

Girls in Crisis: More Consequences of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Teen girls, particularly girls of color and lesbian and bisexual girls, have faced and continue to face unique challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic—challenges that have created lasting trauma and impacts. A concerning high share of girls are experiencing poor mental health coupled with limited access to mental health resources. Additionally, many girls faced racism, harassment and abuse, and cyberbullying during the pandemic. Given fluctuating modes of learning, girls have also faced difficulty completing their schoolwork, new kinds of discipline in a virtual environment, and increased screen time, including more time spent on potentially psychologically harmful social media. Girls' family care responsibilities also likely increased during the pandemic, with many stepping up to care for their siblings and older family members, even if it meant missing school or work. Many have also lost their own paying jobs or were unable to find summer jobs during the pandemic, resulting in short- and long-term consequences for their finances and job prospects. Additionally, many teens of color are experiencing ongoing material hardship, such as food insufficiency. The harms of the pandemic have not been distributed equally and instead have fallen heavily on girls of color and lesbian and bisexual girls. Girls in high school, on the verge of beginning higher education, entering the workforce, and becoming independent, need public investments that help them thrive and achieve their full potential.

While more data are needed to fully understand the breadth of these crises, supporting girls and their families now—through trauma-responsive and mental health programs in schools, expanded access to unemployment insurance, food programs like SNAP and WIC, an expanded Child Tax Credit (CTC), and investments in a robust care infrastructure, among others—is an imperative and immediate priority during this critical and formative period in girls' lives. And still, girls also need public investments to succeed during pandemic recovery and thrive while reaching their full potential, such as continuing the pandemic-era school meal waivers and securing more mental health resources, youth employment programs, and supportive and affirming learning environments for all students.

This brief covers topic issues that can be difficult for some people to talk about and to ask teens about. Some of these topics include abuse and suicide.

About the data

Unless otherwise stated, the data in this brief come from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Adolescent Behaviors and Experiences Survey (ABES), which explores the challenges faced by 9th through 12th grade students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data were collected January – June 2021, but many questions were asked about experiences from the onset of the pandemic. For more information, see <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/abes/abes-feature.htm>.¹

Data were disaggregated for straight girls, lesbian and bisexual girls, and for girls who identified their sexual orientation as something else or who were questioning their sexual orientation. Girls who identified their orientation as something else or who were questioning their sexual orientation could not be confidently classified as LGBTQ and were therefore reported on separately, as they are by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In charts, this population is referred to as “girls identifying differently or questioning.”

Refer to endnotes for specified data sources.

The pandemic worsened girls' mental health—and was particularly acute for lesbian and bisexual girls' mental health.

Teens, particularly girls, have experienced an increase in poor mental health over the last decade.² Prior to the pandemic, many teens reported academic and social pressure, as well as a sense of loneliness or wishing they had more friends.³ The pandemic exacerbated these factors, disrupting regular routines, learning environments, relationships, and hobbies. The pandemic also resulted in the loss of loved ones and impacted housing and food accessibility, economic consequences disproportionately felt by families of color due to structural inequalities.⁴ Additionally, infection precautions during the pandemic meant many young girls did not interact socially with others, which may have increased depression and anxiety among adolescents.⁵ Furthermore, recent political battles around racism and anti-LGBTQI+ bias negatively impact youth of color and LGBTQI+ youth.⁶ These factors may have worsened mental health for teens during the pandemic.

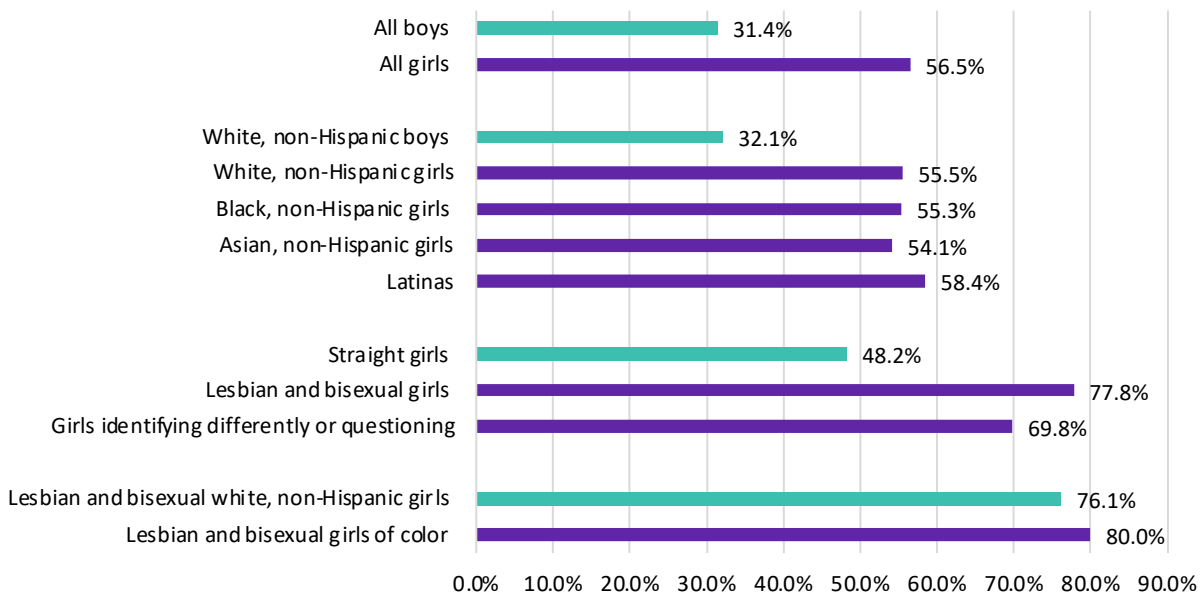
Girls, particularly lesbian and bisexual girls, experienced high rates of depression that increased during the pandemic. Experiencing depression as a youth increases risks for premature death and chronic health conditions, such as heart disease and diabetes⁷ which require more frequent health visits and increased costs.

More than half of girls, including nearly four in five lesbian and bisexual girls, reported experiencing depression this past year.

Here, depression is defined as teens experiencing feelings of sadness or hopelessness almost every day for two weeks or more in a row that stopped them from doing some usual activities.

- In 2021, more than half of girls (56.5%) in high school experienced depression in the past year and were more likely than boys (31.4%) to do so. This is an increase from 2019, when 46.7% of girls and 26.8% of boys reported experiencing depression.⁸
 - Latinas (58.4%), Black, non-Hispanic girls (55.3%), white, non-Hispanic girls (55.5%), and Asian, non-Hispanic girls (54.1%) were all more likely than white, non-Hispanic boys (32.1%) to experience depression in the past year. Black, non-Hispanic and Asian, non-Hispanic girls faced dramatic increases in their experiences of depression compared to their 2019 shares of 41.2% and 39.9%, respectively.⁹
- In 2021, 77.8% of lesbian and bisexual girls in high school and 69.8% of girls who identify differently or who were questioning their sexual orientation reported experiencing depression over the past year. Both groups were more likely than straight girls (48.2%) to experience depression. Lesbian and bisexual girls had an increase in the share who were experiencing depression compared to their 2019 share of 65.4%.¹⁰
 - Among lesbian and bisexual girls, 80.0% of girls of color and 76.1% of white, non-Hispanic girls experienced depression.

