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Understanding Non-Suicidal Self-Injury in Lithuanian Adolescents: The Role of Psycho-Emotional Difficulties

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Introduction: Over the past few decades, the prevalence of self-harming behaviors among adolescents has shown a significant upward trend. This study aims to examine the prevalence of self-harm among Lithuanian school students and explore its associations with psycho-emotional difficulties.

Methods: The study was conducted between October and December 2023 across 12 secondary and 14 high schools in Lithuania. The target population comprised students aged 12 to 17 years. Data were collected using a researcher-developed questionnaire encompassing demographic information, self-reported history of self-harm, and the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) to assess psycho-emotional functioning.

Results: The study included 4,124 adolescents (49.0% female), with a mean age of 14.48 ± 1.15 years. A total of 13.6% of adolescents had engaged in self-harm at least once in their lifetime, and 14.3% had self-harmed more than once. Repeated self-harm was reported by 6.0% of boys and 22.0% of girls ($p < 0.001$, $\phi = 0.289$). The adolescents' mean SDQ total difficulties score was 13.64 ± 5.78 . Respondents who had engaged in self-harm had higher SDQ total difficulties scores (15.70 ± 4.98) compared to those who had not (12.23 ± 5.22) ($p < 0.001$, $d = 0.668$). Regression analysis indicated that emotional problems and hyperactivity were the most important factors associated with self-harm among girls ($\beta = 0.281$; $\beta = 0.140$), while emotional problems and peer problems were the most important factors associated with self-harm among boys ($\beta = 0.272$; $\beta = 0.098$).

Conclusions: Nearly one in four Lithuanian adolescents reported having self-harmed at least once. Emotional difficulties, peer-related problems, and hyperactivity emerged as the most significant psychosocial factors associated with self-harming behavior. These findings emphasize the need for comprehensive school- and community-based mental health strategies aimed at fostering emotional regulation, improving peer relationships, and managing behavioral difficulties to mitigate self-harm risk among adolescents.