

# **Challenges for mental health promotion and prevention among young people in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic**

**Presentation at the 4th biannual Nordic Summit on Mental Health “*Restart: post-pandemic strategies for mental health*”  
18-19 November 2021 in Helsinki**

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# Speech outline

- The pre-pandemic situation.
- Major risk factors.
- Impacts of school closures.
- Impacts of economic downturns.
- Mental health consequences.
- Socioeconomic differences.
- Mental health promotive and preventive interventions for adolescents.
- Conclusions.

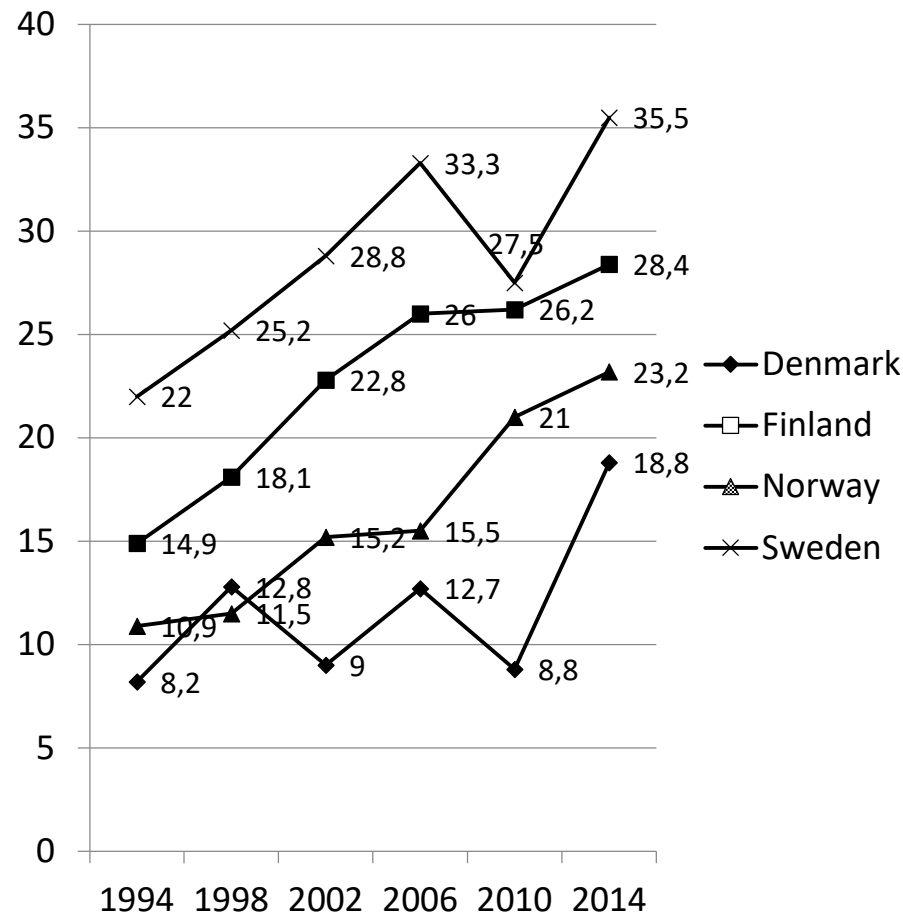
# “Tip of an iceberg”

*“But even absent a pandemic, psychosocial distress and poor mental health afflict far too many children – including millions who, each year, are forced from their homes, scarred by conflict and serious adversity, and deprived of access to schooling, protection and support. **In fact, the COVID-19 pandemic represents merely the tip of the iceberg when it comes to poor mental health outcomes.** It is an iceberg we have been ignoring for far too long, and unless we act, it will continue to have disastrous results for children and societies long after the pandemic is over”.*

[Henrietta H. Fore, UNICEF Executive Director]

United Nations Children’s Fund, The State of the World’s Children 2021: On My Mind – Promoting, protecting and caring for children’s mental health, UNICEF, New York, October 2021.

# Psychosomatic Problems among 15 years old girls, distributed by country and year of investigation



Seven items with three response categories. Proportion of students at or above the 90th percentile (worse health) for the entire sample in 1994.

