The State of Youth Mental Health in 2022

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Youth mental health threats are illuminating a significant need for actionable solutions for students in a post–pandemic world who suffer from depression, loneliness, anxiety, and hopelessness at all–time high levels.

According to new data secured by the CDC, students routinely experience a disproportionate level of threats to their mental health and well–being now more than ever.

Before the COVID–19 pandemic, it was clear that the mental health of high school students was increasingly at risk, as shown by earlier CDC data:

> Prior to the pandemic, mental health concerns were the leading cause of poor life outcomes in young people

> From 2009 to 2019, the number of teenagers who reported constant feelings of hopelessness and sadness increased by 40%

> From 2009 to 2018, youth suicide rates skyrocketed 61.7%

Now, as CDC Acting Principal Deputy Director Debra Houry states, "The current data echo a cry for help."

That cry for help is being answered one school at a time by Rachel's Challenge, a collection of programs and professionals dedicated to breaking down walls that stand in the way of good mental health for students. To learn more about these programs and how they ignite change to awaken hope in schools, reach out to Rachel's Challenge.

Youth Mental Health in a Post-Pandemic World

The impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the mental health of our youth is astounding. According to the CDC, 37% of high school students say they considered their mental health as being poor during the pandemic. Nearly half of students (44%) have reported that they consistently felt hopeless or sad during the past year. More than half of parents and caregivers express concern over their children's mental well-being.
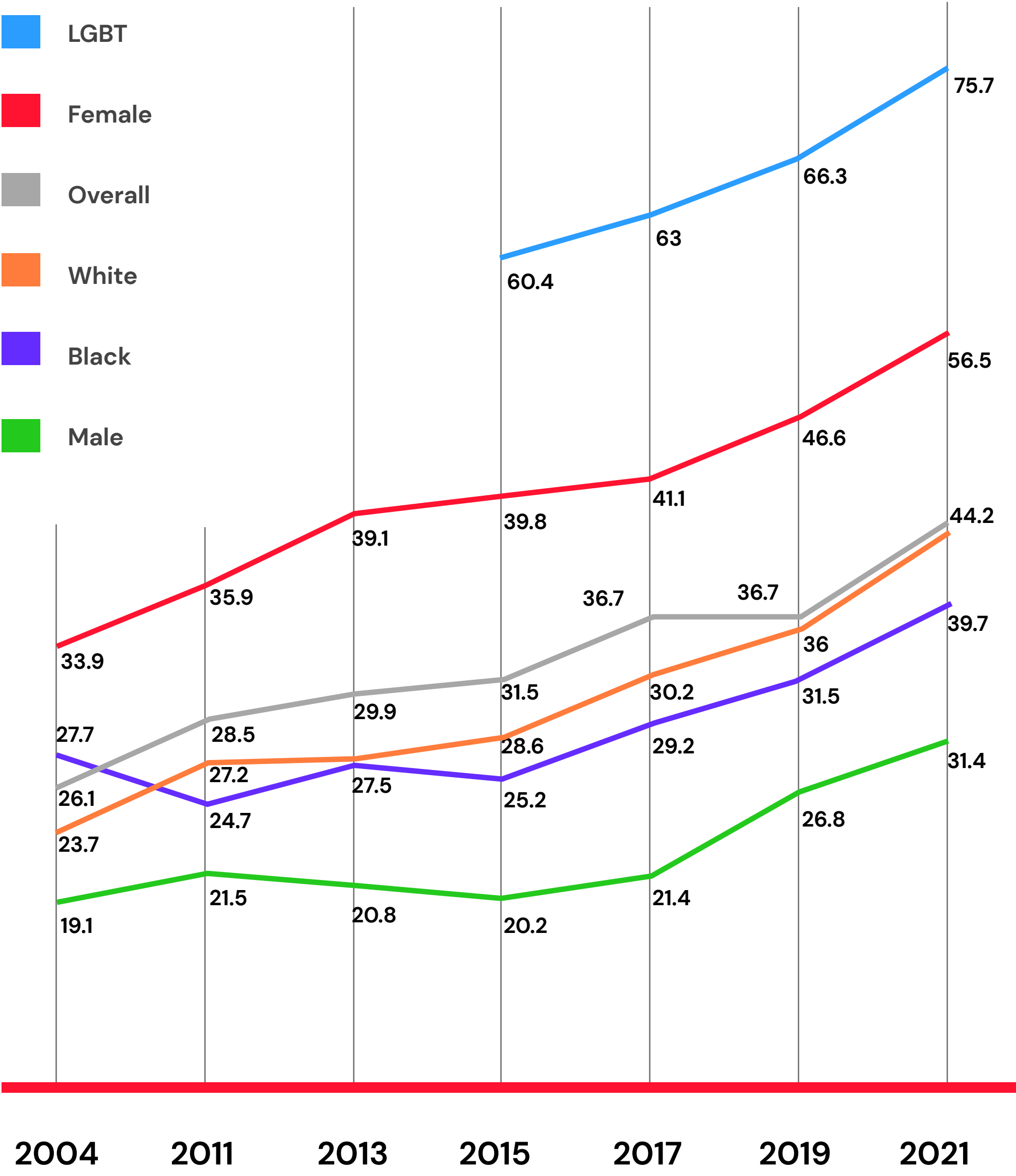
The lack of connectedness, the challenges of isolation, and the loneliness that resulted from the pandemic are all evident in the latest numbers reported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. These numbers reveal that:

