

New CDC data illuminate youth mental health threats during the COVID-19 pandemic

CDC's first nationally representative survey of high school students during the pandemic can inform effective programs

Press Release

Embargoed Until: Thursday, March 31, 2022, 1:00 p.m. ET

Contact: [Media Relations](#)

(404) 639-3286

New CDC analyses, published today, shine additional light on the mental health of U.S. high school students during the COVID-19 pandemic, including a disproportionate level of threats that some students experienced.

According to the new data, in 2021, more than a third (37%) of high school students reported they experienced poor mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic, and 44% reported they persistently felt sad or hopeless during the past year. The new analyses also describe some of the severe challenges youth encountered during the pandemic:

- More than half (55%) reported they experienced emotional abuse by a parent or other adult in the home, including swearing at, insulting, or putting down the student.
- 11% experienced physical abuse by a parent or other adult in the home, including hitting, beating, kicking, or physically hurting the student.
- More than a quarter (29%) reported a parent or other adult in their home lost a job.

Before the pandemic, mental health was getting worse among high school students, according to [prior CDC data](#). 

"These data echo a cry for help," said CDC Acting Principal Deputy Director Debra Houry, M.D., M.P.H. "The COVID-19 pandemic has created traumatic stressors that have the potential to further erode students' mental wellbeing. Our research shows that surrounding youth with the proper support can reverse these trends and help our youth now and in the future."

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth and female youth reported greater levels of poor mental health; emotional abuse by a parent or caregiver; and having attempted suicide than their counterparts.

In addition, over a third (36%) of students said they experienced racism before or during the COVID-19 pandemic. The highest levels were reported among Asian students (64%) and Black students and students of multiple races (both 55%). The survey cannot determine the extent to which events during the pandemic contributed to reported racism. However, experiences of racism among youth have been linked to poor mental health, academic performance, and lifelong health risk behaviors.

School connectedness provided critical protection for students during COVID-19

Findings also highlight that a sense of being cared for, supported, and belonging at school — called "school connectedness" — had an important effect on students during a time of severe disruption. Youth who felt connected to adults and peers at school were significantly less likely than those who did not to report persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness (35% vs. 53%); that they seriously considered attempting suicide (14% vs. 26%); or attempted suicide (6% vs. 12%). However, fewer than half (47%) of youth reported feeling close to people at school during the pandemic.

“School connectedness is a key to addressing youth adversities at all times – especially during times of severe disruptions,” said Kathleen A. Ethier, PhD, Director of CDC’s Division of Adolescent and School Health. “Students need our support now more than ever, whether by making sure that their schools are inclusive and safe or by providing opportunities to engage in their communities and be mentored by supportive adults.”

We all have a role to play to help youth recover from challenges during COVID-19

Youth with poor mental health may struggle with [school and grades](#), decision making, and their health. Mental health problems in youth are also often associated with other health and behavioral risks such as increased risk of [drug use](#), experiencing violence, and higher risk [sexual behaviors](#).

Schools are crucial partners in supporting the health and wellbeing of students. In addition to education, they provide opportunities for academic, social, mental health, and physical health services that can help protect against negative outcomes. Schools are facing unprecedented disruptions during the pandemic, however, and cannot address these complex challenges alone.

“In the face of adversity, support from schools, families, and communities protects adolescents from potentially devastating consequences,” said Jonathan Mermin, M.D., director of the National Center for HIV/AIDS, Viral Hepatitis, STD, and TB Prevention, CDC’s lead Center for monitoring and addressing school-based health. “These data tell us what works. So, what will it take for our schools and communities to help youth withstand the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond?”

More Information

These data, released as an *MMWR Surveillance Supplement*, come from the Adolescent Behaviors and Experiences Survey (ABES), CDC’s first nationally representative survey of public- and private-school high school students to assess the well-being of U.S. youth during the COVID-19 pandemic. Funded through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, CDC fielded the survey during January – June 2021.

CDC’s Division of Adolescent and School Health on mental health among students:
<https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/mental-health/index.htm>.

For more information from CDC’s National Center for HIV/AIDS, Viral Hepatitis, STD, and TB Prevention, visit
www.cdc.gov/nchstp/newsroom

###

[U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES](#) 

CDC works 24/7 protecting America’s health, safety and security. Whether disease start at home or abroad, are curable or preventable, chronic or acute, or from human activity or deliberate attack, CDC responds to America’s most pressing health threats. CDC is headquartered in Atlanta and has experts located throughout the United States and the world.