



New study shows farm kids not immune to farm stressors

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They say it takes a village to raise a child.

And a new study is highlighting that notion when it comes to mental in farm youth, revealing that children aren't immune to stressors on the family farm

The study, from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, explores how economic stressors affect the mental health of farmers and their adolescent children.

“Mental health with youth in agriculture is often overlooked. We have, rightfully so, put emphasis on the owner-operator who makes the decisions on the farm and has to sit with those decisions. But we haven't looked at the impacts on the farm family,” explains Josie Rudolphi, an assistant professor and Extension specialist at the University of Illinois and one of the study's co-authors.

“When families go through trauma, it's usually not just one person who experiences trauma. It's experienced by the family. So, when we think about tough economic situations, it's being felt by everyone in the family. With farming, there are a lot of stressors that aren't typical of most work arrangements and lines between home and work are often blurred.”

In the first two years of the five-year study, data has indicated a higher prevalence of symptoms for depression and anxiety in farm parents and youth compared to the general population. The study found that about 60% of both adults and adolescents met the criteria for at least mild depression, while 55% of adults and 45% of adolescents met the criteria for generalized anxiety disorder.

“Those statistics are much higher than what we see in the general population. Even during COVID, we typically saw, among the general population, 28% to 35% of people meeting the criteria for at least mild depression,” says Rudolphi. “So, we are seeing upwards of double those figures, which is very concerning.”



While the study looks at U.S. farmers and adolescents, Rudolphi notes that the findings are consistent with other studies around the world. The [Survey of Farmer Mental Health in Canada](#), undertaken between February and May 2021 and led by Dr. Andria Jones-Bitton at the University of Guelph, found that stress, anxiety, and depression were higher among farmers than the national average. The research also found that suicide ideation was twice as high among Canadian farmers compared to the general population.

Of particular note in the new study's findings is the correlation between how farm parents' mental health and well-being affect that of their adolescent children.

“If a parent meets the criteria for depression, it's almost guaranteed that the adolescent will as well,” Rudolphi explains. “We have to, of course, acknowledge that some of this is genetic. But what it really underscores is that youth are experiencing what their parents are experiencing; they are absorbing and internalizing their experiences.”

The study has also found a “very strong association” between mental health and risk-taking among farm youth, indicating that those who participated in more risk-taking behaviours were more likely to meet the criteria for at least mild symptoms of depression. That finding echoes a similar conclusion in the research “[Health and Well-Being Among Youth People from Canadian Farms: Associations with a Culture of Risk-Taking](#),” which found risk behaviours to be high among farm adolescents and associated with various negative indicators of health and well-being.

“When we compare what we found to what the CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] has found in non-farm adolescents, we see a higher proportion of our sample participating in those risk-taking activities,” Rudolphi says.

One glimmer of promising news, says Rudolphi, is that today's youth have a heightened awareness of and engagement in mental health conversations.

“There is still some stigma with mental health, in some populations especially, and I think rural and agricultural communities at one point were among the most stigmatizing. But we are starting to see that change,” Rudolphi says. “Youth are really interested in talking about mental health. A lot of it has to do with generational changes.



Millennials are more likely to talk about it than their parents, and Gen Z and beyond are growing up in environments with much more normalized conversations about mental health.”

Of course, capitalizing on that youth interest and engagement means providing adequate and accessible mental health resources and services. And, as the study’s findings underscore, there is a need for more mental health supports focusing on farm youth and farm families.

“Is it concerning that we see a high proportion of our sample meeting the criteria for depression? Yes. But what’s also concerning is the lack of adequate access to mental health care in rural communities,” explains Rudolphi. “Because we know that these are treatable conditions; we have a spectrum of mental health and people are moving through it constantly. It’s very treatable and manageable, if you have the resources at your disposal.”

While there is no quick solution to address mental health and wellness among farm families, Rudolphi hopes the study brings more attention to the experiences of farm families, particularly youth. Though there are plenty of benefits to growing up on a farm, she notes, it’s also important to acknowledge and work to address the risks, which extend beyond physical well-being.

“If we’re going to encourage people to go into farming, if we’re going to encourage people to grow our food, then we need to make sure they’re taken care of from a physical and mental perspective,” she explains.

“These youth today are our next generation of farmers. If they aren’t safe and healthy, then we don’t have our future farmers and ranchers.”

To find mental health resources, information, and supports in your area, visit www.casa-acsa.ca/mental-health.

Kids FarmSafe Week is a new public awareness campaign hosted by the Canadian Agricultural Safety Association with the aim of promoting the safety and wellness of children and youth on Canadian farms. For its inaugural year, the campaign is taking



place May 13-19, 2024 and is presented by BASF Canada Agricultural Solutions. More information can be found at www.kidsfarmsafe.ca.