

Freeing The Anxious Generation

Collective Action to Restore Healthy Childhood



Zach Rausch

Associate Research Scientist
New York University

With support from Jonathan Haidt

**To the Kentucky Interim Joint Committee
on Education**

What Were The Things That Filled Your Childhood?

Do you wish bikes were never invented?



Do you wish television was never invented?



What Are the Things That Fill Gen Z's Childhood?



[Harris Quest](#) [Solutions](#) [Insights & News](#) [Partners](#) [Industries](#)

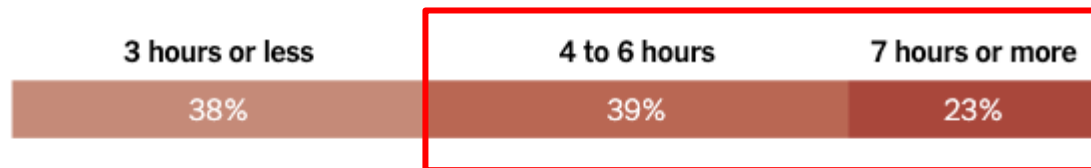
What Gen Z thinks about its social media and smartphone usage

Brief September 10, 2024 • 4 min



Daily time spent by Gen Z on social media

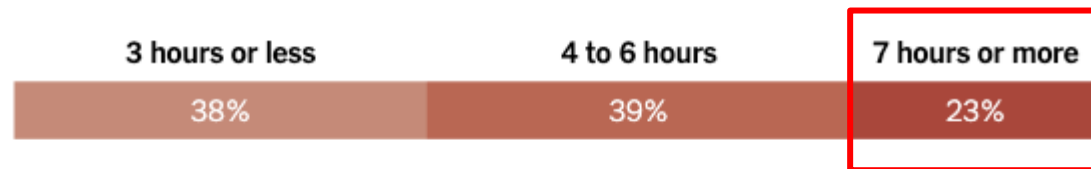
For 18- to 27-year-olds who use social media



Source: Harris Poll; survey questions by Zach Rausch • Note: Figures may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.

Daily time spent by Gen Z on social media

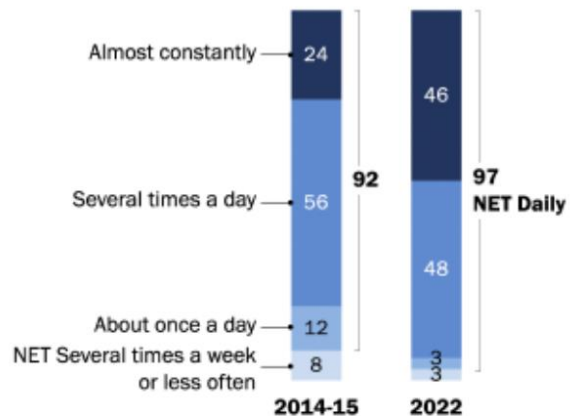
For 18- to 27-year-olds who use social media



Source: Harris Poll; survey questions by Zach Rausch - Note: Figures may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.

Nearly half of teens now say they use the internet 'almost constantly'

% of U.S. teens who say they use the internet ...



Note: Teens refer to those ages 13 to 17. Figures may not add up to the NET values due to rounding. Those who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted April 14-May 4, 2022.

"Teens, Social Media and Technology 2022"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

OPINION
GUEST ESSAY

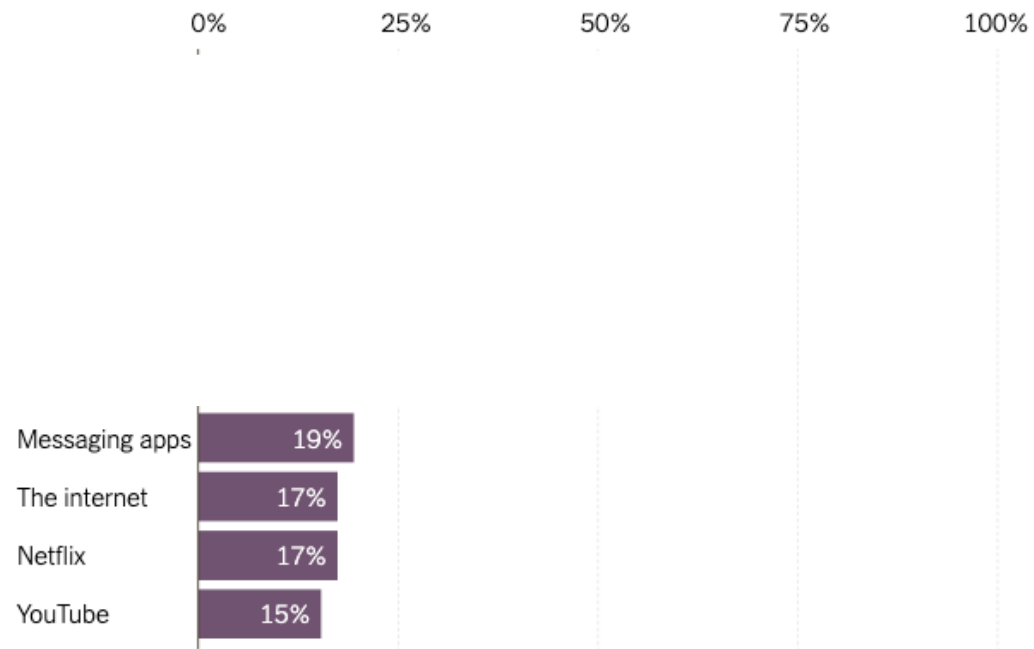
Gen Z Has Regrets

Sept. 17, 2024



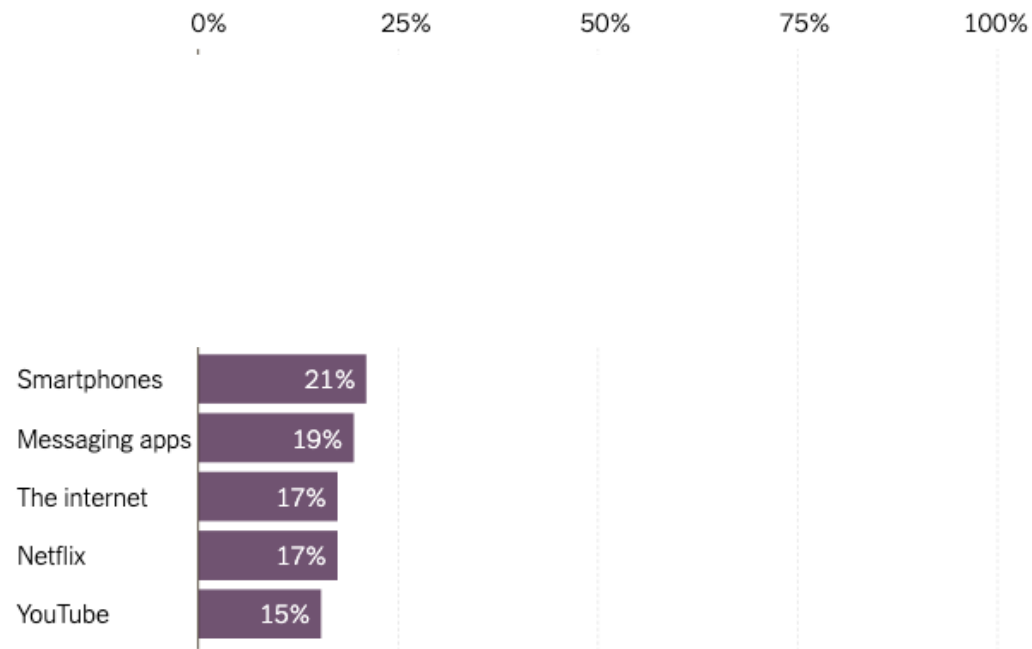
Spencer Lowell/Trunk Archive

Percentage of Gen Z respondents who agree with the statement “I wish ___ had never been invented”



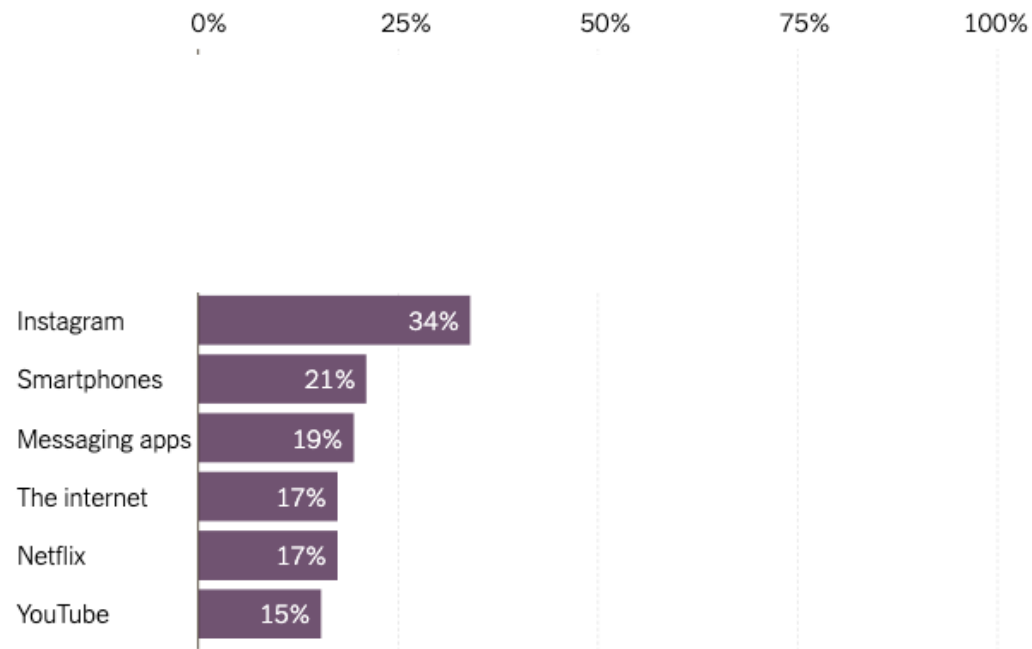
Source: Harris Poll; survey questions by Zach Rausch

