

## Brief communication Σύντομο άρθρο

# Adolescents' mental health during the financial crisis in Greece: The first epidemiological data

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**G**reek financial crisis has incurred adverse effects on the mental health of the population; however existing research is constrained in the adult population. Therefore, the present study aims to shed light on the mental health state of adolescents during the recession. In this context 2,150 adolescents were recruited from a random and representative sample of public and private schools in the greater Athens area. Mental health problems were assessed with the self-report Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire while additional questions enquired about students' socio-demographic characteristics. Findings indicate that roughly one out of ten adolescents scored above the cut off point for the total difficulties score, with the higher prevalence been recorded for the conduct problems sub-scale. More specifically, 7.7% of the sample scored above the abnormal cut-off point for the total difficulties score, 10.9% for emotional symptoms, 11.9% for conduct problems, 10.6% for hyperactivity and 4.8% for peer problems. Furthermore, adolescents who reported that during the previous month there was not enough food in their house displayed higher odds of manifesting mental health problems than adolescents who replied negatively in the particular query. On the grounds of these results, there is indication about the adverse effects of the financial crisis in the development of psychiatric symptomatology in adolescents in the Greek society. This is the first study providing epidemiological data on the current state of adolescents' mental health amid the recession in Greece, showing that the crisis impinges disproportionately on the most vulnerable socio-economic groups.

**Key words:** Financial crisis, adolescent, mental health.

Since 2009 Greece has been consumed by a socio-economic and cultural crisis due to the international financial crisis. During that time, the national income has decreased and unemployment has tripled. For the first time, flexible employment

dominates the job market, while public sector hiring has practically stopped. At the same time, due to reserve "haircuts", insurance funds are unable to cover the current medical expenses of insured people.

The socio-economic crises affects mental health in two mutually sustaining ways: First it undermines the protective factors contributing to and sustaining development, and second it increases and enhances the risk factors for the emergence of mental disorders. Situations of the current reality that fall into the above categories include: employment insecurity, income instability, unemployment, flexible employment, exorbitant debts, homelessness, home insecurity, increase of social inequalities, poverty and social exclusion (especially of vulnerable groups), inability of the individual to control his/her life, and uncertainty for the future. All this contributes to a significant increase in psychiatric morbidity overall that has been researched and documented by the scientific community during the long-term study of crises. Specifically, the global financial crisis has incurred adverse effects on the mental health of the adult population in Greece through various pathways, including elevated rates of unemployment and economic hardship.<sup>1</sup>

However, its impact on the child population has not attracted equal attention, in spite of reports substantiating a stark increase in child poverty rate from 23% in 2008 to 40.5% in 2012.<sup>2</sup> Scarce data from mental health services in the country have corroborated a considerable increase in cases with various psychosocial problems, including conduct disorder, suicide attempts, addictive disorders, school drop outs, bullying and family discord as well as in hospital admissions.<sup>3,4</sup> Nonetheless, no research has been conducted on community samples; while there is a dearth of studies in the international literature as well.<sup>5</sup>

In this context, 2,150 adolescents were recruited from a random and representative sample of 51 schools in Athens area in 2013–2014. Mental health problems were assessed with the Greek version of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire<sup>6,7</sup> while additional questions enquired about students' socio-demographic characteristics. The self-reported instrument consisting of these two sections was completed during one school hour. Findings indicate that 7.7% of the sample scored above the abnormal cut-off point for the total difficulties score,

10.9% for emotional symptoms, 11.9% for conduct problems, 10.6% for hyperactivity and 4.8% for peer problems. It merits noting that the research group that validated the instrument in Greece, did not present the scale's cut off points. Therefore, in the present calculations, the cut off points were computed in accord with the international literature.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, adolescents who reported that during the previous month there was not enough food in their house displayed higher odds of manifesting mental health problems than adolescents who replied negatively in the particular query: OR=5, 95% CI=2.87–8.72  $p<0.01$  for total score, OR=3.12, 95%CI=1.8–5.37 for emotional symptoms, OR=3.32, 95%CI=1.98–5.56,  $p<0.01$  for conduct problems, OR=2.13, 95%CI=1.17–3.89,  $p<0.05$  for hyperactivity and OR=3, 95%CI=1.45–6.22,  $p<0.01$  for peer problems.

