

Social Connectedness and the Mental Health of Southeast Asian Youth. Results from a Population-based Survey in British Columbia

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Background: In recent years adolescent mental health has received increasing attention in Canada and worldwide. The prevalence of mental health problems in a culturally diverse population has created an urgent need for current research in British Columbia on protective factors that may mitigate experiences of emotional distress among minority groups such as Southeast Asian youth.

Purpose: Our goal was to examine the relationships between theorized protective factors and emotional distress among Southeast Asian boys and girls.

Methods: We conducted a secondary analysis of data from the 2008 population-based British Columbia Adolescent Health Survey. Youth who identified as Southeast Asian were included in the analytical sample. Protective factors were theorized as school connectedness, family connectedness and ethnic identity connectedness. Mental health-related items included recent stress and despair, self-harm and suicide behavior. Multivariate models conducted by gender tested for associations between social connectedness and emotional distress controlling for age and immigrant status.

Findings: Compared to boys, Southeast Asian girls reported significantly greater rates of self-harm and suicidal activity as well as higher levels of stress and despair. Multivariate analyses showed that higher levels of family connectedness were related to lower odds of extreme stress and despair among boys and girls. Lower odds of stress and despair were also related to greater school connectedness but only among girls. Ethnic identity connectedness was associated with significantly lower odds of despair among boys, but with higher odds of stress among girls. Implications of these findings are discussed in terms of their relevance for adolescent health providers, researchers and policy-makers in BC and across Canada.