*Hagquist, C. et al. (2019). Cross-country comparisons of trends in adolescent psychosomatic symptoms – A Rasch analysis of HBSC data from four Nordic countries. Health and Quality of Life Outcomes, 17:27.*

# **Major risk factors for adolescent mental health problems**

- School stress and school failure
- Economic stress



**CFBUPH** | Centre for research on child  
and adolescent mental health



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Final Scientific Report

# **RESEARCH PROGRAMME 2013–2020**

The impacts of changed living conditions on child  
and adolescent mental health



<https://www.gu.se/en/research/the-impacts-of-changed-living-conditions-on-child-and-adolescent-mental-health>

# **School closures and loss of learning**

# Consequencies of school closures – a global perspective

*“Hundreds of millions of children have lost at least a full year of schooling due to COVID-19. This pandemic has brought about the largest loss of human capital in living memory and the worst education crisis in a century.”*

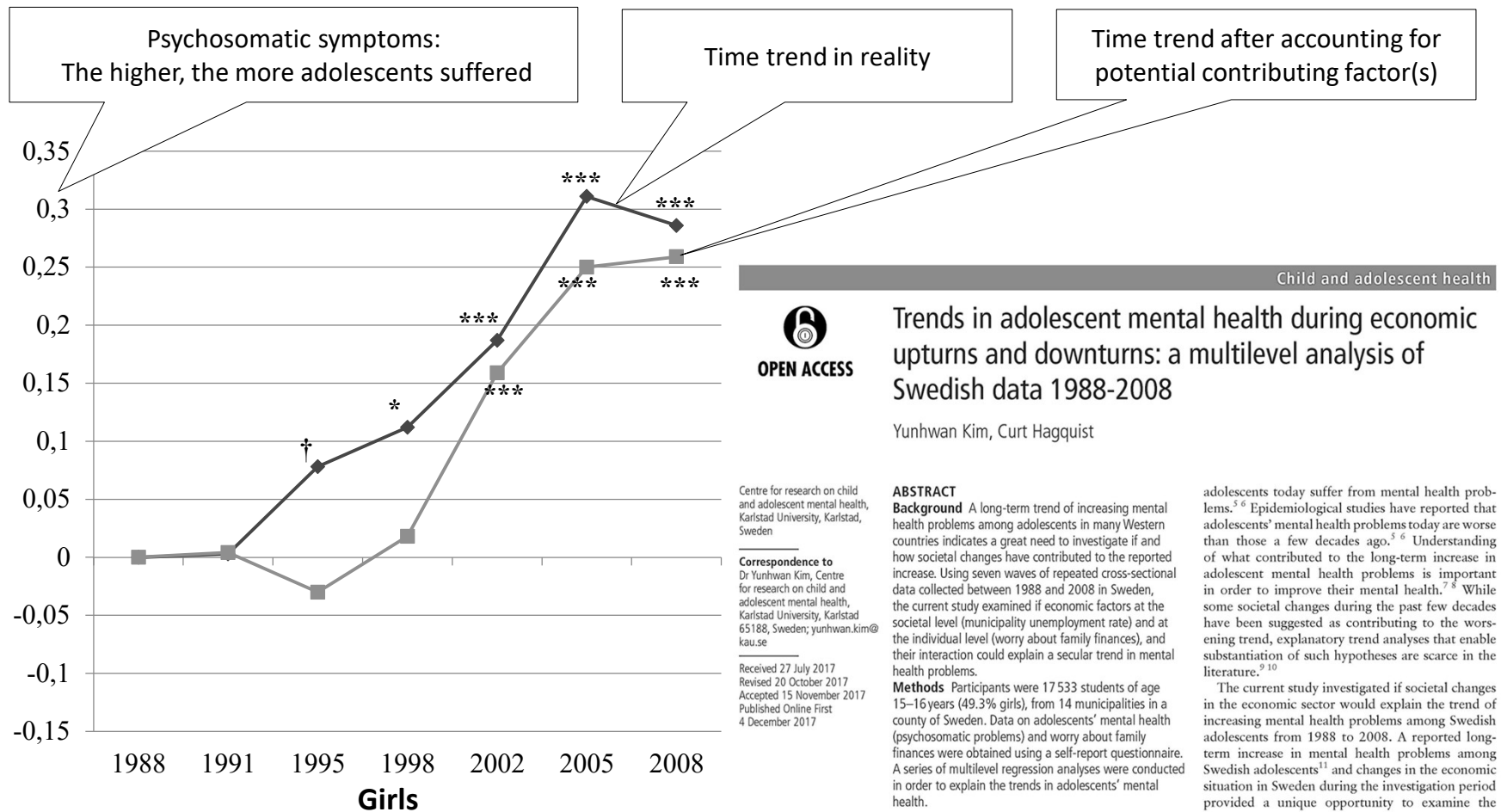
*“It’s vital for children to be in school, especially primary school age children. The consequences of school closures could be felt for decades and are contributing to even wider inequality, particularly for girls.”*

