

SELECTED SOCIAL FACTORS AFFECTING THE PREVALENCE OF MENTAL DISORDERS IN CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

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Abstract

The mental health of children and adolescents has been under considerable pressure in the last few years, and more children require professional help. Growing stress in families, increasing pressure (primarily affected by the covid-19 pandemic), the unfavourable economic situation, and the war in Ukraine are very stressful for children and young people. Due to insufficient care capacity, it is necessary to help vulnerable children before they need psychiatric help. The aim of this article is to describe selected social factors affecting the prevalence of mental disorders in children and adolescents. We selected several social factors that affect the psychological health of children and adolescents in the Czech Republic, such as covid-19, social networks, the economic crisis, and the war in Ukraine. We based the selection of social factors on content analysis of relevant documents that we obtained using scientific databases and multi-search engines (EBSCO, Scopus). The results collection, analysis, and filtering were conducted between 2020 and 2022.

Keywords: *Adolescents; Covid-19; Children; Mental disorders; Mental health; Social factors; Social network; War in Ukraine*

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a critical formative period when individuals experience the transition from childhood to adulthood. Ensuring that adolescents are supported in all areas of life is essential for a productive society. Mental disorders at this age are a significant burden. According to the WHO (2022), one in seven individuals between 10 and 19 years of age suffers from a mental disorder. This is often unrecognised and untreated. According to the WHO (2020), 50% of disorders begin to manifest before the age of 14. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention point to a disturbing trend in suicidal behaviour. The alarming fact is that 46,000 teenagers

decide to commit suicide each year (CDC, 2020). However, the available data do not capture the true extent of all undiagnosed mental disorders and the psychosocial burden of children and adolescents. The persistent stigma surrounding mental health leaves many adolescents without adequate support (Neson, 2021). This study aims to use available database sources and studies from the Czech Republic to describe selected social factors that influence the prevalence of mental disorders in children and adolescents under 18 years of age. We based the selection of the given factors on analysing the most occurring topic-related available articles. We used document content analysis to process the submitted paper. We used scientific databases and

multi-search engines (EBSCO, Scopus) to find the sources between 2020 and 2022. We used the keywords social factors, prevalence, mental disorders, children, adolescents, and the Boolean operators “and” and “or”. During the first phase, we found 261,405 studies. After filtering, 27,225 studies remained. Further analysis removed all duplicates and studies that did not deal with children and adolescents. We excluded studies for which we did not obtain the full published version. The resulting number of studies that were used for processing was 19. We selected available sources from the Institute of Health Information and Statistics of the Czech Republic to gain an overview of children and adolescents with mental disorders.

Number of children and adolescents with mental disorders

Considering the socio-demographic data of paediatric patients' psychiatric care, over 80,000 paediatric patients in the Czech Republic required psychiatric care in 2021. According to the National Psychiatric Care Portal, 58,013 children required outpatient care in 2021. The most affected group were patients aged 11–15 (21,901), with a higher prevalence in boys (58%). The most common psychiatric diagnoses requiring outpatient care were psychological developmental, behavioural and emotional disorders, unspecified mental disorders (56.9%), neurotic, stress, and somatoform disorders (18.5%). Such disorders usually begin in childhood and adolescence. The most significant number of patients requiring outpatient psychiatric care is in Prague, followed by the Moravian-Silesian and South Moravian regions. The need for paediatric outpatient care has increased over the past ten years. There was a slight decrease in 2020. The number of outpatients increased by almost 3,000 in 2021. 25,957 patients between 10-19 years (defined by the National Portal of Psychiatric Care) were hospitalised in 2021. They were mostly hospitalised for less than 3 months; the average hospitalisation was 63 days. 3,201 hospitalisations were acute. The most common reasons were neuroticism, stress, and somatoform disorders. This was the most significant increase in acute hospitalisations of psychiatric patients in the last ten years (Institute of Health Information and Statistics of the Czech Republic, 2021).

Selected social factors affecting the increase in mental disorders among children and adolescents in the Czech Republic in the last decade

The mental health of children and adolescents is affected by factors causing the emergence or reactivation of mental disorders. We selected some of these.