This is the first study providing epidemiological data on the current state of adolescents' mental health amid the recession in Greece, showing that the crisis impinges disproportionately on the most vulnerable socio-economic groups. Faced with this situation, the community of child psychiatrists has intensified its efforts to support public services by offering additional services, developing common actions with other health workers, consolidating its alliances with other social patients (the Church, insurance organizations, patient associations etc), enhancing its advocacy role so that decision makers might change health policies, and using its scientific tools to promote further research and substantiate data on the current state of child mental health.

Additionally, multifaceted interventions targeting families from low socio-economic background as well as mental health promotion activities in schools should be prioritized if we want to avoid extrapolation of these problems to adulthood in the ensuing years.

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# Η ψυχική υγεία των εφήβων στην Ελλάδα της οικονομικής κρίσης: Πρώτα ερευνητικά δεδομένα

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Η οικονομική κρίση στην Ελλάδα έχει επιφέρει βλαπτικές συνέπειες στην ψυχική υγεία του ελληνικού πληθυσμού. Η έρευνα όμως που υπάρχει πάνω σε αυτό το θέμα είχε μέχρι σήμερα επικεντρωθεί αποκλειστικά στον ενήλικο πληθυσμό. Τούτων δοθέντων, η παρούσα μελέτη έχει σκοπό να αναδείξει τα προβλήματα ψυχικής υγείας που ανακύπτουν κατά τη διάρκεια της οικονομικής κρίσης στον εφηβικό πληθυσμό. Γι' αυτόν τον σκοπό επιστρατεύτηκαν 2.150 έφηβοι από τυχαίο και αντιπροσωπευτικό δείγμα δημόσιων αλλά και ιδιωτικών σχολείων από την ευρύτερη περιοχή της Αττικής. Τα προβλήματα ψυχικής υγείας εξετάστηκαν με τη χρήση αυτοσυμπληρούμενου ερωτηματολογίου, του Ερωτηματολογίου Δυνατοτήτων και Δυσκολιών (SDQ). Επιπλέον εξετάστηκαν μια σειρά από κοινωνικά και δημογραφικά χαρακτηριστικά. Σύμφωνα με τα αποτελέσματα περίπου ένας στους 10 εφήβους του δείγματος παρουσιάζει προβλήματα ψυχικής υγείας, με συχνότερα εκείνα που αφορούν στη διαγωγή. Πιο συγκεκριμένα, 7,7% του δείγματος παρουσίασε βαθμολογία πάνω από το επιτρεπτό όριο της κλίμακας, 10,9% του δείγματος παρουσίασε συναισθηματικά προβλήματα, 11,9% παρουσίασε προβλήματα διαγωγής, 10,6 % προβλήματα υπερκινητικότητας, και 4,8% προβλήματα στη σχέση με συνομηλίκους. Επιπρόσθετα, οι έφηβοι που δήλωσαν ότι κατά τη διάρκεια του τελευταίου μήνα δεν υπήρχε αρκετό φαγητό στην οικεία τους, παρουσίασαν υψηλότερα ποσοστά ψυχιατρικής συμπτωματολογίας σε σχέση με τους εφήβους που δήλωσαν ότι υπήρχε φαγητό στην οικεία τους. Τα αποτελέσματα της παρούσας έρευνας στοιχειοθετούν ότι υπάρχουν ενδείξεις πως η οικονομική κρίση συμβάλλει στην ανάπτυξη ψυχιατρικής συμπτωματολογίας στους Έλληνες εφήβους. Η παρούσα μελέτη είναι η πρώτη στην Ελλάδα που εξετάζει την επίπτωση της οικονομικής κρίσης στην ψυχική υγεία των εφήβων και δείχνει ότι η οικονομική κρίση πλήττει τις πλέον ευαίσθητες κοινωνικο-οικονομικές ομάδες του πληθυσμού.

**Λέξεις ευρετηρίου:** Οικονομική κρίση, εφηβεία, ψυχική υγεία.

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