

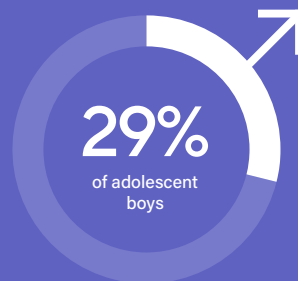
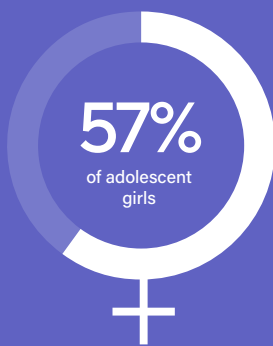


Setting Girls Up for Success: How Philanthropy Can Support Girls' Mental Health



Amidst the youth mental health crisis in the United States, teenage girls in particular face unique challenges. While the reasons for this are complex and multi-faceted, early intervention and prevention can promote resilience among girls, mitigate the long-term effects of mental health conditions, and lead to better outcomes in life.

A 2021 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) report found that 57 percent of adolescent girls compared to 29 percent of adolescent boys had experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness – the highest level in a decade.¹ It also reported that nearly 1 in 3 teen girls seriously considered attempting suicide, and more than 1 in 10 reported they attempted suicide.²



Nearly 1 in 3 girls reported they seriously **considered attempting** suicide.



More than 1 in 10 girls reported they **attempted suicide**.

These findings reflect a decade-long trend that was further exacerbated by the pandemic, but there are solutions to strengthen girls' resilience and support their mental well-being. In this guidance, we explore key prevention and protective factors that can help to address the mental health crisis among adolescent girls, and present opportunities for philanthropy to create a brighter future for all girls.

Championing Emotional Literacy with Caregivers

Supportive caregiver relationships, in the form of any trusted adult, have been positively associated with youth well-being and life satisfaction.³ Teenage girls who receive consistent and nurturing caregiver support develop a strong foundation of emotional resilience and coping skills, which contributes to the development of healthy self-esteem, self-worth, and a positive self-image.⁴

Caregivers can play a vital role in helping teenage girls develop the skills they need to build healthy relationships with others, by providing emotional support, teaching emotional literacy, and modeling healthy coping mechanisms. They can also support teen girls to better understand and embrace their feelings, while simultaneously learning strategies for emotional regulation and management.⁵

Ways That Philanthropy Can Support at Home

Philanthropy can make a profound impact on teen girls' mental health by supporting evidence-based interventions and programs that elevate positive parenting practices, particularly those proven to enhance caregiver-child relationships in this age group. Funders can also support the development of programs and educational materials specifically tailored to caregivers of teenage girls that offer practical insights to foster emotional literacy, promote positive self-esteem, and cultivate healthy emotional expression. Philanthropy can aid caregivers' mental health by improving access to wraparound services such as safe housing, financial resources, and educational opportunities, given their mental health directly impacts youth mental health outcomes, including the development of emotional and self-regulating skills.⁶



The CDC reports greater difficulties among girls than boys across almost all mental health indicators. Yet, boys too experience many of the same challenges at home, school, and online that girls do. Therefore, the philanthropic opportunities highlighted here will also benefit boys, adults, and families.

Fostering Resilience Through School Engagement

Schools are widely recognized as a pivotal entry point for delivering youth mental health services. Research demonstrates that “adolescents are 10 to 21 times more likely to prefer visiting a school-based health center over a community health center for mental health care” due to the increased availability and convenience of services.⁷

Schools also function as spaces for peer connection, providing additional preventive benefits that promote the well-being of girls, especially when considering that those who lack peer support are six times more likely to experience low mental well-being.⁸ For instance, active participation in school activities by teenage girls often leads to the development of more positive social relationships, both among peers and with trusted adults. These activities promote a sense of belonging that bolsters their self-esteem and resilience while decreasing the likelihood of developing mental health challenges.⁹ Moreover, engagement in extracurricular pursuits, hobbies, sports, or creative outlets has a

positive impact on academic achievement, self-esteem, and emotional regulation. These activities empower girls to navigate setbacks, develop problem-solving skills, and foster a positive self-image.¹⁰

Funding can support extracurricular programs that advance social connectedness and resilience skill-building activities, such as arts, athletics, and more. However, while extracurricular activities and school-based mental health services can offer valuable support for young girls, there are notable gaps in research regarding treatment preferences of girls of color and those who identify as LGBTQ+.



GUIDING RESEARCH

Nationally, Black girls are over five times more likely than white girls to be suspended at least once from school, and almost three times more likely to receive referrals to law enforcement.¹¹



Discipline disparities in schools are exacerbated by the “adultification” of Black girls, who are perceived as less innocent than their white counterparts and receive less nurturing and protection, thereby intensifying their emotional distress.¹² To explore opportunities to support school-based mental health care for girls of color, check out these [issue briefs](#) published by the Center on Gender Justice and Opportunity, in partnership with Dr. Kimberlyn Leary.