> Almost 30% of high school students reported that a parent or other adult at home suffered the loss of a job

> More than half (55%) stated they experienced emotional abuse in the home from an adult, including insulting, swearing at, and putting the student down

> 11% claimed they suffered physical abuse by an adult or parent in the home, including kicking, hitting, beating, and other physical harm

> There has been a nearly 30% increase in suicide attempts among youth nation-wide. That number is in addition to the 61% increase in the prior decade.

Furthermore, female youth and gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth reported even higher instances of emotional abuse and suicide attempts than their peers.

Percent of High-School Students Feeling Persistently Sad or Hopless

- LGBT
- Female
- Overall
- White
- Black
- Male

LGBT: 60.4, 63, 66.3, 75.7

Female: 33.9, 35.9, 39.1, 39.8, 41.1, 46.6, 56.5

Overall: 27.7, 28.5, 29.9, 31.5, 36.7, 36.7, 44.2

White: 26.1, 27.2, 27.5, 28.6, 30.2, 36, 39.7

Black: 23.7, 24.7, 25.2, 29.2, 31.5

Male: 19.1, 21.5, 20.8, 20.2, 21.4, 26.8, 31.4

2004 2011 2013 2015 2017 2019 2021

Credit: Derek Thompson, The Atlantic; data from the CDC

The impact of the COVID–19 crisis on the mental health of youth is echoed by assessments carried out by Unicef, as well.

Unicef reports that 27% of participants in a recent poll report feeling anxiety and 15% report feeling depression in the last week. For 30% of those youths, the biggest reason for their mental stress is the state of the economy.

In addition, the U.S. surgeon general issued a new advisory to bring attention to the urgent need to address the mental health crisis of youth in America. Dr. Vivek Murthy has called for a swift, coordinated response, providing recommendations for the country to improve the mental health of young adults, teens, adolescents, and young children.

Youth Gun Violence

The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that youth violence has serious <u>detrimental effects</u> on a person's health and well–being, regardless of whether that person is a witness, a victim, or an offender.

The Current State of Youth Gun Violence

Youth gun violence has exploded in the United States in the past few decades, revealing the depth of the mental health crisis throughout the country. The mental health crisis remains at the heart of the gun violence epidemic.

Many youths suffer from mental health disorders. Nationwide, <u>8 million</u> children under the age of 18 have at least one mental health disorder. However, a shocking number of children never get the mental health treatment they need. Fewer than <u>50%</u> of children ever receive treatment.

Furthermore, only 33% of students who carry out acts of gun violence in schools ever receive a mental health evaluation before their attacks, and <u>fewer than 20%</u> of them were diagnosed with a mental disorder before their shootings.

Contributing Factors to Increasing Youth Gun Violence

Mental health screenings and proper treatment can help <u>prevent gun violence</u>, especially in people who have depression, thoughts of suicide, and related mental health conditions.

Risk factors of youth gun violence can include everything from bullying and isolation to abuse

and neglect from family to mental health problems. It's important to note that according to the National Center for Biotechnology Information (NCBI), the <u>risk factors</u> for violence are not static.