*David Malpass, World Bank Group President,  
October 29, 2021*



# **Impacts of economic downturns and economic stress**

# Economic stress and adolescent mental health



Psychosomatic problems according to years of investigation. The upper-line indicates unstandardized regression coefficients prior to adjusting for the effects of worry. The lower-line indicates unstandardized regression coefficients after adjusting for the effects of worry. Note that statistical significance refers to the difference between the reference year (1988) and the selected year, not the difference between before and after adjustment for worry about family finances in the corresponding year. †  $p < .10$  \*  $p < .05$  \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Kim Y., & Hagquist C. (2018). Trends in adolescent mental health during economic upturns and downturns: A multilevel analysis of Swedish data 1988-2008. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, 72(2), 101-108. doi:10.1136/jech-2017-209784. Open Access

# **Mental health consequences**

# Systematic review of impacts of school closures

*“27 studies concerning mental health identified considerable impacts across emotional, behavioural and restlessness/inattention problems; 18-60% of CYP (children and young people) scored above risk thresholds for distress, particularly anxiety and depressive symptoms”.*

Viner R, Russell S, Saulle R, Crocker H, Stansfeld C, Packer J et al. (2021). Impacts of school closures on physical and mental health of children and young people: a systematic review. medRxiv doi:<https://doi.org/10.1101/2021.02.10.21251526>

Not published yet.

# A call for quality monitoring

WHO European Technical Advisory Group recommendation

*“Countries should monitor changes in mental health at population level through valid, standardized and comparable measures and instruments”.*

WHO (2021). Mental health impacts of COVID-19 in the WHO European Region: recommendations from the European Technical Advisory Group on the mental health impacts of COVID-19, 30 June 2021. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2021.

**Is the impacts of COVID-19  
socially structured?**

## **Associations between socioeconomic position and different worry themes during the pandemic**

In what ways is worry about personal and family issues during the COVID-19 pandemic socially structured?

Ongoing study at the University of Gothenburg based on questionnaire data collected 2020/2021 among about 3000 16-17 years old students in Sweden.

# **Mental health promotive and preventive interventions for adolescents**



# WHO Technical Advisory Group on mental health - recommendations



Action required to address the  
impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic  
on mental health and  
service delivery systems in  
the WHO European Region

Recommendations from the Technical Advisory Group  
on the Mental Health Impacts of COVID-19  
in the WHO European Region

30 June 2021

# Strengthening the resilience of young people

## WHO European Technical Advisory Group recommendation

*“Countries should promote, communicate and increase access to socioemotional learning, educational support for learning loss and mental health and psychosocial support in schools and universities, and provide more community support for adolescents and young adults”.*

WHO (2021). Mental health impacts of COVID-19 in the WHO European Region: recommendations from the European Technical Advisory Group on the mental; health impacts of COVID-19, 30 June 2021. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe2021.

# WHO Technical Advisory Group for schooling - recommendations



## Schooling during **COVID-19**

Recommendations from the  
European Technical Advisory Group  
for schooling during COVID-19

March 2021

# What is social and emotional learning?

“Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which **social-emotional competence** develops. Through SEL, children and youth acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage **emotions**, set and achieve **positive goals**, feel and show **empathy** for others, establish and maintain **positive relationships**, and make **responsible decisions** (Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovich, & Gullotta, 2015)”.