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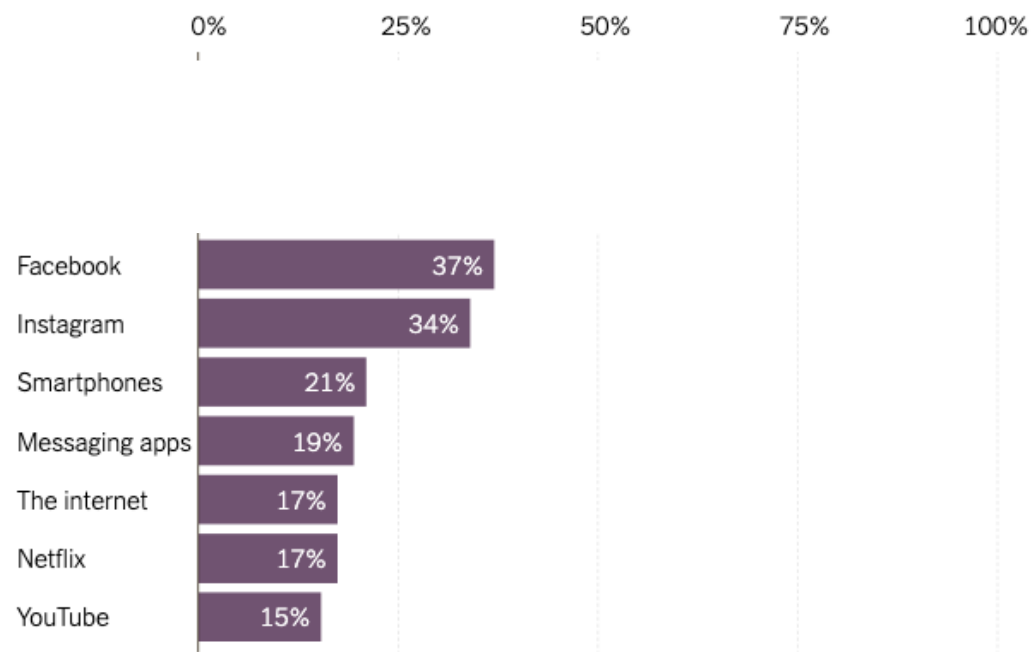
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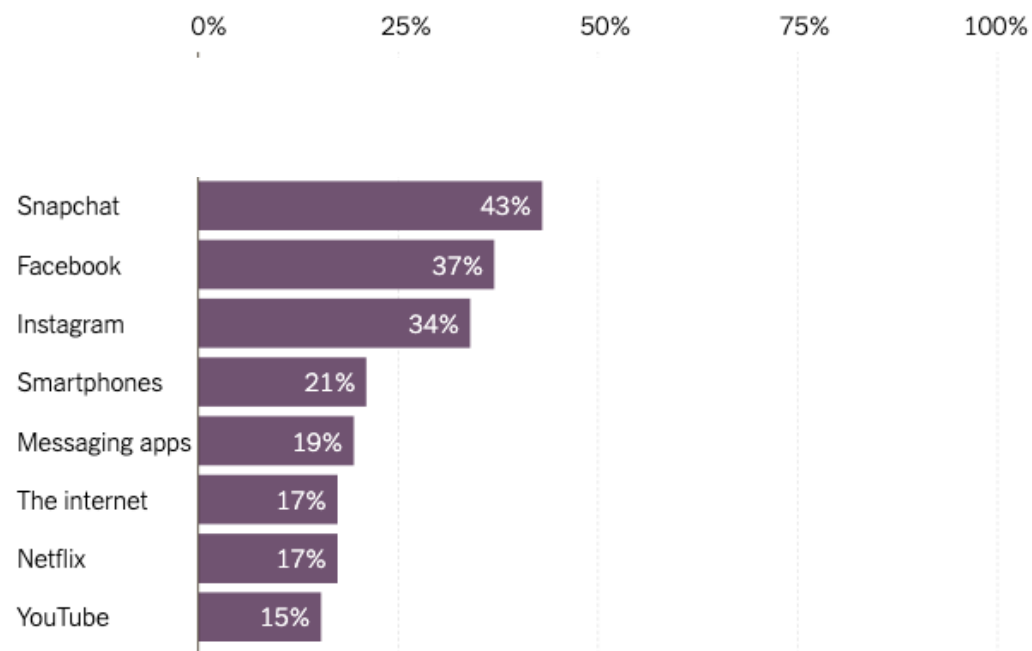
Source: Harris Poll; survey questions by Zach Rausch

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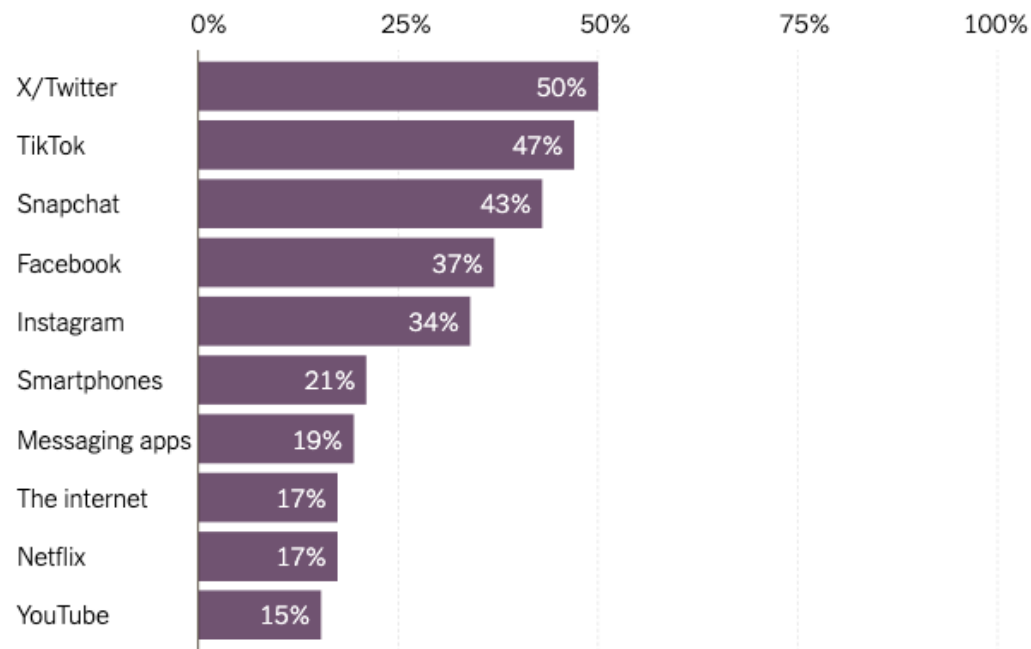
Percentage of Gen Z respondents who agree with the statement “I wish ___ had never been invented”



Source: Harris Poll; survey questions by Zach Rausch

Almost half of Gen Z wishes social media platforms like X and TikTok didn't exist

Percentage of Gen Z respondents who agree with the statement "I wish ___ had never been invented"

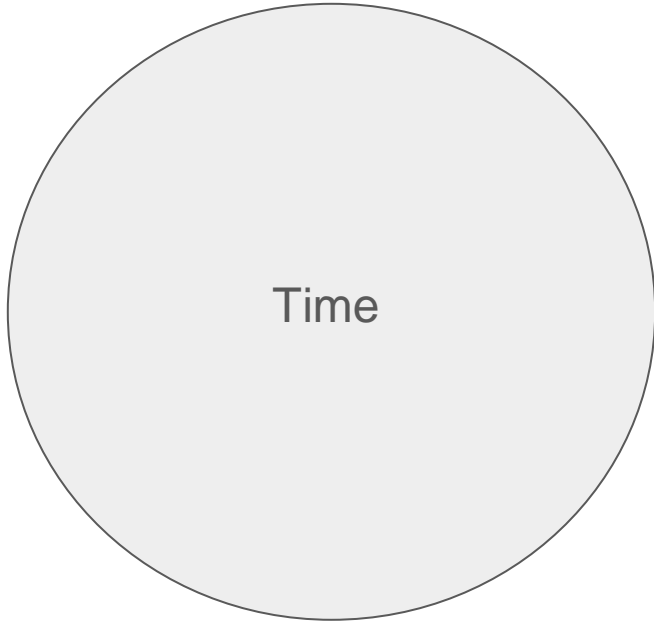


Source: Harris Poll; survey questions by Zach Rausch



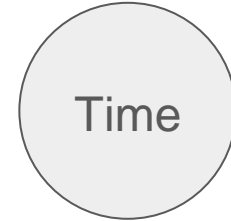
The Implications?

Childhood Before



Childhood Today

Time Outdoors
Exercise
Sleep
Sunlight
Time with friends
Reading books
Hobbies
Going on dates
Thinking deeply



Welcome to the Phone-Based Childhood





The Anxious Generation:

How the Great Rewiring caused an epidemic of mental illness

1. The surge of suffering
2. The costs of the phone-based childhood
3. What we can do



The Anxious Generation:

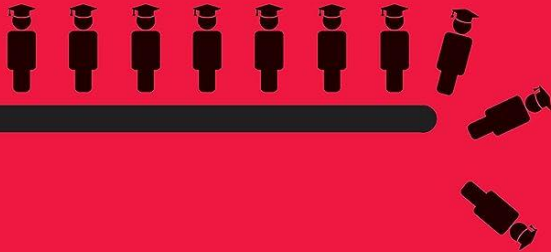
How the Great Rewiring caused an epidemic of mental illness

1. The surge of suffering
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THE CODDLING OF THE AMERICAN MIND

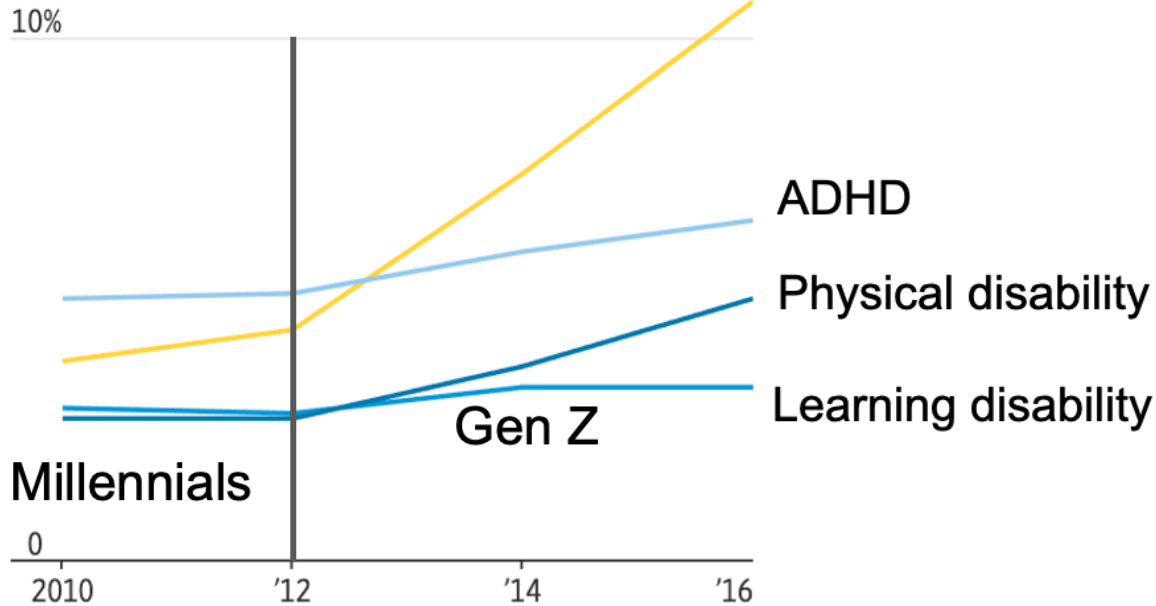
HOW GOOD INTENTIONS
AND BAD IDEAS ARE
SETTING UP A GENERATION
FOR FAILURE

GREG LUKIANOFF
JONATHAN HAIDT



Self-described disabilities of freshmen on U.S. college campuses

- Physical disability
- Learning disability
- Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder
- Psychological disorder

