

Mental Illness

What this is about...

Prevalence of mental illness in urban areas is influenced by a range of biological and environmental issues that includes family and societal stressors. In general, good mental health leads to healthy communities.

What did we find ?

A New Zealand study suggests that around 20% of the population have a diagnosable mental illness (including alcohol and drug disorders) at any one time. Around 3% of this population (adults, young people and children) have serious, ongoing and disabling mental illness requiring treatment from specialist mental health and alcohol and drug services. The other 17% have less severe, moderate, and milder illnesses and problems, which usually do not need treatment from specialist mental health services.⁹⁵

The prevalence of mental illness may be higher among Maori.⁹⁶ Maori have much higher rates of presentation to crisis, acute, and forensic services than non-Maori, and they are much more likely to suffer from alcohol and drug disorders. There is little information on the prevalence of mental disorders among other cultures, such as Pacific Islands, Asian and refugee communities.

Data that indicates prevalence of mental illness at a regional or city wide level is not available. The Blueprint for Mental Health Services notes that there is an urgent need for studies to establish the true prevalence rates amongst the different communities in New Zealand. In response to this need, the Ministry of Health and the Health Research Council will fund a national epidemiological study in 2001. There is also a lack of information about what services are being provided, where, for which diagnoses and for whom. The NZ Health Information Service's Mental Health Information Project may help to address information gaps in this area. Indicators of prevalence may emerge from these projects which can be used in future reporting.

Currently, mental health teams are having difficulty meeting demands for services. Indeed, the gap between full time equivalent mental health workers contracted to Health Funding Authority and the number recommended in the Mental Health Commission Blueprint may indicate difficulty with providing services.

Some regional data indicates that the largest gaps are in the Auckland cities.⁹⁷ However, while the provision of services in an area gives an indication of what's available to help people with mental illness, and this may indicate some level of quality of life, hospital and community services only contribute to one part of recovery. Recovery from a mental illness also involves access to services without fear of stigma, social inclusion, a sense of belonging, good employment opportunities, and appropriate housing. Factors that will help achieve this include no community tolerance of negative discrimination against people with mental illness, good community awareness about mental health issues generally, a responsible news media and responsive public and social services.⁹⁸

95 Cited in the Mental Health Commission. 1998. Blueprint for Mental Health Services in New Zealand: How things need to be.

96 Ibid.

97 Waitemata Health. 2000. Mental Health.

98 Personal communication, Mental Health Commission.