

Trends in the utilization of youth primary healthcare services for psychological distress

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Research article

Keywords: Psychological distress, psychological health complaints, depressive symptoms, young people, youth, primary healthcare, service use, trend

Posted Date: February 28th, 2020

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.2.24855/v1>

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Version of Record: A version of this preprint was published on February 3rd, 2021. See the published version at <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12913-021-06124-w>.

Abstract

Background Psychological distress among young people is increasing in Northern Europe. According to established healthcare utilization theory, this will create a greater need for youth primary healthcare and subsequently lead to more help-seeking behavior by distressed young people. The aim of this study was to investigate the relationship between the use of youth primary healthcare services and psychological distress in times of increasing mental health problems and increased service need.

Methods This study consisted of five waves of repeated annual cross-sectional data collected from young people (aged 13-19) living in Norway between 2014 and 2018 (n = 368,579). Population-weighted and design-adjusted generalized linear regression with a log-link was used to examine the use of youth primary healthcare services over time.

Results We found that a large proportion of young people use primary healthcare services and that young people with high levels of psychological distress use primary healthcare services twice as much as their peers with low levels of psychological distress. In addition, between 2014 and 2018 both psychological distress and primary healthcare service utilization increased: psychological distress increased by 5% and total primary healthcare service use increased by 300 consultations per 1000 young people. Overall, psychological distress had a conditional association with youth primary healthcare service use and could account for between 16-66% of the change in the use of services between 2014 and 2018, depending on the service type. However, the absolute increase seen in the use primary healthcare services was mainly driven by young people with low levels of psychological distress as opposed to young people with high psychological distress. This suggest a converging trend.

Conclusions Our findings suggest that there might be serious barriers between need and help-seeking behavior for young people with high levels of psychological distress and that the pattern of utilization among young people with lower distress may indicate overuse, possibly as an inadvertent consequence of a newly introduced school absence policy. While further research is needed to confirm these findings, our work may inform healthcare providers and policy makers about primary healthcare utilization trends among young people.

Introduction

Indicators of psychological distress among young people, such as psychological and psychosomatic health complaints, appear to be increasing in many developed and Western countries [1-3]. In comparative studies in Europe and North America, young people in the Nordic countries stand out in regard to psychosomatic health complaints where an increasing trend has been reported over the last twenty years [1, 2]. One comparative study highlights Norway as the country with the largest increase in youth reports of two or more weekly psychosomatic complaints, with an increase of almost 11% (from 21.8% to 32.5%) from 1994 to 2010 [2]. Based on the available population health data in Norway, there is further evidence for a trend of increasing psychological distress among young people between 1992 and

2018, especially among females [4-8]. In contrast, the number of health complaints observed in other geographical regions remained stable or declined [1, 2].

Like other countries with an increasing trend of psychological distress among young people, Norway has also seen a parallel increase in the diagnosis of mental illness, prescription of antidepressant medication and primary healthcare service use. These changes appear to correspond with the increase in psychological distress – particularly pronounced among young females [6, 8, 9]. Consequently, deteriorating mental health among young people is recognized as a public health concern both internationally and in Norway [10, 11], and further research to improve our understanding of psychological distress and help-seeking behavior is needed.

Psychological distress is associated with healthcare service use and help-seeking behavior [12, 13]. The use of mental health services by young people is increasing in many developed countries [13-15]. By their own account, mental health problems are among the most common reasons why young people seek help in the primary healthcare service [16]. Alarming, young people frequently show the worst service access compared to other age groups [17] even though 75% of all mental disorders emerge before the age of 25 [18]. Another review has shown that only 20–40% of adolescents with mental health problems are detected by primary healthcare services and only about 25% receive appropriate professional treatment [19]. Homlong et al. [20] found that among 15 to 16-year-olds, frequent users of school health services or youth health centers had a greater risk of dropping out of high school five years later. A Norwegian report found that one in five high school dropouts reported that they quit school because of mental health problems [21].

The Andersen healthcare utilization model [22] is a widely accepted conceptual model for the study of health services utilization. The Andersen healthcare utilization model suggests that help-seeking behavior is a complex interaction between three sets of determinants: predisposing factors (demographic and social), enabling factors (economic) and need for care (health outcomes). Based on this theoretical framework, it could be hypothesized that increasing psychological distress among young people will be associated with an increased need for primary healthcare services, such as youth specific services that promote health (e.g., youth health centers and school health services) and traditional primary healthcare services (e.g., family doctor, psychologist and out-of-hours primary healthcare). Increased need for care should hold true when considering predisposing factors (age, gender) and enabling factors (socioeconomic status, service availability, ease of access).

