

POSTER ABSTRACT

Promoting Mental Wellbeing of Adolescents in Socially Vulnerable Neighbourhoods through Participatory Action Research: protocol of the Belgian ProMent-study

International Conference on Integrated Care (ICIC26), Birmingham, 13-15 April 2026

Lima van den Steen^{1,2,3}, Maja Lopez Hartmann^{1,4}, Lara Vesentini^{1,2}, Johan Bilsen^{1,2}, Kris Van Den Broeck^{1,3}

1: Academie Voor De Eerste Lijn, Belgium

2: Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium

3: Universiteit Antwerpen, Belgium

4: Karel de Grote-Hogeschool, Belgium

Background: Adolescents, particularly those in socially vulnerable neighbourhoods, are at increased risk for experiencing mental health issues. Promoting their mental wellbeing requires a context-sensitive, community-based and integrated approach, that actively and creatively engages adolescents as well as their social environment.

Approach: With ProMent, we will conduct Participatory Action Research (PAR) for five years in two socially vulnerable neighbourhoods in the two largest cities in Belgium, Brussels and Antwerp. To ensure steady engagement and maximize participation, we are continuously developing an 'Academic Workplace', where we bring together stakeholders in different ways, including a diverse advisory committee of academic experts, experts by experience, and formal and informal key persons of adolescents. In this way, we aim to integrate research, health-promoting practices and educational initiatives, valorizing our research on an academic and on a societal level.

Data collection will include in-depth interviews, focus groups, creative workshops, and Innovation Labs sessions using co-creation and Design Thinking. We actively engage local adolescents (12–18 years), formal and informal key persons (e.g. sport coaches, teachers, family), and professional caregivers (e.g. general practitioners, psychologists). Data will be thematically analyzed with inductive and deductive coding, using a socio-ecological framework.

Results: Data collection is currently ongoing. No formal analysis has been done, but preliminary insights of building our Academic Workplace show a strong interest in creative involvement of stakeholder groups, the need of integrating contrasting perspectives and using adapted communication strategies for different populations (e.g., adolescents, formal and informal key persons). Major barriers we are experiencing include low mental health literacy, stigma, and lack

of trust in research. More concrete findings of our first gathered data will be presented during the conference.

Implications: ProMent aims to develop mental health promotion strategies that are adequately adapted to the lived experiences of adolescents, their formal and informal key persons, and professional caregivers, integrating their different perspectives. We want to illustrate how PAR, combined with a socio-ecological view on mental health, can advance mental health promotion by engaging adolescents and their key persons in every phase of the project.

Community involvement can address both structural and social barriers to mental health care, while co-creation advances collaboration and relevance of interventions. It provides valuable insights in the Academic Workplace as an innovative strategy to align scientific, professional, and lived knowledge, to ensure sustainability of research outcomes and integrated mental health care solutions for vulnerable populations.