

Addressing the Youth Mental Health Crisis

Background

Reports from public health officials over the last two years have documented a children’s mental health crisis that was certainly exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic but existed for many decades before. The current crisis, if left unchecked, could break the children’s mental health system, in addition to other systems such as the educational, child welfare, and juvenile justice systems.

- Surgeon General **Dr. Vivek H. Murthy** stated, “The pandemic era’s unfathomable number of deaths, pervasive sense of fear, economic instability, and forced physical distancing from loved ones, friends, and communities have exacerbated the unprecedented stresses young people already faced.”
- According to the **CDC**, in the 10-year period from 2011 to 2021, mental health among students saw a worsening trend, with more than 40% of high school students reporting overwhelming feelings of sadness and hopelessness that impacted their ability to engage in regular activities for at least two weeks during the previous year — a possible indication of the experience of depressive symptoms.
- The report also highlighted an increasing percentage of youth who seriously considered suicide, made a suicide plan, or attempted suicide.
- Additional data suggests that:
 - Depressive and anxiety symptoms rose by 50% during the pandemic (Aknin et al., 2021).
 - Negative emotions or behaviors such as irritability and impulsivity increased (Sharma et al., 2021).
 - In 2021, emergency visits for suicide attempts were 51% higher for adolescent girls and 4% higher for adolescent boys, compared to 2019 (Yard et al., 2021).

Trends in New York City mirror the national data.

- In 2021, **20%** of children age 3-13 in New York City had one or more mental, emotional, developmental, or behavioral problems
- In 2021, **38%** of New York City high schoolers reported feelings of sadness and hopelessness over a 12-month period so severe that it impacted their daily activities.

Disparities Persist and Widen

- In 2021, Black and Latinx students in NYC were significantly more likely than their white counterparts to report severe feelings of sadness and hopelessness.
- Nationally, according to the Surgeon General’s Report, one in three high school students and half of female students reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, an overall increase of 40% from 2009.

- Close to 70% of LGBTQ+ students experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness during the past year; more than 50% had poor mental health during the past 30 days, and almost 25% attempted suicide during the past year.

Key Resources

Protecting Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory

<https://www.hhs.gov/surgeongeneral/priorities/youth-mental-health/index.html>

Care, Community, Action: A Mental Health Plan for New York City

<https://www.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/mh/care-community-action-mental-health-plan.pdf>

Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data Summary & Trends Report: 2011-2021

https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/yrbs/pdf/yrbs_data-summary-trends_report2023_508.pdf