

Sounding the alarm: parent perceptions of teen mental health in the US

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Economist Impact surveyed 1,100 US parents of teenagers 13 to 17 years of age in April 2022. The aim of this survey was to better understand the mental health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic for teens, and the ripple effect for parents, families and communities. The insights below summarize the findings of this survey.

COVID-19 is accelerating the decline in teen mental health

Despite receiving more attention in recent years, research shows an increasing number of teens dealing with mental health challenges. From 2009-2019, the number of high school students reporting persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness increased by 40%.¹

From 2004-2019, the proportion of adolescents 12 to 17 years of age who experienced a major depressive episode lasting two weeks or longer in the past year increased from 9% to nearly 16%.²

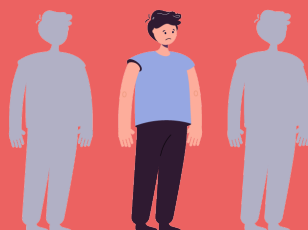


High school students feeling sad or hopeless



Teens with major depressive episode in the last year

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that more than one in three (37%) of high school students experienced poor mental health most of the time or always between January and June 2021.⁴



While these insights show a concerning increase in teen mental health issues before 2020, it is clear that the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has aggravated the problem. A study among 80,000 youth globally found a two-fold increase in symptoms of depression and anxiety during the pandemic, with 25% of all youth experiencing depressive symptoms and 20% experiencing anxiety.³

Parents are sounding the alarm for teens and their families

The 1,100 US parents surveyed for this study reinforced COVID-19's acceleration of mental health challenges among US teens. Nearly 80% of the parents reported seeing new or increased signals of potential mental health issues from their teen, including anxiety, depression, behavioral issues, and/or increased problems with social interactions.

As mental health issues are the leading cause of disability and poor life outcomes in young people, it is clear that this is an urgent public health problem.²

1 Significant increase in use of screens (55.3%)

2 New or increased social anxiety (40.3%)

3 New or increased problems with social interactions (33.0%)

4 New or increased problems sleeping (28.6%)

5 New or worsening irritability or behavioral problems (23.5%)

6 New or worsened depression (23.5%)

Mental health issues not only affect the lives of teens directly, but also create a ripple effect for families, friends and the wider community.



Parents are acutely affected, as more than a third of surveyed parents report increased challenges with their own mental health and financial strain due to mental health issues experienced by their teens. Parents also reported feeling overwhelmed by their child's needs, increased tension with their spouse or partner, uncertainty about where to go for help for their child and whether to seek help at all due to the fear of stigma.

Beyond the home environment, parents with teens experiencing increased mental health

challenges are also facing issues at work. More than one in five working parents report having to seek more flexible or reduced working hours, yet over 55% report not having enough support from their employer to address their teens' needs, such as flexibility for appointments or emergencies. 18% of working parents report a negative impact on their work performance and productivity, while nearly 14% reported having to leave or stay out of the workforce altogether to address their teen's mental health needs. 63% of parents felt that increased flexibility at work would help them better manage their mental health concerns with their teen.

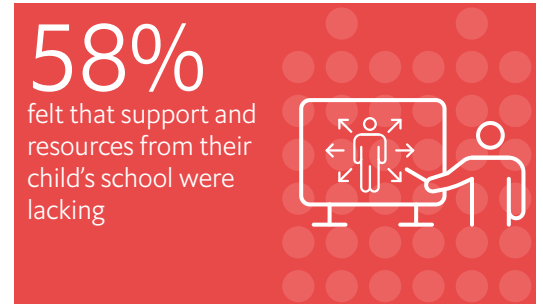
Almost 14% of parents leave the workforce

18% of parents see decrease in productivity

Parents report important barriers to getting their teens the right help

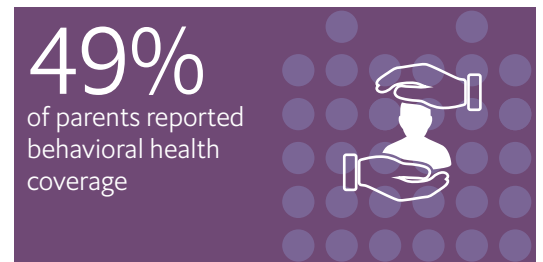
The reported impacts on teens and families are worsened by the barriers parents face in getting the right help at the right time. Approximately 60% of parents reported difficulties in finding a trusted mental health provider to care for their teen in a reasonable amount of time, while 58% felt that

support and resources from their child’s school were lacking. The National Association of School Psychologists backs up parents on this finding, as there is an average of one school psychologist per 1,200 students in the US, far fewer than the recommended one per 500 students.⁵



Financial concerns and perceived stigma are also important factors. While 87% of parents reported having medical coverage, less than half (49%) reported behavioral health coverage.

Despite an increased need for care, 58% of parents said their teens felt embarrassed about needing mental health services, while 57% cited their teens were unwilling to use mental health services because of stigma.



Parents highlight a renewed urgency to help teens struggling with mental health

The status quo is not working, and parents are looking for more information, support and resources. In fact, three out of every five parents researched mental health challenges to support their child during the pandemic.