Share of High School Students Who Experienced Depression in the Past Year by Selected Demographics (January – June 2021)



Source: NWLC Calculations based on Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021 Adolescents Behaviors and Experiences Survey. Students self-identified their sex, race, if they are Hispanic or Latino, and sexual orientation.

Teen girls and lesbian and bisexual girls were experiencing high rates of suicidal ideation during the pandemic.

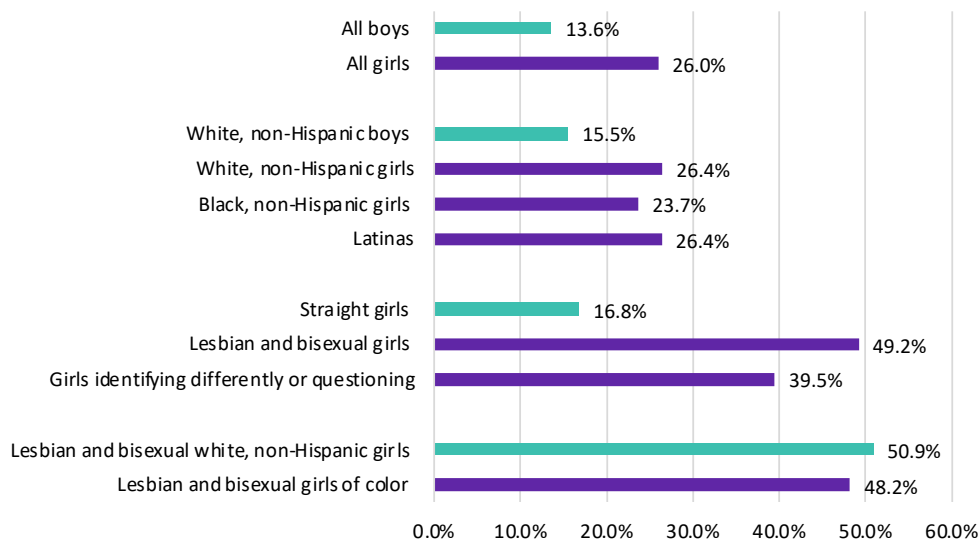
The topic of suicide can be difficult to talk about, ask about, and triggering for some survey participants and readers to discuss. In these data, participants were asked if in the last year they seriously considered attempting suicide.

With increasing experiences of depression in recent years, suicidal ideation among teens has also risen. The share of high school students, particularly lesbian and bisexual girls, who in 2021 reported they seriously considered suicide is disturbingly and unignorable high. Suicide has been one of the leading causes of death among adolescents and has been on the rise for the last 15 years.¹¹

Nearly half of all lesbian and bisexual girls seriously considered suicide in the past year.

- In 2021, girls (26.0%) were nearly two times more likely than boys (13.6%) to have seriously considered suicide in the past year.
 - Latinas (26.4%), white, non-Hispanic girls (26.4%), and Black, non-Hispanic girls (23.7%) were more likely than white, non-Hispanic boys (15.5%) to seriously consider suicide.
- Nearly half of lesbian and bisexual girls (49.2%) and nearly two in five girls who identify as something else or who were questioning their sexual orientation (39.5%) seriously considered suicide in the past year. They were both more likely than straight girls (16.8%) to seriously consider suicide.
 - Over half of white, non-Hispanic lesbian and bisexual girls (50.9%) and nearly half of lesbian and bisexual girls of color (48.2%) seriously considered suicide.

Share of High School Students Who Seriously Considered Suicide in the Past Year by Selected Demographics (January – June 2021)

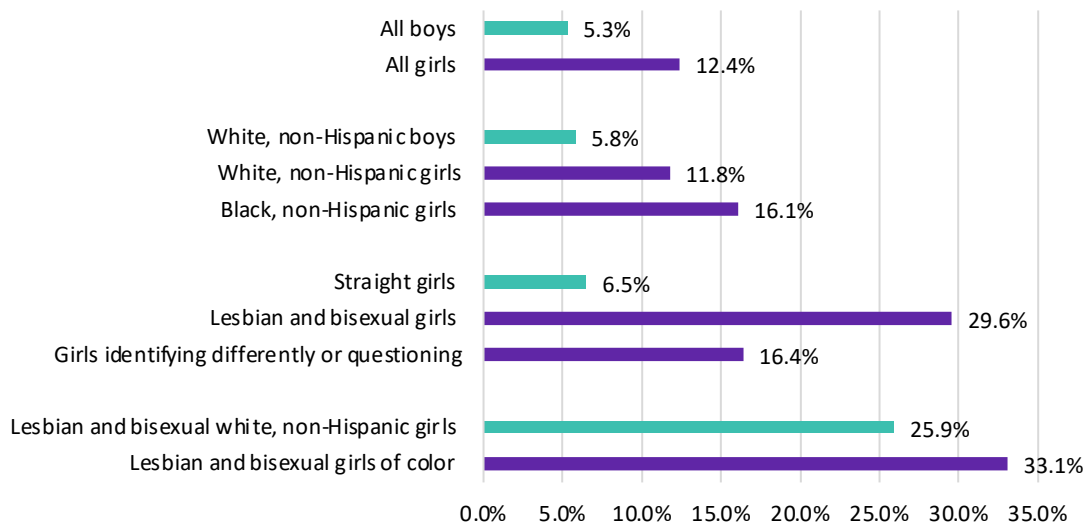


Source: NWLC Calculations based on Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021 Adolescents Behaviors and Experiences Survey. Students self-identified their sex, race, if they are Hispanic or Latino, and sexual orientation. Calculations for Asian, non-Hispanic girls could not be completed due to insufficient sample sizes.

Teen girls, and in particular lesbian and bisexual girls of color, in 2021 had shockingly high rates of attempting suicide in the prior year. In the early months of the pandemic, girls ages 12 to 17 experienced a 51% increase in suicide attempts compared to before the pandemic started. For boys the same age, suicide attempts increased by 3.7%.¹² In these data, participants were asked if they attempted suicide one or more times in the prior year. Any respondents who indicated they attempted suicide any number of times were included below.

- In 2021, girls (12.4%) were also over two times more likely than boys (5.3%) to attempt suicide in the prior year.
 - Black, non-Hispanic girls (16.1%) were nearly three times more likely than white, non-Hispanic boys (5.8%) to attempt suicide. White, non-Hispanic girls (11.8%) were two times more likely than white, non-Hispanic boys to attempt suicide.
- Lesbian and bisexual girls (29.6%) were over 4.5 times more likely than straight girls (6.5%) to attempt suicide in the past year. Girls who identified as something else or who were questioning their sexual orientation (16.4%) were 2.5 times more likely than straight girls to attempt suicide.
 - Among lesbian and bisexual girls, 33.1% of girls of color and 25.9% of white, non-Hispanic girls attempted suicide.

Share of High School Students Who Attempted Suicide in the Past Year by Selected Demographics (January – June 2021)



Source: NWLC Calculations based on Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021 Adolescents Behaviors and Experiences Survey. Students self-identified their sex, race, if they are Hispanic or Latino, and sexual orientation. Calculations for Asian, non-Hispanic girls and Latinas could not be completed due to insufficient sample sizes.

