The Israel Survey of Mental Health among Adolescents: Prevalence of Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, Comorbidity, Methylphenidate Use, and Help-Seeking Patterns

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Background: The prevalence of ADHD is controversial, with many feeling that this disorder is over- or under-diagnosed.

Objectives: To study the prevalence of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and its association with socio-demographic characteristics, comorbid mental disorders, medical services, and methylphenidate use in the Israeli adolescent population.

Methods: The Israel Survey of Mental Health among Adolescents was conducted in a representative national sample of 14–17 year olds and their mothers. The Development and Well-Being Assessment was administered to identify DSM-IV diagnoses of ADHD and comorbid mental and learning disorders and the results were verified by senior child psychiatrists. Respondents were also asked about their use of medical services and psychotropic drug intake in the past 12 months.

Results: Three percent of the adolescents met the DSM-IV criteria for ADHD. ADHD was significantly associated with gender (higher prevalence in boys than girls), ethnicity (higher prevalence in Jews than Arabs/Druze), referral to a medical professional and maternal help-seeking for the emotional or behavioral problems of the adolescent. Medication was prescribed to 2.9% of adolescents: 34.6% with a diagnosis of ADHD had not been prescribed methylphenidate in the past year, and 34.6% of the medicated subjects did not have a diagnosis of ADHD. None of the Arab/Druze adolescents was receiving stimulants compared to 3.7% of the Jewish adolescents.

Conclusions: Despite advances in public awareness of mental disorders in youth, a substantial proportion of older Israeli adolescents, especially from minority groups, are under-diagnosed or untreated. At the same time, many, especially from the Jewish majority, are over-diagnosed and potentially over-treated. Ethnic disparities in rates of mental health care highlight the urgent need to identify and overcome barriers to the recognition and treatment of these conditions.