Ways That Philanthropy Can Support in Schools

Philanthropy can support initiatives that offer professional development to counselors, tutors, coaches, and mentors, based in trauma-responsive, gender specific, and racially sensitive social and emotional programming in schools and afterschool programs. Funders are also uniquely positioned to foster collaborations between schools and community-based organizations for greater support, empowerment, and resilience building among teen girls. In addition, philanthropy can fund participatory action research that engages girls of color and gender-nonconforming individuals to better understand their specific risks for mental illness, responsiveness to interventions, and engagement with programs and services. Based on this research, funders can advocate for effective approaches tailored to the specific needs of these populations. Funding can also be used to develop and evaluate peer-led mental health interventions in schools that aim to equip students with the skills to identify, understand, and respond to signs of mental health and substance use challenges within their peer networks.

Empowering Girls' Mental Health in the Digital World

Up to 95% of youth ages 13-17 report using a social media platform, and more than one-third of adolescent girls report feeling “addicted” to social media.¹³ Social media platforms can be a positive source for connection and belonging by providing opportunities to build communities, share information, and empower creative expression.

However, high frequency and prolonged use of social media has displaced in-person interactions, and is associated with feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and depression, especially for girls.¹⁴ Furthermore, girls in adolescence often face heightened societal pressures to maintain unrealistic beauty standards

that are amplified on social media. This culture of peer comparison, in combination with reinforcing digital algorithms, can lead to body dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, and higher risk of depression, which in turn increases risk for eating disorders.¹⁶



KEY RESOURCE

Adolescence presents a key window of opportunity for early intervention. In 2020, the overall incidence of eating disorders among adolescent girls rose by 15.3% in comparison to previous years,¹⁷ and emergency department visits for eating disorders nearly doubled during the pandemic.¹⁸



Check out [Dove's report](#) on the staggering economic and social cost of body dissatisfaction and appearance-based discrimination in the United States.

Ways That Philanthropy Can Support Online

Philanthropic investors can support the implementation and evaluation of digital literacy and media education after-school programs that teach critical thinking skills to help young girls develop a healthy relationship with social media and technology. Funding can also support applications or platforms dedicated to improving access to mental health care for adolescents, offering options like online resources and virtual provider consultations, which can be particularly beneficial for those who are uncomfortable with traditional access points or find direct contact with mental health professionals stigmatizing.¹⁹

Funding can drive positive change in policies, practices, and industry norms related to social media platforms by supporting awareness efforts that educate individuals and families about the potential mental health risks associated with social media use and uplift best practices. For example, California recently passed [legislation](#) that requires online services to increase protections for youth, and if successful, could serve as a blueprint for philanthropic efforts to advocate for similar legislation in other states nationwide.²⁰

Philanthropic support for research that explores the impact of social media on girls' mental health can be used to inform innovative approaches that promote the more positive elements of these platforms, such as connection and belonging, while mitigating the bad. Specifically, funders can build cross-sector research collaboratives among academic partners, community-based organizations, technology companies, and media to conduct novel studies to better understand the risk and protective factors of social media for girls' mental health.^{21, 22} Any research should include the voices of adolescent girls, including girls of color and those who identify as LGBTQ+, to understand their online experiences firsthand.

The mental health crisis for girls in the U.S. demands urgent attention and comprehensive support.

Funders have the opportunity to seize this moment to ensure that every girl has the support, resources, and connections they need to thrive mentally, emotionally, and socially. The research reveals a need for more targeted preventive and protective interventions to alleviate the mental health challenges girls face, especially those compounded by the complexities – and growing presence – of modern technology.

The U.S. Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek Murthy, has issued two urgent advisories calling for immediate action on the impact of [social media on youth mental health](#) and the [epidemic of loneliness and isolation](#). For young people, time spent in-person with friends has reduced by nearly 70% over almost two decades, and they are almost twice as likely to report feeling lonely than those over sixty-five.²³

He emphasizes that “social connection is a fundamental human need, as essential to survival as food, water, and shelter,” and stresses “our children and adolescents don’t have the luxury of waiting years until we know the full extent of social media’s impact.” This presents

a clear call to action for policymakers, researchers, families, and young people to understand the full impact of social media on youth and opportunities to strengthen social connection and community belonging. The Surgeon General’s Report concludes, “at a moment when we are experiencing a national youth mental health crisis, now is the time to act swiftly and decisively to protect children and adolescents from risk of harm.”

Philanthropy can pave the way for a brighter future for girls and ultimately forge a path towards improved well-being and resilience for generations to come.

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Mindful Philanthropy can recommend specific organizations or develop a comprehensive strategy that aligns with this guidance and your funder priorities upon request.

To get in touch
with a team
member,
click here.

Endnotes

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