



MEDIA RELEASE

TEENAGE SELF-HARM AND SUICIDE RATES UNDER-REPORTED

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New research by the Australian Institute of Family Studies has recorded high rates of self-harm and suicidal behaviour among Australian teenagers.

The national study found that 10 per cent of 14-15 year-olds reported that they had self-harmed in the previous 12 months and a further 5 per cent had attempted suicide.

The Institute's Director, Anne Hollonds said the study – involving 3, 318 teenagers from the *Longitudinal Study of Australian Children* – found that girls were at greater risk of self-harm and suicide than boys.

“A quarter of 14-15 year-old girls in the study said they had thoughts about self-harming and 15 per cent had self-harmed in the previous 12 months,” Ms Hollonds said.

“This might have involved, for example taking an overdose or cutting in a deliberate act of self-harm to release painful emotions or communicate personal distress to others.

“Boys in the study were less susceptible to self-harm, with 8 per cent of male 14-15 year-olds reporting that they had thoughts about self-harm and 4 per cent who had self-harmed.

“Similarly with suicide-related behaviour, 12 per cent of girls reported that they had thoughts of suicide and 6 per cent had made at least one attempt in the past year.

“This compared to the 6 per cent of boys who had thought about suicide and 4 per cent who had made an attempt in the same period.

“The findings indicate that self-harm and suicidal behaviour among Australian teenagers is a serious and often hidden problem that may be substantially under-recorded in official statistics.

“The majority of incidents do not come to the attention of health services, or parents and friends.

“For example, of those who had attempted suicide, only 16 per cent had received any medical treatment.”

AIFS' Executive Manager, Dr Galina Daraganova said the study examined the factors linked to self-harm and found some teens were more at risk than others.

“Teens who reported that they were same-sex attracted, bisexual or unsure of their sexuality were at greater risk of self-harm, than heterosexual teens,” Dr Daraganova said.

“Other risk factors were teens with more reactive temperaments; depression; anxiety; general feelings of unhappiness; or who reported being threatened or feeling victimised by their peers because of their health, skin colour, sexual orientation, language culture or religion.”

“Teens had an elevated risk of suicide if they had self-harmed; were same-sex attracted, bisexual or unsure of their sexuality; or had been involved in crime or property offences.”

Dr Daraganova said the study reaffirmed an apparent link between self-harm and suicide attempts.

“Even though not every teenager who engages in self-harm proceeds with a suicide attempt, self-harm can act as a ‘gateway’,” she said.

“Of those who had attempted suicide, almost two-thirds (63 per cent) had self-harmed.

“Girls who had attempted suicide were twice as likely to have self-harmed than boys.

“However, unplanned suicide attempts were more common among males.”





AIFS' Director, Ms Hollonds said self-destructive behaviour was also linked to earlier health concerns.

“Half of the teens that reported self-harming at 14-15 had experienced issues when they were aged 10-11 and 12-13 including conduct problems, difficulties with their peers, emotional problems or hyperactivity,” she said.

“The findings underline the need for interventions and preventative strategies at both the individual, family and school levels.

“Teenagers need to know the risk factors for themselves and their peers and to be provided with information about the support services that are available as a starting point for identifying issues and finding support.

“Programs that assist teachers and parents to assess early warning signs of self-harm and suicide would also be of benefit.”

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