

Sexuality and gender diversity in a population-representative Australian sample of young adolescents: the Future Proofing Study

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Background:

Sexuality and gender diverse young people experience substantial health disparities. We report the first data about sexuality and gender diversity in a population-representative cohort of adolescents under age 15 (average age 13.9 years).

Methods:

The Future Proofing study is a prospective cohort study of youth mental health, which enrolled three Year 8 cohorts from 134 participating secondary schools. Demographics, mental health and disability diagnoses, sex recorded at birth, gender, and sexuality were self-reported. Associations were examined using logistic regression, adjusted for clustering by school.

Results:

Of 6388 participants, about half (48.9%, 95% confidence interval (CI) 45.2-59.0%; n=3122) identified as female/girls, and 46.5% (95%CI 39.8-53.4%; n=2973) as male/boys. Overall proportions of transgender (trans) identity and sexuality diversity were 3.3% and 12.0%. The proportion of cisgender participants who were sexuality diverse (13.0% of girls; 4.7% of boys) was lower than among gender diverse participants, which ranged from 30.0% of trans girls to 91.5% of those with another diverse gender identity. Gender diversity and sexuality diversity were strongly associated (odds ratio (OR) 66.2, 95%CI 38.2-114.8) and both were associated negatively with age (respectively, OR 0.61, 95%CI 0.49-0.76; OR 0.78, 95%CI 0.65-0.93), and positively with any mental health diagnosis (OR 2.41, 95%CI 1.79-3.24; OR 2.50, 95%CI 2.10-2.98), and any disability diagnosis (OR 2.39, 95%CI 1.68-3.40; OR 1.96, 95%CI 1.64-2.36).

Conclusions:

We found relatively high rates of sexuality and gender diversity. The strong relationships to younger age, poorer mental health, and disability underscore the urgent need for inclusive programs, designed for younger as well as older adolescents, to promote a safe and welcoming environment in schools, health care and communities.

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