

Landmark study reveals mental health toll for Aboriginal mothers

July 8 2019

A landmark study has revealed an increase in the prevalence of mental health related issues among mothers of Aboriginal children in Western Australia.

Through a large-scale analysis of hospital and outpatient health records over 23 years, the study exposes an increasing burden of mental health related contacts in Aboriginal mothers and subsequent increased risk to Aboriginal children.

The study was led by the Ngangk Yira Aboriginal Health and Social Equity Research Centre at Murdoch University in conjunction with the Telethon Kids Institute.

Chief investigator Professor Rhonda Marriott said these results painted an alarming picture for Aboriginal mothers and children.

Results showed a prevalence of 34 percent of Aboriginal children born in Western Australia between 1990 and 2013 were born to a mother who had at least one mental health related contact within the five years prior to birth or one-year post birth.

These mental health contacts were connected to [substance abuse](#), [mood disorders](#) and anxiety, as well as a broad range of psychological disorders.

A need for holistic healthcare

The study showed that children living in disadvantaged areas were more likely to be affected but no difference was found between children being born in a major city or in a very remote area.

Aboriginal women giving birth over the age of 30 were more likely to have a mental health contact, in comparison to the general population where teenage mothers have been shown to be the most vulnerable.

"Early intervention and support for vulnerable women in the earliest stages of family planning are required to support them through the complexities in their lives and alleviate the burden of mental health problems at birth and after [birth](#)," Professor Marriott said.

"The multiple and interrelated disadvantages which influence the [health](#) and well-being of Aboriginal children have an impact on their development, highlighting the need for early intervention and targeted policies.

"There is a clear need for policies on the development of a holistic healthcare model, with a multisector approach, offering culturally appropriate [mental health](#) interventions and services for Aboriginal [children](#) and their parents in Western Australia."

The study was published in *BMJ Open*—an online, open-access journal published by *The BMJ*.

More information: Fernando Lima et al. Trends in mental health related contacts among mothers of Aboriginal children in Western Australia (1990–2013): a linked data population-based cohort study of over 40 000 children, *BMJ Open* (2019). [DOI: 10.1136/bmjopen-2018-027733](#)

Provided by Murdoch University

Citation: Landmark study reveals mental health toll for Aboriginal mothers (2019, July 8)
retrieved 21 January 2023 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-07-landmark-reveals-mental-health-toll.html>

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