The predictive values of risk factors depend on three things:

> The social context

> When they happen in a youth's development

> The circumstances under which they occur

In addition, there can be risk factors in the environment, in the individual themselves, and in the person's ability to respond to the demands of their environment. Some factors involve the school, the neighborhood, the family, and/or the peers around an adolescent.

<u>Risk factors</u> also might come into play during their early childhood and others may not surface until a child's teenage years. It's critical to bear in mind that no single risk factor can predict with certainty which adolescents will become violent.

For example, poor school performance is a risk factor, but not everyone who does poorly at school will become violent. Being male is a contributing factor as well, but not all males are violent.

Solutions to Tackling Youth Gun Violence

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) explains that the public health approach to youth violence hinges on being able to identify risk factors and designing programs to prevent or cease the violence.

For example, according to the National Institutes of Health, poverty is a contributing factor, but eliminating poverty is not a realistic short-term goal. However, developing programs that counter the effects of poverty are.

The bar graph below shows that a majority of people recognize that a root cause of gun violence are mental health problems. Though the issue is complex and confusing, Rachel's Challenge has a simple solution that has already prevented 8 school shootings.

Mass shootings sign of mental health or gun law failures?

Do think that mass shootings in this country are more reflection of problems identifying and treating people with mental health problems or inadequate gun control laws?

0	10	20	30	40	50	60

Mental health problems	63
Gun control laws	23
Both (Vol.)	10
Neither/No open	4
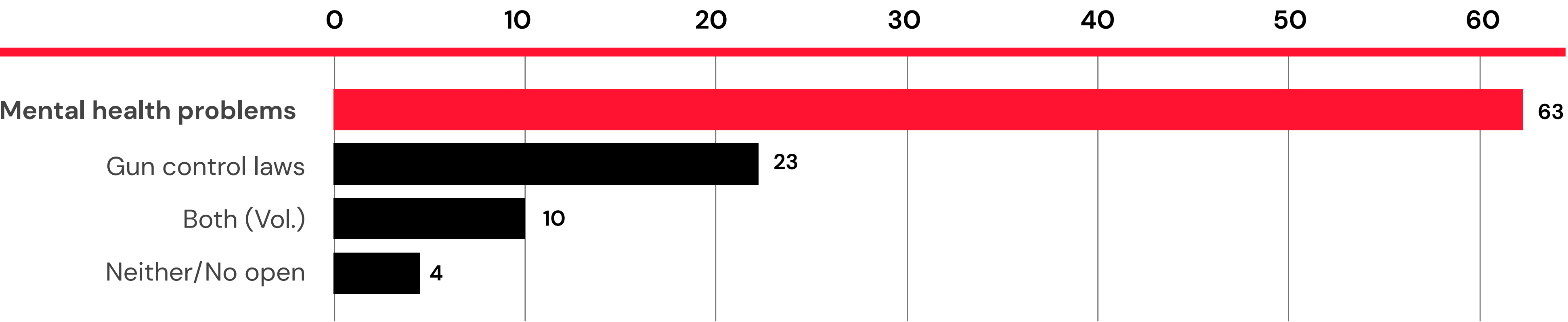
Source: Washington Post–ABC News poll Oct. 15–18, 2015   THE WASHINGTON POST

In order to improve the state of youth gun violence and school shootings, a holistic approach must be taken. Rachel's Challenge focuses on the root causes of the problem by addressing youth isolation and mental health challenges. Gun violence and school shootings are symptoms of the much larger problem.

Teen Suicide

Reports show that 78% of school shooters have histories of mental health concerns, specifically suicidal ideations or suicide attempts. Suicide is currently the second-leading cause of death for Americans who are 10 to 24 years old.

The Current State of Youth and Teen Suicide

Suicide is rarely the outcome of one single source of trauma. Instead, it's often a result of several risk factors being present.

The suicide rate among teens in the United States has surpassed the crisis stage. Teens who have endured trauma from bullying, sexual abuse and violence, physical abuse, and harassment are at an increased risk for suicide. In fact, bullying in school is one of the most significant risk factors for teen suicide.

Statistics reveal that almost ⅓ of high school students in the United States have seriously considered suicide. Sadly, almost 10% of students actually attempt it. Research shows that 90% of people who commit suicide have specific risk factors in common.

Some of those common risk factors include interpersonal losses, bullying, sexual or physical abuse, a history of family violence, and disciplinary problems.