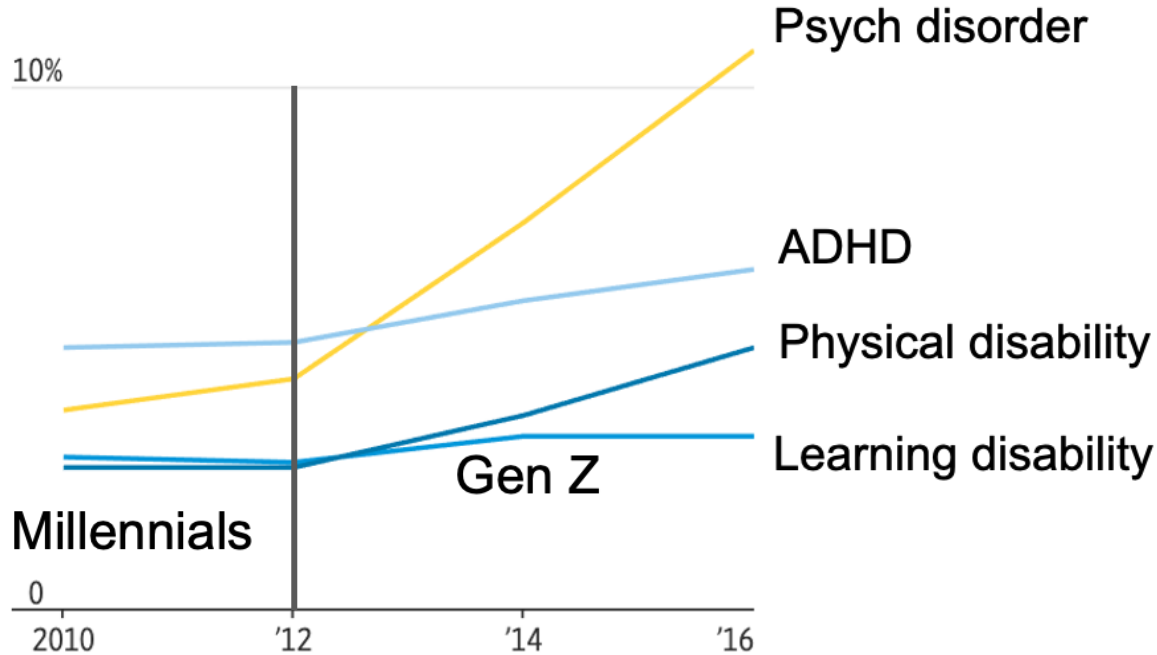


Source: UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute

Self-described disabilities of freshmen on U.S. college campuses

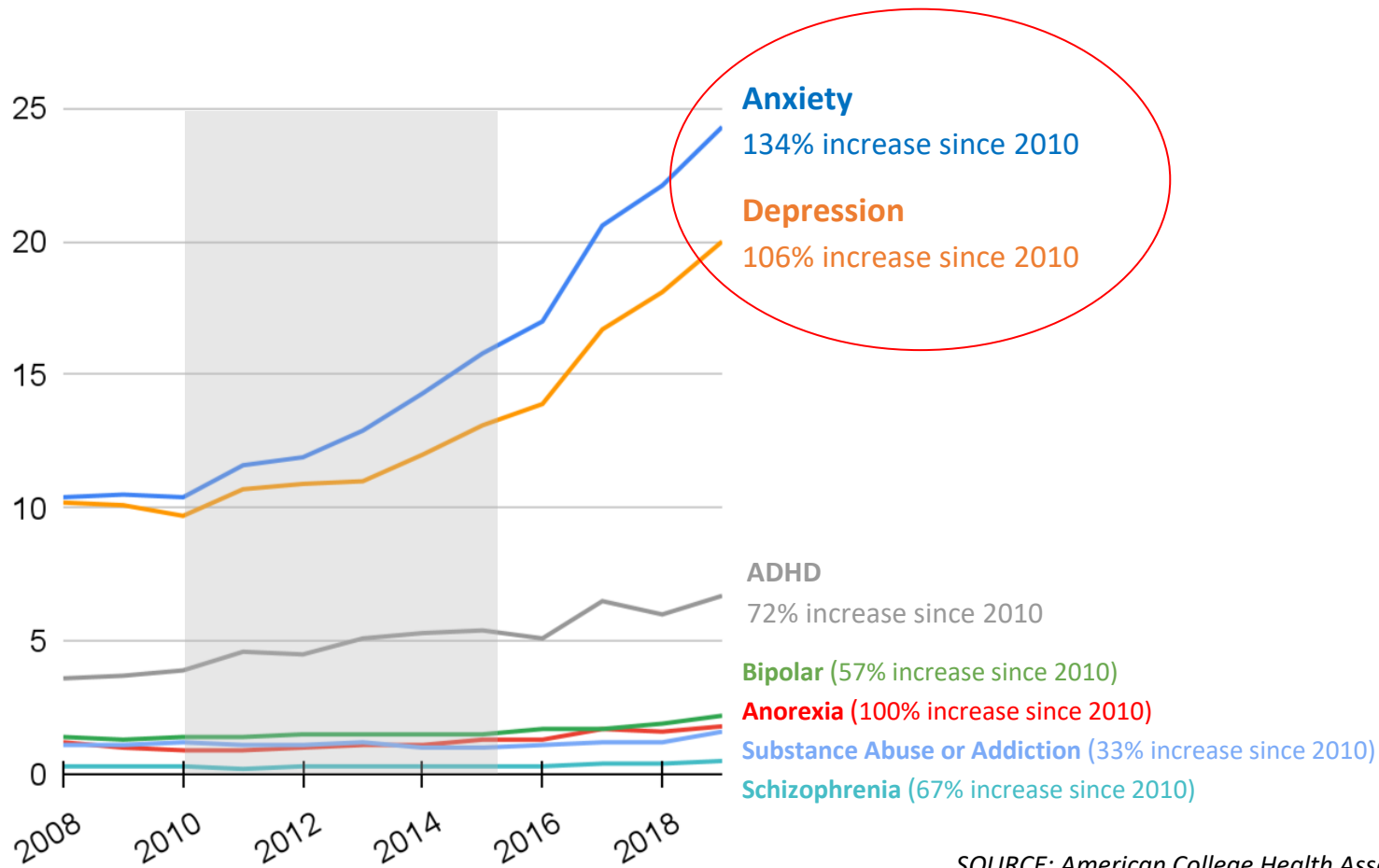
- Physical disability
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- Psychological disorder

Phase change: Gen Z arrives around 2014, with a spike of **psychological problems**



Source: UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute

Percent of U.S. Undergraduates Diagnosed with a Mental Illness



SOURCE: American College Health Association (ACHA-NCHA II)

The Teen Mental Illness Epidemic is International, Part 1: The Anglosphere

Why did mental health fall off a cliff at the same time and in the same way in the USA, The UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand?



ZACH RAUSCH AND JON HAIDT

MAR 29, 2023

The Teen Mental Illness Epidemic is International, Part 2: The Nordic Nations

For Teens, Scandinavia is No Longer The Happiest Place On Earth.



ZACH RAUSCH AND JON HAIDT

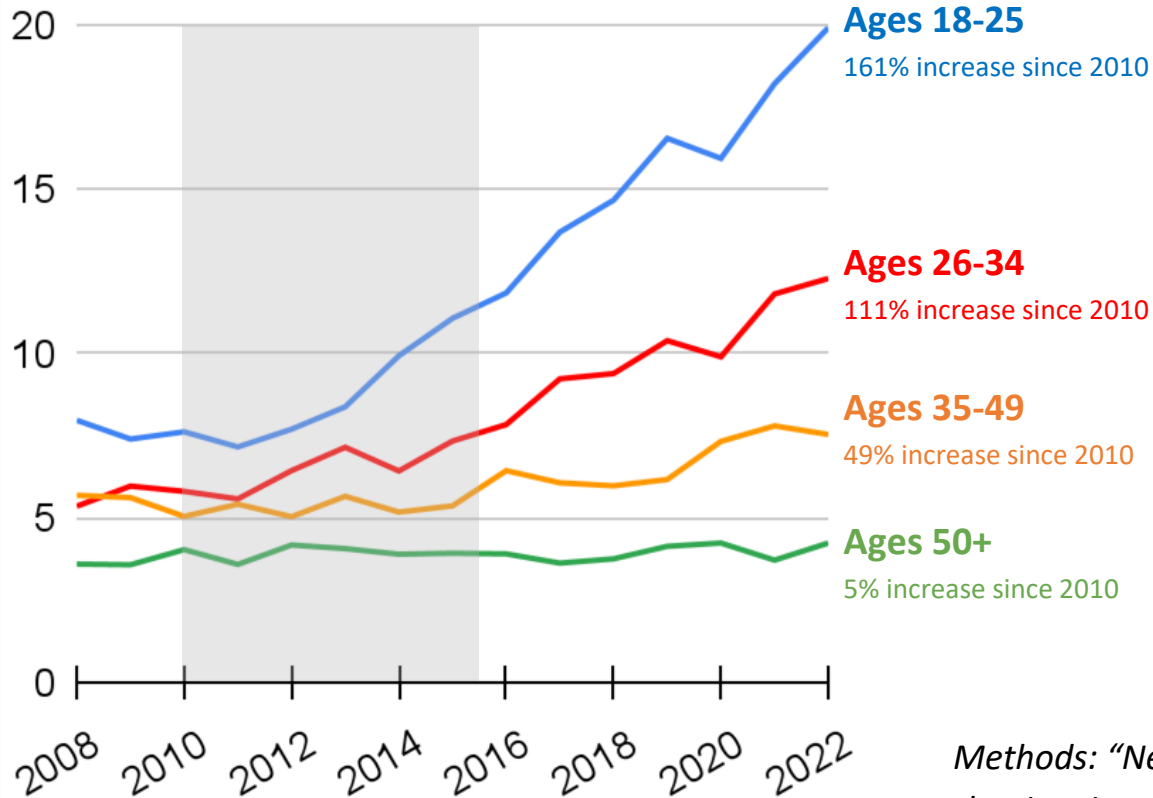
APR 19, 2023

Pattern with Five Parts

1. Mental health deteriorates in the early 2010s
2. Hits girls harder than boys
3. Internalizing disorders (e.g., anxiety and depression)
4. Hits adolescents harder than adults (and Gen Z harder than other generations)
5. International in scope

It's not just mental health

Percent U.S. Anxiety Prevalence



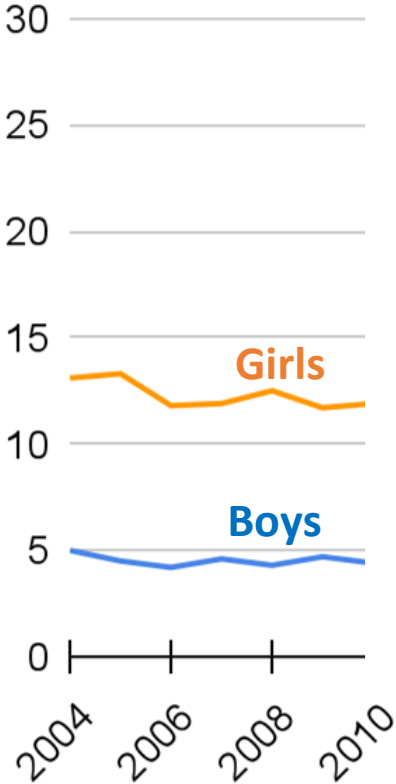
**Gen Z hit hardest
Born after 1995**

Young Millennials too

Methods: "Nervous all of the time or most of the time in past month"