Norway represents a suitable research setting to further explore the relationship between primary healthcare service utilization and psychological distress among young people, since both psychological distress and service use appear to be increasing. In Norway, youth primary healthcare services are generally free, widespread and easily available to the public.

The aim of this study is to investigate the relationship between youth primary healthcare service use and psychological distress in times of increasing mental health problems and increased service need. The following research questions will be addressed:

RQ 1: To what extent did psychological distress increase among young people between 2014 and 2018?

RQ 2: To what extent is psychological distress associated with youth primary healthcare service use?

a) Can changes in psychological distress explain changes in service use among young people over time?

b) How much of the trend in primary healthcare service use can be explained by changes in psychological distress?

c) Is the trend similar for those with low levels and high levels of psychological distress, or do the two groups converge/diverge in relation to primary healthcare service use?

Methods

Study design and participants

The data analyzed are drawn from the Norwegian Ungdata (Youngdata in English) national survey. Ungdata is an annually repeated cross-sectional data collection scheme, designed to conduct youth surveys at the municipal level in Norway (for more information see <http://www.ungdata.no/English>). Since its inception in 2010, youth surveys have been conducted repeatedly in nearly all Norwegian municipalities. Ungdata is regarded as the most comprehensive source of data on adolescent health and well-being in Norway. The data are used in municipal planning and developmental work related to public health and preventive measures as part of national efforts to monitor young people's health. The survey receives funding through the national budget. Norwegian municipalities initiate the survey themselves. The survey consists of approximately 150 mandatory questions with the option of adding additional packages. Surveys are conducted throughout the school year from August to June and involve students attending Grades 8-10 and all three years of upper secondary school (generally aged between 13 and 19 years old).

In the current study, data that included questions about youth primary healthcare service utilization were used. These questions were included in the mandatory questionnaire from 2014 onwards. This produced five waves of data from 2014 to 2018. Response rates are reported to be high at the municipal level (>80%). The sample for this study consisted of 46,019 participants (from 86 municipalities out of 422) in 2014, 73,426 (from 121 municipalities) in 2015, 70,577 (from 138 municipalities) in 2016, 107,601 (from 174 municipalities) in 2017 and 70,956 (from 124 municipalities) in 2018, resulting in a net sample of 368,579 young people growing up in Norway. The gender distribution in our sample is 50% females and 50% males.

Measures

Youth primary healthcare service utilization was measured by the question “How many times have you used the following healthcare services over the past 12 months?” Participants could choose from the following services: “school nurse or doctor”; “youth health centers”; “family doctor”; “psychologist”; “out-of-hours primary healthcare service”. The response options to indicate how often the participant used each service were as follows: “never” (1); “1-2 times” (2); “3-5 times” (3); “6 or more times” (4). For the analysis, these response categories were averaged to represent interval midpoint estimates of service use (never = 0, 1-2 times = 1.5, 3-5 times = 4, 6 or more times = 6).

Symptoms of psychological distress, sometimes referred to as psychological health complaints, were measured with a six-item scale derived from the widely used the Hopkins Symptom Checklist (HSCL) [23]. The HSCL is recommended for use in both clinical and epidemiological studies to measure psychological distress among young people. Short formats of the HSCL (5-25 item scales) have been shown to perform almost as well as the full version [24]. Rasch analysis of the psychometric properties of the six-item HSCL scale used in the current study has previously shown that this scale works reasonably well [25].

Participants were asked if they had been affected by any of the following during the past week: “felt that everything is a struggle”, “had sleep problems”, “felt unhappy, sad or depressed”, “felt hopelessness about the future”, “felt stiff or tense”, “worried too much about things”. The six questions had four response options: (1) “not been affected at all”, (2) “not been affected much”, (3) “been affected quite a lot” and (4) “been affected a great deal”. To capture more severe psychological distress, the responses were dichotomized based on average scores greater than 3.0. Previous studies have shown that young people scoring above this cut-off point were within the range of depressive disorders commonly found in Norwegian community youth samples [26, 27].