While teens experienced increases in poor mental health, very few received mental health care.

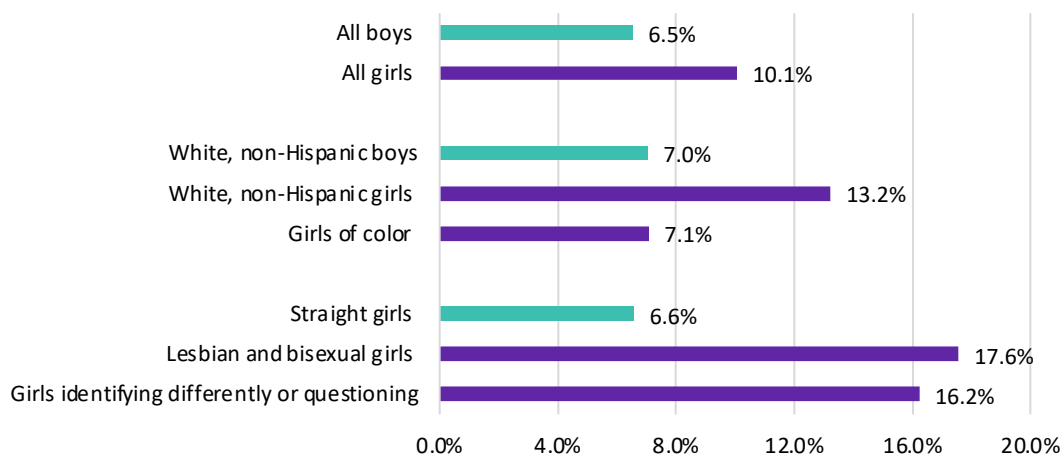
The concerning high rates of depression that increased among teens during the pandemic demonstrate the clear and expansive need for mental health resources for teens. However, very few teens received telehealth-based mental health care during the pandemic. During the pandemic, Black, Latino, and Asian populations had a greater unmet need for mental health care than white populations.¹³

Adolescents face several barriers in accessing mental health care. Foremost, stigma and a lack of mental health knowledge are the largest barriers for teens in accessing mental health treatment.¹⁴ Teens may not know how and where to access services. Other common barriers are a lack of perceived confidentiality or feeling a lack of privacy, particularly in school-based care. The financial cost, or perceived cost, further prevents adolescents from seeking care.¹⁵ Many of these barriers may be greater for teens of color and have lowered their mental health care use. In 2020, a greater share of Black and Latinx children than white, non-Hispanic children did not have health insurance coverage¹⁶ which could have impact their ability to get mental health care.

Only one in 10 girls received telehealth mental health care during the pandemic.

Among high school students, girls (10.1%) were more likely than boys (6.5%) to receive telehealth mental health care during the pandemic.¹⁷ White, non-Hispanic girls (13.2%) were more likely than girls of color (7.1%) to get mental health care via telemedicine. Lesbian and bisexual girls (17.6%) in high school and girls who identify as something else or who were questioning their sexual orientation (16.2%) were both more likely than straight girls (6.6%) to receive telehealth mental health care during the pandemic.

Share of High School Students Who Received Telehealth Mental Health Care During the Pandemic by Selected Demographics (January – June 2021)



Source: NWLC Calculations based on Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021 Adolescents Behaviors and Experiences Survey. Students self-identified their sex, race, if they are Hispanic or Latino, and sexual orientation. Breakdowns for girls of color could not be completed due to insufficient sample sizes.

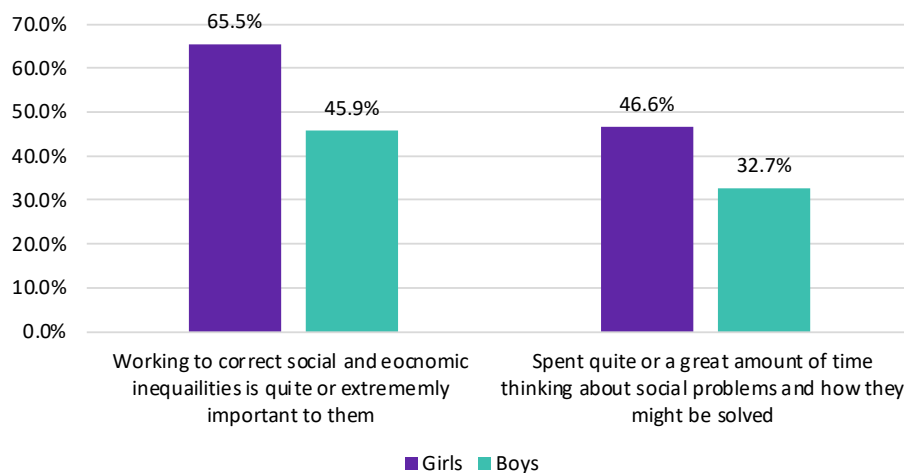
Teens often receive mental health care in schools because schools can reduce some barriers to care such as cost and transportation.¹⁸ However, without in-person instruction, especially early in the pandemic, there were fewer opportunities for teens to receive such care. The demand for mental health resources increased dramatically during the pandemic, yet many schools were not equipped to meet the demand: One in three public schools (33%) reported they strongly or moderately disagree that their school can effectively provide mental health services to all students in need as of April 2022.¹⁹ Schools can also help meet students' mental health needs in many ways apart from direct services. For example, in a recent survey among youth ages 14 to 18 by Mental Health America, 53% said they wanted mental health breaks or absences as a part of school or work. Additionally, 48% wanted to learn how to support their mental health during their daily life.²⁰ Schools can increase youths' access to mental health professionals and teach them skills to care for their own mental health to overall support youth's health.

Girls were more likely than boys to show interest in correcting social and economic inequalities.

The racial and social justice reckoning in the summer of 2020, which led to worldwide protests, increased efforts to address systemic racism and social inequalities. Violence toward Black people and the trauma they experience has been directly connected to worse mental health for Black people,²¹ and particularly for Black girls.²² While mental health resources are needed to care for this trauma, avenues for civic engagement can also benefit mental health, particularly for girls.

In 2021, high school girls (65.5%) were more likely than boys (45.9%) to say that working to correct social and economic inequalities is quite or extremely important to them. Girls (46.6%) were also more likely than boys (32.7%) to say they spent quite or a great amount of time thinking about the social problems of the nation and world, and how they might be solved.²³ Civic engagement among young people has a positive relationship with health and mental health outcomes, educational attainment, and income—not to mention the benefits it has for communities.²⁴ But a survey among young girl activists sheds light on how when girls focus on serving their communities, they may not prioritize their own mental health.²⁵ Girls need to be supported so they can both civically engage and prioritize their mental health.

