

Teen girls: An epidemic of despair

American teens are mired “in a state of emotional catastrophe,” said Moira Donegan in *The Guardian*. A CDC report released last week paints a deeply disturbing picture of the mental health of high schoolers. Among the more than 17,000 teens surveyed in 2021, 42 percent said they experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness. The malaise is far more widespread than in a similar survey in 2011, and affects both genders—but “in nearly every measure, girls are faring dramatically worse.” A majority of girls—57 percent—reported persistent despair, versus 29 percent of boys. Nearly 1 in 3 girls seriously considered suicide (up from 19 percent in 2011), and 13 percent say they attempted it in the past year. Fourteen percent of girls report being raped in the past year—a “horrifying” increase of 27 percent since just 2019. This is “an emergency—one that is worsening.”



For teens, social media can be toxic.

“What caused this misery?” asked Jon Gabriel in *The Arizona Republic*. The CDC offered no definitive answers, but consider what has happened over the past decade. “Instagram was released in late 2010. Snapchat in 2011. TikTok in 2016.” Soon thereafter, 90 percent of teen girls reported using social media every day. These apps—which put a premium on selfies and videos—create more “social comparison, social pressure, and negative peer interactions,” with teens measuring their self-worth—or lack of it—in likes and followers. Then in 2020 “Covid-19 entered the picture,” pushing school onto Zoom and leaving teens “texting with friends or doom-scrolling alone in their bedrooms.”

Actually, “there’s not much evidence of a Covid effect,” said Jonathan Haidt in *Jonathanhaidt.substack.com*. By the time

schools shut their doors, “teens had already lost most of their social lives to their phones.” Before social media apps, teens spent about two hours a day hanging out with friends in person. Then social media ushered in a new, “phone-based childhood.” Smartphones take time away from “sleep, play, and in-person socializing, as well as drown kids in social comparisons they can’t win.” Research shows that “social media is addictive,” said Jessica Karl in *Bloomberg*, especially for teens with limited impulse

control. They spend hours a day studying the posts and videos of celebrities, friends, and strangers, setting up expectations that are “poison for a 13-year-old’s brain.”

“Constantly reminding them of their fragility” hasn’t helped, said Kirsten Fleming in the *New York Post*. Teens are bombarded with media that tells them that the world is a hellscape of racism, mass shootings, and microaggressions, that “language is violence,” and that if they somehow survive to adulthood, climate change will deal them a “death blow.” With adults mired in pessimism and fear, no wonder “these kids are paralyzed by anxiety.”

Whatever its root causes, this epidemic of hopelessness should be considered “a national crisis,” said Derek Thompson in *The Atlantic*. Did the reopening of schools and social spaces this year help reduce teens’ anguish? The CDC survey comes out only every other year, so we’ll have to wait to find out. Clearly, though, “modern internet culture” and its emphasis on physical beauty, conflict, and “catastrophizing” has become toxic for teens. “In the open expanse of the internet, we could have built any kind of world. We built this one. Why have we done this to ourselves?”