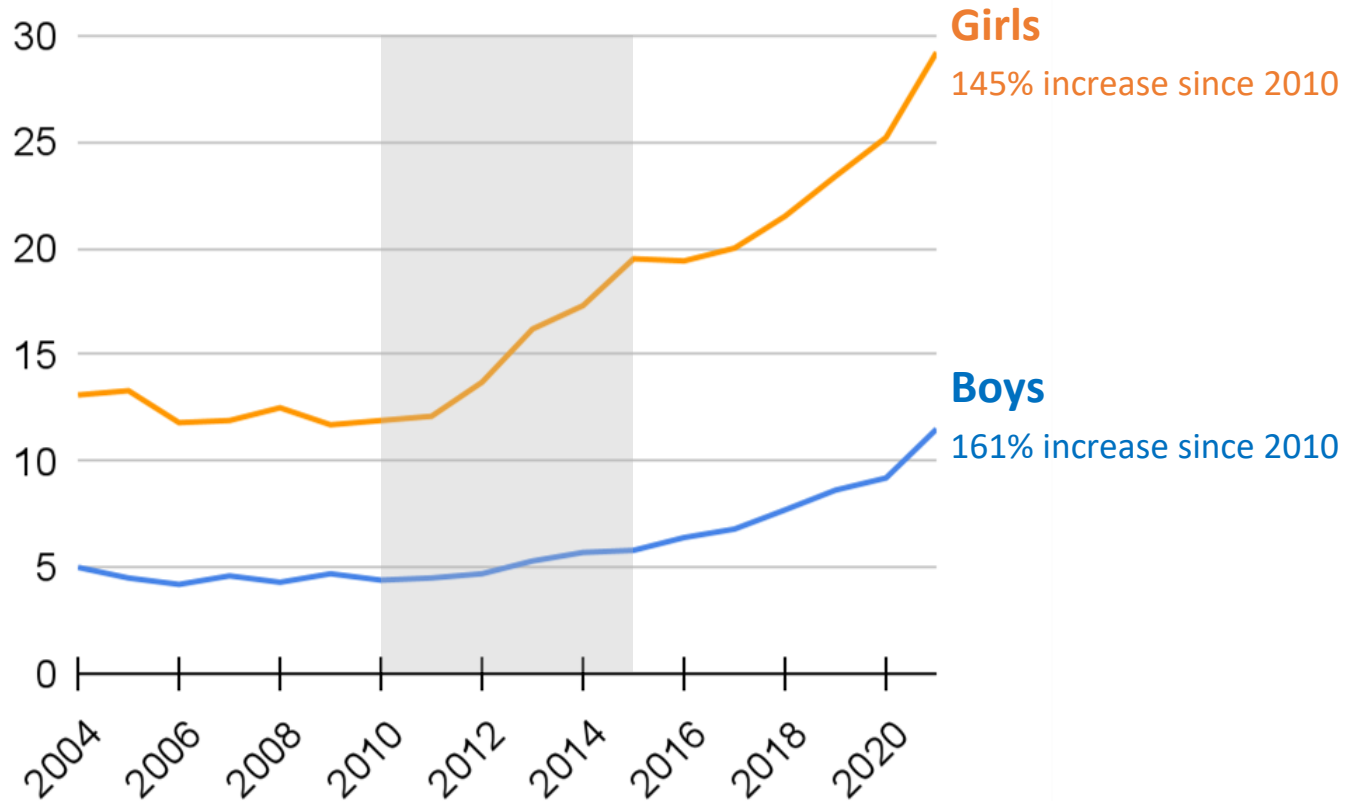
SOURCE: U.S. National Survey on Drug Use and Health

Percent of U.S. Teens with a Major Depression in the Last Year



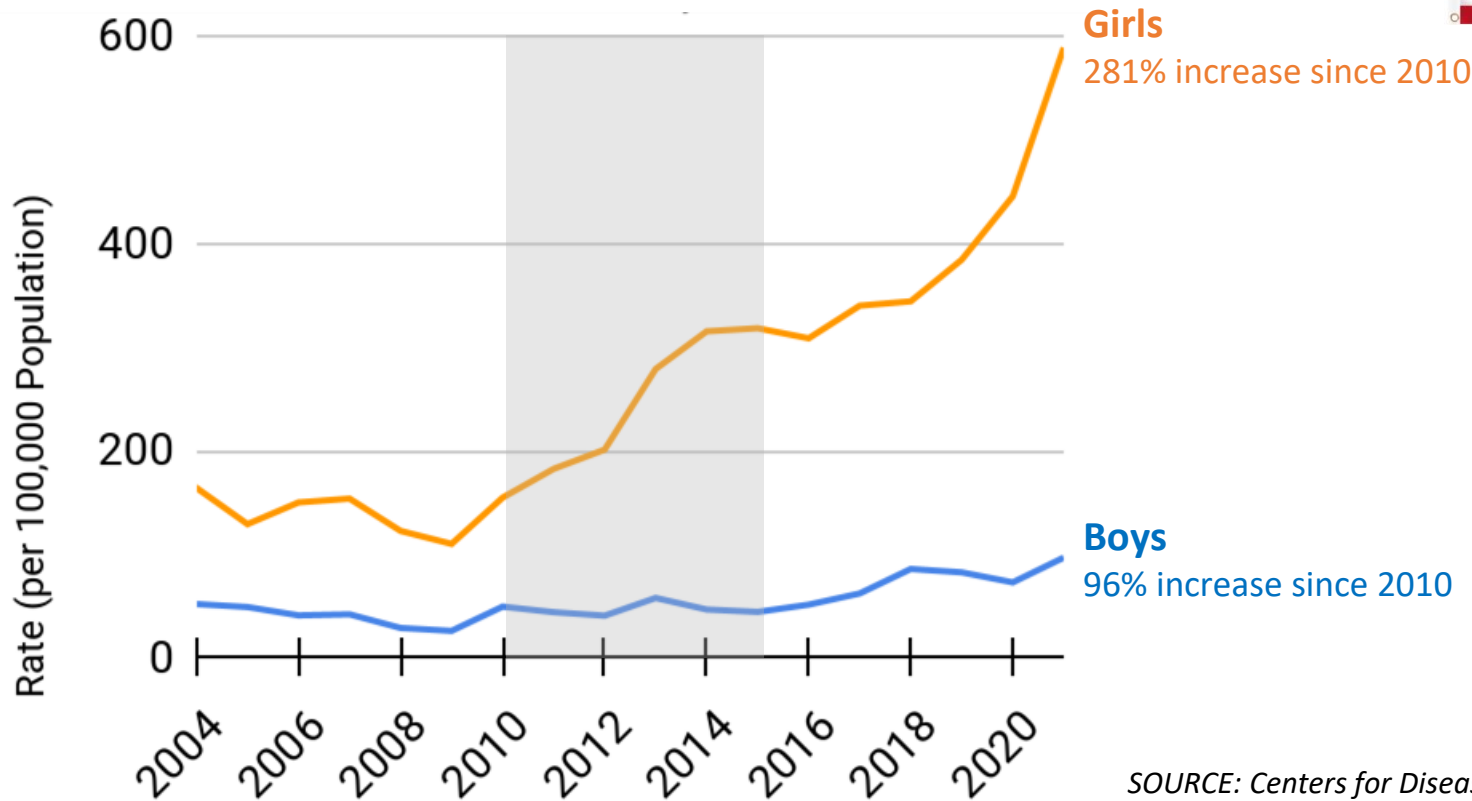
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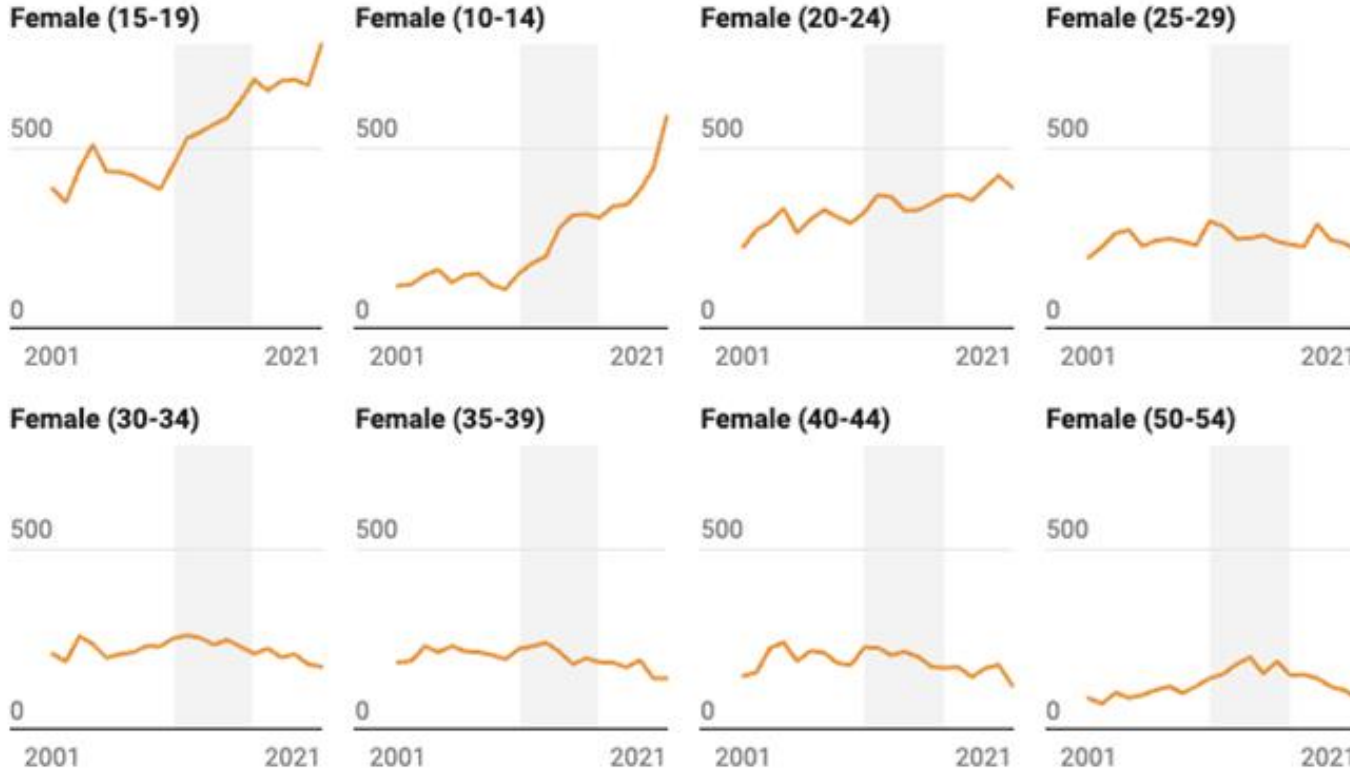
SOURCE: U.S. National Survey on Drug Use and Health