High School Student's Reflections on Social and Economic Inequalities and Social Problems (2021)



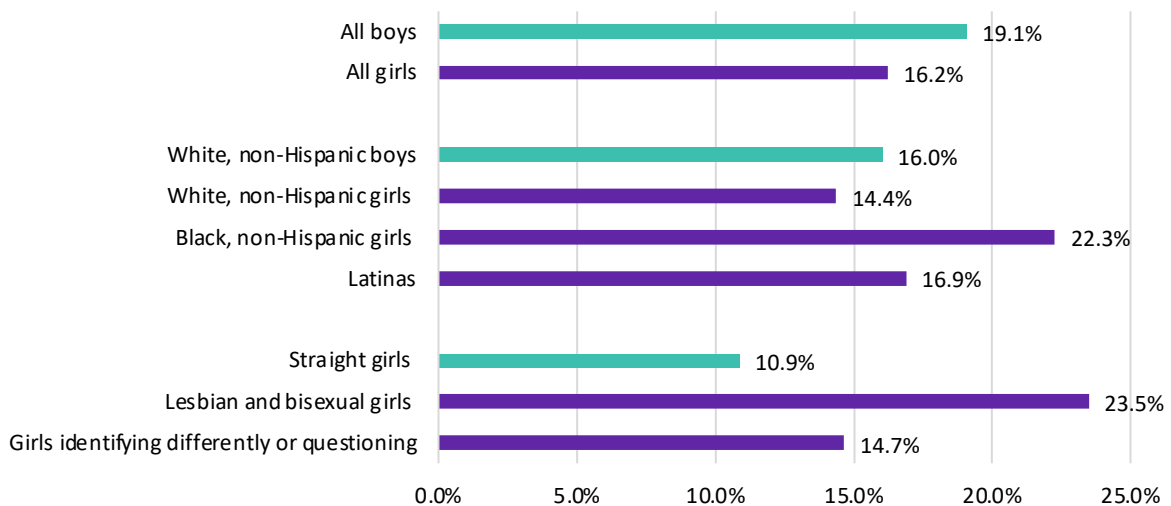
Source: NWLC Calculations based on the 2022 University of Michigan's 9th to 12th grade Monitoring the Future Survey.

A concerning share of girls, particularly Black, non-Hispanic girls and lesbian and bisexual girls, experienced abuse during the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic increased stressors, increased time in the home, and decreased social supports, creating a ripe environment for abuse. Communities of color experienced a greater impact from the pandemic in forms of economic loss and higher infection and death rates, while also having the fewest resources, which may have contributed to the higher rates of abuse of Black, non-Hispanic girls in 2021. Lesbian and bisexual girls also experienced higher rates of abuse during the pandemic. While these data demonstrate that abuse persisted during the pandemic, actual reporting of abuse decreased,²⁶ which may be due to children spending less time with teachers, health care providers, and child care providers²⁷ who had fewer opportunities to detect signs of and report abuse.²⁸ Child maltreatment can lead to a variety of long-term negative physical, mental, and behavioral health outcomes.²⁹

- During the pandemic, 16.2% of girls and 19.1% of boys in high school experienced physical abuse from a parent or adult in their homes.³⁰
 - Black, non-Hispanic girls (22.3%) were more likely than white, non-Hispanic boys (16.0%) to experience physical abuse during the pandemic. Additionally, 16.9% of Latinas and 14.4% of white, non-Hispanic girls experienced physical abuse from a parent or adult in their homes.
- Lesbian and bisexual girls (23.5%) in high school were over two times more likely than straight girls (10.9%) to experience physical abuse during the pandemic. Of girls who identify as something else or who were questioning their sexual orientation, 14.7% experienced physical abuse.

Share of High School Students Who Experienced Physical Abuse from a Parent or Adult in Their Home by Selected Demographics (January – June 2021)

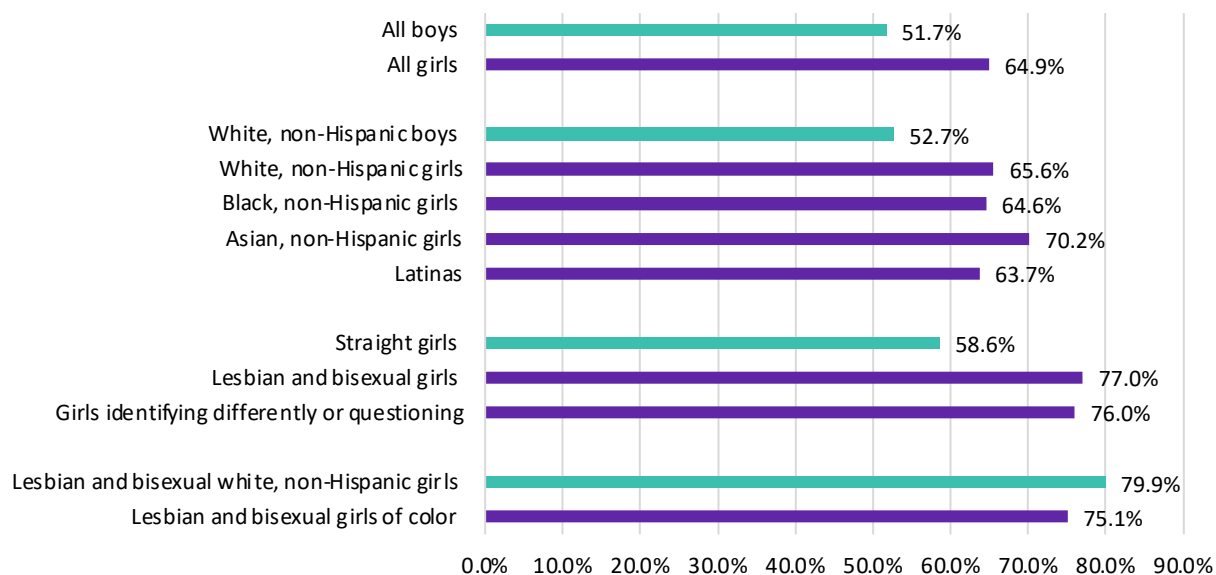


Source: NWLC Calculations based on Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021 Adolescents Behaviors and Experiences Survey. Students self-identified their sex, race, if they are Hispanic or Latino, and sexual orientation. Calculations for Asian, non-Hispanic girls could not be completed due to insufficient sample sizes.

Girls, particularly lesbian and bisexual girls, were especially likely to experience emotional abuse during the pandemic. Emotional abuse in these data are defined as a teen experiencing a parent or adult in the home swearing, insulting, or putting them down during the pandemic.

- Among high school students, girls (64.9%) were more likely than boys (51.7%) to experience emotional abuse from a parent or adult in their home during the COVID-19 pandemic.
 - Asian, non-Hispanic girls (70.2%), Black, non-Hispanic girls (64.6%), Latinas (63.7%), and white, non-Hispanic girls (65.6%) were all more likely than white, non-Hispanic boys (52.7%) to experience emotional abuse during the pandemic.
- Lesbian and bisexual girls (77.0%) and girls who identify as something else or who were questioning their sexual orientation (76.0%) were more likely than straight girls (58.6%) in high school to experience emotional abuse from a parent or adult in their home during the pandemic.
 - Among lesbian and bisexual girls, 79.9% of white, non-Hispanic and 75.1% of girls of color reported experiencing emotional abuse during the pandemic.

Share of High School Students Who Experienced Emotional Abuse From a Parent or Adult in Their Homes During the COVID-19 Pandemic by Selected Demographics (January – June 2021)



Source: NWLC Calculations based on Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021 Adolescents Behaviors and Experiences Survey. Students self-identified their sex, race, if they are Hispanic or Latino, and sexual orientation.

