

Adolescent Mental Health

Significant Challenges and Strategies for Improvement in Washington State

KEY POINTS



- Teens want easier access to mental health care.
- Anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts are rising in young people and teens.
- Sexually and gender diverse, disabled, and other minoritized youth face more barriers to good mental health.
- Strong social support can improve and protect adolescent mental health.

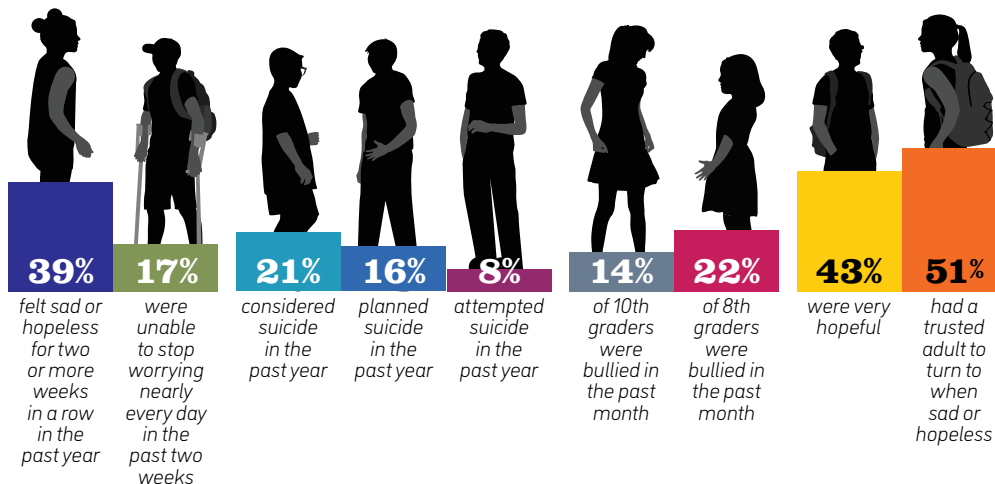
ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health is central to our well-being at every stage of life. It affects everything—how we think, feel, handle challenges, and navigate relationships.

Positive social connections, community involvement, parental support, a sense of belonging at school, and secure peer relationships promote good mental health.¹⁻¹¹ A positive support system boosts mental health by allowing adolescents to explore their identities, recover from trauma, and form trusting relationships.

Mental health challenges include symptoms of depression or anxiety, difficulty with relationships and responsibilities, and thoughts of self-harm or suicide or attempts. The number of adolescents reporting poor mental health is rising across the country and in Washington. Some experts think that social and community disconnection is causing this.^{12,13}

Figure 1: Prevalence of selected mental health indicators from the 2021 Healthy Youth Survey. Data is reported by 10th graders (except where specified otherwise).¹⁴



COVID-19 AND ADOLESCENT MENTAL HEALTH

The COVID-19 pandemic caused fear, anxiety, loneliness, and grief. Its social isolation may raise the risk of depression for years into the future.¹⁵ 1 in 3 middle and high school students surveyed in 2022 were pretty or extremely worried about friends or family getting sick with COVID-19.^{16,17}

As of November 2021, 150 in every 100,000 children 14–17 years of age in WA had lost a parent or caregiver to COVID-19.¹⁸ Structural inequities caused more loss for families in certain racial and ethnic groups, including Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Island and American Indian/Alaska Native families.

GABRIELLE'S STORY

Gabrielle started seeing a mental health professional for anxiety and depression at a young age. Her mom always made sure she got mental health care. As someone with a medical disability at a higher risk for COVID-19, fear for her health has been high. The pandemic also paused extra-curricular activities that bring purpose and community to Gabrielle's life. Since finding a therapist who is a good fit, Gabrielle is doing well mentally. Her close relationship with her sister and the structure of school and activities are key to her well-being.



The main thing we need to do right now is make [mental health care] more accessible. Not everyone can drive. ... You have to have at least a little bit of support from your parents in order to get these services and not a lot of people that need these services have that support.

—Gabrielle



Find resources, hotlines, and information from Healthy Youth Survey: [Resource list](#)

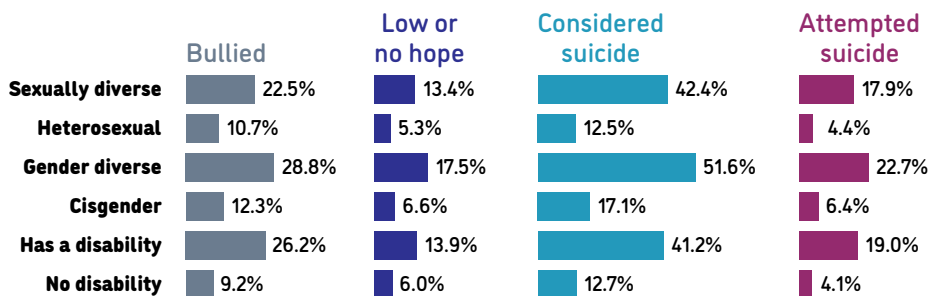


In an emergency, call 911 or 988, the new national mental health crisis hotline.