U.S. Emergency Department Visits for Nonfatal Self-harm (Ages 10-14)



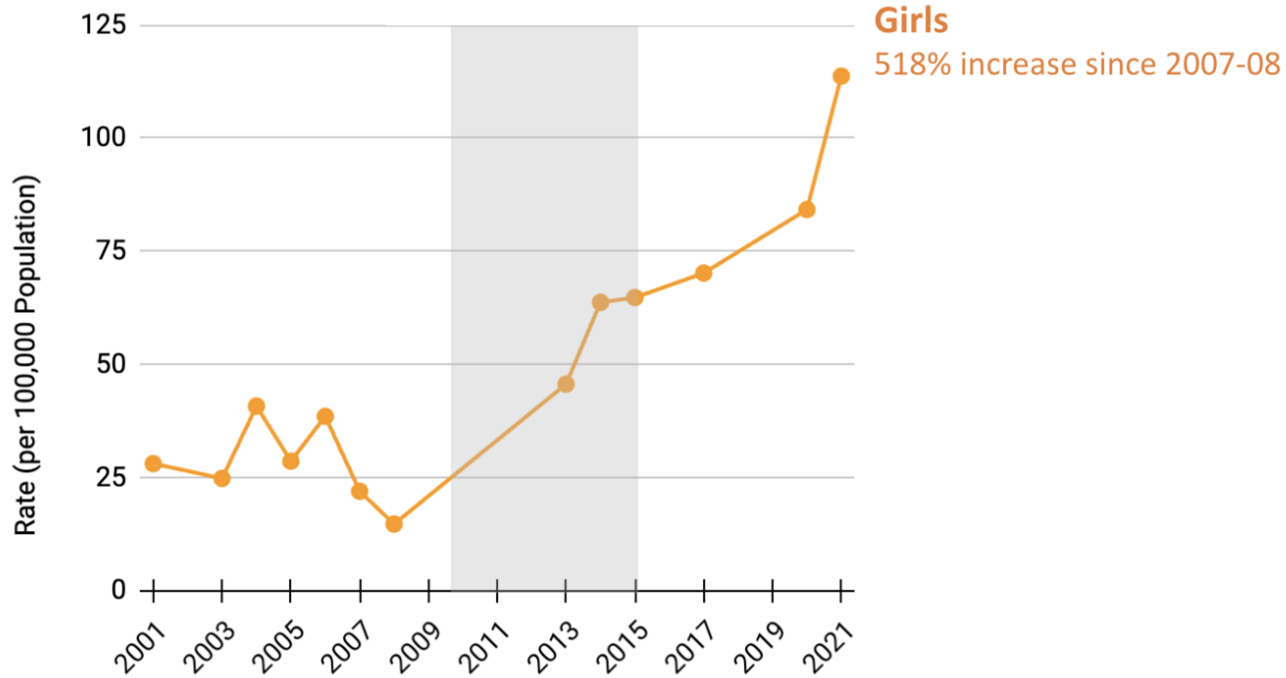
SOURCE: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control

U.S. Emergency Department Visits for Nonfatal Self-harm (Ages 10-14)



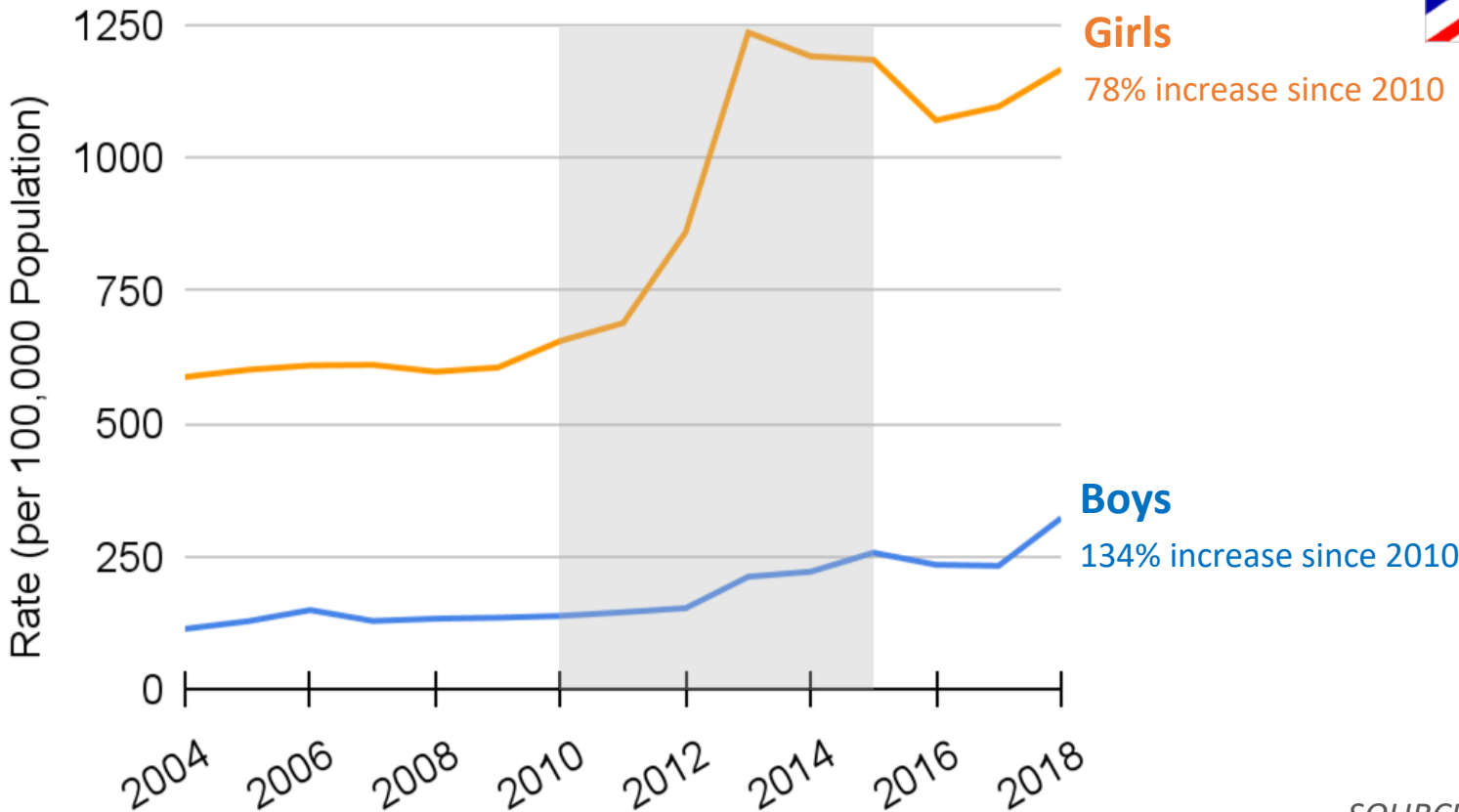
SOURCE: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control

Hospitalizations for Nonfatal Self-harm (Ages 10-14)



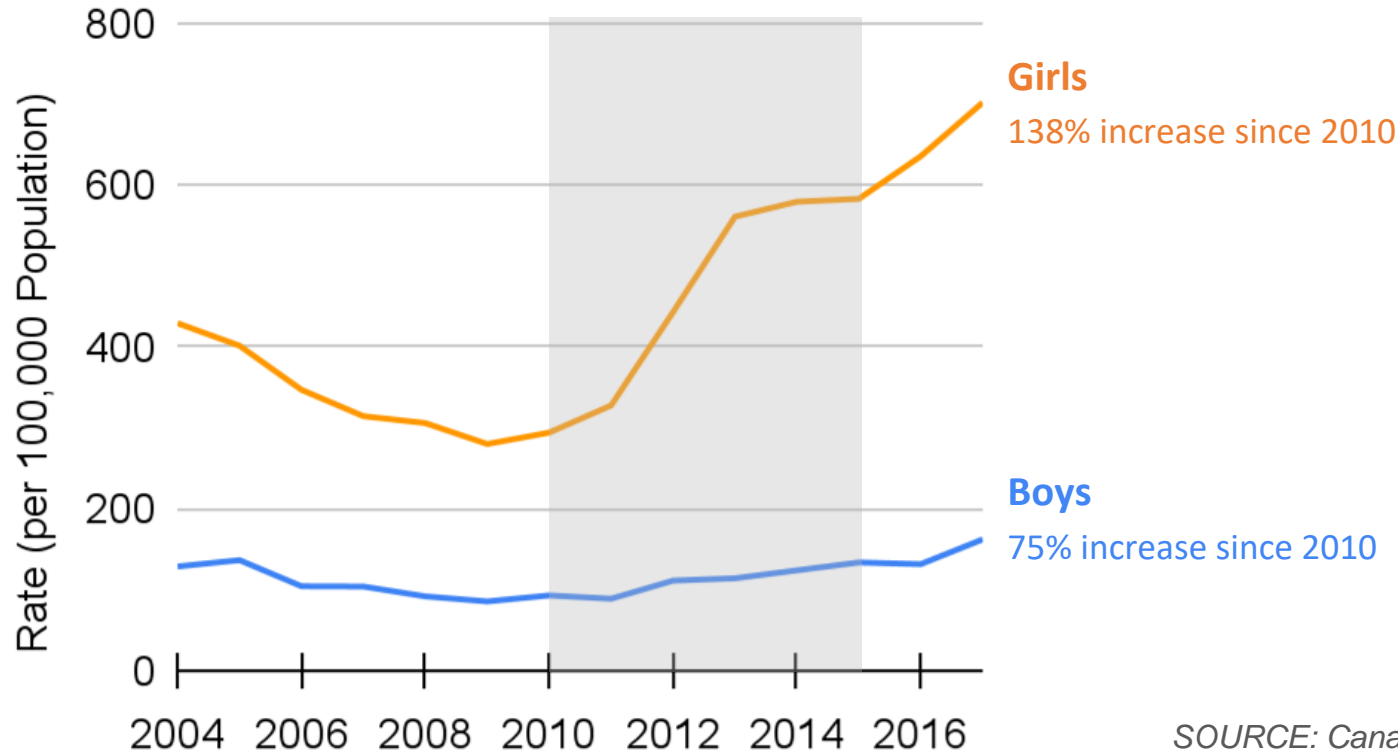
*SOURCE: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention,
National Center for Injury Prevention and Control*

UK Teens, Self-harm Episodes (Ages 13 – 16)