Background characteristics and demography

The socioeconomic status of young people was measured using the Family Affluence Scale (FAS II) which is a validated, brief, assets-based measure of family wealth that is designed for use in youth surveys [28, 29]. FAS consisted of four questions: “Does your family have a car?”; “Do you have your own bedroom?”; “How many times have you travelled somewhere on holiday with your family over the past year?”; “How many computers does your family have?”. A mean score was created from the participants’ responses.

Availability of core primary healthcare services was measured through a municipal centrality index developed by Statistics Norway, ranking the 422 municipalities in Norway on a scale from 0-1000 based on service availability and available workplaces within a 90-minute drive by car [30].

In addition, grade, gender and survey year (time) were added as covariates in later analysis.

Data analysis

Statistical analysis was performed using the survey package for complex survey samples [31] in R [32]. Regression models were analyzed using a generalized linear model (GLM) with a log-link to account for non-normal distribution of the residuals. The GLM approach with a log-link is preferable to log-linearized models when the distribution of residuals is non-normal as was found in the current study [33, 34]. Complex survey design weights were created using population weights, stratifying for municipality and survey year, in order to maintain national representativeness of the sample. In addition, design weights were used to provide robust standard errors. Interaction terms between psychological distress and survey year were tested using a Rao-Scott log likelihood test for complex survey samples. The log likelihood statistic was used to test if an independent variable shows no association with the outcome (null hypothesis). If the likelihood test fails to reject the null hypothesis, removing the independent variable from the model will not substantially reduce the fit of that model [35].

Results

Descriptive statistics

Increasing trend of psychological distress and primary healthcare service utilization among young people between 2014 and 2018

A summary of the population weighted trends in psychological distress between 2014 and 2018 suggests that psychological distress increased yearly from 13% in 2014 (95% CI = 12%, 13%) to 18% in 2018 (95% CI = 17%, 19%). Overall, there were substantial gender and age differences in those suffering from psychological distress. For males, 7% (95% CI = 7%, 8%) reported psychological distress compared to 22% among females (95% CI = 22%, 23%). With respect to age, the difference in psychological distress increased from 8% (95% CI = 8%, 9%) for the youngest teens to 22% for the oldest (95% CI = 21%, 23%).

In our sample, 35% (95% CI = 34%, 35%) of the participants used the school health service (the school nurse or doctor), 13% (95% CI = 12%, 13%) used a youth health center, 10% (95% CI = 10%, 10%) used a psychologist, 60% (95% CI = 60%, 60%) used their family doctor and 36% (95% CI = 36%, 36%) used an out-of-hours primary healthcare service during the previous six months. In general, there was a trend of increasing service use in the youth population, increasing from an average of 3.6 consultations in 2014 to 4.1 consultations in 2018 (Table 2).

Young people with high levels of psychological distress tended to consult primary healthcare services more often (M = 6.48, 95% CI = 6.40, 6.55), almost twice as much as their peers with low levels of distress (M = 3.36, 95% CI = 3.28, 3.43).

Table 2. The use of primary healthcare services among young people by year and psychological distress (population weighted).

		Mean (95% CI)					
		Year					
		2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	Average
Health service	Psychological distress						
School nurse or doctor	High level	1.41 (1.34, 1.48)	1.38 (1.31, 1.45)	1.47 (1.38, 1.56)	1.48 (1.42, 1.54)	1.52 (1.46, 1.59)	1.46 (1.43, 1.49)
	Low level	0.62 (0.58, 0.67)	0.63 (0.59, 0.67)	0.64 (0.61, 0.67)	0.73 (0.69, 0.77)	0.79 (0.74, 0.85)	0.69 (0.66, 0.71)
Youth health centers	High level	0.72 (0.67, 0.76)	0.64 (0.58, 0.70)	0.63 (0.60, 0.67)	0.65 (0.61, 0.70)	0.65 (0.55, 0.75)	0.66 (0.63, 0.69)
	Low level	0.25 (0.22, 0.27)	0.21 (0.19, 0.23)	0.21 (0.20, 0.23)	0.26 (0.23, 0.28)	0.26 (0.24, 0.28)	0.24 (0.23, 0.25)
Psychologist	High level	1.22 (1.15, 1.28)	1.2 (1.16, 1.24)	1.19 (1.15, 1.24)	1.13 (1.1, 1.17)	1.11 (1.08, 1.14)	1.16 (1.14, 1.18)
	Low level	0.21 (0.20, 0.23)	0.22 (0.20, 0.23)	0.21 (0.20, 0.22)	0.25 (0.24, 0.25)	0.26 (0.24, 0.28)	0.23 (0.22, 0.24)
Family doctor	High level	2.20 (2.12, 2.28)	2.25 (2.20, 2.29)	2.24 (2.18, 2.30)	2.25 (2.15, 2.34)	2.22 (2.18, 2.26)	2.23 (2.20, 2.26)
	Low level	1.48 (1.44, 1.53)	1.51 (1.45, 1.56)	1.45 (1.42, 1.49)	1.53 (1.46, 1.59)	1.58 (1.48, 1.68)	1.51 (1.48, 1.55)
Out-of-hours primary healthcare service	High level	1.06 (0.99, 1.13)	1.12 (1.08, 1.17)	1.01 (0.97, 1.06)	1.02 (0.98, 1.05)	1.04 (1.00, 1.09)	1.05 (1.03, 1.07)
	Low level	0.70 (0.68, 0.72)	0.76 (0.73, 0.78)	0.70 (0.68, 0.73)	0.75 (0.74, 0.77)	0.80 (0.76, 0.83)	0.74 (0.73, 0.76)
Average		3.64 (3.54, 3.74)	3.76 (3.62, 3.90)	3.64 (3.56, 3.72)	3.95 (3.86, 4.05)	4.13 (3.99, 4.27)	