Domitrovich CE, Durlak JA, Staley KC, Weissberg RP. Social-Emotional Competence: An Essential Factor for Promoting Positive Adjustment and Reducing Risk in School Children. Child Dev. 2017 Mar;88(2):408-416. doi: 10.1111/cdev.12739. Epub 2017 Feb 18. PMID: 28213889.

## **Meta-analysis of 213 school-based, universal social and emotional learning (SEL) programs**

“Current findings document that SEL programs yielded **significant positive effects** on targeted **social-emotional competencies** and attitudes about self, others, and school. They also enhanced students’ behavioral adjustment in the form of **increased prosocial behaviors and reduced conduct and internalizing problems**, and **improved academic performance** on achievement tests and grades”.

Durlak JA, Weissberg RP, Dymnicki AB, Taylor RD, Schellinger KB. The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: a meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. Child Dev. 2011 Jan-Feb;82(1):405-32. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01564.x. PMID: 21291449.

## WHO recommendation for mental health promotive and preventive interventions for adolescents

*"Universally delivered psychosocial interventions should be provided for all adolescents. These interventions promote positive mental health, as well as prevent and reduce suicidal behaviour, mental disorders (such as depression and anxiety), aggressive, disruptive and oppositional behaviours, and substance use".*

**Strength of recommendation:** Strong.

**Certainty of evidence:** Low.

**Important remarks:** Based on available evidence, interventions should cover ***social and emotional learning***, which may include components such as: emotional regulation, problem-solving, interpersonal skills, mindfulness, assertiveness and stress management."

Guidelines on mental health promotive and preventive interventions for adolescents: helping adolescents thrive. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2020. Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO.

## **WHO recommendation, cont'd**

**“Rationale:** The certainty of the evidence was often downgraded because studies were subject to the risk of bias due to difficulty in blinding the interventions and to reliance on self-reported outcomes, both of which are common in these types of intervention studies. **However, a strong recommendation was made despite the low certainty of evidence thanks to the relative consistency of the study results and the fact that significant benefits substantially outweighed potential harms”.**

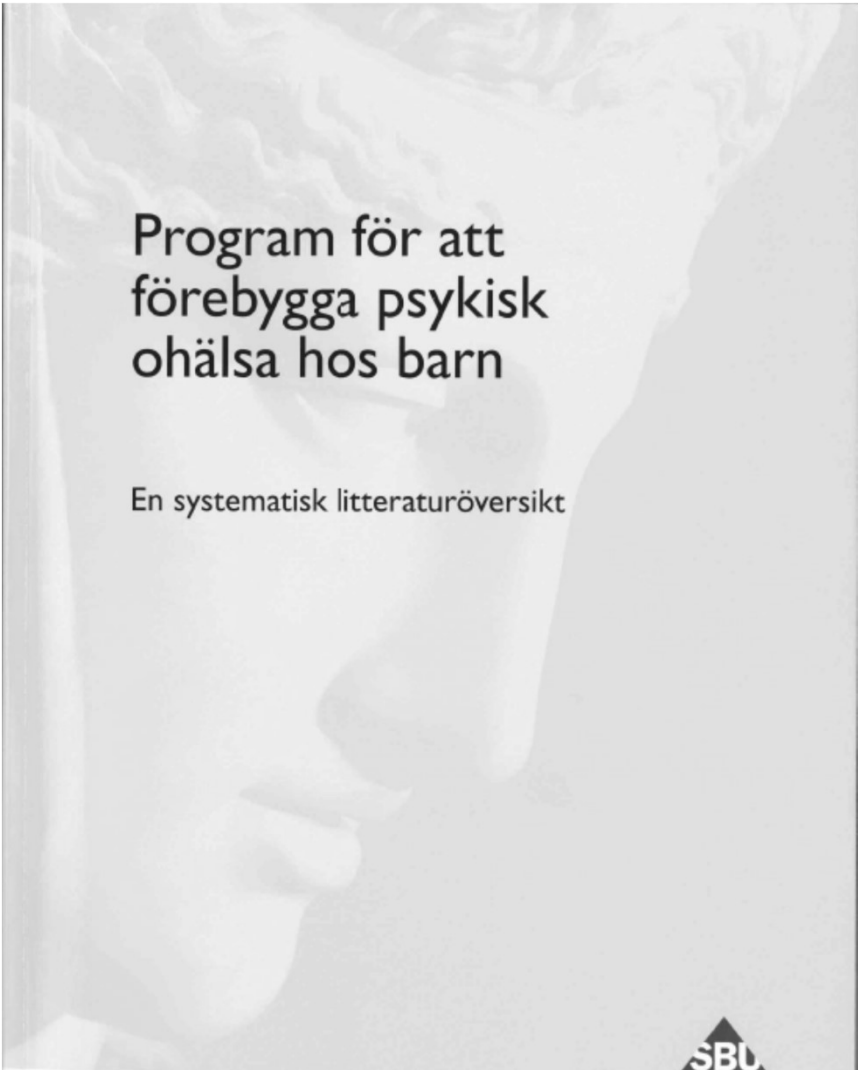
Guidelines on mental health promotive and preventive interventions for adolescents: helping adolescents thrive. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2020. Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO.

