

Adolescent girls have worse mental health and well-being compared to boys, says survey

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Adolescent girls have worse mental health and well-being across the board compared to boys, finds a new survey report by the WHO Regional Office for Europe released today, World Mental Health Day.

Dr. Jo Inchley from the University of Glasgow is the International

Coordinator of the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) survey. The survey monitors the health behaviors and [social environments](#) of nearly 280,000 boys and girls aged 11, 13 and 15 years from 44 countries in Europe, Central Asia and Canada.

[The report](#), "Focus on [adolescent mental health](#) and well-being in Europe, Central Asia and Canada," is based on data from the HBSC survey 2021/2022.

It found girls scored consistently lower on life satisfaction, mental well-being and self-rated health, and higher on loneliness, than boys. About a quarter of 15-year-old girls reported feeling lonely most of the time or always in the past year, compared with about one in seven boys.

A long-running pattern

Although the COVID-19 pandemic and its containment measures are believed to have played a role, they are not the sole explanation. In fact, [life satisfaction](#) and self-rated health among adolescents, particularly girls, has been in decline since 2018, even before the pandemic, while there has been a rise in multiple health complaints—such as difficulty sleeping, backaches or headaches, or feeling low—since 2014.

"I think there's a lot of girls who put themselves down because they're like 'Am I good enough? Am I strong enough? Am I capable of doing things?'" said one girl from a secondary school in Scotland, when asked about the results. "They put themselves down and beat themselves up for nothing. They don't appreciate themselves for who they are."

The survey also found that one-third of adolescents experienced feeling nervous or irritable more than once a week in the last six months. One in four reported sleep difficulties (29%) and/or feeling low (25%). One in five (20%) reported frequent headaches more than once a week.

The report also reiterates longstanding findings that [socioeconomic status](#) is an indicator of mental health, with overall health being worse among adolescents from less affluent families.

A foundation for holistic health and well-being

Being able to monitor child and adolescent mental health, such as through the HBSC surveys, can help determine the impact of national or regional activities to improve mental health and well-being.

"With its long-term trends, HBSC enables us to monitor the impact of wider societal change and individual lifestyles on [health outcomes](#) for adolescents," said Jo Inchley. "Importantly, it lets us hear from young people themselves about the issues that matter to them and the factors that affect their health and well-being. While there are many challenges to address, the data also highlight the importance of providing caring and supportive environments in which adolescents can thrive."

"The challenges faced by young people today are diverse and demanding, ranging from the climate crisis to academic pressures and [social expectations](#) to the pervasive influence of social media," said Dr. Hans Henri P. Kluge, WHO Regional Director for Europe.

"It is our collective responsibility to ensure they have the support and resources they need to navigate these challenges successfully. Just last month, WHO/Europe launched the Youth4Health Network, which will give [young people](#) a seat at the table in the decisions about their health and well-being. Today—on World Mental Health Day—we stand together to emphasize the crucial importance of youth mental health."

Provided by University of Glasgow

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