Self-Harming Behaviour Among Adolescents in Schools: Prevalence, Patterns, and Associated Characteristics

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Abstract

Self-harming behaviour represents a prevalent maladaptive coping strategy among adolescents, posing an important challenge for schools and the professionals working within them. This study aimed to examine the prevalence, frequency, forms, age-related patterns, and selected contextual characteristics of self-harming behaviour among adolescents, with particular attention to its relevance in school settings. A cross-sectional survey was conducted among 1,415 adolescents aged 12–19 years (M = 15.47) attending primary and secondary schools in Slovakia. Data were collected using a modified Self-Harm Inventory (SHI) and additional questions addressing the circumstances of self-harm, peer awareness, and help-seeking behaviour. Overall, 56.3% of adolescents reported at least one form of self-harming behaviour, while 47.8% reported repeated engagement. The most frequently reported forms were intentional scratching (34.6%), hitting oneself (32.4%), and self-defeating thoughts (32.3%). Self-harm was most prevalent at age 16 (28%), whereas its onset was most frequently reported at age 13. Female adolescents reported both a higher prevalence and greater intensity of self-harm than males. Most adolescents engaged in self-harm alone (88%), and 19.3% reported having required medical attention following an episode. Although self-harming adolescents were more likely to have received psychological or psychiatric care, 68.2% had not received such assistance. The findings indicate a substantial prevalence of self-harming behaviour during adolescence, particularly in mid-adolescence. They highlight the need to raise awareness among school personnel about the scale of the phenomenon, its characteristic age-related patterns, and the importance of early recognition and appropriate support within school environments.

Keywords: Self-Harm; Prevalence; Adolescence; School Environment; Age Characteristics