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Youth mental health woes rise

Study cites COVID-19's role in surge of distress

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Emergency room visits by teens who intentionally harmed themselves soared in the year after the COVID-19 pandemic began, part of a broad local and national trend of worsening youth mental health on display in a report released Thursday.

The report, created by Common Ground Health and Coordinated Care Services Inc., puts troubling health data together with anecdotal data gathered from dozens of interviews with young people across Monroe County.

"I feel like every relationship I had disappeared during COVID," one child said.

"It feels embarrassing to be this emotionless," said another.

It shows that self-harm visits to the emergency room by people 21 years and younger jumped sharply from 2020 to 2021, in particular among girls and Hispanic youths.

More than a third of Monroe County youth surveyed said their mental health was "not good" during most or all of the pandemic. More young people said they now have difficulty concentrating or making decisions.

The main recommendation is to

help youth rebuild supportive relationships, with adults and among themselves.

Among the ideas for achieving that are hyperlocal structures like block clubs and "neighborhood hubs" like schools, libraries, recreation centers and small businesses.

"I used to stay after school in the rec center and it felt like a community and there were people there who actually cared about us," one young person said. "I don't know where else to get that from."

New trauma on existing trauma

The report describes COVID as "the third ACE." The first ACE is adverse childhood experiences, a well established marker of trauma. The second, adverse community environments, acknowledges broader societal effects like a lack of economic mobility.

Some of the adverse COVID experiences named in the report:

- sudden and drastic disruptions to routines, such as remote learning
- social isolation from friends and peers
- heightened stress on families
- increased screen time and presence on social media
- uncertainty when planning for the future "We didn't realize how much we socialize and how many friends we had and how many times we got to see them before, until we lost it," one young person said.

v From 2022: RCS D adds resources for students facing trauma The report also calls for destigmatizing discussion of mental health, both in school and outside of it. Last, it says that "youth should be integrated into decision-making at all phases," something that can be accomplished in part through leadership and advocacy training. Children in Monroe County "need *agape* love," Common Ground Health's Director of Mental Health and Wellness Melanie Funchess said in a press release. "That unconditional love that shows up and gives itself without expecting anything in return."

— Justin Murphy is a veteran reporter at the Democrat and Chronicle and author of "Your Children Are Very Greatly in Danger: School Segregation in Rochester, New York." Follow him on Twitter at twitter.com/CitizenMurphy or contact him at jmurphy7@gannett.com.

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