Warning Signs of Youth and Teen Suicide

Unfortunately, suicide attempts, ideation, and completion by youth continue to rise in the United States. Even though it can be difficult to predict if an adolescent or teenager will commit suicide, tragically, 80% of suicide deaths by teens are preceded by warning signs.

Some warning signs of suicide include:

- **>** Changes in sleeping patterns
- **>** Changes in eating habits
- **>** Changes in personality
- **>** Having no hope that things will ever get better
- **>** Displaying a fear of losing control
- **>** Talking about disappearing or dying
- **>** Talking of or carrying out self-harm
- **>** Difficulty focusing on routine tasks, school, and work
- **>** Low self-esteem
- **>** Feelings of self-hatred, worthlessness, and shame

When warning signs of suicide are successfully identified, the social isolation, low self–esteem, and lack of support can be mitigated to help them rise above thoughts of suicidal ideation.

Kids at risk

Suicide is the second leading cause of death among young people, aged 10 to 24

1 in 5, or 15 million, American children and young adults up to age 25 struggle with a mental illness or learning disorder
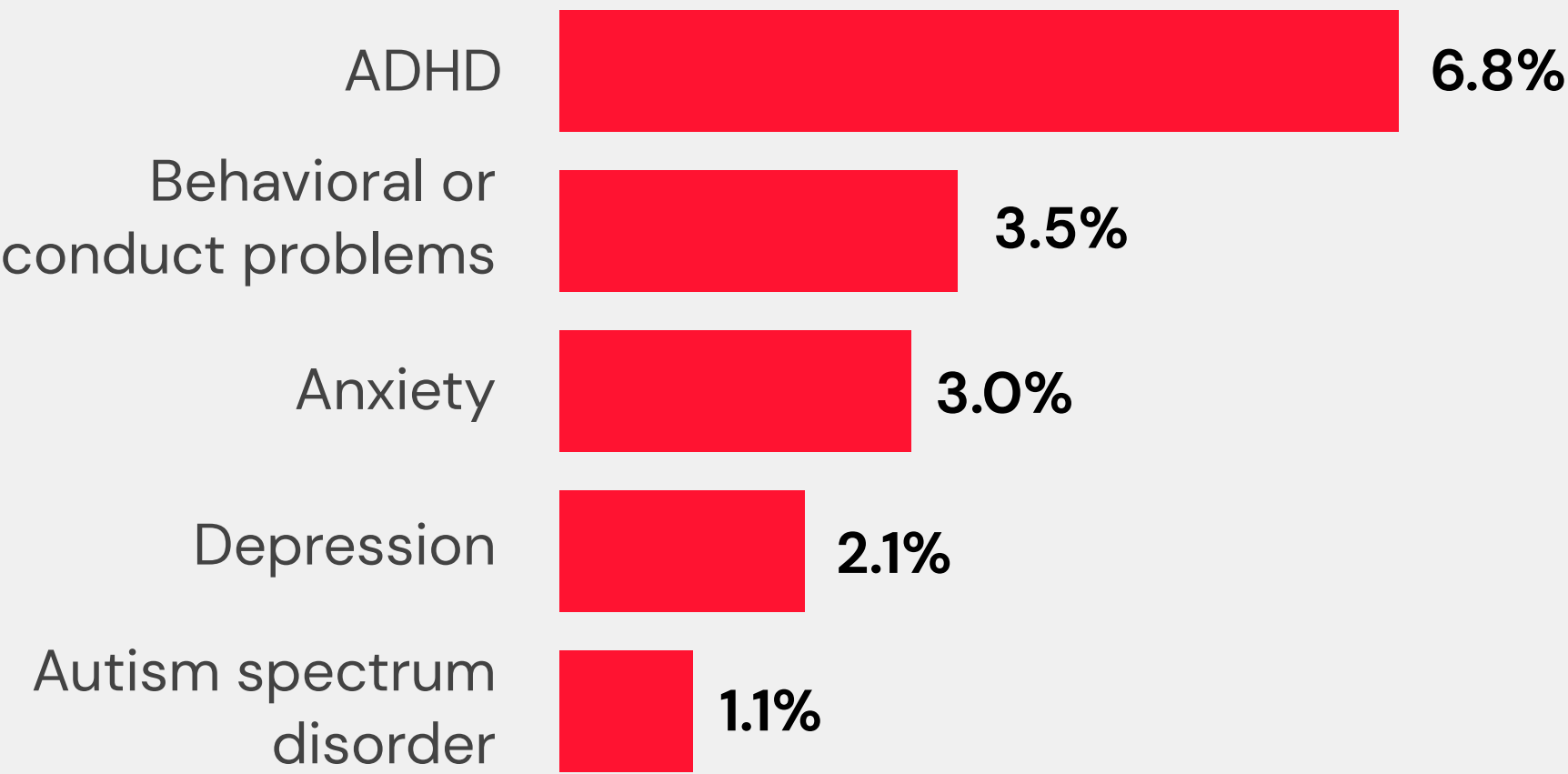
And 2/3 or 10 million are undiagnosed or untreated

