



# Silent suffering: Loneliness among secondary school students in Malaysia unveiled in Adolescent Health Survey 2022

Mohamad Aznuddin Abd Razak<sup>1</sup>, Norhafizah Sahri<sup>1</sup>, Faizul Akmal Abdul Rahim<sup>1</sup>, Hamizatul Akmal Abd Hamid<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Institute for Public Health, National Institutes of Health, Ministry of Health Malaysia.

## Introduction

Adolescence, recognized as the transitional phase from childhood to adulthood encompassing ages 10 to 19 as defined by the WHO, is marked by vulnerability to feelings of isolation due to the multifaceted shifts in development and societal pressures experienced during this pivotal life stage.<sup>(1)</sup> A study revealed that loneliness surged among adolescents attending school, showing an increase in 36 out of 37 countries between 2012 and 2018. <sup>(2)</sup> Meanwhile, within Malaysia, findings from the National Health and Morbidity Survey indicated a rise in prevalence from 8.1% in 2012 to 9.3% in 2017. <sup>(3, 4)</sup> The escalating levels of loneliness among adolescents can profoundly impact their future well-being, escalating the risk of mental health issues, engagement in risky physical behaviours, and encountering challenges in education and employment. <sup>(5)</sup> In order to curtail the upward trajectory of loneliness among Malaysian adolescents attending school, it becomes imperative to meticulously investigate both the prevalence and the underlying risk factors contributing to this issue.

## Results

Majority of the student was female and Malay. Overall, the prevalence of loneliness among secondary school students was 16.2%. The prevalence was higher among females [20.8% (95% CI: 19.80%, 21.90%)] compared to males. Those who lived with single parent (separated or widow/er) had higher prevalence of loneliness compared to those with both parents together (Table 1). Multiple logistic regression revealed that students with depression symptoms had a nine-fold higher likelihood of feeling lonely. Poor parental or guardian connectedness and bonding were significantly associated with feeling lonely. Furthermore, students whose parents are separated had a 40% higher risk of experiencing loneliness. (Table 2)

Table 1: The Prevalence of Loneliness among Secondary School Students in Malaysia, 2022

Socio-demographic characteristic	Count (n)	Estimated Population	Prevalence (%)	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower	Upper
<b>Overall</b>	5485	337154	16.2	15.51	16.99
<b>Sex</b>					
Male	1795	120919	11.6	10.84	12.50
Female	3690	216236	20.8	19.80	21.90
<b>Form</b>					
Form 1	990	57331	12.7	11.62	13.85
Form 2	1129	70373	16.2	15.02	17.51
Form 3	1128	72563	17.3	15.78	19.03
Form 4	1188	71625	18.3	16.73	19.98
Form 5	1050	65262	17.1	15.87	18.41
<b>Ethnicity</b>					
Malay	3948	223713	17.1	16.27	17.99
Chinese	553	41298	11.0	9.78	12.30
Indian	230	19115	15.5	12.39	19.14
Other Bumiputeras	628	45333	20.3	17.98	22.91
Others	126	7695	16.6	13.07	20.82
<b>Parent's Marital Status</b>					
Married	4241	260164	15.0	14.29	15.75
Separated or widowed	1126	69449	22.9	21.26	24.68
<b>Depression</b>					
Yes	3890	239370	43.0	41.57	44.47
No	1572	96103	6.4	5.95	6.78
<b>Truancy</b>					
Yes	1813	116888	22.3	21.07	23.60
No	3618	217455	14.3	13.58	15.01
<b>Peer support</b>					
Does not have sufficient peer support	2783	173152	15.7	14.86	16.53
Has sufficient peer support	2646	161017	17.1	16.08	18.19
<b>Parental or guardian supervision</b>					
Does not have sufficient parental or guardian supervision	5050	310822	16.9	16.13	17.64
Has sufficient parental or guardian supervision	375	23097	11.4	9.84	13.15
<b>Parental or guardian connectedness</b>					
Does not have sufficient parental or guardian connectedness	4709	290070	18.7	17.87	19.57
Has sufficient parental or guardian connectedness	722	44139	8.9	8.16	9.77
<b>Parental or guardian bonding</b>					
Does not have sufficient parental or guardian bonding	4304	263352	19.3	18.41	20.30
Has sufficient parental or guardian bonding	1126	70858	10.4	9.63	11.19
<b>Parental or guardian respect for privacy</b>					
Parent(s) or guardian(s) do not respect their privacy	1214	77870	20.9	19.27	22.60
Parent(s) or guardian(s) respect their privacy	4214	256214	15.3	14.65	16.05