In addition to physical and emotional abuse, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s recent youth risk behavior report highlights high rates of sexual violence among girls and LGBQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, questioning, or another non-heterosexual identity). About 18% of high school girls and 22% of LGBQ+ students experienced sexual violence by anyone in 2020. While these data were not broken down for girls of color, shares were higher among American Indian or Alaska Native (16%) and multiracial (15%) students compared to white students (12%).³¹

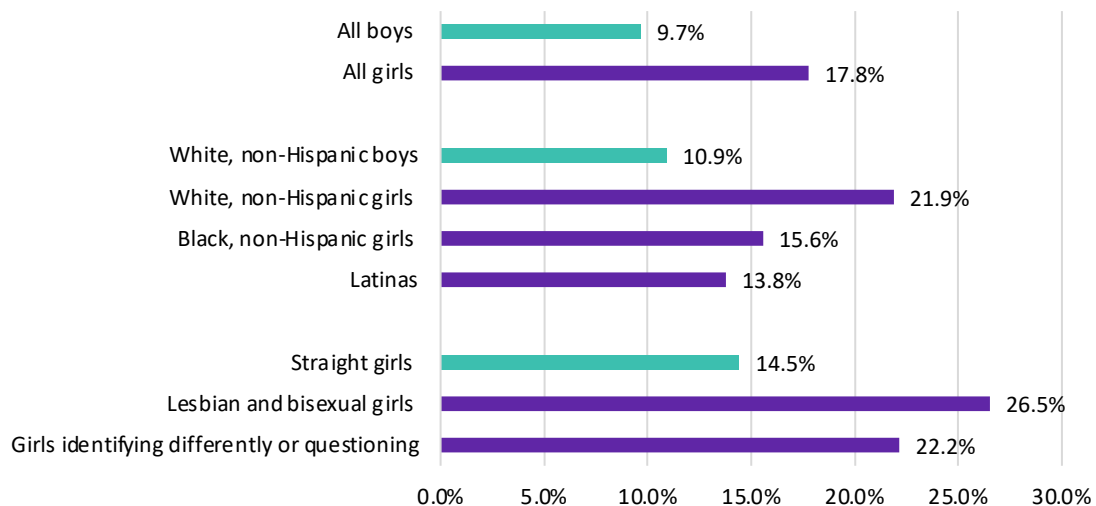
Lesbian and bisexual girls were especially likely to report being cyberbullied in the prior year.

While reports of in-person and cyberbullying have decreased throughout the pandemic,³² a still concerning high share of girls, particularly lesbian and bisexual girls, reported being cyberbullied. The pandemic resulted in an increased online presence for many teens,³³ both socially and for educational purposes. With significant reports of cyberbullying and an increase in online use, more targeted approaches may need to be made by schools to keep teens, particularly girls, safe.

Lesbian and bisexual girls were nearly two times more likely than straight girls to be cyberbullied.

- Among high school students in 2021, girls (17.8%) were nearly two times more likely than boys (9.7%) to report being cyberbullied in the prior year.³⁴
 - White, non-Hispanic girls (21.9%) and girls of color (14.0%), including 15.6% of Black, non-Hispanic girls and 13.8% of Latinas, were all more likely than white, non-Hispanic boys (10.9%) to be cyberbullied in the prior year.
- Lesbian and bisexual girls (26.5%) in high school were nearly two times more likely than straight girls (14.5%) to report being cyberbullied within the prior year. Girls identifying as something else or who were questioning their sexual orientation (22.2%) were also more likely than straight girls to report being cyberbullied in the prior year.

Share of High School Students Who Were Cyberbullied in the Last Year by Selected Demographics (January – June 2021)



Source: NWLC Calculations based on Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021 Adolescents Behaviors and Experiences Survey. Students self-identified their sex, race, if they are Hispanic or Latino, and sexual orientation. Calculations for Asian, non-Hispanic girls could not be completed due to insufficient sample sizes.

With limited in-person social activities, young people were spending an increasing amount of time on social media. Screen time among surveyed tweens (ages 8 to 12) and teens (ages 13 to 18) increased between 2019 and 2021: by 49 minutes to a total of 5 hours and 33 minutes of daily use and by 1 hour and 17 minutes to a total of 8 hours and 39 minutes of daily use, respectively.³⁵ Girls (30%) more than boys (9%) ages 8 to 18 indicated they enjoy using social media a lot in 2021. Among teens who indicated they used social media or online videos at least once a week, girls were more likely than boys to use Instagram (78% vs 62%) and more girls (30%) than boys (8%) used Pinterest. This increased online presence has the potential to increase rates of cyberbullying, and also may negatively impact mental health.

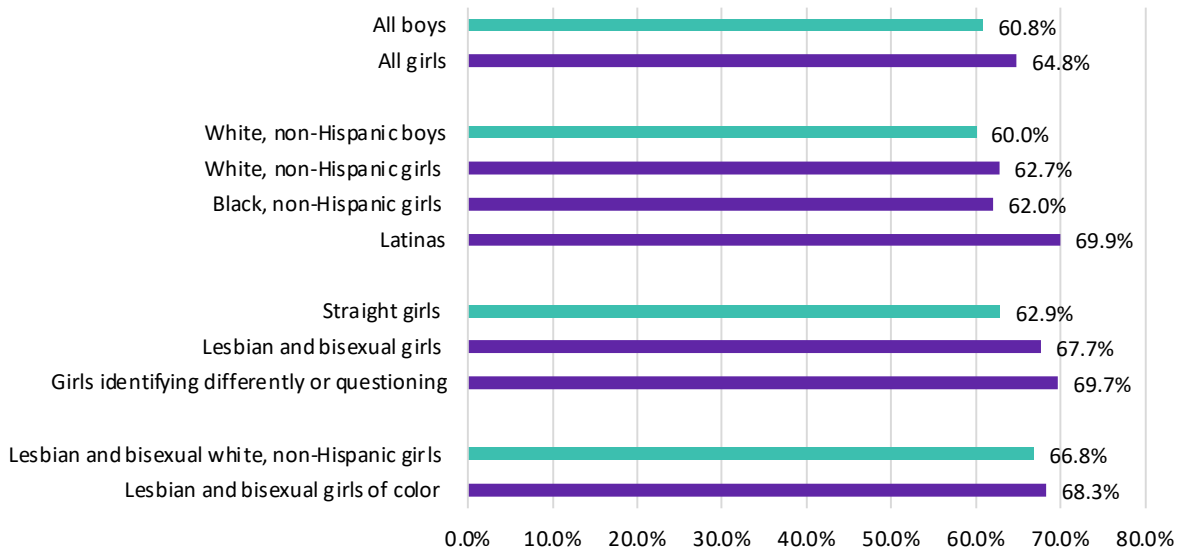
Research on Instagram's overall effect on mental health has been mixed, with some teens reporting stronger social connections from social media but others reporting negative impacts.³⁶ Instagram may be linked to negative body image, increased social comparison, and disordered eating or poor eating habits,³⁷ and so may have negative mental health consequences.³⁸ At the same time, social media has also been known to increase social support and connectedness with others, a potential positive mental health impact. These negative or positive differences may be attributed to the way people use social media apps.³⁹ While more research needs to be conducted, evidence suggests caution around increasing social media use with the potential negative mental health impacts, especially on top of the struggles of social isolation and general uncertainty from the pandemic.