Looking more closely at the statutory youth primary healthcare services revealed that the use of the school health service increased from an average of 0.72 consultations per person in 2014 to 0.92 in 2018 (Table 2). Young people tended to consult youth health centers less often than the school health services. Consultation rates for youth health centers increased slightly from 0.31 per person in 2014 to 0.33 in 2018 (Table 2). Young people with high levels of psychological distress used school health services more than twice as much as their peers with low levels of distress (Table 2). The results were similar for youth health centers where young people with high levels of psychological distress used the service close to three times as much as their peers with low levels of distress (Table 2).

In general, there were gender and age differences in primary healthcare service use. Females and older users accessed the services more than males and younger users. On average, females had 1.5 more consultations during a six-month period ($M = 4.57$, 95% CI = 4.50, 4.64) than males ($M = 3.06$, 95% CI = 2.96, 3.16). As the users got older, they used primary healthcare services more, with an average difference of 1.3 consultations between grade 8 ($M = 3.30$, 95% CI = 3.21, 4.30) and third year of upper secondary school ($M = 4.58$, 95% CI = 4.38, 4.72).

For the statutory youth services specifically, females tended to use both services twice as much as males. For the school health services, females had on average 1.07 consultations (95% CI = 1.04, 1.10) compared to 0.53 (95% CI = 0.51, 0.56) for males. For youth health centers, females had 0.42 consultations (96% CI = 0.40, 0.44) compared to 0.17 (95% CI = 0.17, 0.18) among males. As the young people got older, they generally used the services more. For the school health service, use increased through grades 8 to 10, from 0.82 (95% CI = 0.78, 0.86) in grade 8 to a peak of 0.9 (95% CI = 0.87, 0.93) in grade 10. In the transition to upper secondary education where the availability of this service is reduced, the use of the school health service declined to 0.77 (95% CI = 0.74, 0.79). However, service use then increased as the young people got older to 0.8 (95% CI = 0.74, 0.86) in the third and final year of upper secondary school. For youth health centers, service use increased linearly from 0.17 (95% CI = 0.16, 0.18) in grade 8 to 0.51 (95% CI = 0.46, 0.56) in the last year of upper secondary school.

Regression analysis

Convergence in primary healthcare service utilization for psychological distress among young people between 2014 and 2018

Results from the GLM regression analysis suggest a changing pattern in primary healthcare service use among young people between 2014 and 2018. Results indicate a gross change in service use over time.

There was a significant yearly increase in all service types in the youth population (see Additional file 1). The statutory youth primary healthcare services, the school health service (school nurse or doctor) and youth health centers had an estimated yearly increase of 6% and 4% respectively, based on the log means of primary healthcare service use over time. For the remaining primary healthcare services, the use of a psychologist increased by 5% while both the use of family doctor and out-of-hours primary healthcare increased by 2% yearly. Adding psychological distress as a covariate indicated the proportion of the effect of the time coefficient that could be explained by psychological distress among young people. This ranged from 16% in the pattern of use for the school health service to 66% for the use of a psychologist. This suggests that psychological distress can explain a substantial part of the change in young people's primary healthcare service use between 2014 and 2018.