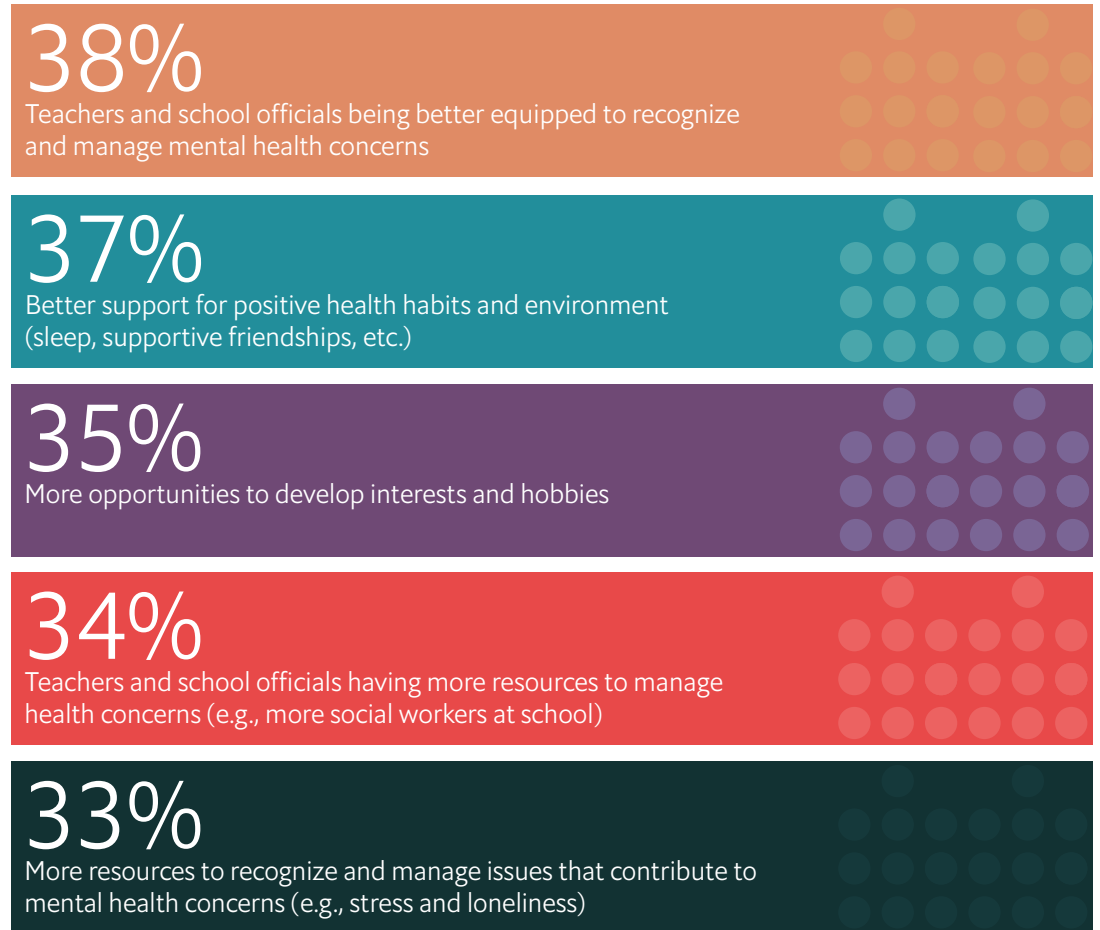
The barriers highlighted above have laid the groundwork for virtual health expansion. 65% of parents agreed that virtual care options have made mental healthcare more accessible and 62% are more open to virtual care now than they were before the COVID-19 pandemic.

The majority of parents (71%) also think educators should be more involved in awareness and recognition of mental health challenges in teens. In fact, parents thought that more resources and training for teachers and school officials to recognize, manage and address mental concerns would have the biggest impact among several different solutions to improve the lives of teens struggling with mental health. Increased support from employers, better support for positive health habits among teens (e.g., sleep, supportive friendships) and more opportunities for teens to develop interests and hobbies were also highlighted as top factors to address the teen mental health epidemic.

As we look to the future, it is clear that many different stakeholders will need to collaborate to manage the rising teen mental health crisis,

particularly to support the impacts that parents are facing. This not only takes a human toll on the families of teens struggling with mental health directly, but it also takes a wider economic toll as parents are forced to drop out of the workforce to care for their teens, and teens may

face longer-term impacts on their education and future prospects without the right support. It is imperative for public and private stakeholders to come together to address teen mental health issues to ensure a healthier, more resilient future for all.



¹ The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory. Protecting Youth Mental Health. 2021. Available from: <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-youth-mental-health-advisory.pdf>.

² SAMHSA. Key Substance Use and Mental Health Indicators in the United States: Results from the 2019 National Survey on Drug Use and Health. U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2019. Available from: <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/reports/rpt29393/2019NSDUHFFRPDFWHTML/2019NSDUHFFR1PDFW090120.pdf>.

³ Racine N, McArthur BA, Cooke JE, et al. Global prevalence of depressive and anxiety symptoms in children and adolescents during COVID-19: a meta-analysis. *JAMA pediatrics*. 2021;175(11):1142-50.

⁴ Jones SE, Ethier KA, Hertz M, et al. Mental Health, Suicidality, and Connectedness Among High School Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic—Adolescent Behaviors and Experiences Survey, United States, January–June 2021. *MMWR supplements*. 2022;71(3):16.

⁵ National Association of School Psychologists. Shortage of School Psychologists [Internet]. Available from: <https://www.nasponline.org/research-and-policy/policy-priorities/critical-policy-issues/shortage-of-school-psychologists>.

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