## WHO recommendation, cont'd

“In addition, considerations about values, feasibility and **cost-effectiveness further supported the recommendation**. Universal interventions in schools may be easier to implement and less likely to cause stigmatization compared to interventions that require screening. When delivered in schools, interventions may help to reach a large proportion of adolescents and address a wide range of risk factors while providing basic skills to promote mental health and prevent risky behaviours”.

Guidelines on mental health promotive and preventive interventions for adolescents: helping adolescents thrive. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2020. Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO.





# Program för att förebygga psykisk ohälsa hos barn

En systematisk litteraturöversikt

SBU – Statens beredning för medicinsk utvärdering  
*Swedish Council on Health Technology Assessment*



## **Consensus on the state of knowledge of programs for the prevention of mental illness in children**

“More knowledge is needed about programs (methods) to prevent mental illness among children. This is the opinion of SBU, FHI and the National Board of Health and Welfare, which together have analyzed the state of knowledge. The programs used should have shown effect in Swedish studies with high quality. Programs that are already established locally can be used pending better knowledge, if the effect of them is followed up at the same time”.

*Joint statement 2010 by the Swedish Council on Health Technology Assessment (SBU), the Swedish Public Health Institute and the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare  
(Translation from Swedish)*

# A successful Swedish example

*Health Promotion International*, 2021;36:1039–1049

doi: 10.1093/heapro/daaa130

Advance Access Publication Date: 10 December 2020

Article

OXFORD

## Improvements in the school environment— results of a Swedish school project 2005–2011

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### Summary

To examine whether a public health project to reduce problem behavior in schools and improve the classroom climate, undertaken among eight secondary schools in a municipality in Sweden, was accompanied by favorable changes in the school environment over time. Data were collected from ninth grade students (aged 15–16 years) at three different time points: the year before the project began (2005), during the project (2008) and when the project finished (2011). Changes in the school environment, measured as damage, littering, noise and classroom disorder, were compared between the project municipality and a comparison group of other municipalities in the same county, using multinomial logistic regression analysis. Descriptive comparisons were made between the schools within the project municipality. The school environment improved significantly from 2005 to 2011 in the project municipality compared with the other municipalities. The school environment was improved in all schools within the project municipality. The biggest improvements took place in two schools which systematically worked with one program incorporated into the school schedule. This study demonstrates that it may be possible to improve the school environment by implementing health programs. Further studies based on experimental designs are required in order to confirm the potential and efficiency of school health programs.

**Key words:** health, schools, school environment, Sweden, quantitative study

# In conclusion

- Young people's living conditions and everyday life are profoundly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic including loss of education, big change in the social relations, with more loneliness, more sedentary behaviours and less physical activities. While there is a big number of studies indicating that the mental health and wellbeing of young people is negatively affected by the pandemic, **there is a need for studies of high quality studies that monitor changes in mental health at population and subgroups levels.**
- There is an **obvious risk that the inequalities in living conditions and mental health of young people will increase** in the wake of the pandemic, within Sweden and other high-income countries as well as between high and low-income countries.
- There is an **urgent need for educational and psychosocial support** to adolescents, in order to mitigate the negative impacts of the pandemic and improve resilience. **Special attention needs to be paid to groups at higher risk for school failure**, for example socioeconomic disadvantaged students and those with pre-existing mental health conditions.

# Thanks!

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