

Survey of US high school youth finds mental health issues climbed in second year of pandemic

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A recent survey of high schoolers conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) warned of an increase in “mental health threats” among youth in the United States as a result of the devastating conditions created by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has been allowed to run rampant, officially sickening more than 80 million and killing 1 million.

The CDC data came from the Adolescent Behaviors and Experiences Survey (ABES), a nationwide poll conducted among 7,705 high school students from January to June 2021. It is the first nationally representative survey of public- and private-school high school students to assess the mental health and well-being of American youth during the COVID-19 pandemic.

While no doubt prevalent prior to 2020, the data in the CDC report point to a dramatic growth in youth psychological and emotional trauma over the past two years, as the pandemic has wreaked havoc on schools and communities nationwide. In 2021, 37 percent, more than a third, of high school students reported they experienced poor mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nearly half, 44 percent, reported they persistently felt sad or hopeless in 2021.

The report notes more than 55 percent of high schoolers experienced emotional abuse, such as swearing, insulting or belittling at the hands of a parent or other adult in the home. Those surveyed indicated 11 percent experienced physical abuse by a parent or guardian, including hitting, beating or other expressions of violent harm.

A JAMA Network research study in 2013 found parental abuse to be substantially lower, with 13.9 percent of respondents ages 14 to 17 reporting emotional abuse during the preceding year, and only 5.5 percent reporting physical abuse.

The significant rise in these figures over the last two years is an indicator of a deep social crisis in the United States. As Debra Houry, CDC Acting Principal Deputy Director, described it: “These data echo a cry for help.” Houry explained further: “The COVID-19 pandemic has created traumatic stressors that have the potential to further erode students’ mental wellbeing.”

More than 25 percent of students who identified as lesbian, gay and bisexual reported that they attempted suicide in the past year, along with 12 percent of female students. These groups also reported greater emotional abuse from a parent or caregiver and having attempted suicide more than their counterparts.

A large chunk of students, 36 percent, reported experiencing racism before or during the pandemic. The highest levels were reported among Asian students, with 64 percent saying they experienced racism, while 55 percent of black students and students of multiple races each responded in the affirmative. As the CDC news release notes: “experiences of racism among youth have been linked to poor mental health, academic performance, and lifelong health risk behaviors.”

The alarming statistics on racism point to a toxic social climate that has been fostered by the far right, which has deliberately whipped up racist sentiment during the pandemic. This campaign was spearheaded by former-President Donald Trump and far-right opponents of public health measures who repeatedly use racist terms to describe COVID-19 like “Wuhan virus” and the “Chinese Plague” in their efforts to scapegoat Asians for the US government’s criminal handling of the pandemic.

The Republican Party’s fascist strategy has also encouraged racial prejudice in the name of a crusade against Critical Race Theory in schools and racial and gender politics, which it falsely associates with socialism and Marxism. The Democratic Party has sought to confine all opposition to the far-right by promoting identity politics, aimed at sowing divisions among workers and youth while covering up the fundamental class divisions in society.

The ABES survey follows a rare public health advisory issued from the US Surgeon General last December, warning of a “devastating” rise in adolescent depression, anxiety and mental health distress that were already widespread before the onset of the pandemic in the spring of 2020.

In addition to mental and emotional distress, more than a quarter of high schoolers reported a parent or other adult in their home lost a job, and 24 percent reported they experienced hunger.

Indeed, the corporate assault on workers’ jobs and living conditions intensified throughout 2021. Corporations and Wall Street exploited the pandemic as an opportunity to reap massive profits while families saw their living standards slashed due to layoffs, inflation and the rise in the cost of living. Corporate profits surged to their highest levels in decades, rising 25 percent year over year to \$2.81 trillion.

Meanwhile, millions of young children and households have had to endure chronic unemployment, unaffordable rents, hunger, and parents and teens risking their lives working under threat of a

deadly virus. Food insecurity for US families shot upward to 26.8 percent in the past year and 45.4 percent for low-income families.

Income data point to the social catastrophe worsening for millions of households in the coming year, with projections that the average American household will see \$5,200 in lost income in 2022 due to inflation. Politicians on both sides of the aisle assert nothing can be done to stop this social disaster, all while the Federal Reserve continues to pump billions into Wall Street every month and Congress proposes record-breaking military budgets to wage imperialist wars.