The interaction term between psychological distress and time that was added to the model was significant and improved the model fit for the school health service ($X^2(1, 635) = 8.9, p < 0.01$), youth health centers ($X^2(1, 635) = 8.6, p < 0.01$), psychologist ($X^2(1, 635) = 31.9, p < 0.001$) and out-of-hours primary healthcare services ($X^2(1, 635) = 14.5, p < 0.001$), but not for family doctor (see Additional file 2). This indicates that primary healthcare service use follows a different slope for young people depending on whether they have high levels of psychological distress or not. This effect did not change when adjusting for gender, grade, socioeconomic status and service availability. The strongest predictor of primary healthcare service use was psychological distress followed by gender.

Exponentiating the adjusted regression coefficients for primary healthcare service use over time at the average of all included covariates indicates that young people with high levels of psychological distress use health services more than their peers with low levels. However, the increase of service use over time was mainly observed among young people with low levels of psychological distress and not among those with high levels (Figure 1).

— Insert figure 1 around here —

Figure 1. Youth primary healthcare service use by psychological distress and year (predicted values).

Based on the total predicted values, the observed increase in primary healthcare service use in 2014 compared to 2018 equated to an increase of 371 consultations per 1000 among young people with low levels of psychological distress, while it decreased by 68 consultations for young people with high levels of psychological distress. The only primary healthcare service which saw an actual increase in use by young people with high levels of psychological distress was the school health service (that is an increase of 150 consultations per 1000). This suggests convergence in primary healthcare service use between young people with low levels of psychological distress and those with high levels. If the current trend remains unchanged, young people with low levels of psychological distress will use primary healthcare services

more than those with high levels within 20 years and the point of convergence is expected to be reached before the year 2038.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate the relation between youth primary healthcare service use and psychological distress in times of increasing mental health problems. Based on Andersen's healthcare utilization model, we expected an increase in psychological distress, such as the increase seen among the youth of Norway, would lead to an increased need for primary healthcare services and an increase in help-seeking behavior among the distressed. We found that between 2014 and 2018 psychological distress among young people continued to increase alongside increasing rates of primary healthcare service use. A large proportion of young people used available primary healthcare services, ranging from 10% using a psychologist to 60% using their family doctor over a six-month period. Overall, psychological distress has a conditional association with youth primary healthcare service use and can explain between 16-66% of the change in the use of services between 2014 and 2018, depending on the service type. Young people with high levels of psychological distress tended to seek help from primary healthcare services twice as often as their peers with low levels of distress. Contrary to our hypothesis, the absolute increase in primary healthcare service use observed between 2014 and 2018 appeared to be driven mainly by young people with low levels of psychological distress and not by the increasing proportion of young people with high levels of psychological distress. While young people with low psychological distress use services more over time, young people with high levels of psychological distress use services less and less. This is suggestive of a converging trend. This decrease in service utilization among distressed young people was seen in all the youth primary healthcare services, except in the school health service.

Why do young people with high levels of psychological distress use primary healthcare services less over time despite the increasing prevalence of psychological distress?

In our data, based on self-reports, the proportion of young people with high levels of psychological distress increased from 13% in 2014 to 18% in 2018. An increase in psychological distress in Norway has previously been observed by other researchers in the period between 1992 and 2018 [4-8]. This increasing trend of mental health problems among young people is regarded as a public health concern [4]. Psychological distress is usually considered to be strongly associated with primary healthcare service utilization among young people [12, 13] and according to Andersen's health service utilization model [22], increasing rates of psychological distress should theoretically lead to an increased need for primary

healthcare services. For young people this should constitute increased primary healthcare service utilization within the school health service and youth health centers or other primary healthcare services. Superficially, this appeared to be the case as we found that young people with psychological distress tend to use primary healthcare services twice as much as their peers with low levels of distress. However, between 2014 and 2018, youth service utilization of primary healthcare services declined yearly by 68 consultations per 1000 young people among those with high levels of psychological distress.

The cause of the decline in the utilization of primary healthcare services among distressed young people is unknown and was unexpected based on our proposed theoretical framework. The healthcare utilization model suggests that deteriorating health outcomes would create a greater need for care leading to greater primary healthcare service utilization. It would be expected that deteriorating mental health outcomes should lead to a greater need for care. However, since our study does not support this idea, the implication is that there are serious barriers between perceived need for care by young people and primary healthcare service access. This is in line with previous research that has shown that young people access services less than adults [17]. The inherent barriers between care needs and help-seeking behavior is particularly worrying in times of the increasing prevalence of psychological distress in the youth population.

