



## Editorial

## The Measurement of Mental Health Problems Among Adolescents and Young Adults Throughout the World



With this issue of the *Journal of Adolescent Health*, we are beginning a series of original articles, commentaries, and editorials that focus exclusively on the measurement of mental health problems among adolescents and young adults throughout the world. Articles that are accepted after peer review will appear individually in the “Articles Online First” section of our Web site (<https://www.jahonline.org/inpress>). Once all the articles submitted to this series have been reviewed, those that have been accepted will be assembled and published as a discrete *Journal of Adolescent Health* supplement in 2022.

This supplement is intended to address the need for better data on adolescent and young adult mental health, which will in turn help us to develop better prevention and treatment programs for improving the health and well-being of adolescents and young adults. It builds upon the United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goals, adopted in 2015 by 193 member states, marking the first time that mental health and well-being had been included in a global accountability framework. Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals will require addressing the high burden of disease among adolescents and young adults caused by mental health disorders and preventing adolescent deaths by suicide [1,2].

The consequences of our failure to address adolescent and young adult mental health problems includes young people experiencing an increased risk of suicide, greater likelihood of problems with substance abuse or eating disorders, lower uptake of sexual and reproductive health interventions, reduced anti-retroviral adherence among HIV positive adolescents, lower academic achievement, and increased likelihood of dropping out of school [3]. Longer-term negative impacts of neglecting adolescent and young adult mental health range from reduced opportunities for girls and boys to individually lead meaningful, happy lives as adults, to broader social consequences including higher rates of unemployment, drug or alcohol addiction, and other poor health outcomes, higher rates of incarceration, and increased exposure to violence [4].

Global estimates suggest that approximately 1 in 7 of adolescents have a mental health problem [5]. However, global prevalence estimates are based on sparse data, representing less than 7% of the world’s adolescents. More than 100 countries, mostly low- and middle-income countries, lack comparable data on adolescent mental health conditions [6]. The COVID-19 pandemic has posed additional challenges to the mental health and well-being of adolescents and young adults, potentially increasing the prevalence of mental health disorders. During 2020, an estimated 90% of adolescents faced school closures and

cancellation of recreational activities, reducing opportunities for social interaction with peers and other support networks [7]. Lockdown measures have also increased adolescents’ risk of exposure to domestic violence and online exploitation or bullying and reduced income-earning opportunities for adolescents and young adults who were already out of school before the pandemic started [8]. The longer-term impacts of the pandemic on the life opportunities and well-being of this generation of adolescents are unknown.

The ability to effectively address adolescent and young adult mental health problems starts with adequate data on the prevalence of mental health conditions. These data are essential to inform the design and implementation of appropriate policies, programs, and allocation of resources to adolescent and young adult mental health. United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and many other partners have embarked on measurement efforts to close this data gap. This supplement highlights the importance of measuring and monitoring adolescent and young adult mental health disorders, presenting key efforts aimed at developing tools and indicators for standard measurement and reporting across settings. These tools may be integrated into national or subnational survey efforts and adapted for language and cultural differences in specific countries. These high-quality instruments may be of assistance in detection of adolescent mental health conditions and care-seeking behaviors.

Seven articles for this supplement have been published in the Articles Online First section of the journal’s Web site. The commentary on the Measurement of Mental Health Among Adolescents at the Population Level project describes UNICEF led efforts to develop a data collection tool for measuring mental health conditions validated in 4 countries across regions using rigorous methods [9]. A related article by van den Broek [10] provides details on the validation of a tool for use in communities to improve the detection of adolescent and young adult mental health conditions and care-seeking behaviors. This tool has been incorporated into the suite of tools used for the Measurement of Mental Health Among Adolescents at the Population Level project. The article by Erskine and colleagues presents the core principles that underpin the National Adolescent Mental Health Surveys (NAMHS), including collaboration, cultural relevancy, capacity building, and translation of findings.’ [11]. Guthold’s [12] commentary provides an overview of a series of consultations conducted by the World Health Organization’s Global Action for Measurement of Adolescent Health initiative, which identified lack of data as an important barrier to action on adolescent

mental health globally and nationally. Azzopardi [13] proposed a comprehensive framework for adolescent mental health that promotes multisectoral action across the health, education, and social protection as key for prevention and treatment of adolescent mental health conditions. El Omrani [14], supported by Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director General at the World Health Organization, and UNICEF's Executive Director Henrietta Fore, proposed three calls for action in response to the COVID-19 pandemic: (1) give young people a place at the decision-making table for global, regional, and national response efforts; (2) implement actions that destigmatize adolescent mental health; and (3) increase investments in mental health services and data-collection mechanisms that capture youth perspectives. The final commentary, by Hayes and colleagues [15], highlights the findings from a convening of mental health leaders by the World Economic Forum, Global Future Council, which called for increased investment in adolescent mental health given that adolescence is the peak age of onset of most mental health conditions.

In 2020, the International Alliance of Mental Health Research Funders, along with the U.S. National Institute of Mental Health and the Wellcome Trust, announced a joint agreement to promote data harmonization in mental health research by committing to common metrics, or Common Data Elements [16]. The set of articles in this *Journal of Adolescent Health* supplement will bring attention to and contribute to this harmonization effort.

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