Mental Health Visits to Emergency Rooms on the Rise Among Youth

The greatest increase in such visits was among girls ages 15 to 17, mostly related to substance use and self-harm.

May 14, 2020 By Alicia Green

A new study published in the journal Pediatrics reveals that emergency department (ED) visits for mental health disorders, substance use and self-harm have significantly increased among children and teens, according to a press release from Nationwide Children's Hospital in Columbus, Ohio.

For the 10-year inquiry, researchers at the medical center reviewed the number of youth ages 5 to 17 in the United States who visited EDs for mental health reasons as well as the geographic location of the EDs and the number of children admitted to each.

Results showed that most mental health visits occurred at non-children's emergency rooms in both city and nonurban areas. What's more, emergency departments saw a 68% increase in visits by kids age 15 to 17, with a greater increase among girls (a 74% increase).

Children's ED visits for substance use disorders escalated by 75% (a rise of over 150%), and alcohol-related disorders declined by nearly 40%. In addition, the rate of visits for deliberate self-harm rose by 329%.

Study investigators also examined the characteristics of the EDs where children presented to assess the volume of patients they handled and pinpoint their geographic locations.

"We would like children to go to their primary care provider or a psychiatrist, but EDs are the safety net for children with mental health disorders, and we need to be able to take care of them," said Rachel Stanley, MD, division chief of emergency medicine at Nationwide Children's and the study's senior author.

To improve EDs for pediatric mental health cases, researchers suggested universal screenings for suicidal thoughts as well as telehealth services, which can increase access to behavioral health specialists who can assist with acute interventions and help connect kids to follow-up care within their community.

Stanley explained that large children's hospitals could offer outreach to smaller EDs via telehealth

and additional training for physicians and nurses, thus boosting the smaller EDs' preparedness to triage and treat kids with mental health issues.

For related coverage, read "Can Lack of Sleep Increase the Risk of Mental Health Problems in Kids?" and "More Frequent Mental Health Visits May Reduce Suicide by At-Risk Youth."

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