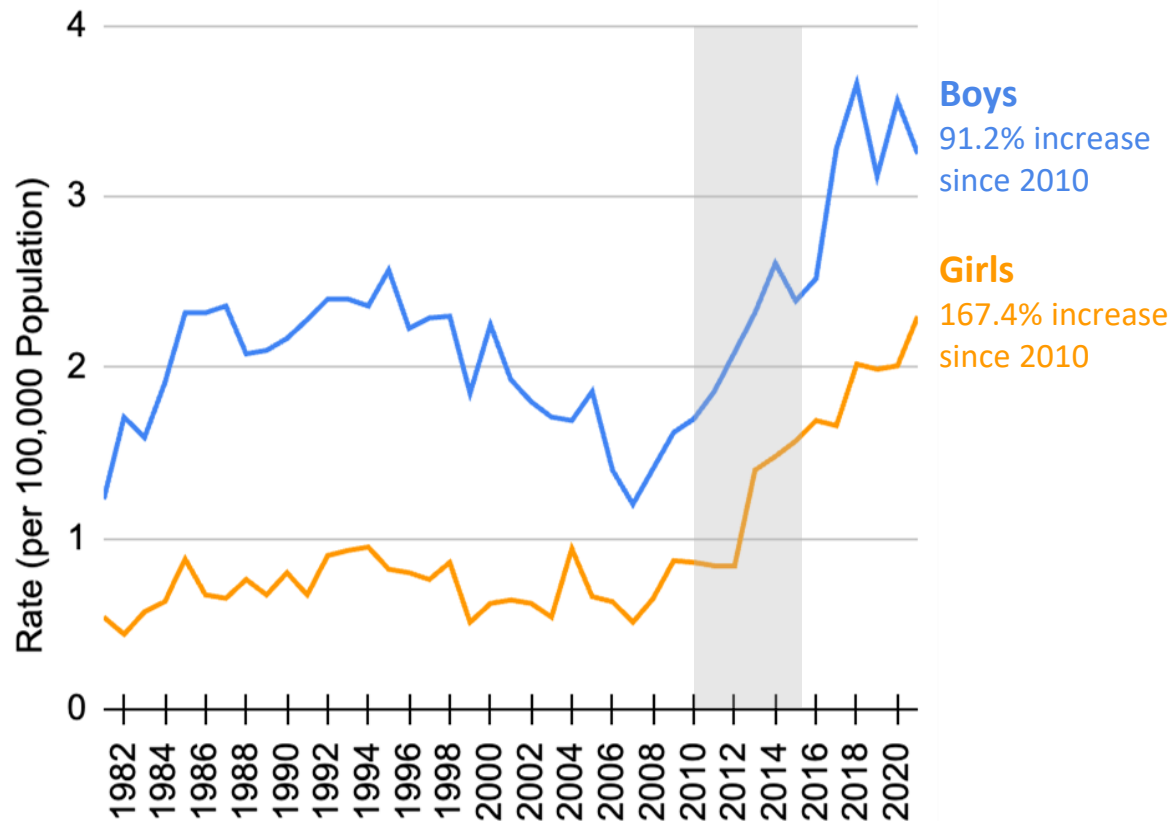
SOURCE: Cybulski et al., 2021

Self-Harm Emergency Dept Visits, Ontarian Teens (13-17)



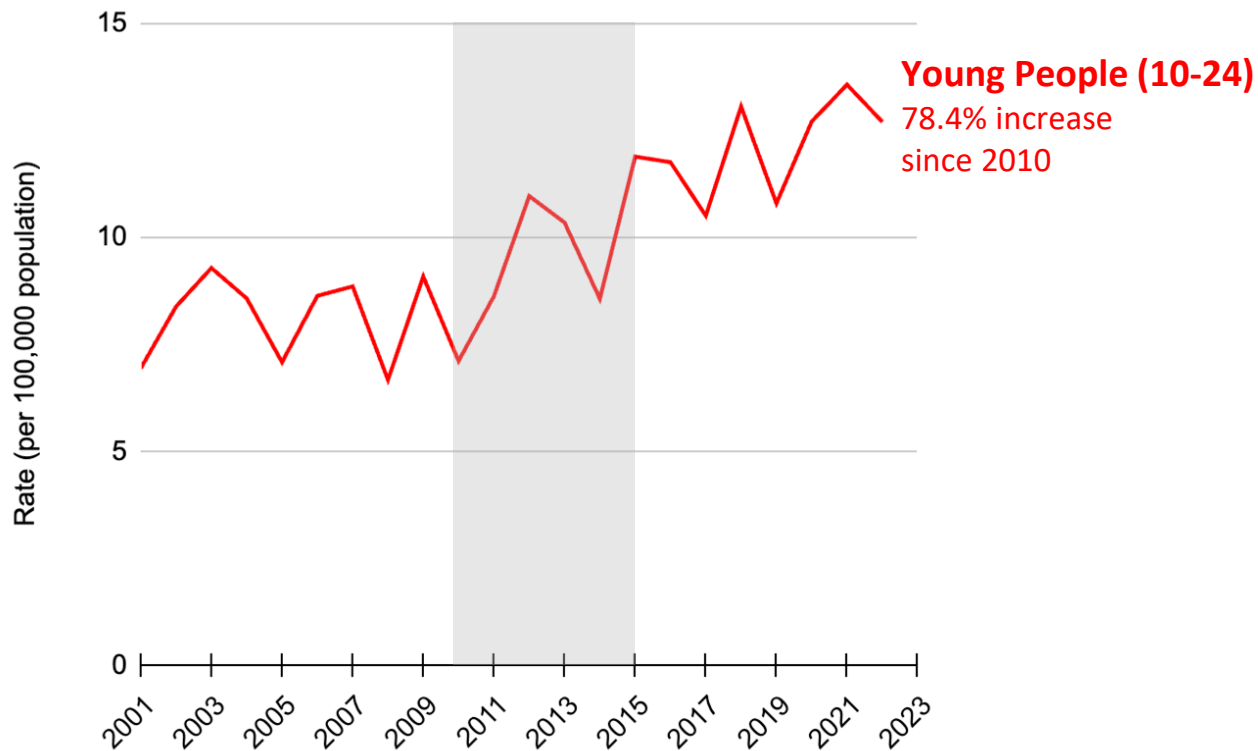
SOURCE: Canadian National Ambulatory Care Reporting System (NACRS) database

U.S. Suicide Rates (Ages 10-14)



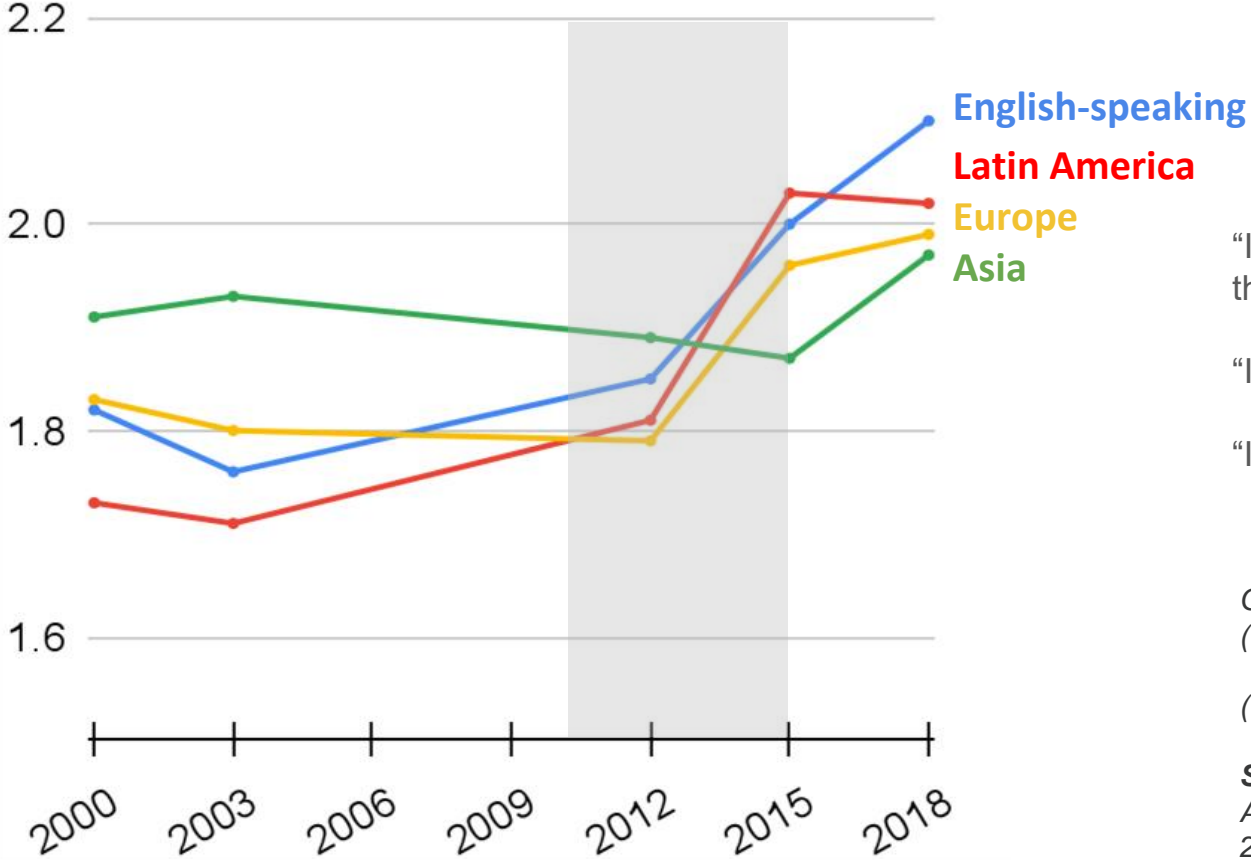
SOURCE: CDC Wisqars Fatal Injury Reports

Kentucky Suicide Rates (Ages 10-24)



SOURCE: CDC Wisqars Fatal Injury Reports

School Alienation, Worldwide (Ages 15-16), Average Scores



“I feel like an outsider (or left out of things) at school” “

“I feel like I belong at school”

“I feel lonely at school.”

Changes in school alienation, 2000-2018 (teens ages 15-16), n = 1,049,784.

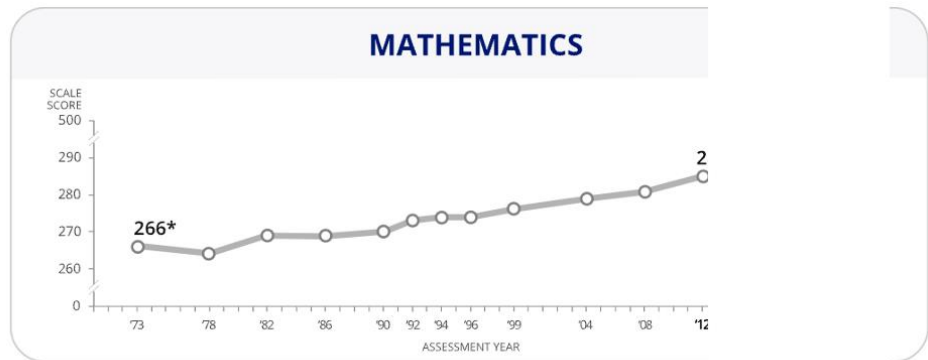
(1) Strongly disagree to strongly agree.(4)

Source: Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), 2002-2018. No data 2006 and 2009.

NAEP Long-Term Trend

Yes, COVID mattered.

But an unprecedented reversal began in 2012.