Many teens report not often being able to virtually connect with family and friends during the pandemic.

During the pandemic, the internet provided many people with the only means to connect with friends and family. Students who face barriers in accessing technology may have struggled to connect virtually with others and faced negative mental health consequences from this lack of connection. Going into the pandemic, 16.9 million children did not have access to high-speed internet and devices, including children in one of three Black, Latino, and Native American households.⁴⁰

Girls (64.8%) were more likely than boys (60.8%) to report sometimes, rarely, or never being able to spend time with family and friends using a device like a computer or phone. Latinas (69.9%) were the most likely, in comparison to white, non-Hispanic boys (60.0%), to report not being able to virtually spend time with family and friends. In addition, 62.0% of Black, non-Hispanic girls, 62.7% of white, non-Hispanic girls, 62.9% of straight girls, 67.7% of lesbian and bisexual girls, and 69.7% of girls identifying as something else or who were questioning their sexual orientation reported sometimes, rarely, or never being able to virtually spend time with family and friends most of the time or always. The lack of virtual connection during the pandemic, particularly for Latinas and lesbian and bisexual girls of color, may have reduced social supports for teens and potentially worsened their mental health.

Share of High School Students Who Sometimes, Rarely, or Never Virtually Spent Time With Family and Friends by Selected Demographics (January – June 2021)



Source: NWLC Calculations based on Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021 Adolescents Behaviors and Experiences Survey. Students self-identified their sex, race, if they are Hispanic or Latino, and sexual orientation. Calculations for Asian, non-Hispanic girls could not be completed due to insufficient sample sizes.

Amid a fluctuating school environment, girls experienced trouble doing their schoolwork.

In the spring of 2020, nearly all K-12 schools transitioned to virtual learning. The school year that began in fall 2020 continued as a patchwork of virtual, hybrid, and in-person learning environments.⁴¹ Prior to the pandemic, nearly 16.9 million children lacked access to the internet and devices and a disproportionate share of those were children of color.⁴² Without internet and computers, these children would not be able to attend virtual school during the pandemic, negatively impacting their education and potentially setting them back for a long time to come.

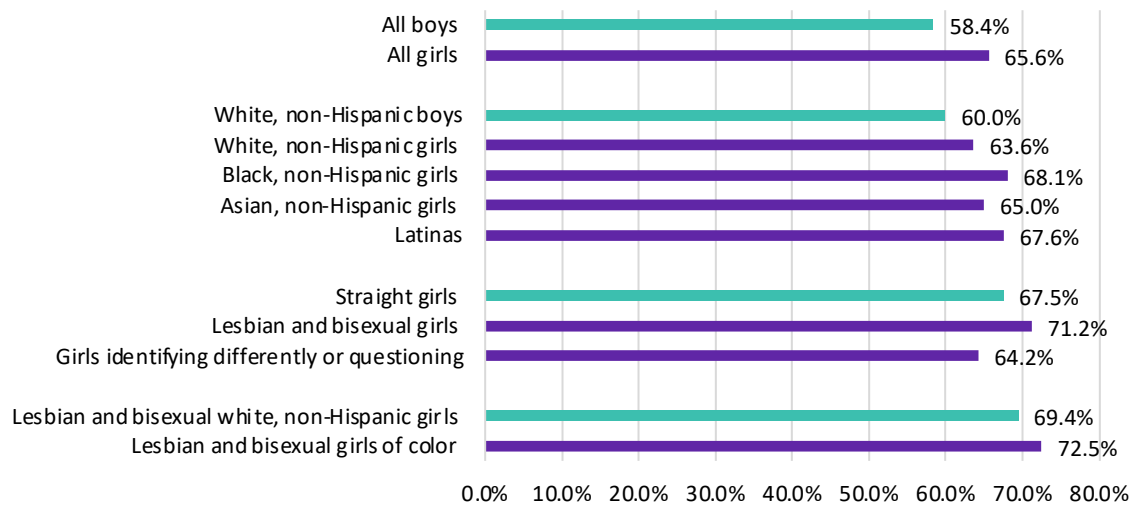
Through this volatility of virtual learning and the upheavals created by the pandemic, girls faced challenges participating in school and completing their schoolwork.

Nearly two out of three girls report schoolwork being more difficult during the COVID-19 pandemic than before.

- Among high school students, girls (65.6%) were more likely than boys (58.4%) to report schoolwork being more difficult during the pandemic than prior to the pandemic.
- Black, non-Hispanic girls (68.1%) and Latinas (67.6%) were more likely than white, non-Hispanic boys (60.0%) to report schoolwork being more difficult during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, 65.0% of Asian, non-Hispanic girls and 63.6% of white, non-Hispanic girls reported the same.

- Among high school students, 71.2% of lesbian and bisexual girls, 67.5% of straight girls, and 64.2% of girls identifying as something else or who were questioning their sexual orientation reported schoolwork being more difficult during the pandemic than before it.
- Among lesbian and bisexual girls, 72.5% of girls of color and 69.4% of white, non-Hispanic girls reported schoolwork being more difficult during the pandemic than before.

Share of High School Students Who Reported Schoolwork Being More Difficult During the Pandemic by Selected Demographics (January – June 2021)



Source: NWLC Calculations based on Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021 Adolescents Behaviors and Experiences Survey. Students self-identified their sex, race, if they are Hispanic or Latino, and sexual orientation.

As students worked through the trauma of the pandemic, student discipline and high levels of racism were prevalent in schools.

The ongoing pandemic—which has resulted in students’ fears about themselves and their loved ones getting sick, social and physical distancing, school closures, high levels of uncertainty, and many of the other concerns addressed in this brief—is a form of trauma.⁴³ Facing trauma from multiple sources at a time and for a sustained period of time can have long-term mental and physical developmental impacts in adolescents.⁴⁴ One natural response to trauma with youth and adolescents can be changes in behavior—sometimes even in ways some may call “acting out.”⁴⁵ During the pandemic, schools reported an increase in students “acting out.” In May 2022, the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute for Education Sciences (IES) surveyed public elementary, middle, and high school staff and administrators on student behavior. Nearly nine in 10 schools (87%) reported the pandemic negatively impacted student social-emotional development during the 2021–22 school year and more than eight in 10 (84%) agreed or strongly agreed it negatively impacted student behavior. Schools reported increases in incidents of classroom disruptions from student misconduct, rowdiness outside of the classroom, acts of disrespect towards teachers and staff, and prohibited use of electronic devices.⁴⁶

