

Research in Brief:
**The “Downward Spiral” of
Mental Health Problems and
Early School-Leaving**

Early school-leaving is a concern both for educators and society as a whole. Young people who leave secondary school prior to graduation are more likely to find themselves without jobs and may be unsure of how to improve their lives. Mental health problems, including anxiety, may result, and compound other issues in their lives.

To help reduce the risk of students dropping out prior to graduation, it is important to understand both the reasons why students leave school early and the common consequences of early school-leaving.

If the key factors associated with why students drop out are established, the youth at risk for those factors can then be identified, and intervention programs developed and implemented. Likewise, once the consequences of dropout are identified, programs, policies, and support can then be directed toward individuals to help prevent negative repercussions.

School-leaving and mental health problems

The association of mental disorders with the abuse of various substances, as well as with leaving high school, has been a topic of recent interest. Researchers have investigated which types of psychiatric disorders seem to have the strongest link with early school-leaving, while also exploring which disorders may develop afterward.



Why does this matter?

- ⇒ Early dropout research has focused primarily on demographic and scholastic risk factors related to educational attainment.
- ⇒ Recently, a link between mental health and early drop out has been studied.
- ⇒ Most symptoms of psychiatric disorders cause impairment on emotional, cognitive, and social levels, which may lead to students being unable to carry out their academic potential.
- ⇒ The interrelation between psychological issues and negative school experiences can peak and cause the student to drop out.

The Knowledge Network for Student Well-Being is a project of the **Knowledge Network for Applied Educational Research** (www.knaer-recrae.ca)

Communities of practice in the KNSWB include: **Ontario Healthy Schools Coalition, PREVNet, School Mental Health ASSIST, and the Social Planning Network of Ontario**

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The “Downward Spiral” of Mental Health Problems and Early School-Leaving

Research has considered both internalizing disorders (including anxiety and mood disorders) and externalizing disorders (such as disruptive behaviour disorders, conduct disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, and antisocial personality disorder) to help determine a link between mental health and early school-leaving.

What is a meta-analysis?

A meta-analysis is a study that combines the results of several other studies. It involves selecting several high quality studies in a specific research area and analyzing the findings collectively. This method provides researchers with a larger sample size and allows them to draw stronger conclusions than those based on individual studies.

The meta-analysis summarized here was conducted by Esch et al. (2014). Their objectives were to combine data and results from a number of studies considering mental disorders and early school-leaving in order to strengthen their own results, as well as to discuss the implications for educators and stakeholders in youth’s academic achievement.

What did the researchers do?

The research team conducted a meta-analysis of 51 published, peer-reviewed studies from four different databases; all studies were published between 1987 and 2014. For each study, school dropout had to occur during secondary education, and is defined by having left prior to graduation. Assessment of psychiatric disorders was based on the criteria set out by the American Psychological Association (DSM IV-R, DSM IV, DSM III-R, DSM III).

What did they learn?

- Results indicated that disruptive behaviour and substance abuse disorders seemed to have a more direct effect on educational attainment, while internalizing disorders had less of an effect on school dropout.

- For girls, mood disorders, and to a lesser extent anxiety disorders, were significantly related to school dropout.
- Teens who began using cannabis before age 16 were more likely to drop out of secondary school.
- Compared to total abstinence, cannabis experimentation was more likely to lead to graduation.
- Smoking, or nicotine dependence, was strongly related to secondary school dropout, whereas alcohol was not.
- Externalizing disorders (disruptive behaviour, attention problems, and inadequate social adjustment) were strong and independent predictors of secondary school dropout.
- Internalizing disorders, especially mood disorders and suicidal ideation, were consequences of school dropout. Anxiety disorders did not develop until years after dropout.
- Early school-leavers who already consumed cannabis were at increased risk for developing a substance abuse disorder.



This brief summary was prepared from: Esch, P., Bocquet, V., Pull, C. et al. *BMC Psychiatry* (2014) 14: 237. doi:10.1186/s12888-014-0237-4

Please see the original document for full details. In the case of any disagreement between this summary and the original document, the original document should be seen as authoritative.