

Why are 42 percent of US high school students experiencing persistent feelings of sadness and hopelessness?

Kate Randall
19 February 2023

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention this month released its “Youth Risk Behavior Survey [YRBS] Data Summary & Trends Report: 2011-2021.” The CDC’s findings are both shocking and disturbing.

Among US high school students in 2021:

- 42 percent experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness
- 29 percent experienced poor mental health during the previous 30 days
- 22 percent seriously considered attempting suicide
- 18 percent made a suicide plan
- 10 percent attempted suicide
- 3 percent were injured in a suicide attempt that had to be treated by a doctor or nurse

There were approximately 17 million students enrolled in private and public high schools in the US in 2021 (Statistica). Extrapolating from the CDC data, this means that more than 7 million of these students experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, and 1.7 million attempted suicide. Suicide is the second-leading cause of death among 15- to 24-year-olds in the US.

What is behind this devastating picture of the mental health of teenagers in America? While the CDC offers few answers or solutions, they can be pointed to in the life experiences of this young segment of the population in the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic, which served to amplify the ills and mental health struggles in a society already wracked by poverty, social inequality, police violence and war.

Consider some of the conditions young people confront:

In the US, 238,500 young people have lost a primary caregiver in the pandemic—becoming COVID-19 orphans—according to Imperial College London.

Losing a parent is one of the most destabilizing and stressful events of the human experience, placing bereaved children at increased risk of mental ill-health and psychosocial problems. Orphans are at increased risk of substance abuse, dropping out of school, and almost twice as likely as non-orphans to die by suicide.

Adding to the pressure on children was the mounting

incidence of mental health issues among their parents. 71 percent of parents surveyed in 2020 said they believed the pandemic had hurt their mental health.

A 2021 study found that 34 percent of parents reported elevated anxiety symptoms and 28 percent of them reported depression symptoms at the point of clinical concern, reports Lucy (Kathleen) McGoron, assistant professor of Child and Family Development at Wayne State University.

In October 2021, the American Academy of Pediatrics declared a national emergency in child mental health, citing “soaring” rates of child mental health.

The US government has committed only \$300 million to a national response to the child mental health crisis, a pittance compared to the \$25 billion in “security assistance” given to Ukraine since the beginning of the Biden administration.

Breaking down the statistics

The YRBS survey found that poor mental health and suicidality were worse for certain sections of the high school population.

Fifty-seven percent of female students experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, and 41 percent said they experienced poor mental health during the previous 30 days. Over the previous year, 30 percent of high school girls considered attempting suicide, 24 percent made a suicide plan, 13 percent attempted suicide and 4 percent were injured in a suicide attempt.

LGBQ+ students fared the worst in all mental-health-related categories. (YRBS did not have a question assessing gender identity, so did not specifically include students who identify as transgender.) A staggering 69 percent of LGBQ+ students experienced persistent feelings of hopelessness in 2021; 52 percent experienced poor mental health during the previous 30 days, 45 seriously considered attempting suicide, 37 percent made a suicide plan, 22 percent attempted suicide, and 7

percent were injured in a suicide attempt.

In 2021, 31 percent of American Indian and Alaska Native students experienced high levels of poor mental health, 27 percent seriously considered suicide, 22 percent made a suicide plan, and 16 percent attempted suicide. Forty-nine percent of students identifying as multiracial experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, 33 percent experienced poor mental health over the previous 30 days, and 24 percent seriously considered attempting suicide.

Black, Hispanic, white and Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander students showed similar rates of feeling persistently sad or hopeless (39–41 percent), experiences poor mental health (20–30 percent), seriously considered suicide (21–23 percent) or made a suicide plan (17–20). Asian students fared somewhat better than other demographics.

The survey considered race and sexual identity to the exclusion of questions of class or socioeconomic status. One survey question did ask whether, over the previous 30 days, students experienced unstable housing—living in a shelter or emergency housing, being homeless, doubling up with family or friends, living in a shelter or emergency housing, or in motel, car, campground or other public place—which would indicate students living in a household experiencing unemployment, poverty or abusive conditions.

The overall total of students experiencing unstable housing was 3 percent, with the highest rates among American Indian or Alaska Natives (8 percent) and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islanders (10 percent). The survey's preoccupation with race and sexual identity is reflected in its inability to offer any understanding of why high school students are experiencing a mental health crisis or what can be done about it.

Results from other Focus Areas of the survey mirror the advanced stage of the social crisis in America as experienced by young people.

Substance use

The CDC's YRBS survey found that among all US high school students in 2021:

- 23 percent drank alcohol during the previous 30 days
- 16 percent used cannabis during the previous 30 days
- 12 percent had ever misused prescription opioids

US overdose deaths rose by 15 percent to record levels in 2021, nearing 108,000, fueled mainly by fentanyl. Deaths involving synthetic opioids rose to 71,000 in 2021, up from 58,000 in 2020, the first year of the pandemic.

Experiencing violence

Among all high school students in 2021:

- 7 percent were threatened or injured with a weapon at school
- 15 reported being bullied at school
- 16 percent were electronically bullied
- 11 percent of all students, 18 percent of females, and 39 percent of students who reported any same-sex sexual contacts experienced sexual violence.

So far this year, as of February 19, the Gun Violence Archive reports 5,789 gun violence deaths of all causes, including 2,489 homicides/unintentional shootings and 3,300 suicides.

Seventy-nine mass shootings resulted in the deaths of 32 children (age 0-11) and 212 teenagers (age 12-17).

There were 183 police-involved shootings, resulting in 112 deaths; murder/suicides claimed 102 lives.

Youth are witness to this non-stop slaughter at home as well as the violence of the US-NATO proxy war in Ukraine against Russia. The US ruling elite is hurtling now toward war with nuclear power Russia, raising the threat of millions of deaths in a Third World War.

US life expectancy in the US decreased for the second year in a row in 2021, according to the CDC, leading to a decline in life expectancy from 77 years to 76.4 years. If this trend continues, a child born in the US today is expected to live a shorter life than his or her grandparents.

The mental health emergency plaguing America's high school students is above all a social crisis that must be confronted by workers and youth in a struggle against a wealthy elite that is prepared to drive millions into poverty as prices soar, real wages plunge and job prospects for young people dwindle.

The latest CDC survey shows that the soaring death count from COVID-19, mass shootings and police violence is exacting a heavy mental toll on the nation's high school students. It is also provoking anger and outrage, as the upsurge of workers struggles, both in the US and internationally, is now demonstrating. Young people must turn to the working class, the only force that has the power and position in society to fight for socialism in opposition to the murderous policies of the ruling class.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact