

Episode 3: Survey Says: Our Youth Are In Crisis

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Hi, friends and welcome to the Heartful Parent Podcast. I'm your host, Christy Keating. In this podcast, we talk about it all, our parenting, our partnering, and our professional lives, because they are all a part of us. And we were never meant to do this alone.

Hello, everyone, Hi friends. Welcome back to the Heartful Parent Podcast. This week is going to be another solo show with yours truly. And the reason for that, which is different than my original plan is because something really significant happened on February 13 of this year. And I think we need to talk about it. Because it affects each and every one of you who is listening. If you are a parent, if you are an educator, if you are a policymaker, or if you are in charge of parent education, in whatever organization you work for, or volunteer for what happened on February 13, is important.

So, here's the deal. The Centers for Disease Control, the CDC, here in the United States, does research into a lot of different areas. And starting in 2011, they started conducting a pretty comprehensive investigation into the overall well-being and health of our youth, specifically, our high school youth between the grades of nine and 12. So, you know, ages 14 to 18, approximately, give or take. And this investigation is done every two years, starting in 2011. And the most recent report was just released on February 13. That encompasses data gathered up through 2021. So this report spans a 10 year period. It's called the Youth Risk Behavior Survey. And it really details the data and trends that they're seeing that they were able to glean from the questionnaires that they had high school students fill out. This year, they looked at five separate areas. And I will talk about those a little bit. And they sort of evaluated over those five areas how our youth are doing. And the reason that I felt like it was really important to sort of swap up my original plan for podcast episodes and jump in with this is because the trend and the data that we're seeing is really it's distressing.

I have printed and read with a fairly fine tooth comb, this 86 page report. And there really is no other word than distressing to describe what we're seeing in terms of the trends with our youth. It is abundantly clear that our young people are telling us collectively, we're not okay, we are not doing okay. And in fact, some reporters and the CDC have sort of referred to it as collective distress that our youth are in that this isn't, you know, coming from one family or one pocket of the country, or one state or one, you know, city, liberal conservative, right. This is nationwide data that is telling us wherever you look, our kids are not faring well. They are certainly faring worse than they were in 2011. We also saw some distressing trends that occurred, you know, during and through the pandemic. Although I think it's really important to recognize that the pandemic is not the cause for any of the data here. It certainly escalated things or exacerbated things. But the trends were not great before that. So I wanted to spend some time today talking about this report, what does it mean? What are the numbers telling us? And what do we think the causes are? And what can we do about it. And I'm also going to dig into that in future



weeks with guests who work with teens work with parents, you know, and can maybe help us shed some light. And the reality is, there's no one clear pat answer to any of this.

So let's sort of let's start at the beginning. As I said, this is called the Youth Risk Behavior Survey. It's a survey that is done every two years. It started in 2011. The most recent data was collected in 2021. And it was then analyzed and released on February 13, of this year 2023. We, they collected 17,200 responses. And it's really based on this data. And previous iterations of this report that the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and the Children's Hospital Association, have declared a national state of emergency when it comes to our youth. That is not hyperbole, that is not drama. That is people that are in the trenches, seeing what's going on, reporting that our kids are in struggle, they're not doing okay. And although this report focuses on those high school years, the high school years don't happen in a vacuum, right? They're not in a bubble. And so I think we can extrapolate out and say that our younger people are also struggling and our older, right, those young adults, college aged adults and beyond are also in struggle. Because you, you don't just have four years of challenges, and then everything afterwards is rosy, and everything before it was great. Right? This is, I think, a really good cultural indicator of where we are right now. And it's not good. It's not good. And I think it's really important as we talk about the numbers for us as parents and educators and policymakers to ask ourselves, what role are we playing in this. And I don't see that from a blame perspective, in the least, we all get rolled in to sort of the cultural trends and the things that are going on, and many of us, and I put myself in this bucket to often do that without thinking about it, or we feel powerless to change it. And so we just kind of go along with the culture, we go along to go along because we're tired, we're exhausted, we're busy. And we're doing the best that we can. And I truly believe that that every parent listening right now is doing the best that you can with the skills and the tools that you have available to you and the culture within which you're working. I am doing the best that I can with the skills and the tools available to me within the culture in which I'm working, right. We're all doing that. And we have to maybe start to step out of that a little bit and figure out what we can do, because these numbers aren't good.

So let me give you a really big picture bird's eye view of what we're seeing overall. And a few things to know. So the way that they broke these, the survey down or the categories of individuals who they looked at. So for every factor that they looked at, they looked at the sex of the responding person. So female versus male, they also broke down the racial and ethnic minorities into American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black, Hispanic, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, white and multiracial. They did look at sexual identity. So they looked at heterosexual, you know, teens, and they looked at those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, questioning or other. They did not include in this, gender identity, which it would be transgendered students, that will be included in future surveys and future reports, but was not looked at in 2021. And so we don't have any data on that. However, given what we know from other research and the trends around LGP, LG BQ students in general, I think we can extrapolate and assume, although I don't like to assume, but that our transgender students are also in struggle with our LGBTQ students, if not, perhaps even worse, in terms of the the challenges that they are experiencing. So the big picture than here's what we know, on average. And, you know, this is not true for every



single category that we looked at. But on average, our female students are faring far worse than our male students. Their trends are not as good. And on average, our racial and ethnic minority students are faring worse than our white students, again, not in every situation, not in every case. And we know that our LGBTQ plus students are faring worse than our heterosexual students. But that's the big picture. It is. Right, it is a rough time to be a youth, you know, a young person in general. And it's a particularly rough time, to be female, to be a racial minority, or to be anything other than straight. That's just the reality of what this is telling us and how well our students are doing.

Now, as I mentioned, a little while ago, the CDC looked at five prime areas, they did a survey and five areas of mental and physical health for our students. And I went full confession, I first started recording this episode, and I got really deep in the weeds into what all the stats were saying, in each area, I then decided not to do that. If you're really interested in the numbers, the very specific numbers, this report is free, you can pull it up on the internet, you can print it out if you want to. I'm a paper person. You know, you can you can read what the numbers are specifically saying, I'm going to try to give you big trends and sort of some big picture stuff to think about today, rather than have you sit and listen to me recite stats and figures to you, which I don't think is very interesting, and why I'm changing tax and how I'm how I'm doing this episode of the podcast for you. It is important to know, though, that the CDC looked at five key areas. And, you know, did ask survey questions in each of those areas. So the first one was sexual behavior. Second one is substance use. Third one is experiencing violence. Fourth one is mental health and suicidality. And the final focus area was new and emerging national data. And we're going to talk a little bit about that one. But that is actually an focus area that was not previously included in in the the reports that were issued prior to 2021, or, you know, the data that was collected prior to 2021. So we'll talk about that one a little bit. But there aren't trends in that particular focus area, because it was the first time that that focus area was included in the survey.

Okay, so let's talk just a little bit broadly about each of these areas. So the first one was sexual behavior. So this is really looking at the overall sexual activity and sexual health of our young people. And the rate, one of the key reasons that they looked at that is because they know, we know, that sexual behaviors can result in adverse health outcomes, like unintended pregnancies, STDs, including HIV and I would argue can also lead to adverse mental health outcomes. And this is, you know, particularly relevant to look at right now because we know that young people, so and they categorize that as people ages 13 to 24 account for 20%, which is 1/5 of all new HIV diagnoses in the US, and more than half more than half of the 20 million new sexually transmitted diseases or infections that were reported in the year 2020 were among young people aged 15 to 24 are teen birth rates are at their lowest recorded levels. But it will be interesting to see if those levels stay low, given what we're seeing in some of these trends, so here's the big picture trends. The good news is that overall, the number of teen students who have ever had sex, and the number of teen students who have had four or more lifetime sexual partners, so they've had sex with four different people over the course of their lives, we're seeing those numbers go down. And in some cases pretty dramatically. Four or more lifetime partners, was like that stat was dropped by more than 50%, between 2011 and 2021. Now, I want to issue a little caveat here. And I Because yes, overall, it is healthier for our teens to be having fewer



sexual partners. And I think it's important to look at what is the reason for that. And what is what has become the substitute. So if the reason, for example, was better self esteem, better self agency, better, you know, sort of decision making skills, et cetera, et cetera, I think that would be for sure positive. If those numbers are lower, because our teens are substituting real life interactions with a partner with exposure to violent pornography, then I think we've got it, we've replaced one problem with another. And that becomes relevant when we start looking at the escalation in violence that we're going to talk about. So overall, it's a good thing. But I don't think any of these things get can be looked at in a vacuum. Where the badness comes in, when we look at sexual behavior, is that there is a distinct downward trend in the number of teens who are practicing safer sex. And I say safer because they're, you know, there really is outside of a monogamous, one partner, really, you know, committed relationship. There really isn't safe sex. But safer sex, which means using condoms, and in heterosexual relationships, at least using hormonal birth control. And being regularly tested for HIV and STDs. And on all of those, we are seeing a downward trend with the exception of the hormonal birth control, because the CDC only started looking at that in 2021. So we don't know what the trend is yet. So far fewer students are using condoms. Far fewer students like 50%, more than 50% of the students back in 2011, are being tested for HIV ever. They're just not getting tested for it. And we're also seeing a downward trend in the number of students tested in the past year for STDs. So when we see lower testing, lower condom use, that, you know, even though the number of sexual partners seems to be going down, that is still a recipe for long term disaster. It's not good. And so we should, we should talk about that from a big trend. Again, in this category, we see girls with more sexual partners than boys. We see LGBTQ partners, or youth having had sex at a higher level than our heterosexual youth. And we see some differences in racial and ethnic makeup, although those are not frankly, dramatic. We're not really seeing a dramatic change there. Aside from mentioning that our Asian students seem to have fewer sexual partners than most of the other categories. But there's not a super big distinction between the racial and ethnic minorities and actually need to clarify one thing, and that is that overall, the number of female students We've had sex is slightly higher than the number of male students who have had sex. But the number of male students who have had sex with four or more partners is higher than the number of female students who have had sex with four or more partners. So I think that's important to note. So some concerning trends theres one spot of potential brightness, again, we can't look at it in a vacuum, but some concerning trends.

When we move on to substance use, this is where we do overall see some pretty good trends. And what we know from the big picture is that the number of students who currently drink alcohol, currently use marijuana, or have ever used illicit drugs or misused prescription opioids, those trends are all going in the right direction, we are seeing those numbers go down. And we're seeing the numbers hold steady when it comes to vaping. And misusing prescription opioids, currently misusing prescription opioids. So they just, they make a distinction between those who have ever done that. We're seeing good trends there, and those who are currently doing it, and that's holding steady. So I'm not going to sit here and tell you substance use is not an issue it is it's something we still need to be talking about with our youth. And I think it would be interesting to see how these trends change when they hit, you know, that 18 to 24 range, or beyond. But we are at least seeing a decrease in the high school years,



again, overall. And I think that can really be seen as a big positive. And something that I hope, we will continue to see the trend in.

Now, here's with the third category that we looked at, which is experiencing violence, I say we looked at I didn't the CDC, when we start looking at experiencing violence. This to me is where the numbers get, frankly, scary, especially as someone who works in the space of trying to prevent sexual violence, whether it's child sexual abuse, or sexual assault, right, that is something I care deeply about, it's something I've spent years working on whether it was as a prosecutor or now in my work as an educator. It's, I care so deeply that our kids are not growing up with a history of trauma, and not experiencing that sexual trauma, or bullying trauma, and this category looked at both. And here's what we know, is that between 2019 and 2021 we saw a 27% increase in the number of girls who said they have been forced to have sex, a 27% increase in that statistic. 15% of girls overall report having been raped just in that four year period. Right? This isn't accounting for what happens when they hit college and beyond. But by the time they're in high school 15% of girls report having been forced to have sex having been raped, that means that if you are there in a group of 10 girls, you know, one to two of them have been raped by and what they consider to be rape, right? Not they may not be thinking of things like coercion or, you know, sort of guilted them into it. Right, which is not what I would call consensual intercourse, but like forcibly raped, okay, that number is not okay. As the mother of two daughters, as a parent educator, as a former prosecutor, that number is not okay. Overall, what we are seeing is that female students and white students, we saw big jumps in the numbers that were reporting they'd been forced to have sex and we saw and that was between 2011 and 2021. And we saw big jumps in general, more generalized sexual violence for our female students between 2017 and 2021.

Now, there are also some really not great trends about kids not going to school because they fear violence. We are seeing a decrease in bullying at school. But that was the only sort of bright spot in this category where they were looking at the experience of violence. The numbers are just frankly, way too high. And they looked at electronic bullying. They looked at As I said, being forced to have sex, sexual violence. All of those were aspects of this category. And the trends are not good. They're just not good.

The second area that is a really, really big concern to me as a parent and an educator is mental health and suicidality, and this the numbers here are staggering. And what we are seeing here, again, big picture is that the trends are are going in the wrong direction. In every category, the number of students that we are learning, who are experiencing persistent feelings of sadness, or hopelessness is staggering. We're talking 42% Overall, of students, which is nearly 50%. And when we look when we break that down by sex, and we look at females versus males, we are talking about 57% of our female students overall, experiencing persistent feelings of sadness, or hopelessness, which means that they felt so sad or hopeless almost every day for at least two weeks in a row, that they stopped doing their usual activities. When we are being told that nearly 50% overall and over 50% of our girls are so despondent that they are stopping their usual activities. That is a really scary statistic. From my perspective, we're seeing overall that again, the number there's a disparity between heterosexual and LGBTQ students, so heterosexual students, it was 35% LGBTQ plus students are talking nearly 70%,



that number came in at 69%. These are incredibly high numbers of depression, anxiety, mental health challenges. And, you know, as if that's not bad enough, that is translating into some other really scary trends. One in three high school girls, reported in 2021, one out of three, reported that they seriously considered suicide. Not only is that an astronomical number, it is up 60% from 2011. One in three girls have reported being seriously suicidal. And what we know that again, overall, if we go back and sort of zoom back out to the big picture, we have 18% of students who have actually made a suicide plan 24% of girls, that's a quarter of all of our girls have made a suicide plan, not just thought about it, not just contemplated it, but actually made a plan. And when we look at our LGBTQ plus students, that number goes up to 37% of them that have made a plan. We also know that 10% of our students overall have actually attempted suicide 13% of our female students have attempted suicide. Interestingly, and I'm not saying there's a connection here. But, you know, we're seeing 15% of our girls being forced into having sex, and 13% of them attempting suicide. There's some continuity in those numbers that is, you know, I think at least worth looking at and thinking about. But overall, what we know is that these numbers are seeing a stark increase in poor mental health and poor mental health that is leading to thoughts of suicide plans for suicide actual suicide attempts. That is terrifying. It's terrifying. The final section that I want to touch on just very briefly, the new and emerging national data. This is where for the first time in the 10 year history of this survey, the CDC started to look at school connectedness which is how many students feel a sense of connection at school to other people. How many of them report having some degree of parental monitoring, which means, you know, their parents know mostly where they are and who they're with. And the number of students who are experiencing unstable housing.