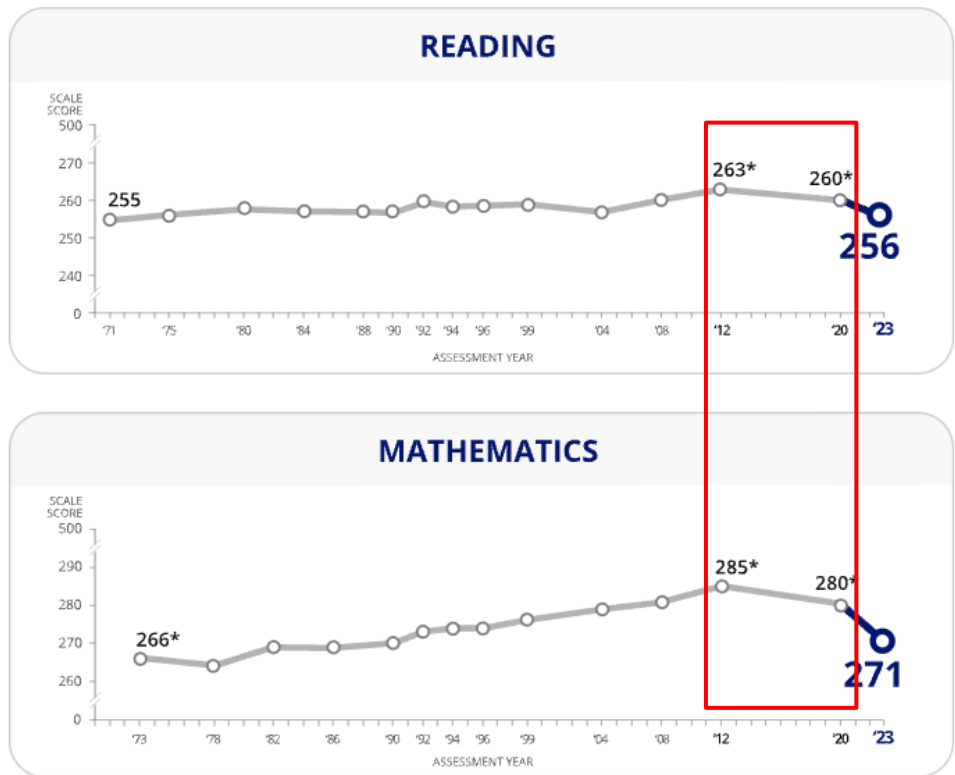


NAEP Long-Term Trend

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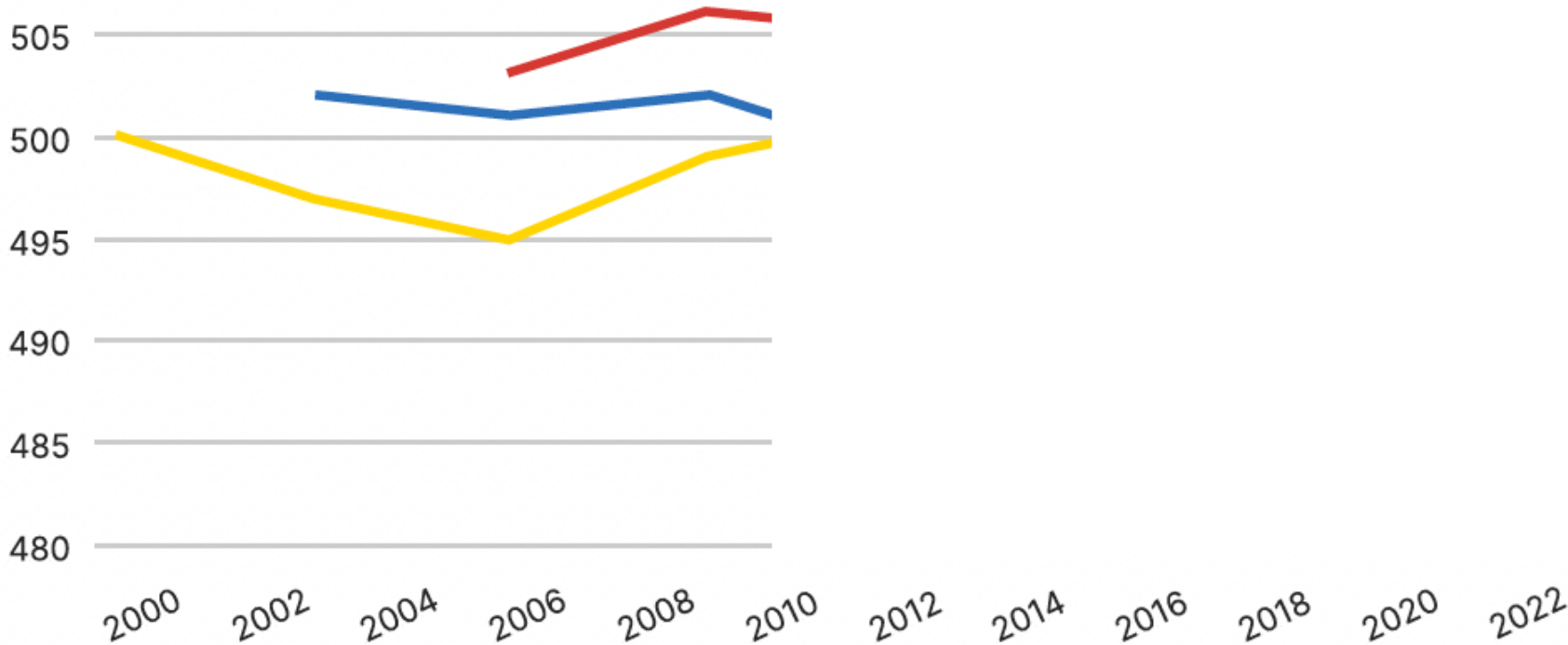
But an unprecedented reversal began in 2012.

We are most of the way back to 1971

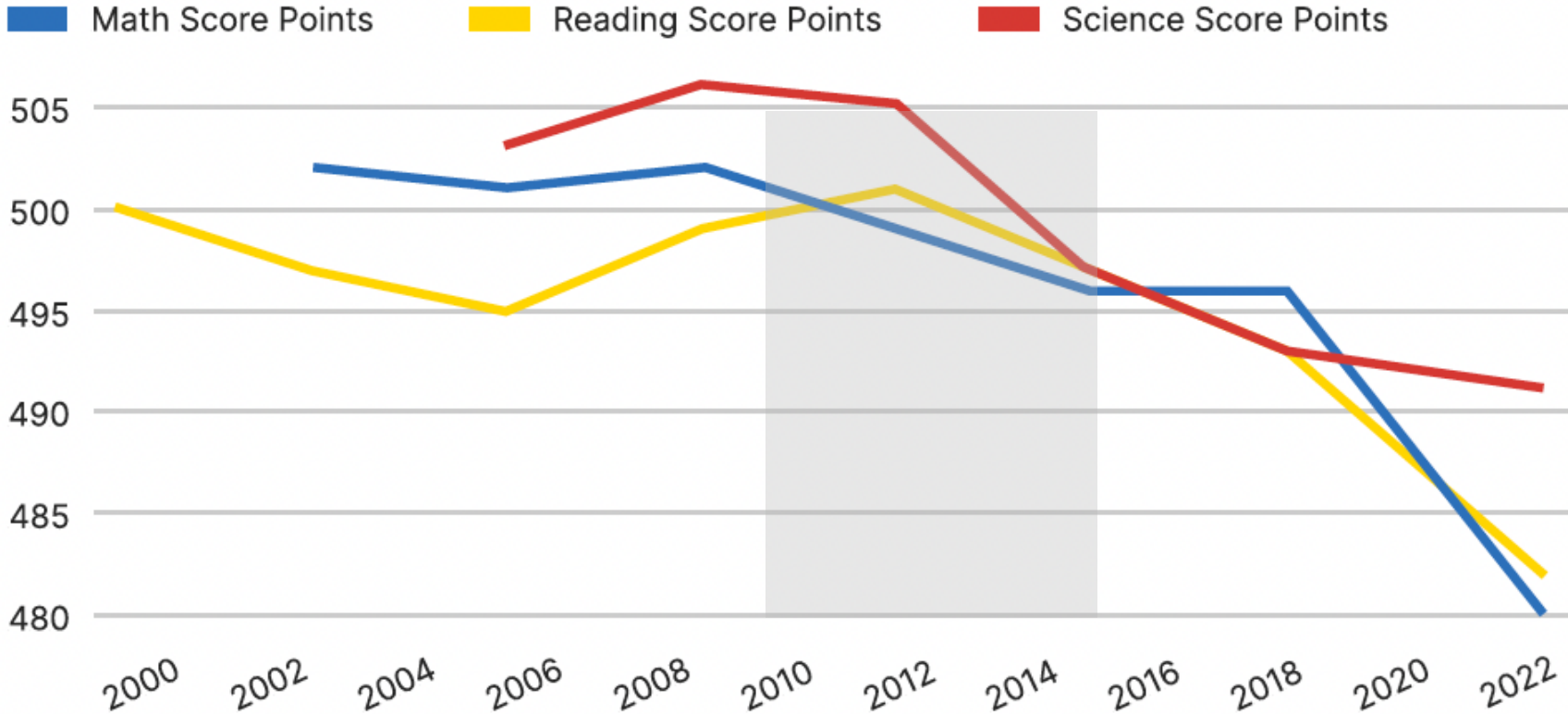


It's Not Only Mental Health: Global PISA Test Scores (Age 15, OECD)

■ Math Score Points ■ Reading Score Points ■ Science Score Points



It's Not Only Mental Health: Global PISA Test Scores (Age 15, OECD)



What happened?

Here are 13 Other Explanations For The Adolescent Mental Health Crisis. None of Them Work.



