



AUSTRALIAN-FIRST STUDY FINDS CHILD MALTREATMENT IS WIDESPREAD

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

An Australian-first study published in *The Medical Journal of Australia* today has found the maltreatment of children is widespread across the country.

The [Australian Child Maltreatment Study](#) (ACMS) surveyed 8500 randomly selected Australians aged 16-65 years and over, finding high prevalence of childhood maltreatment experienced by people of every age group.

It found that, in childhood aged up to 18:

- 32.0% had experienced physical abuse;
- 28.5% had experienced sexual abuse;
- 30.9% had experienced emotional abuse;
- 8.9% had experienced neglect; and
- 39.6% of respondents had been exposed to domestic violence between parents.

"It is sobering to learn these results," lead investigator Professor Ben Mathews, Principal Research Fellow at the School of Law at Queensland University of Technology, said.

"Some maltreatment types, especially sexual abuse and emotional abuse have been found to be strongly associated with mental disorders (including major depressive disorder and generalised anxiety disorder) and health risk behaviours (including cannabis dependence, self-harm, and suicide attempt).

"In addition, many children experienced more than one type of maltreatment - that is, multi-type maltreatment.

"Girls are more likely to experience multi-type maltreatment (43.2%) than boys (34.9%), and gender-diverse participants are even more likely to do so (66.1%)," Professor Mathews said.

Young people

Young people aged 16-24 years of age reported even higher rates of emotional abuse and exposure to domestic violence than the full sample, showing maltreatment is not just a historical problem.

In young people aged 16-24 years, the prevalence of child maltreatment up to age 18 was:

- physical abuse (28.2%);
- sexual abuse (25.7%);
- emotional abuse (34.6%);
- neglect (10.3%) and;

- exposure to domestic violence (43.8%).

Call for better support

The study has led to calls for intensified national efforts for primary prevention.

The study has also recommended better support for children and adolescents who have experienced maltreatment, and for parents and families.

“Health practitioners, including those who observe indicators of maltreatment, or hear disclosures of maltreatment from children and adolescents for the first time, need to be alert that their patient may have experienced more than one type of maltreatment, and may be experiencing mental health problems and health risk behaviours,” Professor Mathews said.

“Child welfare professionals also need to intensify provision of trauma-informed counselling and healing services for maltreated children and adolescents.

About the ACMS

The ACMS was funded by the National Health and Medical Research Council with additional funding from the Australian Government.

It was conducted by a consortium of researchers from Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom.

The ACMS was funded and designed to identify for the first time how many Australians in the general population experienced any of the five types of child abuse and neglect (physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, and exposure to domestic violence), and to estimate the associated impacts on mental disorders and health risk behaviours through life, and the burden of disease to the nation.

Find out more

- Read the ACMS findings in the [supplement of the 3 April 2023](#) edition of *The Medical Journal of Australia*.
- Hear from researchers Professor David Lawrence and Associate Professor Holly Erskine discussing the research in an [MJA Podcast](#).
- [Read the InSight+ article](#) by researchers Professor Daryl Higgins and Professor Ben Mathews discussing the research.

All MJA media releases are open access and can be found at:

<https://www.mja.com.au/journal/media>

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Media Release

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Further support

This media release contains information about child abuse and neglect which may be distressing to some people in the community.

Blue Knot

The Blue Knot helpline is available to help adult survivors of childhood trauma and abuse, parents, partners, family and friends as well as the professionals who work with them. You can call the Blue Knot Helpline and Redress Support Service on 1300 657 380.

1800 RESPECT

1800RESPECT is the national domestic, family and sexual violence counselling, information and support service. If you or someone you know is experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, domestic, family or sexual violence, call 1800RESPECT on 1800 737 732 or chat via our website (www.1800RESPECT.org.au).

Kids Helpline

Kids Helpline is Australia's only free and confidential, 24/7 online and phone counselling service for young people aged 5-25 years. Free call 1800 55 1800 or www.kidshelpline.com.au

13 YARN

13YARN is the first national crisis support line for mob who are feeling overwhelmed or having difficulty coping. We offer a confidential one-on-one yarning opportunity with a Lifeline-trained Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Crisis Supporter. If you, or someone you know, are feeling worried or no good, we encourage you to connect with 13YARN on 13 92 76 (24 hours/7 days) and talk with an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Crisis Supporter.

Lifeline Australia

If you or someone you know needs crisis support, please phone Lifeline on 13 11 14.