Covid-19 pandemic

This global crisis led to anti-epidemiological measures that meant social isolation for children and adolescents, and their daily routines were disrupted (Uhlíř, 2021). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention mention that this unprecedented situation has changed how children grow, learn, play, behave, communicate, and manage emotions (CDC, 2020). Many clinical studies (*e.g.*, Bínová and Havelka, 2021; Racine et al., 2021; Uhlíř, 2021) point to the deterioration of mental health as a result of the pandemic, which, according to UNICEF, has a prolonged impact (UNICEF, 2022). This statement also correlates with the findings of the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) (2022) in cooperation with the helplines of the Czech Republic, with workers reporting a significant increase in callers during the covid-19 pandemic; mainly due to personal crisis and worse psychological state of children and adolescents. Ashraf and Yaqoob (2022) point out that most children and adolescents experienced a deterioration in their mental health. Children with mental problems or a diagnosed autism spectrum disorder experienced more negative changes than children/adolescents without previous psychological issues. According to the authors, there was increased anxiety, depression, irritability, sleep disorders, lethargy, dissatisfaction, and fear of death. Panchal et al. (2021) mention an extreme risk of eating disorder relapses, where 41% of clinically treated patients experienced reactivation of symptoms during lockdown. Nearchou et al. (2020) and Magson et al. (2021) point to a high prevalence of anxiety, depression, and life dissatisfaction. Racine et al. (2021) mention that, globally, one in four children and adolescents under 18 have clinical symptoms of depression. Ravens-Sieberer et al. (2021) inform about the change in the quality of life that was significantly affected by the covid-19 pandemic in relation to mental health, espe-

cially among socially disadvantaged children and children who were greatly influenced by their parents' mental health.

NIMH (2022) only provides data on the impact of covid-19 on the mental health of adults. There are no available statistical data for children and adolescents we could rely on. Experts' findings and studies in the Czech Republic do not include the young generation in the research group (e.g., Bartoš et al., 2020, Lečbych, 2021). We can only rely on the information provided by the statistics of health insurance companies and the Czech Statistical Office. We can only speculate about how the pandemic affected the mental health of children and adolescents in the Czech Republic. However, Jardin Kocourek and Petrásková (2021) mention that parents have been requesting psychological or psychiatric services since the beginning of the pandemic. They have been primarily requesting this due to loss of motivation, increased apathy, fatigue, sleep disorders, food intake disorders, and existential doubts.

The influence of social networks

The rapidly developing cyberspace brings new social networks that play an important role in the lives of children and adolescents (Nesi, 2020). Teenagers use social networks to easily create a virtual image of their ideal self, present a perfect appearance of themselves, and gain a sense of popularity by having followers. For children and adolescents, the Internet is often an escape from their problems and a space for easier communication (Nováková, 2015). However, Keles et al. (2019) state that, although social media has become an integral part of our daily lives, it is blamed for increasing mental health problems among younger people. We can look at the impact of social media on mental health from different perspectives. Some of these are addiction, the disruption of personal and social development (Greenfield, 2014; Karim et al., 2020; UNICEF, 2018), the content on social networks, risky behaviour (such as cyberbullying), sexual abuse on the Internet, or forwarding inappropriate content among social network users (Hamm et al., 2015; Richards and Caldwell, 2015). Studies indicate that this may be a significant predisposition to developing anxiety and depression (Berryman et al., 2018; Coyne et al., 2020; O'Reilly

et al., 2019). However, social networks like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok or Twitter are a space for adolescents with mental disorders to share their stories and gain support from their peers, express emotions, easily communicate (Keles et al., 2019), or access peer self-help groups (Naslund et al., 2020).

Economic crisis and the war in Ukraine

Daily news broadcasts from Ukraine presenting catastrophic scenarios and showing photos or videos make us wonder what the consequences of war can be.

Elvevåg and Delisi (2022) say that the war affects people of all ages, but children are especially vulnerable. In the age of digital connection, children and young people watch countless stories from Ukraine, and even those not directly affected by the war are likely to suffer from psychological trauma. The organisation Nevypušť duši (2022) says that the war in Ukraine affects the psyche of all of us. It intervenes in our lives without us being prepared for it. War is closely related to fear, social and economic stress, uncertainty, and trauma. When a person becomes a refugee, it affects their mental illness symptoms (Kavanová et al., 2022). The statistics of the Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic (2022) show approximately 200,000 long-term refugees in the Czech Republic in 2021. Many of them are students and young people who, according to Kozáková (2022), turn to professional help because they are afraid for their families and feel guilty for not being able to help their loved ones. The war also significantly affects Russian students (Kozáková, 2022). Studies confirm the deterioration of mental state in recent months; mental problems have increased, especially in families significantly affected by inflation (Czech Radio and PAQ Research, 2022).

CONCLUSION

The mental health of children and young people is currently a topic of discussion in the Czech Republic. Many factors determine the prevalence of mental disorders, with covid-19 pointing to the tip of the iceberg that has long been overlooked regarding mental health. Selected enhancing factors, such as social networks, the war in Ukraine, or inflation, may

cause a more significant need for expert support from the health and social spheres. The actual number of children and adolescents requiring psychological help is unknown. No studies in the Czech Republic have covered the influence of selected factors in children and adolescents under 18. For this reason, we

based our research on foreign representative studies.

Ethical aspects and conflict of interests

The authors have no conflict of interests to declare.

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