

International study fills data gap on adolescent mental health

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Surveys involving thousands of adolescents and their primary caregiver have shown the prevalence of mental disorders within the age group is very different across Kenya, Indonesia, and Vietnam.

Associate Professor Holly Erskine, from The University of Queensland's School of Public Health and the Queensland Center for Mental Health Research, said the findings demonstrated the importance of collecting

data for [individual countries](#), rather than assuming all low- and [middle-income countries](#) are similar. The work is [published](#) in *The Lancet* journal.

The National Adolescent Mental Health Surveys (NAMHS) led by UQ found nearly 1 in 8 adolescents in Kenya had a [mental disorder](#) in the 12 months prior to the survey, while in Indonesia it was 1 in 18 and in Vietnam 1 in 30.

"NAMHS found the prevalence of mental disorders in 10- to 17-year-olds in Kenya to be more consistent with similar studies undertaken in other countries, including Australia, although Indonesia and Vietnam were much lower," Dr. Erskine said.

"These findings warrant further research to determine whether cultural and societal factors like family and community cohesion, and more authoritative parenting styles may be behind the results.

"Fortunately, NAMHS also collected comprehensive data on risk and protective factors for adolescent mental disorders, so we are able to investigate further to better understand our prevalence findings."

The [survey results](#) showed adolescents across the three countries were more likely to experience suicidal behaviors and self-harm in the 12 months prior to the survey if they had a mental disorder, compared to [adolescents](#) without a mental disorder.

"This important finding suggests that targeted strategies are needed to prevent suicide and [self-harm](#) in those with existing mental disorders," Dr. Erskine said.

Professor James Scott, from UQ's Child Health Research Center, said NAMHS was a landmark and innovative study which developed methods

for conducting high-quality nationally representative surveys across different countries and cultures.

"Teams from five countries worked collaboratively to develop and adapt the questionnaires used in the study and to establish a methodology suitable for all three countries and for future surveys in other countries," Professor Scott said.

"The involvement of organizations within Kenya, Indonesia, and Vietnam was vital, given their knowledge and understanding of their country's unique cultural and geographic factors, and ability to administer NAMHS in their context.

"Africa and Southeast Asia are home to some of the youngest populations globally, so this research will help governments and health organizations plan and prioritize adolescent mental health services more effectively and inform prevention and early intervention initiatives."

More information: Holly E Erskine et al, Prevalence of adolescent mental disorders in Kenya, Indonesia, and Viet Nam measured by the National Adolescent Mental Health Surveys (NAMHS): a multi-national cross-sectional study, *The Lancet* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/S0140-6736\(23\)02641-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(23)02641-7)

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