

## **Self harm high among Goth youths**

### ***Prevalence of deliberate self harm and attempted suicide within contemporary Goth youth subculture: longitudinal cohort study BMJ Online First***

Rates of self harm and attempted suicide are high within Goth youth subculture, finds a study published on bmj.com today.

Deliberate self harm is common among young people, with rates of 7-14% in the UK. It is particularly widespread in certain populations and may be linked to depression, attempted suicide, and various psychiatric disorders in later life.

Contemporary Goth youth subculture has been linked with self harm, but there is little evidence to support this.

Researchers at the MRC Social and Public Health Sciences Unit, based at Glasgow University surveyed, 1,258 young people during their final year of primary school (age 11) and again at ages 13, 15, and 19. They were asked about self harm and identification with a variety of youth subcultures, including Goth.

They found that belonging to the Goth subculture was strongly associated with a lifetime prevalence of self harm (53%) and attempted suicide (47%).

Even after adjusting for factors such as social class, parental separation, smoking, alcohol use, or previous depression, Goth identification remained the single strongest predictor of either self harm or suicide attempt.

To test how specific this identification effect was to Goth, they analysed rates of self harm among 14 other common youth subcultures. Although some other subcultures were also associated with self harm (Punk and Mosher), the association was strongest for Goth.

Reasons for this effect remain unclear, but the authors suggest that self harm could be a normal component of Goth subculture, including emulation of icons or peers who self harm. Alternatively, it could be explained by selection, with young people with a particular propensity to self harm being attracted to the subculture, they say.

Although based on small numbers, these data suggest that both processes are involved, with selection mechanisms possibly being more likely, they conclude.

Mr Robert Young, lead researcher on the study, said: "Although only fairly small numbers of young people identify as belonging to the Goth subculture, rates of self-harm and attempted suicide are very high among this group. One common suggestion is they may be copying subcultural icons or peers. But since our study found that more reported self-harm before, rather than after, becoming a Goth, this suggests that young people with a tendency to self-harm are attracted to the Goth subculture. Rather than posing a risk it's also possible that by belonging to this subculture young people are gaining valuable social and emotional support from their peers. However, the study was based on small numbers and replication is needed to confirm our results."

Dr Michael van Beinum, Consultant Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist, and advisor to the study said: “Mental health problems are common in young people and there is evidence that they are on the increase. For some young people with mental health problems, a Goth subculture may be attractive, as it may allow them to find a community within which it may be easier for their distress to be understood. Social support is important for all young people to help them cope with the difficulties they face, and therefore finding a peer group of like-minded Goths may, for some, be adaptive. Adults helping young people in difficulty need to be aware that those who clearly identify with Goth subculture may also be self-harming, and may benefit from learning further coping mechanisms to help them overcome inner distress. Further provision of mental health services for all young people is urgently required.”

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**Notes to Editors**

1. This study was conducted by the following social scientists at the MRC's Social and Public Health Sciences Unit:

Mr Robert Young (lead researcher)

Dr Helen Sweeting

Professor Patrick West

Dr Michael van Beinum is advisor to the Study.

2. Mr Robert Young and Dr Michael van Beinum are available for interview. Please contact the BMJ press office on :

Tel (BMA): +44 (0)20 7383 6529; (home - out of office hours): +44 (0)1923 350 436; (mobile): +44 (0)7810 246 013  
for more details.

3. The MRC Social and Public Health Sciences Unit was created in 1998 to promote human health via the study of social and environmental influences on health. ([www.msoc-mrc.gla.ac.uk](http://www.msoc-mrc.gla.ac.uk)) The Unit's Young People's Health and Health Behaviour programme seeks to understand the range of influences on young people's health and health behaviours, particularly those associated with the family, school, peer group and youth culture, which may either mediate broader social structural influences or cut across them to promote common experiences, behaviours or attitudes.

4. The Medical Research Council (MRC) is a national organisation funded by the UK tax-payer. Its business is medical research aimed at improving human health. The research it supports and the scientists it trains meet the needs of the health services, the pharmaceutical and other health-related industries and the academic world.