The trends there are, we don't know the trends yet, because this is the first year that they've looked at it. But what we're seeing is that 61% of students overall feel connected at school. That's 65% for males and 58% for females. That's an okay starting off point, I'd obviously like to see 100% of our students feeling connected at school. So, I would love to see those numbers go up. In coming years, 86% of our students are reporting parental monitoring, or what they call high parental monitoring, which is defined, maybe not as I would define it, but for purposes of the survey, it's that their parents or other adults in their family, most of the time know where they're going and who they're with. So that was at 86%. For overall 89% for females, 84% for males, 86%, for LGBTQ plus, so pretty high numbers across the board there. And then the unstable housing, we overall 3% of students are experiencing unstable housing, those numbers get higher with some of our racial and ethnic minority groups, particularly our American Indian, Alaskan Native Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander groups. The others, really, it's fairly well, I don't want to say low, but the numbers are lower than with those two groups. So we're seeing, you know, on average, 3%, it'll be interesting to see where those trends go as the economy changes, and, you know, inflation and, and sort of the, we continue to see the economic impact of the pandemic. Here's, so that's the report in a nutshell, perhaps in more detail than the needed. But I think it's so important to recognize the different trends that we're seeing in these really big indicators of adolescent health, mental and physical health.



And I think it's important to recognize that we are at a crisis point. You know, as I mentioned earlier, the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and the Children's Hospital Association have said that we are in a national state of emergency. You know, pretty much everyone who reads this report and looks at the trends with any detail recognizes that we're at a real inflection point. The CDC reports that some of the cures for this quote, unquote, cures are better mental health access at school, classroom management, training for teachers, more gay straight alliances. So those are groups that support our LGBTQ LGBTQ plus students in schools. You know, good factually based health ed, and the enforcement of anti harassment policies, and well, all of those things are good and needed. And I agree. I also think we need to start investigating what can we as parents do? And I don't have an easy answer to that. I think some of the big causes that I would see, or that I would blame for all of this is a presence of the of social media and the accessibility to the internet for our students, which is resulting in disconnection for them. Social media, we know that teens that are really engaged in social media, when they get there, we see a decrease in mental health, especially among our girls. We know that the accessibility to violent pornography, which is the pornography that is free, is having a huge impact on the mental health of our boys and our girls, and their ideas of what real relationships, healthy relationships look like, what real bodies look like, what consent means. You know, I think we are engulfing our boys and violence in that medium.

And all of that is coming with a lack of awareness by many of us as parents of what our kids are seeing and being exposed to. And I think we as parents need to decide like, when are we going to make some shifts? When are we going to start demanding different laws that protect our kids better? That demand that these online internet companies, whether it's social media, or big pornography can Pomerance that they protect our kids, they have the ability to do it. They just don't because it doesn't increase their profits, right?

And what are the changes that we can make in our homes to build more connected families to to engage in what I call brain safe parenting. That's what we're going to dig into in the coming weeks and months. As we look further dig deeper into the impact that all of these trends are having on our kids and what we're seeing reflected in this survey from the CDC. I'm not going to go into more detail about potential causes and fixes today, both in the interest of In then because I want to let you all you know, I want to let these numbers and these trends kind of percolate a little bit. And think about, you know, what does that mean for our younger kids? What does that mean for our young adults? And what do we need to start shifting and changing?

I'd love to hear questions that you have about this report, you can send them in to podcast at the heartfulparent.com. And next week, I'm going to start digging in with guests. We're gonna meet with teen life coach Sherif grasser next week to talk about sort of what she's seeing and what she's hearing from the kids themselves. So this is a jumping off point. When this report comes out in two years, I desperately hope that we have sort of heeded the call and can see some some numbers improve. I'm I'm fearful if we don't, because our kids are not okay. And we have we as parents have a great deal of power to start changing this. So I'm going to leave you with this question or questions? What do you



think about these numbers? What do you think are the causes? And what do you think we need to do individually and collectively, to start seeing a shift? Email me? Drop me a line on social media? Let me know what you think. And above all, of course, follow or subscribe to the heartfelt parent podcast, so you don't miss any future episodes where we dig into this and other issues that affect us as parents, partners and professionals. Take care of everyone