Table 2: Factor Associated with Loneliness among Secondary School Students in Malaysia

Socio-demographic characteristic	Crude OR			Adjusted OR				
	Exp(B)	95% Confidence Interval		p-value	Exp(B)	95% Confidence Interval		p-value
		Lower	Upper			Lower	Upper	
<b>Sex</b>								
Male	1			1				
Female	1.996	1.826	2.183	0.000	1.231	1.115	1.359	0.000*
<b>Form</b>								
Form 1	1			1				
Form 2	1.332	1.177	1.508	0.000	1.177	1.034	1.340	0.014*
Form 3	1.443	1.253	1.662	0.000	1.312	1.128	1.526	0.000*
Form 4	1.541	1.335	1.779	0.000	1.342	1.164	1.547	0.000*
Form 5	1.419	1.249	1.613	0.000	1.164	1.010	1.340	0.036*
<b>Ethnicity</b>								
Malay	1.674	1.451	1.932	0.000	1.372	1.225	1.537	0.000*
Chinese	1			1				
Indian	1.484	1.159	1.901	0.002	1.674	1.259	2.224	0.000*
Other Bumiputeras	2.070	1.730	2.478	0.000	1.692	1.411	2.029	0.000*
Others	1.613	1.172	2.220	0.004	1.347	0.956	1.899	0.089
<b>Parent's Marital Status</b>								
Married	1			1				
Separated or widowed	1.685	1.525	1.861	0.000	1.390	1.231	1.569	0.000*
<b>Depression</b>								
Yes	11.128	10.224	12.111	0.000	9.328	8.516	10.218	0.000*
No	1			1				
<b>Truancy</b>								
Yes	1.724	1.597	1.861	0.000	1.260	1.152	1.378	0.000*
No	1			1				
<b>Peer support</b>								
Does not have sufficient peer support	0.901	0.825	0.984	0.020	0.892	0.811	0.981	0.018*
Has sufficient peer support	1			1				
<b>Parental or guardian supervision</b>								
Does not have sufficient parental or guardian supervision	1.579	1.340	1.860	0.000	1.011	0.843	1.212	0.904
Has sufficient parental or guardian supervision	1			1				
<b>Parental or guardian connectedness</b>								
Does not have sufficient parental or guardian connectedness	2.347	2.121	2.597	0.000	1.551	1.391	1.730	0.000*
Has sufficient parental or guardian connectedness	1			1				
<b>Parental or guardian bonding</b>								
Does not have sufficient parental or guardian bonding	2.070	1.883	2.276	0.000	1.385	1.226	1.564	0.000*
Has sufficient parental or guardian bonding	1			1				
<b>Parental or guardian respect for privacy</b>								
Parent(s) or guardian(s) do not respect their privacy	1.457	1.321	1.608	0.000	1.452	1.305	1.616	0.000*
Parent(s) or guardian(s) respect their privacy	1			1				

\* significant different at  $\alpha = 0.05$ . Analysis was done using complex sample logistic regression analysis. Classification table (85.4%) were used to check model fitness. p-value 0.000 = <math>< 0.001</math>

## Discussion and Conclusions

Loneliness among secondary school students was increased compared to previous years. <sup>(3, 4)</sup> The rise in prevalence might be the impact of the post Covid-19 pandemic and advancements in technologies. <sup>(6, 7)</sup>

Loneliness among students were significantly associated with depression. It could be explained when individuals have negative emotions such as anxiety, pessimism, and disappointment, they tend to experience more feelings of loneliness, loss of help, and desire to be understood. <sup>(8)</sup>

Lack of bonding and connectedness with parents were associated to loneliness among secondary school students. A systematic review found that, positive interaction and bonding with parent was frequently reported as a protective barrier against loneliness among young people. <sup>(9)</sup> Those who perceived their parents as more supportive of their sense of relatedness reported higher levels of connectedness to others, which in turn reduced level of loneliness. <sup>(10)</sup>

## Recommendations

- Parents or guardians should establish better bonding with their children, with some privacy boundaries to address this issue.
- The involvement of all parties in ensuring that school students in Malaysia can manage their emotions including mental health screening and programs in school.

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