

Self-harm cases among Canadian girls up 110%: CIHI report

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A new report from The Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI) suggests a major increase in the rate of intentional self-harm-related hospitalizations among Canadian girls in the past five years. The most frequent method of self-harm was poisoning, including the use of prescription drugs, narcotics, illegal drugs, chemical substances and alcohol.

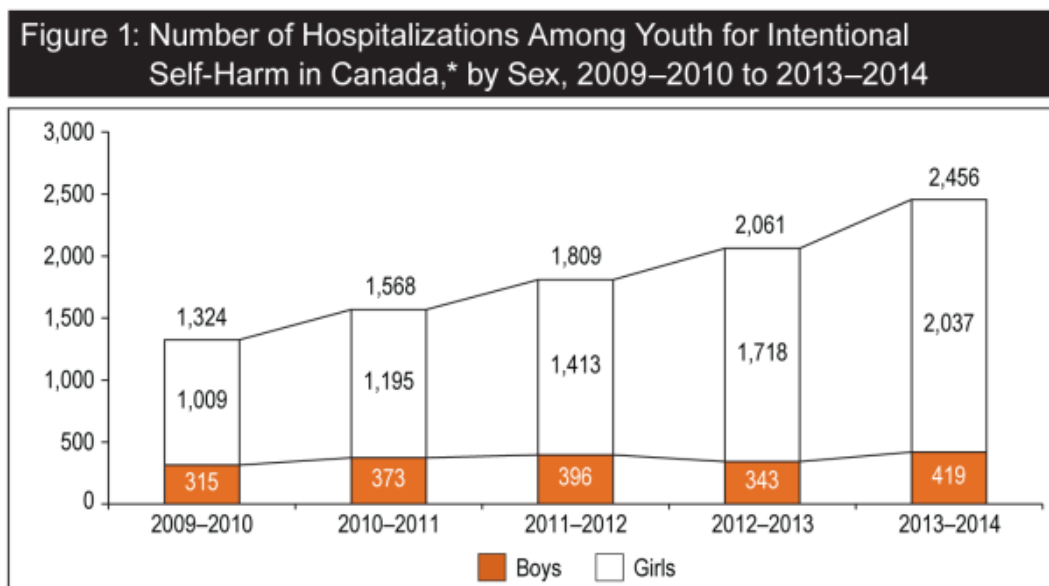
There has been a major increase in the rate of intentional self-harm-related hospitalizations among Canadian girls in the past five years, according to a new report.

The Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI) found a notable difference between the rate of self-harm-related hospitalizations for girls and boys. While the rate for girls jumped from 78 to 164 per 100,000 girls -- an increase of 110 per cent -- the rate for boys increased by 35 per cent, from 23 to 32 per 100,000.

The findings were released by CIHI Tuesday in a major report on intentional injuries among children in Canada. The report did not include Quebec data.

The data revealed that out of the 17,500 Canadian children who were hospitalized for injuries in 2013-14, about 3,000 of those hospitalizations were for intentional injury, with 2,500 cases a result of self-harm and 500 cases a result of injury caused by others. And again the numbers indicated that girls were more likely to intentionally harm themselves than boys.

CIHI found that girls were four times more likely to be hospitalized for self-harm-related injuries than boys. Out of the 2,500 children aged 10 to 17 hospitalized last year as a result of self-harm, 80 per cent were girls.



Note

* Quebec data has been excluded from this analysis.

Source

Discharge Abstract Database, 2009–2010 to 2013–2014, Canadian Institute for Health Information.

The most frequent method of self-harm was poisoning, including the use of prescription drugs, narcotics, illegal drugs, chemical substances and alcohol, said the report. For instance, in 2013-14, poisoning made up 88 per cent of intentional self-harm hospitalizations among girls and 82 per cent among boys aged 10 to 17.

The rate of girls who were hospitalized for self-harm with a sharp object -- making small cuts to their bodies, usually on the arms and legs -- also went up 90 per cent in the past five years.

Juliana Wu, manager of Decision Support Services at CIHI, said that while the data doesn't explain why girls are more prone to hospitalization for self-harm-related injuries than boys, there is a difference in coping mechanisms for both genders.

"We do know that girls and boys do tend to handle stresses and life situations quite differently. Girls may be internalizing a little bit more than boys. So I think these are all reasons to potentially look into," said Wu.

Nancy Heath, the founder and past president of the International Society for the Study of Self-Injury, thinks the disparity highlighted in the report comes from males avoiding hospitalization.

She said she's concerned the report will perpetuate the "myth" that boys don't engage in self-harm.

"They don't do the cutting that gets them to emergency room, and they don't go to emergency room as much as girls," Heath said. "But they're engaging in this behaviour as well, and they're very secretive about it because they feel ashamed, and they feel it's a girl behaviour, because we talk about it that way."

Most hospitalizations for self-harm-related injuries do not end in death, according to the report. Citing the latest data from Statistics Canada, the CIHI noted that in 2011, there were 140 deaths due to intentional self-harm for boys and 58 for girls aged 15 to 19. And for 10 to 14 year olds, there were 12 and 17 deaths for boys and girls, respectively. The most common cause of death was hanging, strangulation and suffocation, said the report.

"The data is basically telling us that, increasingly, young people are engaging in self-harm behaviour and this is most likely a coping mechanism toward handling stresses or very distressing emotions," said Wu. "The data tells us that we really need to pay more attention to this area and look out for those who are at risk."

For Megan Schellenberg, of Ottawa, the CIHI report hits close to home. Schellenberg, 29, was diagnosed with borderline personality disorder and used to cut herself in an effort to deal with her emotions. Her cutting got particularly bad when she was a teenager and she was hospitalized as a result.

"It (cutting) takes away from the emotional distress, the emotional pain I was experiencing at the time and really allowed me to collect my thoughts, I guess, in calming and quiet way."

Now recovered, Schellenberg now works with the Mental Health Commission of Canada as a knowledge broker, where she is involved in youth advocacy and counselling. While Schellenberg called CIHI's new report "heartbreaking," she said it's "unfortunately not surprising."

"I've met many people through my illness and recovery who also self-harmed."

Going forward, Schellenberg said it is important that the public not jump to conclusions when dealing with individuals who self-harm.

"Self-injury does not equate to suicide attempts or even suicidality," she said. "People aren't cutting themselves because they want attention ... It's just so important for people to know that this is a coping mechanism."

With a report from CTV's medical specialist Avis Favaro and producer Elizabeth St. Philip