

# Epidemiology of Childhood and Adult Mental Illness



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## KEYWORDS

• Vaccination • Neuro-epidemiology • Public health

## KEY POINTS

- Mental illness in adults accounts for a greater proportion of disability in developed countries than any other group of illnesses, including cancer and heart disease.
- Population-based surveys and surveillance provide much of the evidence needed to understand mental health promotion, mental illness prevention, and treatment programs in the United States.
- Childhood mental health disorders present serious deviations from expected cognitive, social, and emotional development are an important public health issue in the United States.
- Suicide is among the most important manifestation of mental illness in children, interacting with other factors resulting in an overall suicide rate of 4.5 per 100,000 in 2010.
- Mental illness can be managed effectively with increased access to mental health treatment services to reduced associated morbidity.

## INTRODUCTION

The *term mental illness* refers to all diagnosable mental disorders and is characterized by sustained, abnormal alterations in thinking, mood, or behavior associated with distress and impaired functioning.<sup>1</sup> Mental illness is an important domestic and global public health problem because the condition it is associated with other chronic diseases, further increasing their morbidity and mortality. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental illness accounts for more disability in developed countries than any other group of illnesses, including cancer and heart disease.<sup>2</sup> Kessler and colleagues<sup>3–5</sup> noted that up to one-fourth of adults in the United States (US) reported symptoms of mental illness with one-half developing at least 1 mental illness during their lifetime, the commonest of which were anxiety and mood disorders. The impact of mental illness in children ranges from minor to severe disruptions in daily

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The author has nothing to disclose.

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functioning, with serious deviations from expected cognitive, social, and emotional development to incapacitating personal and social impairments. Mental illness in children is further associated with a life-long risk of anxiety, depression, and suicide.<sup>6</sup> In adults, mental illness leads to significant occupational impairments,<sup>7-9</sup> heightened morbidity, and premature mortality from concurrent chronic diseases. Mental illness may further increase the risk for adverse health outcomes associated with cardiovascular disease, diabetes, obesity, asthma, epilepsy, and cancer<sup>10-12</sup> owing to lesser use of medical care and treatment adherence<sup>13,14</sup> and concomitant abuse of tobacco and alcohol products.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the rates for injuries, both intentional (homicide and suicide) and unintentional (motor vehicle) increased by 2- to 4-fold in those with mental illness compared with the general population.<sup>16,17</sup>

This paper reviews data from selected Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) surveillance and information systems that measured mental illness and the associated effects in US children<sup>6</sup> and adults,<sup>7</sup> and the global impact of mental illness.

## METHODOLOGY OF SURVEILLANCE

Reeves and colleagues<sup>7</sup> provide an overview of public health surveillance in adult mental illness. Perou and colleagues<sup>6</sup> describe mental health surveillance in children. Surveillance in both reports involves the ongoing and systematic collection, analysis, interpretation, and dissemination of data used to develop public health interventions to reduce morbidity and mortality and improve health in their respective populations. The derived data are essential to the public health goals of reducing the incidence, prevalence, severity, and economic impact of mental illnesses. That information is used by public health officials, academicians, health care providers, and advocacy groups to track trends in mental illness prevalence and severity. It is also used to assess associations between mental illness and other chronic medical conditions in adults such as obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and alcohol and substance abuse; to identify populations at high risk for mental illness and target interventions, and prevention measures; and to provide outcome measures for evaluating mental illness interventions.

### *National Population Surveys and Reporting Systems*

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#### **Adults and children**

**The National Health Interview Survey** The National Health Interview Survey (NHIS) is a national survey administered by the National Center for Health Statistics on the health of the civilian noninstitutionalized US population. Its main objective is to monitor the health of the US population through the collection and analysis of data on a broad range of health topics by in-person household interviews. Approximately 40,000 households per year were interviewed as of 2010.

**The National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey** The National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES), administered by the National Center for Health Statistics, is designed to assess the health and nutritional status of adults and children in the US. It collects information derived from interviews, physical examinations, laboratory tests, nutritional assessment, and DNA repositories. As of 2008, approximately 5000 persons per year were interviewed.

**National Vital Statistics System** The National Vital Statistics System assembles mortality statistics from death certificates filed in the US and is processed by the CDC.

**National Violent Death Reporting System** The National Violent Death Reporting System (NVDRS) is a population-based active surveillance system among participating

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