INEQUITIES IN MENTAL HEALTH

There are wide gaps in mental health and access to care. Youth who lack trusted adults and experience bullying, hopelessness, family rejection, racism, and discrimination are at higher risk of having poor mental health.^{6,19–22} Sexually and gender diverse youth and disabled youth report the highest rates of these risk factors. They are two to four times more likely to consider suicide and attempt suicide than heterosexual, cisgender, and nondisabled peers. These differences are most likely driven by societal inequities faced by these groups.

Figure 2: Inequities in prevalence of poor mental health among Washington 10th Graders in 2021.¹⁴



WHY ADDRESSING ADOLESCENT MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS

When young people's mental health issues go unaddressed, there are long-term negative effects. It can damage their school performance, like attendance and grades.²³ Health consequences include higher risk of diabetes, heart disease, and stroke.²⁴

Finding ways to improve youth mental health is critical—so our young people can fulfill their goals, develop into healthy adults, and navigate their lives with grace, patience, love, and integrity. Closing gaps and ensuring equal access to mental health services is essential to helping youth reach their potential.

LOOKING FORWARD

These data highlight the urgent need to improve mental health and reduce impacts of discrimination. Increased access to mental health care can help address mental health problems youth are experiencing now. Health equity initiatives can help address disparities. Strong communities and social support for young people of all backgrounds can prevent mental health problems.

Learn more about adolescent mental health data at [Ask HYS](#) and [COVID-19 Student Survey](#).



Questions, comments, concerns?

Contact natalie.franz@doh.wa.gov.

DEFINITIONS

Sexually diverse Participants indicated their sexual orientation to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, questioning/not sure, or “something else fits better.”

Gender diverse Participants indicated their gender identity to be transgender, questioning/not sure, “something else fits better,” or they selected more than one response.

Cisgender Not transgender; participants indicated their gender identity to be male or female and did not select any other options.

REFERENCES

- Battista, *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. 2022;19(17):10873.
- Borowsky, *Pediatrics*. 2001;107(3):485–493.
- Gariépy, *Br J Psychiatry*. 2016;209(4):284–293.
- Yap, *J Affect Disord*. 2014;156:8–23.
- Parmar, *J Adolesc Health*. 2022;70(3):470–477.
- Austin, *J Interpers Violence*. 2022;37(5–6):NP2696–NP2718.
- Bond, *J Adolesc Health Off Publ Soc Adolesc Med*. 2007;40(4):357.e9–18.
- Gloppen, *Am J Orthopsychiatry*. 2018;88(4):413–421.
- Millings, *J Adolesc*. 2012;35(4):1061–1067.
- Wilkinson-Lee, *J Youth Adolesc*. 2011;40(2):221–230.
- Sharaf, *J Child Adolesc Psychiatr Nurs*. 2009;22(3):160–168.
- Fenkel, *Psychology Today*. psychologytoday.com/us/blog/democratizing-mental-health-care/202211/isolations-silent-role-in-the-teen-mental-health-crisis
- Mitchell, *GW Today*. gwtoday.gwu.edu/disconnection-isolation-pose-challenges-mental-health
- Healthy Youth Survey 2021*. Washington State Health Care Authority, Department of Health, Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, and Liquor and Cannabis Board; 2022.
- Loades, *J Am Acad Child Adolesc Psychiatry*. 2020;59(11):1218–1239.e3.
- 2022 COVID-19 Student Survey (Grades 9–12)*. University of Washington Center for the Study of Health & Risk Behaviors, Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction; 2022.
- 2022 COVID-19 Student Survey (Grades 6–8)*. University of Washington Center for the Study of Health & Risk Behaviors, Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction; 2022.
- Treglia. *Hidden Pain: Children Who Lost a Parent or Caregiver to COVID-19 and What the Nation Can Do to Help Them*. COVID Collaborative; 2022.
- O’Keefe. *Suicide Life Threat Behav*. 2015;45(5):567–576.
- Russell, *J Adolesc Health Off Publ Soc Adolesc Med*. 2018;63(4):503–505.
- Kuo, *Soc Psychiatry Psychiatr Epidemiol*. 2004;39(6):497–501.
- Holt, *Pediatrics*. 2015;135(2):e496–509.
- How Mental Health Disorders Affect Youth*. youth.gov/youth-topics/youth-mental-health/how-mental-health-disorders-affect-youth
- About Mental Health. cdc.gov/mentalhealth/learn/index.htm