Great measures are taken in Norway to ensure high quality, easily available youth primary healthcare, but the extent to which the services provided are standardized and evidence-based is still under debate. Several Norwegian systematic reviews suggest that there is still room for improvement in the provision of youth-specific services [36, 37]. Current evidence on the provision of mental healthcare in the general population suggests that there are no obvious changes in the risk factors for psychological distress that could explain an increasing trend in mental health problems. This indicates that the issue is complex [38]. The authors argue that the lack of improved mental health may be related to the quality of the care service provided and that currently these services do not meet the minimum standards of clinical practice guidelines. In addition, the services may fail to adequately provide preventive efforts in the pursuit of health promotion among young people and adults. If the authors' conclusion is correct, it would suggest that the quality of the services provided for young people in Norway does not currently meet the needs of young people with psychological distress and that many distressed young people seek help elsewhere or possibly not at all. It is presently unknown if young people with psychological distress seek help elsewhere within the healthcare system (for example other care services or specialized care), or that they seek help from informal sources of care, such as family and friends [39]. If they do, this could explain the decline observed in most primary healthcare services between 2014 and 2018.

Our finding that young people with high levels of psychological distress used primary healthcare services less between 2014 and 2018 despite deteriorating mental health supports the recommended quality improvements in healthcare systems suggested by Jorm et al. [38], in order to make primary healthcare services more effective in preventing further deterioration of mental health in the youth population. Policy makers and care providers should be advised that primary healthcare services need to be made more attractive and youth-friendly in order to ensure access for young people with psychological distress.

Why do young people with low levels of psychological distress use services more often over time?

Young people with low levels of psychological distress use primary healthcare services relatively less than those with high levels of psychological distress. However, between 2014 and 2018, service use among young people with low levels of psychological distress increased substantially. Compared to 2014, young people with low levels of psychological distress had 371 more primary healthcare consultations per 1000 young people in 2018. This leads to many questions regarding psychological distress and its effects on primary healthcare utilization. Since young people with low levels of psychological distress use primary healthcare services more often over time, this may suggest a change in the propensity to seek care, such as a lower threshold for seeking care (overuse).

A previous study found that the mean level of psychological distress among young people using psychiatric services between 2002 and 2010 decreased suggesting a lower threshold for help-seeking behavior among young people in Sweden. However, this development was not found among adults. The authors therefore argued that a lower threshold of help-seeking behavior among young people may explain the recent increase in psychiatric service use in Sweden and perhaps in other developed countries [13]. Another study involving patient data from 34 countries investigated the propensity to seek healthcare and found that it was weakly associated with greater use of a family doctor [40]. In addition, the authors found that the characteristics of the healthcare system might influence patients' decision to seek help, potentially leading to either overuse or underuse of health services [40]. According to the Norwegian Institute of Public Health [41], underuse of primary healthcare services appears to be more likely in the general population. On the other hand, the Norwegian Institute of Public Health points out that if help-seeking behavior were to increase among those with low levels of psychological symptoms, as seen in our study and in a study by Kosidou et al. [13], this might instead indicate overuse of health services.

Further evidence to support the notion of overuse among young people with low levels of psychological distress between 2014 and 2018 might be found in the impact of a school absence policy introduced in 2016. From the start of the 2016/17 school year, new rules for absence were introduced in upper secondary schools [42]. The main feature of the new regulations is that students with more than 10% undocumented absence in a school subject lose their right to a graded semester assessment without which they are unable to graduate. In case of illness, only a medical certificate or documentation issued by a qualified healthcare professional will be considered as valid absence documentation following more than 10% absence from upper secondary school. According to Bakken et al. [43], the number of consultations in the general practice services increased by 30% in the age group 16 to 18 years in the year the reform was introduced compared to the previous year. This led the authors to believe that it is very likely that the school absence policy is inadvertently causing young people to overuse primary healthcare

services. Bakken et al. [43] only included data on the use of family doctors among young people, but since health personnel other than the family doctor (e.g., physiotherapists, dentists, psychologists) may also document absence for the students [42], a similar increase could conceivably be observed in other primary healthcare services as well. Interestingly, our study partially confirms this. Young people in general (and to a greater extent young people in upper secondary school) with low levels of psychological distress had a general increase of primary healthcare service use after the policy change in 2016 above that of young people with high levels of psychological distress. This might suggest that part of the increase in youth primary healthcare service use is not a sign of increased morbidity, but rather in part due to young people needing a medical certificate to avoid failing subjects, further supporting the notion of overuse among young people with low levels of psychological distress.

