

Comparative analysis of child and adolescent psychiatric emergency department presentations in Australia in 2019 and 2021, before and during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Background

Hospitals saw increased paediatric mental health, self-harm and suicide-related emergency department (ED) presentations during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, factors precipitating these presentations remain under-researched. We generated and compared profiles of children and youth presenting to Australian EDs with mental health and self-harm / suicide related complaints before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. We compared the frequency of specific diagnoses, and the acuity and management of presentations.

Methods

Retrospective audit of paediatric mental health presentations at 10 hospitals in Australia between 1 January to 31 December 2019 (pre-COVID-19) and 1 January to 31 December 2021 (COVID-19). At each site, up to 200 randomly selected patients' records were included (100 per year, N = 1964). Using Mantel-Haenszel tests and mixed effects linear regression models with restricted maximum likelihood (REML), we compared pre-COVID-19 and COVID-19 groups on demographics, precipitants, care received, length of stay, preliminary and final diagnosis, and final disposition at discharge.

Results

We identified increased presentations amongst those identifying as female, sexuality and gender diverse, and children aged 11-17 years old. Interestingly, we did not identify increases in suicidal ideation, self-harm or suicide attempts, although there were changes in the methods of self-harm reported. We found increased reports of precipitants including interpersonal conflict and domestic violence; sexual and emotional abuse / assault (both recent and historic); life stressors including school pressures, loneliness, unstable housing and poor sleep; and current substance use.

Conclusions

Young female and sexuality and gender diverse Australians may have been at greater risk of mental health-related presentations during 2021 compared to 2019. Certain methods of self-harm appear to have increased, while overall suicide and self-harm related presentations remained stable. Young people in our study faced a greater number of challenges in 2021 than in previous years, particularly related to loneliness, sleep issues, and interpersonal violence.

Disclosure of Interest Statement

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