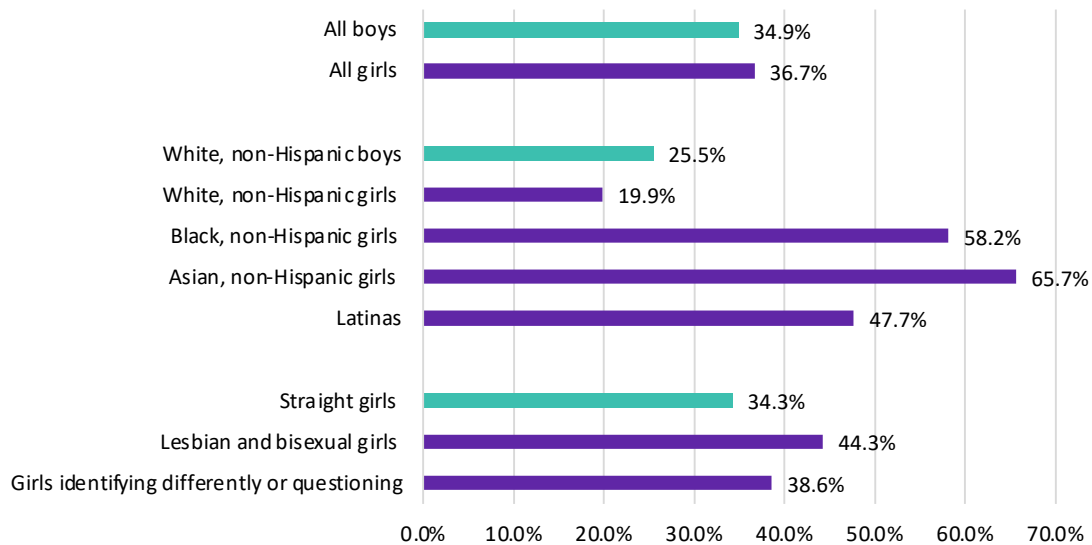
The U.S. Department of Education has yet to release data on school discipline since the start of the pandemic. Yet, anecdotal evidence demonstrates many schools addressed changes in behavior with increased discipline and policing—instead of trauma-informed responses. This includes harsh consequences for familiar behaviors, like when a Black girl in Michigan was jailed for violating parole by not completing her homework in the early weeks of the pandemic.⁴⁷ Schools also turned to discipline to address new scenarios revealed by the pandemic, including suspending students for playing with or teachers merely seeing toy guns during virtual class⁴⁸ and doling out dress code violations for wearing masks incorrectly.⁴⁹ These trends are likely to have consequences for girls of color⁵⁰ and girls with disabilities, who face higher rates of discipline and, therefore, miss out more on learning time.⁵¹

In addition to trauma induced and exacerbated by the pandemic, students faced high levels of racism in schools. Girls of color experiences with racism may have been exacerbated by the pandemic. Hate crimes and discrimination against Asians rose dramatically during the pandemic, in part due to racist terms used to describe the COVID-19 virus (“Kung flu”, “Chinese Virus”, etc.).⁵² Racism, a form of chronic stress, negatively impacts physical and mental health in children and adolescents.⁵³ Schools need resources to be able to protect girls from the harms of racism.

Overall, nearly two in three Asian, non-Hispanic girls report ever being treated badly or unfairly in school because of their race or ethnicity.

- At some point in their lives, 36.7% of girls and 34.9% of boys in high school reported being treated badly or unfairly in school because of their race or ethnicity.
 - Asian, non-Hispanic girls (65.7%), Black, non-Hispanic girls (58.2%), and Latinas (47.7%) were more likely than white, non-Hispanic boys (25.5%) and white, non-Hispanic girls (19.9%) to report ever being treated badly in school because of their race or ethnicity.
- Lesbian and bisexual girls (44.3%) in high school were more likely than straight girls (34.3%) to report ever being treated badly in school because of their race or ethnicity. Among girls who identify as something else or who were questioning their sexual orientation, 38.6% report ever being treated badly because of their race or ethnicity. People of color are more likely to report being LGBTQI+ than white people,⁵⁴ which may influence why a substantial share of lesbian and bisexual girls report discrimination based on race.

Share of High School Students Who Report Ever Being Treatedly Badly or Unfairly in School Because of Their Race or Ethnicity by Selected Demographics (January – June 2021)



Source: NWLC Calculations based on Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021 Adolescents Behaviors and Experiences Survey. Students self-identified their sex, race, if they are Hispanic or Latino, and sexual orientation.

Young girls' education, social activities, and mental health suffer because of girls' disproportionate share of caregiving and household work.

Over the last two decades, the estimated number of children who were caring for family members, a disproportionate share of whom were girls, has dramatically increased from approximately 1.4 million in 2003 to 3.4 million in 2020.⁵⁵ Given limited data on child caregivers, these estimates may be underinclusive. Children and adolescents primarily care for siblings, but they may also care for older adults in the home. Prior to the pandemic, girls were already spending more time on household and care activities than boys.⁵⁶ The disproportionate share girls perform compared to boys is likely due to sexist expectations. Girls also begin their caregiving and household responsibilities at an earlier age than boys do, and the gap in time spent doing so only widens as they age.⁵⁷ In particular, low-income households often lack affordable child care, and thus have a greater need for children in the home to take on care and household responsibilities. In low-income households, research has demonstrated that while the time girls spend on care duties increases dramatically, the time for boys remains constant or even decreases,⁵⁸ placing an even more disproportionate burden on girls. As families of color are more likely to be low-income, girls of color are likely to shoulder a disproportionate share of household responsibilities compared to their white peers.

Given that more children remained home in 2020 and 2021 because of the pandemic, girls' care responsibilities for young children likely increased. Previous research found that adolescents were more likely to provide sibling care during and after the Great Recession than when the economy began to recover.⁵⁹ We may see similar trends after the pandemic and its expansive economic and social

consequences. Moreover, disruption in child care during the pandemic hit young mothers hard, meaning caregiving for their own children likely increased for teen mothers.⁶⁰

Girls who take on significant caregiving and household responsibilities are disproportionately girls of color and experience negative impacts on their education, social development, and mental health. Increased time spent caring for siblings and older adults or doing household chores leaves less time available for homework, extracurricular and social activities, and even attending school.⁶¹ A 2006 study found that 22% of students who were pushed out of high school had significant family caregiving responsibilities.⁶² A 2021 study found young women ages 16 to 24 across racial and ethnic groups were more likely than their male peers to identify care responsibilities as the main reason for not working for pay during the pandemic, with young Black and Latina women especially likely to report as such.⁶³

Caregiving at an early age can foster pride and purpose and help develop empathy and compassion. But the disproportionate responsibilities placed on girls can result in increased stress, anxiety, isolation, and resentment.⁶⁴ These feelings may persist through adulthood, further impacting their physical, mental, and social well-being.

Girls of color were especially likely to be in households that lost employment income and to lose their own paying jobs.

Many families of color lost employment income during the pandemic, creating greater economic insecurity. Asian, non-Hispanic (37.1%) and Latinx (38.0%) high schoolers were more likely than white, non-Hispanic (24.4%) high schoolers to report their parent or another adult in their home lost their job during the pandemic. In addition, 24.9% of Black, non-Hispanic high schoolers reported their parent or another adult in the home lost their job during the pandemic.