Alternatively, the increased use of primary healthcare services among young people with low levels of psychological distress might partly be explained by a change in how young people utilize primary healthcare services for matters not directly relating to psychological distress and not captured in our study. Young people use primary healthcare services for a wide range of reasons, including sexual health (such as pregnancy, contraception and sexually transmitted infections) which is also one of the most common reasons for contact with youth primary healthcare alongside mental health issues [16].

The propensity for young people to seek care remains understudied and more research is needed in order to determine if increases seen in youth primary healthcare use are due to overuse mechanisms.

Predisposing and enabling factors of service use

The predisposing and enabling factors covered in this study, gender, age, socioeconomic status and psychological distress, are all important indicators of primary healthcare service utilization among young people. In regard to gender and youth primary healthcare service use, it is well known that females use primary healthcare services more than males, a finding that is also observed in the current study. Given that males have the same need for primary healthcare services when they have psychological distress, it is not thoroughly understood why males report less help-seeking behavior. Empirical evidence indicates that low treatment rates among males cannot be explained by better health, but must be attributed to a discrepancy between perception of need and help-seeking behavior [44, 45]. Furthermore, we found that older young people generally used primary healthcare services more often. We also found that overall, socioeconomically disadvantaged young people used primary healthcare services more than the more advantaged. This might suggest equitable services proportionate to those with the greatest need [46].

Strengths and limitations

A major strength of this study is that it is based on a very large sample of young people and has a yearly data collection scheme allowing the investigation of trends in the general youth population in Norway. In addition, data are weighted and adjusted in order to ensure national representativeness of young people growing up in Norway. However, one limitation is that the repeated cross-sectional design used in the current study does not enable strict causal inference. In addition, this study relies on self-reported data, which provide the overall picture from the young people's own perspective and might be distinct from objective data. Finally, the use of youth primary healthcare services is a general outcome in the survey and therefore the specific reason for the consultations are not known and could be related to health outcomes other than those studied in our paper.

Conclusion

Between 2014 and 2018, there was an increase in the prevalence of psychological distress and primary healthcare service use among young people in Norway. Young people with high levels of psychological distress used primary healthcare services twice as often as their peers. However, despite an increasing proportion of young people with psychological distress between 2014 and 2018, primary healthcare service use among young people with high levels of psychological distress declined. This suggests that the absolute increase seen in primary healthcare utilization among young people is accounted for by increased use among the less distressed. Declining primary healthcare service use among young people with high levels of psychological distress in parallel with increasing use among the less distressed suggests future convergence. A converging trend of primary healthcare service use suggests overuse of primary healthcare services among the less distressed young people and likely underuse among the more distressed. It is currently unknown if young people with high levels of psychological distress seek care elsewhere in the healthcare system, from friends and family or not at all. These issues need to be further investigated in order to map possible overuse and underuse mechanisms and to ensure that young people get excellent care when they need it.

Abbreviations

HSCL: Hopkins Symptom Checklist

FAS: Family Affluence Scale

GLM: Generalized Linear Model

NSD: Norwegian Centre for Research Data

NOVA: Norwegian Social Research – NOVA

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

The study was approved by the NSD, Norwegian Centre for Research Data (reference number: 42367). The Ungdata survey was administered anonymously online during school hours with a teacher present. The young people were informed that participation was voluntary, and parents were informed prior to the study (a passive consent scheme).

Consent for publication

N/A

Availability of data and materials

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available in the NSD - Norwegian Centre for Research Data repository (<https://nsd.no/nsd/english/orderform.html>).

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Funding

The authors declare that they have no competing interests

Authors' contributions

All authors prepared the outline of the first draft and created a data analysis plan. TP prepared the first draft of the paper. TP and NW analyzed the data. All authors reviewed the first- and subsequent drafts of the paper and approved the final manuscript.

