

Youth mental health issues in the US have skyrocketed during pandemic

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The United States Surgeon General warned on Tuesday that young people are facing a “devastating” mental health crisis that has been vastly exacerbated by the conditions created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to the report, since the pandemic began in early 2020, rates of “psychological distress” among young people, including symptoms of anxiety, depression, and other mental health disorders, have increased dramatically. The Surgeon General’s report is based on recent research covering 80,000 youth globally. The findings reveal that symptoms of depression and anxiety have doubled during the pandemic, with 25 percent of youth experiencing depressive symptoms and 20 percent experiencing anxiety symptoms.

The report also notes other disturbing signs of distress among youth. In early 2021, emergency department visits in the United States for suspected suicide attempts were a staggering 51 percent higher for adolescent girls and 4 percent higher for adolescent boys compared to the same time period in early 2019. Early estimates that suggest more than 6,600 deaths by suicide occurred among the 10-24 age group in 2020.

To the extent that the mainstream media has responded to these shocking figures, it has been to downplay their severity and the broader social context. In an article in the *New York Times* by Matt Ritel, “Surgeon General Warns of Youth Mental Health Crisis,” for example, the author barely refers to the on-going COVID-19 pandemic. The author, rather, spends most of the article quibbling over minor factors such as too much “screen time” and “online interactions.”

Near the end of the article when the pandemic is finally mentioned, Ritel writes that the pandemic intensified stress on young people, “in part by isolating them during a period of their lives when social connection is vital for healthy development.” While there is no doubt that the social isolation caused by the pandemic has had an impact on youth, the argument made by the *Times* is done in bad faith.

Since the start of the pandemic, the mainstream press and politicians on both sides of the aisle have sought to

weaponize the mental health crisis to justify the reopening of schools despite the enormous health risks involved for young people, teachers and staff and the community at large. These politicians—many of whom have spent their careers overseeing the destruction of social services, the starving of funds for education, and the exorbitant funding of militarism abroad and at home—expect the public to believe that they are deeply concerned about the crisis of mental health among youth.

The reality is that the political establishment has a material interest in sending kids back to school. The reopening of schools has always been a prerequisite to getting workers back to work in order to maintain the flow of corporate profits. What impact this has had and continues to have on children is really of no concern to these figures. As for the *Times*, Ritel concludes his piece by casting doubt on the validity of the statistics themselves, arguing that it could be the case that youth are simply more comfortable reporting mental health issues than in previous generations.

Who could believe such nonsense? It is notable that the *Times* does not mention another staggering statistic from the report: it is estimated that as of June 2021, more than 140,000 children in the US had lost a parent or grandparent caregiver to COVID-19. That is, nearly one in four of the 621,656 deaths from COVID-19 as of June 30, nearly 6 months ago, were those of parents or caregivers to children. Added to this is number of children who have experienced the loss of a dear teacher or school staff member to the disease, a figure which remains uncounted despite the broad impact.

One may also add that in addition to losing their loved ones and educators to COVID-19, at least one in seven infected children and potentially one-third of infected adults will suffer from Long COVID, defined as persistent symptoms lasting more than four weeks after infection.

Others still have been thrown into dire poverty: 15 percent of US families reported high food insecurity prior to the pandemic, increasing to 26.8 percent in the past year. Food

insecurity for low-income families rose from 29.2 percent pre-pandemic to a staggering 45.4 percent today.

These are only the most tangible indices of the immense level of trauma inflicted on an entire generation of young people.

The youthful years of human development are meant to be a time filled with hope, optimism and idealism. For those coming of age in the early 2020s, this time presents itself instead as a nightmare. A teenager today will have spent the last two years watching in disbelief as the death toll from the virus climbs each day, until it now surpasses 800,000 people.

No doubt they have heard stories, or know first-hand, of the social misery taking place—people dying alone in hospital beds without a loved one allowed in the room to say goodbye. Millions more may have themselves waited with their parents in the food lines, lost their homes and watched their parents struggle to provide for their families while risking infection with a deadly virus. All the while, a very slim section of the world's richest people continues to make record profits. The world's billionaires added \$3.6 trillion to their net worth in 2020, while 100 million were driven into extreme poverty.

The figures outlined in the report are truly devastating. The callous and indifferent response of the entire ruling class to the pandemic over the past two years has created a catastrophe for the working class, and the youth have no doubt been severely impacted.

However, the report also correctly notes that while the pandemic has accelerated the mental health crisis among youth, it certainly did not create it. Over the past two decades in particular, mental health issues have skyrocketed among young people.

In 2019, for example, one in three high school students and half of female students reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, an overall increase of 40 percent from 2009. The report notes that the percentage of youth ages 12 to 17 who had a major depressive episode in the past year, for instance, increased from an estimated 8 percent in 2010 to 15.7 percent in 2019, according to data from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

The percentage of high school students who seriously contemplated suicide increased from 13.8 percent in 2009 to 18.8 percent in 2019, according to an October 2020 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) report.

Youth depression, anxiety, and suicide in particular, are among the most tragic symptoms of a diseased and terminally decayed social order. The staggering mental health crisis that workers and young people face today is a byproduct of an entire social system that is predicated on

sacrificing lives for the sake of private profit and wealth. The pandemic has only revealed the reality of capitalism in the most open and naked form.

No faction of the ruling class has anything close to an answer for such problems. The real answer, however, is emerging more openly and more forcefully every day.

The same conditions which give rise to the litany of mental health disorders among the young also gives rise to social opposition. Workers all over the world are beginning to fight back.

The past several months has seen a series of major strikes here in the United States: Volvo Trucks workers in Dublin, Virginia; distillery workers in Kentucky; hospital workers in Buffalo, New York; Warrior Met coal miners in northern Alabama; Frontier telecom workers in California; and many more. Just yesterday, more than 1,400 Kellogg's cereal workers in Michigan, Nebraska, Pennsylvania and Tennessee voted overwhelmingly to reject a union-backed contract after two months on strike.

This week, teachers and support staff at The School at Marygrove, a public school in Detroit, Michigan, launched a wildcat sickout to demand improved safety measures after the Oxford school shooting, and virtual-only classes to protect educators, 330 students and their families from COVID-19.

The protest in Detroit is part of the growing resistance of educators in the US and internationally, including a one-day strike by 50,000 New South Wales teachers in Australia on Monday.

While the unions are trying to do everything they can to smother opposition, there is an objective movement that is developing. The sheer scale of contract rejections by workers—often by more than 90 percent—is an expression of a powerful and growing mood of social resistance.

Young people as a whole are being politically radicalized. Even before the pandemic, more young people supported socialism than capitalism. As it does other social tendencies, the pandemic will enormously accelerate this process.

For young people seeking a way forward, the turn must be to the working class. The struggles of students and youth must be linked to the fight of all workers against the pandemic, social inequality, war, and the capitalist system.



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