

Mental health challenges four times higher in young mothers

21 February 2020



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New research from McMaster Children's Hospital shows that two out of three young mothers have at least one mental health problem.

Researchers found that teen mothers have a much higher prevalence of mental health challenges than mothers aged 21 and older and teens who aren't parents. Almost 40% of young moms have more than one mental health issue, including depression, a range of anxiety disorders and hyperactivity. This is up to four times higher than in mothers aged 21 years or older and teens without children.

"Now that we understand that young mothers can struggle with problems other than just [postpartum depression](#), our findings can be used to develop better screening processes, more effectively detect [mental health problems](#) in teenaged mothers, and direct treatment," says Dr. Ryan Van Lieshout, a psychiatrist and Canada Research Chair in the Perinatal Programming of Mental Disorders. He is also an associate professor of psychiatry and behavioural neurosciences at McMaster University.

"We hope that this sparks partnerships between

healthcare, educational, and social service organizations so that we can meet the needs of this vulnerable population."

The study, recently published in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*, says identifying and treating mental health issues in young mothers is especially important as their health also affects the wellbeing of their children. The research recommends "further efforts should be directed at engaging and treating this high-risk group."

"Young mothers can face a great deal of adversity both before and after becoming a parent, yet next-to-nothing has been known about the rates and types of significant mental health problems among these women in our community," says Dr. Van Lieshout. "We did this study to better understand these problems so that we can help to improve outcomes for young mothers and their families."

Between 2012 and 2015, the Young Mothers Health Study recruited 450 mothers aged younger than 21 years old and 100 comparison mothers aged older than 20 years old at the time of their first delivery. The moms were from Hamilton, Niagara, Haldimand-Norfolk, and Brant counties. Funded by Hamilton Health Sciences, this study is the first in Canada and one of the first in the world to use diagnostic interviews to examine a range of mental health problems beyond postpartum depression.

"Because Canadian [teen mothers](#) are a difficult group to study, most previous research was based on very [small samples](#) and used mailed questionnaires rather than doing direct interviews," says Dr. Van Lieshout, who was lead author on the research paper. "Structured diagnostic interviews are the gold standard for this kind of research. We're glad to have used this method to talk to hundreds of young [mothers](#) about their experiences."

Age-matched [young mothers](#) were also compared

with 15- to 17-year-old women without children from the 2014 Ontario Child Health Study who were assessed for mental disorders.

More information: Ryan J. Van Lieshout et al. The Mental Health of Young Canadian Mothers, *Journal of Adolescent Health* (2020). DOI: [10.1016/j.jadohealth.2019.10.024](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2019.10.024)

Provided by McMaster University

APA citation: Mental health challenges four times higher in young mothers (2020, February 21) retrieved 24 September 2022 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-02-mental-health-higher-young-mothers.html>

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