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Children ages 3–17 diagnosed with:

ADHD **6.8%**
Behavioral or conduct problems **3.5%**
Anxiety **3.0%**
Depression **2.1%**
Autism spectrum disorder **1.1%**

Contributing Factors to Increasing Youth and Teen Suicide

The seriousness of this public health crisis cannot be overstated. The teen suicide rate is higher among males than females, but females make more attempts than males. In addition, suicide attempts are higher among teens who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual than those who do not.

Some of the contributing factors to increasing youth and teen suicide include:

- > Feelings of social isolation
- > Physical and/or sexual abuse
- > Family history of suicide
- > Family history of depression

- > The loss of a parent to divorce or death
- > Psychiatric disorders like bipolar, major depressive, and substance use disorders

- > Lack of a support network
- > Bullying

The need for teen suicide prevention solutions has reached a critical state, especially in the wake of the COVID–19 pandemic and the skyrocketing incidence of school violence.

Modern Solutions to the Youth Mental Health Crisis

Solutions that can mitigate the effects of these risk factors include cultivating school environments that foster connectedness and a strong sense of community, among others.

The United Health Foundation states that youth violence, including suicide, is preventable, and efforts must focus on all levels of influence, which include individual, interpersonal, community, and societal levels.

Strengthening School Culture

School culture plays one of the most critical and influential roles in preventing not only teen suicide but the youth mental health crisis as a whole. By taking a ground-up approach, modeling behavior, and providing shared experiences, school students, faculty, and staff members can make an enormous difference.

Strengthening school culture so that it's safe, fosters empathy and acceptance, and provides a supportive environment for students should include goals like:

> Expanding student well-being programs

> Connecting students with behavioral health coverage

> Protecting and prioritizing higher-risk students

> Providing mental health support for students

In addition, partnering with speakers and programs like Rachel's Challenge to encourage discussion and connection around mental health is vital.

A Note About Student Well-Being Programs

Student well-being programs help students learn how to manage their emotions, make good decisions, and cultivate relationships in healthy ways. Teaching students and faculty to give back to their learning environments in ways that promote empathy and acceptance creates safer schools.

Through this type of engagement, schools foster a supportive learning environment that functions with collaboration, connectedness, meaningful instruction, trusting relationships, and safety at their core.

Implementing programs that focus on youth mental health have been shown to be effective in reducing and preventing teen violence in schools. Teaching the fundamentals to help students develop and maintain relationships that are meaningful and valuable to them helps eliminate feelings of isolation and boosts students' support systems.

Preventing Youth Violence Through Connectedness

Rachel's Challenge offers programs that encourage hopefulness, self-awareness, and connectedness. When students have a strong support system and are surrounded by peers in a safe, accepting, connected school environment, their mental health can dramatically improve.

Our programs make a positive impact on everything from the academic performance and mental well-being of students to healthy relationships and emotional resilience. Rachel's Challenge offers an expansive series of programs tailored for students at every academic grade level.

Our suite of programs makes schools safer, more supportive, kinder, more accepting, and more connected. Students not only become more self-aware but also more aware of and empathetic toward others.

To date, Rachel's Challenge has impacted more than 20,000 schools across the country and is proven effective for reducing and preventing youth violence, including suicide. Positive, strong relationships form the foundations of connectedness. We combine training for school staff as well as students and offer life-changing presentations for schools.

RachelsChallenge .org

To learn more about how Rachel's Challenge empowers students, staff members, faculty, administration, and even parents to surround each other in a healthy, safe culture for the benefit of youth and teen mental health, contact Rachel's Challenge today.