missed three months or more. The parents reported a similar reduction in their child's ability to engage in other [daily activities](#), revealing that these conditions permeate all facets of the child's life.

"The real effects of untreated mental health conditions among [youth](#) will extend well into adulthood when they are less able to obtain rewarding and high-paying jobs due to poor school performance and other challenges resulting from their illness," said Professor Eric Finkelstein, a health economist from Duke-NUS' Health Services & Systems Research (HSSR) and senior author of the study. This study follows on from a similar survey among Singaporean adults [published recently](#), which showed that depression and anxiety among adults are responsible for as much as a 2.9% reduction in GDP due to roughly 1 in 5 adults having such symptoms.

This latest survey, conducted between April and June 2022, asked 991 parents about their children, totaling 1,515 youths, in order to gauge the state of youth mental health. The initial screening survey identified 104 parents whose children, aged 4 to 21, had depression or [anxiety symptoms](#). These parents then filled out a more comprehensive survey with questions on school absences, school performance and health care utilization.

The parents' responses indicated that nearly 12% of the youths had symptoms consistent with depression while approximately 13% had symptoms consistent with anxiety; in total, 16.2% of the youths were reported to have symptoms consistent with at least one of these

conditions. Despite this, only 15% had a formal diagnosis from a health professional, suggesting that many remain untreated.

This may explain why nearly two-thirds of the affected youths had an unplanned visit to an emergency department and just over half required inpatient hospitalization over the past year. The parents reported spending an average of S\$10,250 on [medical care](#) as a result of their children's mental health condition. At the [population level](#), direct health care costs for these conditions among youths are estimated to be S\$1.2 billion.

Assistant Professor Irene Teo from Duke-NUS' HSSR program and co-author of the study added, "The results from our study show that greater outreach efforts are needed to encourage both children and adults to take advantage of the many avenues to obtain mental health treatments in Singapore."

"These findings point to the importance of early intervention to help reduce the risk of long-term complications and improve outcomes. For this to happen, mental health awareness and literacy is necessary. For instance, if the parent recognizes the symptoms (awareness) and knows what to do (literacy), they could encourage the child to talk about it or suggest getting some help," said Associate Professor Daniel Fung, Chief Executive Officer, Institute of Mental Health, and a co-author of the study.

Prof. Finkelstein added, "Along with greater access to evidence-based treatments, we should be implementing screening programs for both children and adults to identify mental health conditions early, make better use of peer support programs and increase efforts to destigmatize mental health. With the high prevalence and costs of mental illness among both children and adults, a successful [mental health](#) strategy should take on the same level of urgency as Singapore's War on

Diabetes."

More information: Parth Chodavadia et al, Healthcare utilization and costs of Singaporean youth with symptoms of depression and anxiety: results from a 2022 web panel, *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health* (2023). [DOI: 10.1186/s13034-023-00604-z](https://doi.org/10.1186/s13034-023-00604-z)

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