



## CDC reports on teens' mental health during pandemic reveal alarming trends

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**Editor's note:** For the latest news on COVID-19, visit <http://bit.ly/AAPNewsCOVID19>.

Health officials say they are deeply troubled by new data on teens' mental health struggles and experiences of abuse during the COVID-19 pandemic.

[New reports from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) (CDC) found more than half experienced emotional abuse, 44% felt persistent sadness/hopelessness and 20% seriously considered attempting suicide. Females, students of color and lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) students tended to fare the worst.

"Our data make it clear that young people experienced significant disruption and adversity during the pandemic and are experiencing a mental health crisis," said Kathleen A. Ethier, Ph.D., director of the CDC's Division of Adolescent and School Health.

The findings come from nationally representative survey data on high school students in the first half of 2021. Students were asked about mental health, disruptions to school and home life, racism and substance use.

### **Mental health**

Even before the pandemic, [CDC researchers found](#) teens were struggling with mental health. The pandemic exacerbated these struggles by disrupting schools, isolating students from friends, increasing stress and reducing access to care.

The new survey data on high school students' experiences during the pandemic show:

- 44% persistently felt sad or hopeless during the past 12 months,
- 37% reported poor mental health most of the time or always,
- 20% seriously considered attempting suicide during the past 12 months and
- 9% attempted suicide during the past 12 months.

All four of these measures were higher among females than males and higher among LGB students compared to heterosexual students. American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) students had higher rates of suicide attempts than students of other races/ethnicities.

“We know from other research that youth with poor mental health are more likely to struggle with school and grades, decision-making and physical health,” said Jonathan Mermin, M.D., director of the CDC’s National Center for HIV/AIDS, Viral Hepatitis, STD, and TB Prevention. “Furthermore, mental health problems in youth are associated with other behavioral risks such as drug use, experiencing violence and higher-risk sexual behaviors. These problems can have lasting negative effects well into adulthood.”

The AAP has been sounding the alarm on youth mental health throughout the pandemic. Late last year, the AAP, American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Children’s Hospital Association declared a [national emergency in children’s mental health](#), and the [U.S. surgeon general issued an advisory](#) calling for action to protect the mental health of youths.

### **School/home life**

Teens also were asked about disruptions to their school and home lives during the pandemic. Researchers found:

- 66% had difficulty completing schoolwork,
- 55% experienced emotional abuse by an adult at home,
- 29% reported a parent or other adult in their home lost a job,
- 24% experienced hunger and
- 11% experienced physical abuse by an adult at home.

LGB students, females and students of color had higher rates of these difficulties than their peers.

### **Racism**

About 36% of youths reported they had experienced racism in school before or during the pandemic, including 64% of Asian students, 55% of Black students and 55% of multiracial students. Rates were lowest for White (23%) and AI/AN (27%) students.

The percent of teens reporting perceived racism was higher among those who had poor mental health during the pandemic, lack of closeness to people at school or difficulty concentrating/making decisions compared to students who did not experience these issues.

### **Substance use**

About one-third of teens reported use of tobacco products, alcohol or marijuana or misuse of prescription opioids during the pandemic. Alcohol was the most common (20%), followed by vaping products (15%) and marijuana (13%). The study also found about one-third of substance users said their use increased during the pandemic.

AI/AN students had some of the highest rates of substance use. Students who are gay, lesbian or bisexual tended to have higher substance use rates than heterosexual students.

### **Taking action**

The new survey data show less than half of teens felt close to people at school. Those who had these connections had better mental health.

“Decades of research have demonstrated that youth who feel connected at school are less likely to experience negative health outcomes related to mental health, substance use, violence and sexual risk, and that this protection that connectedness offers can last into adulthood,” Dr. Ethier said.

The CDC is calling on schools to help foster connectedness and to assist students in accessing resources. Schools can promote inclusivity, implement school-wide social and emotional learning programs, improve staff training and improve relationships with families. In turn, families and communities can support schools in these efforts.

“The findings we presented today highlight complex issues ... and kids, parents and schools cannot address them alone,” Dr. Mermin said. “The impact of COVID-19 will be felt for many years with devastating consequences. Together, we can mitigate its negative effects, increase health equity and create a healthier future for all youth.”

## Resources

- [AAP mental health initiatives](#)
- [AAP interim guidance on children’s emotional and behavioral health during the pandemic](#)
- [Information for parents from HealthyChildren.org on mental health during the pandemic](#)
- [CDC’s What Works in Schools program](#)
- [COVID-19 parental resources toolkit on mental health from the CDC](#)
- [U.S. surgeon general advisory “Protecting Youth Mental Health”](#)
- [Information from the American Medical Association on integrating behavioral health care into a clinical practice](#)

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