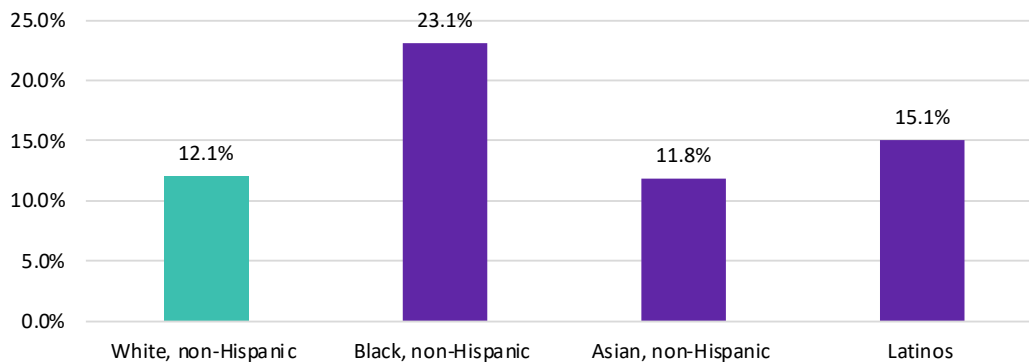
Summer jobs help keep adolescents out of the juvenile legal system,⁶⁵ improve students' academic performance during the school year,⁶⁶ and they can increase young people's income and job prospects in both the short- and long-term.⁶⁷ In the summer—when adolescent work peaks due to summer jobs—a greater share of young men and boys are typically employed than the share of young women and girls. In July 2019, the last summer before the pandemic, 57.3% of men and boys ages 16 to 24 (which includes some in high school) were employed compared to 55.1% of young women and girls.⁶⁸ Yet, among high school students who were employed, girls (25.5%) were more likely than boys (19.0%) to lose their own paying job during the COVID-19 pandemic. White, non-Hispanic girls (25.9%) and Latinas (25.7%) were more likely than white, non-Hispanic boys (18.4%) to lose their jobs. One-quarter (24.8%) of all girls of color who were employed lost their jobs during the pandemic.

This is also reflected in summer employment of young women and girls ages 16 to 24 during the pandemic, which includes some girls in high school. The summer unemployment rate for young women and girls ages 16 to 24 more than doubled between July 2019 and July 2020 (from 8.8% to 18.6%), and the rate for young men and boys ages 16 to 24 nearly doubled (from 9.4% to 18.4%).⁶⁹ Though the July 2022 summer unemployment rate for young women and girls ages 16 to 24 was below the pre-pandemic July 2019 rate, this group's labor force participation rate continues to lag: Their summer labor force participation rate in July 2022 was 59.2%—1.2 percentage points below their July 2019 rate.⁷⁰

Teens experienced high levels of food insufficiency, which leads to poor health and cognitive outcomes.

Levels of food insufficiency, which is when someone sometimes, most of the time, or always does not have enough food to eat, increased during the pandemic⁷¹, and with the rising cost of food may remain high. Black, non-Hispanic high schoolers (23.1%) were nearly two times more likely than white, non-Hispanic students (12.1%) to report sometimes, most of the time, or always going hungry because there was not enough food in their homes. In addition, 15.1% of Latinx and 11.8% of Asian, non-Hispanic high school students reported the same. Children who experience food insufficiency have poor physical and mental health⁷² and cognitive outcomes,⁷³ all of which can impact their education and well-being throughout their lives. Families also suffer economically when their children experience food insufficiency, often spending more money on emergency room services when children are young.⁷⁴

Share of High School Students Who Sometimes, Most of the Time, or Always Did Not Have Enough Food to Eat During the Pandemic by Selected Demographics (January – June 2021)



Source: NWLC Calculations based on Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021 Adolescents Behaviors and Experiences Survey. Students self-identified their sex, race, if they are Hispanic or Latino, and sexual orientation.

School meals can help reduce food insufficiency, improve students' diets, and improve their academic outcomes.⁷⁵ During the pandemic, several policy changes ensured students would not lose access to meals when schools closed or became virtual and thus combatted children's food insufficiency. The Pandemic Electronic Transfer Program loaded additional grocery dollars equal to the cost of a school meal onto EBT cards for people with children who would normally receive free or reduced cost lunch but may have missed them during the pandemic.⁷⁶ The U.S. Department of Agriculture also waived eligibility requirements, so all students were eligible for free lunch through June 2022.⁷⁷ A report highlighting 62 school districts—including 9,188 schools—finds an additional 24.1 million school lunches were served in October 2021 (during the 2021–22 school year) than in April 2021 (during the 2020–21 school year, the first school year with the waivers).⁷⁸ When free school meals are universal, it means parents don't have to apply for the free and reduced-price meal program, and schools don't have to determine and track eligibility. Of the school districts surveyed, nearly nine in 10 (89%) reported that offering free meals to all students made it easier for parents and guardians, more than eight in 10 (85%) reported it eliminated stigma associated with the program, and more than eight in 10 (84%) reported it eased administrative work.⁷⁹ While policy solutions during the pandemic aided in more children having access to the food they need, they were only temporary, and many have ended. Teens need more permanent policy solutions to counter high levels of food insufficiency.

Public investments are needed to ensure girls are supported.

Data on girls during the pandemic clearly demonstrate the need for public investments to support girls' mental and physical health, educational attainment, overall well-being, and futures. If not addressed, these compounded struggles will set girls back not only financially, but also in their schooling and health, which will bleed into all aspects of their lives, continuing into adulthood.

Examining children's official poverty measure (OPM) and supplemental poverty measure (SPM) in 2021 demonstrates the necessity and significant benefit of government support. When using the OPM, which indicates that a family's income falls below the federal poverty threshold, over 15.3% of children lived in poverty in 2021.⁸⁰ The SPM includes not only family income, but also the value of certain federal and state benefits, such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits and refundable tax credits like the Child Tax Credit (CTC). Under the SPM, children's poverty dropped from 15.3% to 5.2% in 2021, demonstrating the significant immediate impact of increased government supports. When considering the lifelong health, educational, and economic consequences of childhood poverty,⁸¹ government benefits to reduce poverty also protect children from future negative health and economic impacts.

The American Rescue Plan, a crucial first step, stabilized families and the economy in the wake of the pandemic. The expanded Child Tax Credit, unemployment insurance, child care relief, emergency rental assistance, and more mitigated the hardship facing girls and their families. However, these relief measures did not address the underlying systemic problems, intersecting with sexism, racism, and anti-LGBTQI+ bias that make this pandemic far worse for girls and their families—especially girls of color and lesbian and bisexual girls.

In order to ensure a full and equitable recovery where all girls can thrive, the government must prioritize:

- Extending the programs that supported girls and their families during the pandemic. This includes the expanded Child Tax Credit, enhanced Unemployment Insurance, and the school meal waivers, while also making long-term investments in affordable child care, nutrition assistance, and summer job programs.
- Creating supportive and affirming learning environments for all students. This includes investing in culturally responsive curricula, a diverse teaching workforce, trauma-informed and evidence-based alternatives to racist and sexist school discipline policies, school-based mental health services instead of school-based police, increased social and emotional supports in schools, strong programs to prevent and address harassment, and inclusive activities and programs for transgender students and other students at particular risk of discrimination and harassment. This also means increasing funding for public schools, especially those in low-income communities, to ensure that the teachers and students have the resources they need.
- Ensuring that girls and their families are healthy and safe. This includes expanding access to mental health services, paid sick leave, and health insurance and support for adolescents with caregiving responsibilities.

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