

Don't Let Politics Cloud Your View of What's Going On With Teens and Depression Feb. 24, 2023

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Last year, a study came out showing that left-leaning adolescents were experiencing a greater increase in depression than their more conservative peers. Indeed, while girls are more likely to be depressed than boys, the study, by a group of epidemiologists at Columbia, showed that liberal boys had higher rates of depression than conservative girls.

Because I wrote quite a bit about the dire psychological fallout of Donald Trump's abusive presidency, I was immediately interested in the study, titled "The Politics of Depression." It's long been known that liberals tend to be more depressed than conservatives, which you can interpret as either a cause or an effect of their unhappiness with the status quo. But innate factors couldn't explain why, among the 12th graders the study examined, the gap in depressive symptoms between liberals and conservatives appeared to be growing. Nor could those factors explain why, after several years in which liberal girls and liberal boys endured roughly equal rates of depression, girls who identified as liberal had started having a much harder time.

The study speculated that left-leaning girls might simply be reacting to the political environment. "Broad-reaching phenomena, such as worsening climate change or school shootings, may impact mental health for all adolescents, while social injustices like sexism, which gained media attention through the #MeToo movement, may be felt most acutely by those personally affected," it said. The notion that Trump's America was a psychologically unhealthy place for young women resonated with me, and I considered writing about it.

But as I looked closer at the data, I saw that the inflection point for liberal adolescent depression wasn't 2016, but around 2012. That was the year of the devastating Sandy Hook mass shooting, but it was not otherwise a time of liberal political despair. Barack Obama was re-elected in 2012. In 2013, the Supreme Court extended gay marriage rights. It was hard to draw a direct link between that period's political events and teenage depression, which in 2012 started an increase that has continued, unabated, until today.

One person I hoped could make sense of the study was Jean Twenge, a professor of psychology at San Diego State University and the author of the 2017 book "iGen," about the deleterious psychological effects of social media. When I spoke to her last year, Twenge had preliminary data showing that liberal teenagers spent more time on social media than their conservative peers. Girls also use social media more than boys do, though boys tend to spend more time on screens, largely because of video games.

Twenge pointed out that "The Politics of Depression" found increases not just in depression but also in loneliness among liberal teenage girls. "Why would they feel lonely because of the state of politics?" she asked.

I couldn't answer that question, and since I lost faith in my initial interpretation of "The Politics of Depression," I never ended up writing about it. Now, however, with a roiling debate about what's

causing the downward spiral of kids' mental health, it's worth revisiting why the notion of teenage depression as a sort of internalized protest against an unjust society doesn't hold up.

This month, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention published alarming findings from its Youth Risk Behavior Survey that demonstrated the gravity of the psychological crisis that adolescents, especially adolescent girls, are facing. In 2021, it found, nearly 60 percent of high school girls experienced persistent feelings of sadness and hopelessness. Almost a quarter made a suicide plan.

It would be comforting to attribute this distress to the pandemic. But as Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist at New York University working on a book about social media and adolescent mental illness, noted to me, one of the most surprising things about the C.D.C. numbers is that there isn't a large Covid-era spike in depression. Instead, there's a slight intensification of a decade-long climb. "In aggregate, Covid barely moved the needle," said Haidt. "The incredibly rapid rise of mental illness since 2012 basically just charged on almost unaffected."

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Clearly, kids are in terrible pain. In trying to understand why, many conservatives have embraced ideas about the damaging effects of social media championed by Haidt and Twenge. The Republican senator Josh Hawley cited Twenge's work in calling for a ban on social media use by kids under 16. "Depression and social media use go hand in hand," he wrote in *The Washington Post*. In Utah, the Republican governor has announced plans to sue social media companies for allegedly damaging kids' mental health, and the Republican-controlled House there just passed a bill making it easier for individuals to sue social media companies as well.

Some on the left, by contrast, are drawn to the assumptions I first made when I saw the "Politics of Depression" paper, pointing to the lamentable state of the world to explain girls' misery. In *The Guardian*, Moira Donegan zeroed in on the Youth Risk Behavior Survey's finding that 14 percent of high school girls say they'd been forced to have sex, and nearly a fifth experienced sexual violence in the past year. *The Washington Post*'s Taylor Lorenz wrote, in a viral tweet, "People are like 'why are kids so depressed it must be their PHONES!' But never mention the fact that we're living in a late stage capitalist hellscape during an ongoing deadly pandemic." The feminist writer Jessica Valenti argued that girls' depression is a natural reaction to a brutally misogynist culture. "The real crisis, the problem that needs fixing, isn't girls' mental health," she wrote. "In the midst of all this violence and dehumanization, their depression is actually very reasonable!"

I agree with Donegan and Valenti about the horrifying toll that sexist violence takes on girls and women. But sexual assault and political backsliding can't be the whole story behind soaring rates of adolescent anguish. Sexual violence has been consistently bad in America: According to the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, in 2011, 12 percent of girls reported that they'd been forced to have sex, only two points fewer than in 2021. American politics didn't take a severe right turn until 2016. And regardless, the steep decline in young people's mental health around 2012 isn't just an American problem: It also shows up in Britain, Canada and Australia.

Technology, not politics, was what changed in all these countries around 2012. That was the year that Facebook bought Instagram and the word “selfie” entered the popular lexicon. As Twenge showed in “iGen,” in 2009, fewer than 60 percent of eighth-grade girls reported near-daily use of what were then called “social networking sites.” By 2014, more than 80 percent did.

Social media didn’t just cut into offline socializing. It precipitated a revolution in consciousness, in which people are constantly packaging themselves for public consumption and seeing their popularity and the popularity of others quantified. It’s not shocking that this new mode of existence would be particularly fraught for those in a stage of life where both fashioning the self and finding a place to belong are paramount.

Twenge and Haidt maintain a Google document collecting studies on social media and mental health that experts, including those who disagree with them, can contribute to. As Haidt points out, 55 studies in their review found a significant correlation between time spent on social media and mood disorders, compared with 11 that found little or no correlation. Other research suggests a causal relationship. A 2022 study in *The American Economic Review*, for example, took advantage of the fact that Facebook rolled out on different college campuses at different times. “The introduction of Facebook at a college had a negative impact on student mental health,” it found, presenting evidence that Facebook fostered “unfavorable social comparisons.”

It’s certainly true, as critics of Haidt and Twenge’s work sometimes note, that new forms of media and technology often spur kids-these-days moral panics. Adults have fretted about the damaging impacts of radio, comic books, television and even the music of Prince. That’s a reason to approach the evidence linking social media to mental health disorders with caution. But it’s not a reason to discount it. After all, unlike hysteria over rock music, concern about the psychological effects of social media is something many young people share. “Teens blame Instagram for increases in the rate of anxiety and depression,” said internal Facebook research leaked by the whistle-blower Frances Haugen in 2021. “This reaction was unprompted and consistent across all groups.”

The idea that unaccountable corporate behemoths are harming kids with their products shouldn’t be a hard one for liberals to accept, even if figures like Hawley believe it as well. I’m not sure if banning social media for young people is the right way to start fixing the psychic catastrophe engulfing so many kids. But we’re not going to find any fix at all if we simply start with our political priors and work backward.

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