The combined evils of social inequality and the forced resumption of workplaces and schools in the face of a raging pandemic have inflicted immense levels of trauma on young people.

The response of the American ruling-class, led first by the Donald Trump administration and now the Biden presidency, has been to subordinate the health of the entire population to the defense of corporate profits. This has led to over 1 million American lives lost, tens of millions infected and many having to endure the potentially life-long consequences of Long COVID.

The mainstream press, which has dutifully parroted the narrative of both the Democrats and Republicans that the pandemic is over, even as hundreds still lose their lives each day, responded to the ABES study with indifference. A *New York Times* article headlined, “Many Teens Report Emotional and Physical Abuse by Parents During Lockdown,” carries a substantially watered-down examination of the study’s dismal figures.

The *Times* piece makes no reference to the social and economic conditions that have plunged millions of families into dire poverty and traumatized an entire generation of youth. No mention is made of the more than 200,000 American children who have now lost a parent or primary caregiver to COVID-19, and the trauma that has accompanied being orphaned at such an early stage in life.

To the extent that any analysis is made, the piece makes a transparent effort to promote the idea that staying home in the early stages of the pandemic, instead of being forced back into infected classrooms, contributed to the dysfunctional environments children have been subjected to during the pandemic. The author argues that the research suggests “home was not a safe place” for teenagers who were “ordered” to remain out of school.

The article cites statements from Kathleen Ethier, head of the adolescent and school health program at the CDC, who seeks to reinforce the notion that being in school protects students from harmful households. The *Times* quotes Ethier as saying the data “underscores the protective role that schools can play in the lives of young people.” Ethier argues further: “Schools provide a way of identifying and addressing youth who may be experiencing abuse in the home.”

While schools may lend a protective buffer against potentially harmful home environments, the explanations provided by Ethier are disingenuous at best, as mental health problems among young people predate the pandemic and have risen sharply over the last 20 years. Research from the American Academy of Pediatrics, Kaiser Family Foundation, and Mental Health America, showed that the mental health of young people had been on a downward spiral the past two decades.

The share of youth aged 12 to 17 reporting a major depressive episode had doubled between 2009 and 2019. The rate of hospital emergency room visits for children’s deliberate self-harm rose by 329 percent from 2007 to 2016 and youth suicide rates consistently increased over the past decade. By 2018, suicide became—and still is—the second leading cause of death for ages 10 to 24.

Furthermore, according to the KIDS COUNT Data Center, the percentage of high school students reporting persistent sadness or hopelessness increased over the past decade from 26 percent in 2009 to 37 percent in 2019. In California, this figure reached nearly half of high school students in 2019. In a similarly troubling trend, the share of young adults ages 18 to 24 reporting zero poor mental health days had been declining prior to the pandemic, with only 46 percent, less than half, reporting no poor mental health days in the past month between 2017 and 2019.

In fact, mental health services and treatment were largely inaccessible to broad sections of young people as a result of decades of austerity and cuts to public health services. Funding for public education and social support for students has been bled dry to satiate the ruling-class’s unbridled appetite for profit. Although the youth mental health crisis was vastly intensified by the pandemic, it remains only a symptom of a failed capitalist order.

Capitalist politicians and their media mouthpieces who lament over school closures as being the cause of worsening mental health are the same figures who have overseen or advocated for the systematic destruction of social services, the starving of education, and the decades-long continuation of wars and militarism abroad, which have been supplied with trillions of dollars every year with wide bipartisan approval.

The same conditions that are driving the rise of mental health disorders and suffering among youth are also giving rise to social opposition. There is an immense striving on the part of students, youth and workers to fight back against the unbearable conditions created by the capitalist system.

Earlier this year, thousands of high school students throughout the country staged walkouts and protests in opposition to the unsafe return to in-person learning amid a massive surge in COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations and deaths from the Omicron COVID-19 variant.

In the past month, thousands of teachers launched strike action in Sacramento, California and Minneapolis, Minnesota. There is an ongoing strike by 600 oil refinery workers in Richmond, California.

The struggles of students and youth must be connected to the fight on the part of the working class against social inequality, the pandemic, a third world war and to overturn the capitalist system.



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