Acknowledgment

(Part of) the data used in this study are taken from the “Ungdata 2010-2018”. The survey is funded by the Norwegian Directorate of Health, Ministry of Justice and Public Security, Ministry of Children and Families and Ministry of Education and Research. Data in anonymous form are made available by Norwegian Social Research – NOVA through NSD - Norwegian Centre for Research Data. NOVA, the Norwegian Directorate of Health, Ministry of Justice and Public Security, Ministry of Children and Families and Ministry of Education and Research or NSD are not responsible for the analysis of the data or the interpretations made.

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Figures

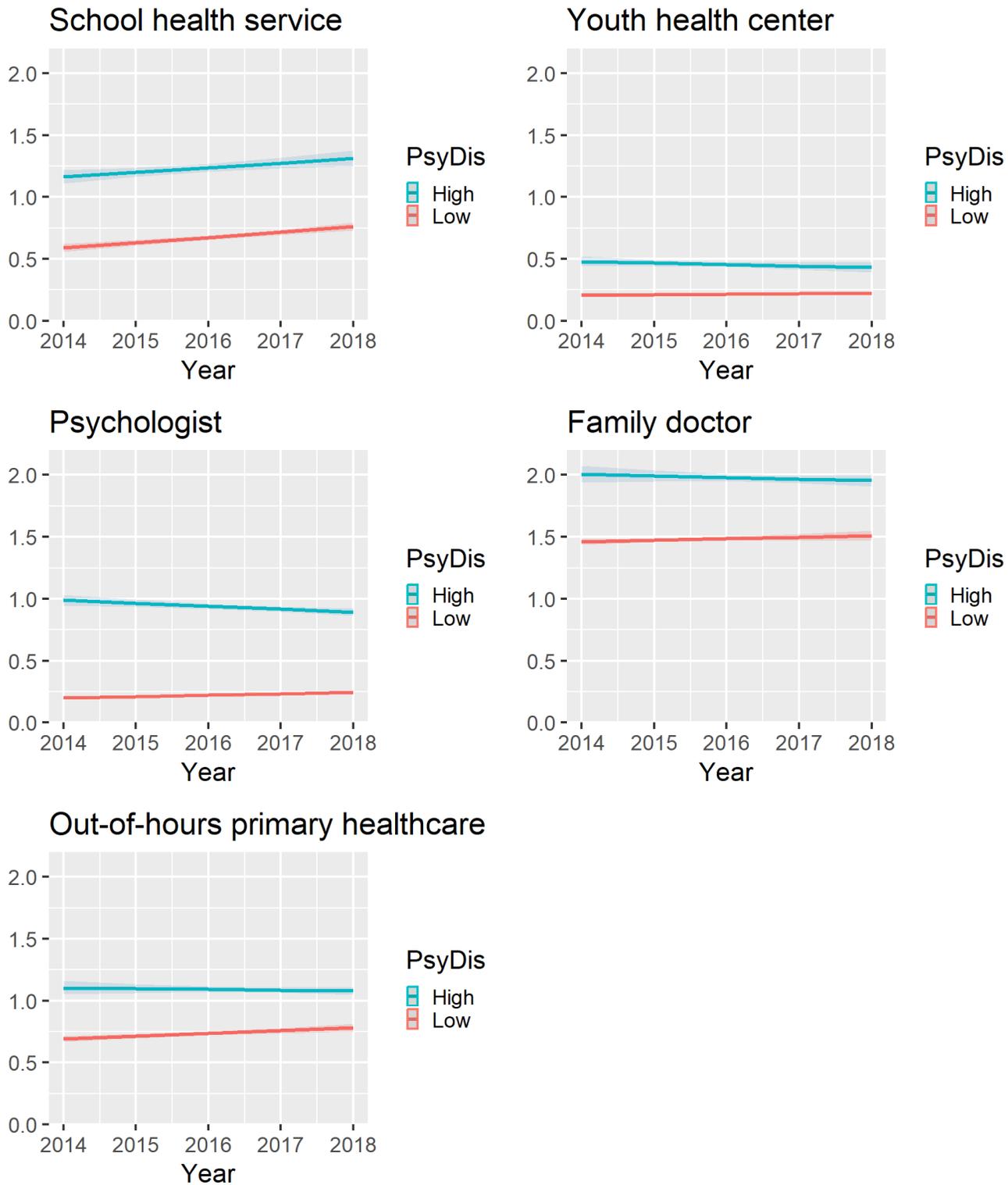


Figure 1

Youth primary healthcare service use by psychological distress and year (predicted values).

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