

The Youth Mental Health Crisis: What Does It All Mean?

New data on the mental health of American college students shows a somber trend. Rates of depression, anxiety, low flourishing, suicidal thinking, and suicidal attempts have all worsened over the years 2007 to 2018, according to [research](#) by Jean Twenge and colleagues, published in the Journal of Adolescent Health. And it's not all down to more reporting.

Two surveys during that period, involving a total of nearly 1.4 million undergraduates, showed that rates of moderate to severe depression rose from 23.2 percent in 2007 to 41.1 percent in 2018, and moderate to severe anxiety from 17.9 percent to 34.4 percent. Severe depression rose from 9.4 percent to 21.1 percent in the same period, while suicide attempts increased from 0.7 percent in 2013 to 1.8 percent in 2018.

The U.S. is not alone in this. Google practically any Western country alongside the terms "youth" and "mental health" and you will find the same picture.

What is causing all this anxiety and depression? There's probably no good data on that, but some guesses are more informed than others.

Twenge, a psychology professor at San Diego State University and author of the book "iGen," sees a strong correlation between worsening mental health and the rise of the smartphone, with the boost it gave to social media. Going to bed with a smartphone on under her pillow in case her love interest sends a message is not going to give girl a great sleep. Not seeing friends face-to-face puts a question mark over "friendship." Both habits are unhealthy but they can't

alone account for the growing crisis.

Some experts say that mental health services on campuses are inadequate, and some schools expel suicidal students or insist they take medical leave to avoid liability for student suicides, Reuters reports. One told the news agency that the solution was not just a question of more of the same; colleges should get more creative, perhaps with online services or peer support to help students.

But blaming a lack of services doesn't deal with the basic question of why so many students even start down the road of anxiety and depression. Anyone can get anxious at exam time, or down-hearted for a day or two over an argument with parents or a friend; but when such moods become chronic or severe there is something more fundamental going on.

Perhaps it's poverty, or minority status, or a broken home. The students who volunteered to answer the survey questionnaires were predominantly white (three out of four) and female (two out of three in one study and 57 percent in the other); that doesn't tell us much, but white, female college students are likely to suffer less from social and economic deprivation than other groups.

Here's another idea.

A couple of months ago the Huffington Post ran an interesting [feature](#) about an increase in young American women wanting to become nuns. Yes, nuns. And not modern sisters either, but more the strict, traditional variety. It would be unwise to build too much on the surge of inquiries to Catholic vocations offices – or freelance websites – that writer Eve Fairbanks noted, but her case studies of 20-something Catholics and her own reactions to them are revealing.

What they have in common is a search for love, and meaning. Reliable, rock-solid love, meaning that gives one's life a purpose. These are things more or less absent from their life

experience, and yes, broken homes are a factor (two of Fairbanks' interviewees have suffered this). They want an answer to questions like: What is worth working for? Loving for? Even living for?

Academic success, career, popularity, "relationships", a busy Facebook or Instagram account – none of these singly or even all of them together answers those questions for the would-be nuns.

What does answer them is the news that God loves them unconditionally, just as they are, before they achieve anything or even when they fail to achieve something. They discover that Christ is a lover who rewards their love a hundredfold and will never let them down, whether they become religious sisters or not (and it seems most of them will not.)

At the same time, these young women are attracted to the idea of a demanding vocation, a Mother Teresa lifestyle, say, in all its stark simplicity; and to the doctrinal underpinnings of the Catholic faith that make it solid and reliable. The teacher of some high school juniors at a Catholic school tells Fairbanks how astonished he was at their positive response to a priest in full clericals who told them, "You are called to holiness. You are called to be saints."

If the Greta Thunbergs and the social justice warriors of the world show us that young people are not afraid of seriousness and moral demands, the Millennial nuns – and the hundreds of thousands of young Catholics who congregate for World Youth Days with the Pope – show that they can be just as enthusiastic when the moral vision is driven by religious faith.

In fact, morality isn't enough. What human beings crave above all is a sense that their lives rest upon the firm foundation of a love that will never fail, never end. We need the joy of finding ourselves part of a divine plot, the relief of not

having to make it all up for themselves. But this is precisely what we are not passing on to the younger generations.

In the New York Times today Ross Douthat [responds](#) to a U.S. Senate [report](#) which shows a doubling of deaths from drugs, alcohol, and suicide between 2000 and 2017, “easily eclipsing all prior 20th-century highs.” At the rate of 45.8 per 100,000 Americans, this year alone would see 70,000 *more* of these “deaths of despair” than in 2000.

Douthat classifies typical solutions, liberal/progressive and conservative, offered for this shocking epidemic. While drug control and economic policies may prevent some of these deaths in future, he suggests, the increase in depression and suicide generally and among young people especially, “has more mysterious causes (social media? secularization?) and might only yield to a psychological and spiritual response.”

But at the same time the simultaneity of the different self-destroying trends is a brute fact of American life. And that simultaneity does not feel like just a coincidence, just correlation without entanglement—especially when you include other indicators, collapsing birthrates and declining marriage rates and decaying social trust, that all suggest a society suffering a meaning deficit, a loss of purpose and optimism and direction, a gently dehumanizing drift.

A meaning deficit, a loss of purpose, optimism and direction – these are surely at the bottom of the adolescent mental health crisis. And, deeper still, a love deficit. Can these losses be remedied except by rebuilding the institutions that nourish love, faith, and happiness?

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