

A Scoping Review of Mental Health Service Utilization Among School-Going Children and Adolescents in Malaysia: A Letter to the Editor

Dear Editor

We recently conducted a scoping review of the literature on mental health service utilization in Malaysia, with the aim of mapping key trends, identifying research gaps, and highlighting implications for health policy. Mental health disorders among school-going children in Malaysia have risen, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. There has been a sharp increase in the data reported for adolescents with suicidal ideation, from 10% in 2017 to 13.1% in 2022.¹ Furthermore, the 2023 National Health and Morbidity Survey showed that the mental health burden has doubled to 16.5% among children aged 5-15 years.² It is important to note that the majority of mental disorders diagnosed in adulthood stemmed from adolescence.³

The present review covered peer-reviewed studies from seven electronic gateways and databases: PubMed, EBSCOHost, Scopus, Ovid, ERA, MyCite, and Google Scholar. The keywords were chosen based on previous studies and systematic reviews with similar concepts. The specific keywords were ("mental health" OR depression OR anxiety) AND ("school-based services" OR "school health services" OR hospital OR "health clinic" OR "health service" OR "school counsellor" OR clinic OR utilization) AND ("school going children" OR "school children" OR "primary school" OR "secondary school" OR children OR adolescent OR teenager). The search terms were explored in titles, abstracts, and keywords. The inclusion criteria of the papers were primary studies and reviews reporting mental health service utilization among children and adolescents aged 7-17 years in Malaysia, encompassing qualitative or quantitative studies published in either English or Malay. A total of 2,434 papers were retrieved from the systematic search and were initially screened by title and abstract. Subsequently, 69 papers were screened by two reviewers for eligibility, resulting in nine papers being included in this review, consisting of three cross-sectional papers, three review papers, one policy brief, one mixed-methods study, and one qualitative paper.

The included articles were drawn from a wide range of Malaysian states, with the majority of studies conducted in Selangor (n=3), followed by Kedah (n=1), Johor (n=1), Peninsular Malaysia (n=1), and Malaysia as a whole (n=3). Four out of the nine included articles reported the percentage of mental health service utilization among school-going children and adolescents in Malaysia. The utilization rate ranged from 3.4% to 9.5%. Specifically, Khairudin reported that only 3.7% of the 771 Form-six students surveyed sought help from formal mental health services.⁴ The utilization of formal mental health services was prominent at government general hospitals (46.4%), followed by health clinics (39.3%), private clinics (39.3%), and private hospitals (25%). Other formal sources of help included school counsellors (11.9%) and teachers (9.7%).² Similarly, Aida and others reported that none of the 175 secondary school students utilized mental health services, as most of them were unaware of the availability of such services.⁵ Surprisingly, only 3.4% of the participants preferred the formal pathway of seeking help through primary health care services. The low mental health service utilization rate was attributed to the preference of Malaysian adolescents and children for seeking help from other sources, such as friends, teachers, and family members, and to limited knowledge regarding the accessibility of mental health services.

From the included studies, we also identified common barriers to accessing mental health services among school-going children in Malaysia. The most common barriers were related to individual perception (6 articles), poor awareness and preference for informal support (6 articles), societal stigma (4 articles), and other factors (5 articles). Aida and others reported that most of the youths worried about

the perceptions of friends (48.6%) and family members (44.6%) toward their mental health issues.⁵ A minority of them (10.8%) perceived that nobody could help them, further exacerbating this conflict. As such, friends and families were both facilitators and barriers to mental health utilization. Other barriers noted in this review included self-blame and negative thoughts regarding mental health help.⁵ Youths in this review perceived mental health problems to be their own fault and assumed that they would not receive appropriate help from anyone.

Due to the limited number of studies, the data obtained might not reflect the true utilization rate in Malaysia. Furthermore, the latest included paper was from 2021. Consequently, the current utilization rate remains undocumented. We searched for papers reporting mental health service utilization since then; however, we have unfortunately not found any. This review highlighted the lack of readily available data for identifying the current rate of mental health service utilization in Malaysia, which does not correspond with the increasing burden reported in the national survey. Understanding the current utilization rates and barriers is important for improving access and designing effective mental health services for school-going children and adolescents. Overcoming socio-cultural stigma and logistical barriers will require multi-sectoral collaboration to ensure that children and adolescents receive the help they need.^{6, 7}

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Authors' Contribution

TAM.TM: Conceptualization, study design, data screening and synthesis, and drafting the manuscript; KH.AA: Conceptualization and critical review of the manuscript; S.S: Data curation, study selection, data interpretation, and reviewing the manuscript; SS.Z: Data curation, study selection, data interpretation, and reviewing the manuscript; NN.CA: Data curation, study selection, data interpretation, and reviewing the manuscript; B. MK: Data synthesis and manuscript reviewing. C.WY: Study design, interpretation of the data, and reviewing the manuscript; All authors have read and approved the final manuscript and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

Declaration of AI

The authors declare that Claude AI version Sonet 5 was used to check the grammar of the manuscript.

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