

Childhood maltreatment causes life-long mental health conditions

Key findings from a University of Sydney study

A University of Sydney study, published in *JAMA Psychiatry*, found that childhood maltreatment causes up to 40 per cent of common, life-long mental health conditions.¹ It is the first research in Australia to estimate the proportion of mental health conditions directly caused by childhood maltreatment, independent from other influences such as genetics and social environments. This FACSIAR Summary provides an overview of key findings from the study, which complements the findings from the 2023 Australian Child Maltreatment Study² and highlights the need to address the underlying drivers of child maltreatment.

What did the study find?

Mental health conditions examined in the study included anxiety, depression, harmful alcohol and drug use, self-harm, and suicide attempts. Childhood maltreatment was defined as physical, sexual and emotional abuse and emotional or physical neglect before the age of 18 years (not including exposure to domestic and family violence).

Childhood maltreatment causes many life-long mental health conditions

After accounting for other influences such as genetics and social factors the researchers estimated that childhood maltreatment was responsible for:



Childhood maltreatment puts a heavy burden on the health system

- The researchers estimated that more than 1.8 million cases of depressive, anxiety, and substance use disorders could be prevented if childhood maltreatment was eradicated.
- In 2023, childhood maltreatment led to 66,143 years of life lost (primarily through suicide) and 118,493 years lived with disability, totalling 184,636 years of healthy life lost through mental health conditions.



Why is this research important?

The findings from this research highlight the profound impact of childhood maltreatment on the development of mental health disorders. Together with the Australian Child Maltreatment Study, the current research from the University of Sydney provides important evidence for policy and practice.

The Australian Child Maltreatment Study revealed the prevalence of childhood abuse and neglect in Australia and their significant role in increasing the risk of mental health issues and harmful behaviours in adulthood, such as self-harm and suicide attempts.² The University of Sydney study builds on those findings by quantifying the proportion of common mental health conditions in Australia directly attributable to childhood maltreatment, excluding other factors.

Both studies highlight the need to address underlying causes, such as poverty, financial stress, housing instability or homelessness, social isolation and insufficient support for child rearing.³ They also highlight the importance of preventive programs like [DCJ's Targeted Earlier Intervention program](#) and the need for mental health support services for children and young people who have experienced maltreatment, such as DCJ's Psychological and Specialist Services and the [Out-of-Home Care Health Pathway](#) with NSW Health.

How was the study conducted?

The University of Sydney study drew on international research into the causal effect of childhood maltreatment on mental health, which removed the influence of other factors such as genetics or socio-economic factors.⁴ For example, there are twin studies, where the children share the same genetics, but one child was adopted out, allowing to separate the effects of genetics on maltreatment and mental health conditions.^{5,6} The University of Sydney researchers were able to link the results from these international studies to Australian population-based statistics to arrive at the proportion and number of cases of mental health conditions that are caused by childhood maltreatment.^{7,8}

Where can I find the study?

Grummitt, L, Baldwin JR, Lafoa'i J, Keyes KM, Barrett EL, 2024, 'Burden of mental disorders and suicide attributable to childhood maltreatment', *JAMA Psychiatry*, vol. 81, no. 8, pp. 782-788, viewed 4 September 2024, DOI [10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2024.0804](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2024.0804).

Produced by:

Lina Jakob and Caroline Anderson

Family and Community Services Insights Analysis and Research (FACSIAR)

NSW Department of Communities and Justice

www.dcj.nsw.gov.au Email: facsiar@dcj.nsw.gov.au

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2. Haslam, D, Mathews, B, Pacella, R, Scott, JG, Finkelhor, D, Higgins, DJ, Meinck, F, Erskine, HE, Thomas, HJ, Lawrence, D & Malacova, E 2023, The prevalence and impact of child maltreatment in Australia: findings from the Australian Child Maltreatment Study: brief report. Australian Child Maltreatment Study, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Qld., viewed 4 June 2024, <https://www.acms.au/resources/the-prevalence-and-impact-of-child-maltreatment-in-australia-findings-from-the-australian-child-maltreatment-study-2023-brief-report/>. See also FACSIAR publications: [The Australian Child Maltreatment Study shows a large proportion of Australians experience maltreatment as children](#) and [Australian Child Maltreatment Study finds strong links between maltreatment and mental health disorders in young people](#).
3. Higgins, DJ & Hunt, GR 2024, 'Child, parent and contextual factors associated with child protection system involvement and child maltreatment in the family: a rapid evidence review', *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 59, pp. 358–400, viewed 4 June 2024, DOI [10.1002/ajs4.306](https://doi.org/10.1002/ajs4.306).
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6. May, N 2024, 'Huge proportion of mental health conditions in Australia found to be caused by childhood maltreatment', *The Guardian*, Australian edition, 9 May, viewed 4 June 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/au>.
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