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Study sheds light on the state of mental health and wellbeing amongst New Zealand youth

New research co-led by a Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington researcher shows that while more than two-thirds of high school-aged New Zealanders reported good wellbeing, an increasing number of students are reporting high levels of distress.

The findings are part of the Youth19 Rangatahi smart study, the latest in the Youth2000 survey series. The Youth2000 surveys have run since 2001, with over 36,000 New Zealand high school students surveyed to date.

Findings show that while more than two-thirds of students reported good wellbeing, 23 percent reported significant symptoms of depression. This has almost doubled for many groups since 2012. Symptoms are higher among female students, Māori and Pasifika students, Asian students, those in lower income communities and those from sexual and gender minority groups.

The survey also looked at suicide attempts amongst this age group and found that attempts have increased, particularly for males. Around one-fifth of students reported that they had difficulty getting help for feeling bad or having a hard time in the past year.

Study co-lead Dr Terry (Theresa) Fleming from the University's Faculty of Health says that there is robust evidence of worsening emotional and mental wellbeing among New Zealand teens in the last seven years, but no single cause is responsible for this increase in distress.

“Important factors are increased social media, increased loneliness, the impact of poverty, discrimination, or harmful environments, social pressures and the impact of serious worries about the future – from climate change to jobs and housing security.”

She also says that just as there is no single cause, there is no single solution to improving youth mental health.

“Young people need adults who care, acceptance and belonging, connection and fun things to do, hope for the future and help when things go wrong,” she says.

“Improving youth mental health could include simple activities such as spending time with family and friends, listening to teens, and helping them get more help when they are struggling, as well as big picture improvements to issues such as equity.”

Participants in the survey were asked to identify the biggest problems currently, and what they think should change to support young people in New Zealand. Students reported that adults listening to young people, and involving them in decisions, would make a difference.

They also reported that support when they had problems and addressing climate change and issues that affect their future were critical.

Associate Professor Terryann Clark from the University of Auckland, co-lead on the study, says that a sense of hope for the future is really important for young people.

“We have to be visionary and brave and make some big system changes if we want to address equity and make a difference for all of our rangatahi and future generations,” she says.

A multi-disciplinary group of representatives met last week to discuss the findings and what parents, schools, and communities can do to support young people. This discussion and other results are available online at www.youth19.ac.nz

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The Youth19 team are holding a public webinar via Zoom to discuss the findings on Thursday 13 August, 1-2pm. Please [Register online](#). Detailed reports are available on www.youth19.ac.nz

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