JEAN M. TWENGE

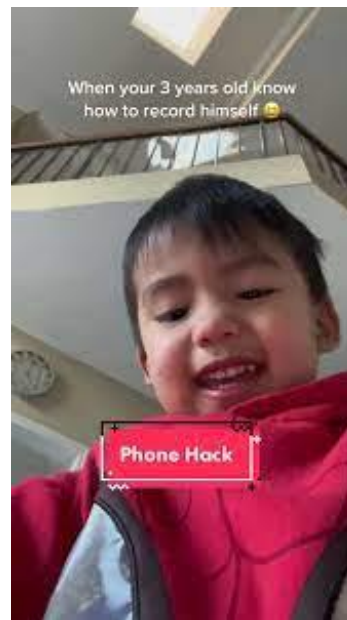
OCT 24, 2023

Our Explanation:

Play-Based to Phone-Based Childhoods

2010-2015





A Tragedy in Two Acts

Act 1. The play-based childhood faded out gradually (1980-2010)

Act 2. The phone-based childhood stormed in with iPhone, social media, front-facing camera, and high-speed internet (2010-2015)



The Anxious Generation:

How the Great Rewiring caused an epidemic of mental illness

1. The surge of suffering
2. The costs of the phone-based childhood
3. What we can do

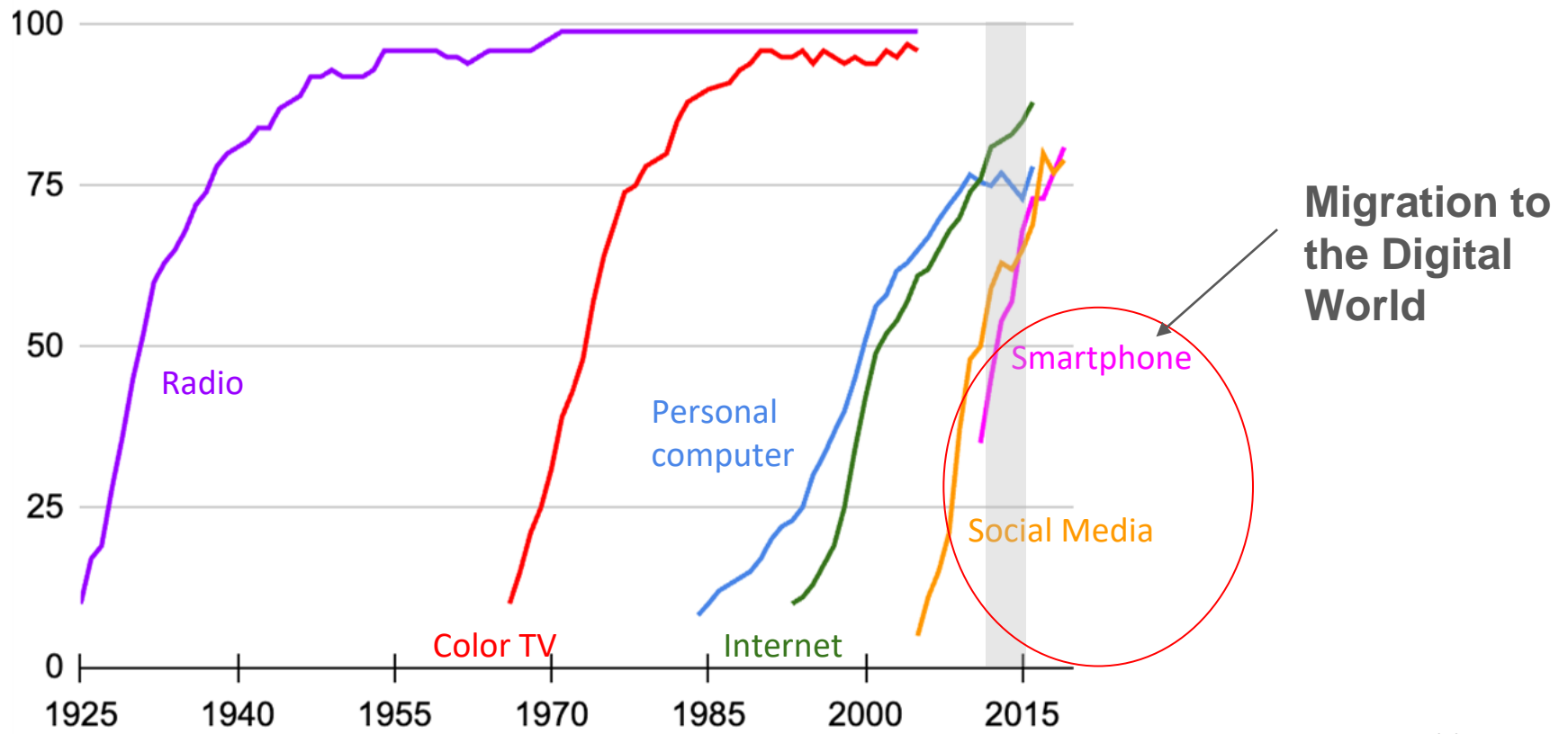


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Share of U.S. Households Using Specific Technologies (1925-2019)

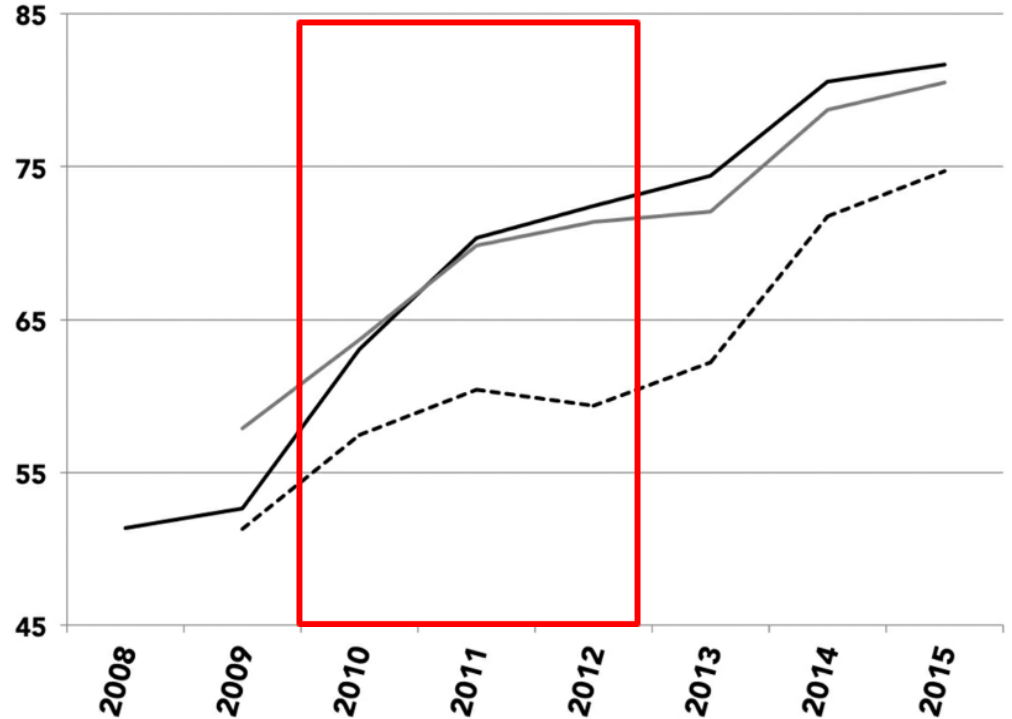


SOURCE: Our World in Data, 2023

The Rise of the Phone-Based Childhood

- 2006:** FB opens to all
- 2007:** Smartphones
- 2008:** App Store
- 2009:** FB adds “Like” button; Twitter “retweet”; Apple “push notifications”
- 2009-2011:** Migration of teen social life onto social media in USA
- 2010:** Front facing camera, IG
- 2012:** FB buys Instagram; rapid growth

Epidemic Begins



Source: *Monitoring the Future, 2008–2015*, graphed by Twenge (2017).

Percent of 8th, 10th, and 12th graders using social networking sites almost every day.

The Great Rewiring of Childhood



Millennial
puberty

to

Gen Z
puberty



A tool for connecting with
friends and family:

- No front-facing camera
- No internet
- No Instagram
- You pay for texts

A portal by which companies and
strangers can get to you

- Front-facing camera
- High speed internet, Instagram,
etc
- Unlimited data and texts
- Unlimited interruptions

Evidence of Harm Is Everywhere

- Evidence from the companies
- The correlational research
- The experimental research
- What young people say
- What parents say
- What educators say
- It fits the pattern: The timing, international scope, the age group, the gender, the disorders

The Industrial Scale Harm of Social Media

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

the facebook files 🇺🇸

Facebook Knows Instagram Is Toxic for Teen Girls, Company Documents Show

Its own in-depth research shows a significant teen
mental-health issue that Facebook plays down in
public



Snap Failed to Warn Users About Sextortion Risks, State Lawsuit Alleges

New Mexico claims the social-media company's product features and enforcement gaps make its platform a haven for child predation and blackmail

By [Jeff Horwitz](#) [Follow](#)

Oct. 1, 2024 6:00 am ET

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Snap has been accused of giving priority to growth over safety. PHOTO: THOMAS TRUTSCHEL/ZUMA PRESS

Snap: 10,000 reports of sextortion **each month.** This number, “likely represents a small fraction of this abuse.”

TikTok: “leakage” rates of violating content that’s not removed.

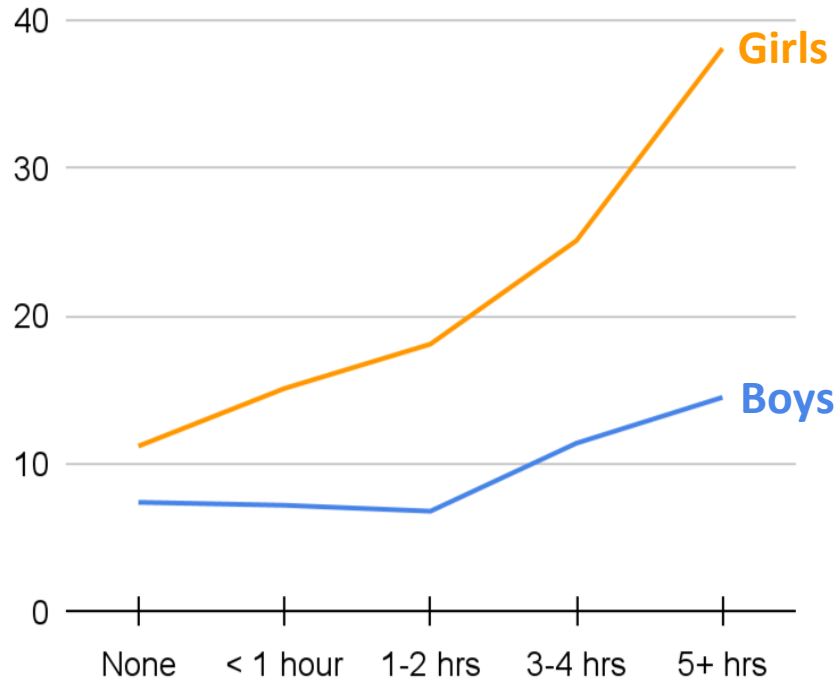
- 35.71% of “Normalization of Pedophilia”
- 33.33% of “Minor Sexual Solicitation”
- 39.13% of “Minor Physical Abuse”
- 30.36% of “leading minors off platform”
- 50% of “Glorification of Minor Sexual Assault”
- “100% of “Fetishizing Minors”

Meta: 13%—roughly one in eight young teens—had experienced unwanted sexual advances **in the past seven days.**

“Instagram hosts the largest-scale sexual harassment of teens to have ever happened.”
— Meta whistleblower, Arturo Bejar

Correlational Evidence

Percent of UK Teens Depressed as a Function of Hours per Weekday on Social Media



Correlational studies: Girls who spend more than 5 hours a day are 3x more likely to be depressed.

“For every one hour increase in use, there is a 13% increased for depression” (*Meta Analysis of 26 studies*)

SOURCE: Millennium Cohort Study.
Kelly (2018)

Article | [Open access](#) | [Published: 28 March 2022](#)

Windows of developmental sensitivity to social media

[Amy Orben](#) , [Andrew K. Przybylski](#), [Sarah-Jayne Blakemore](#) & [Rogier A. Kievit](#)

[Nature Communications](#) **13**, Article number: 1649 (2022) | [Cite this article](#)

58k Accesses | **53** Citations | **2336** Altmetric | [Metrics](#)

Females: 11–13

Males: Ages 14–15

Experimental Evidence

Social media reduction studies

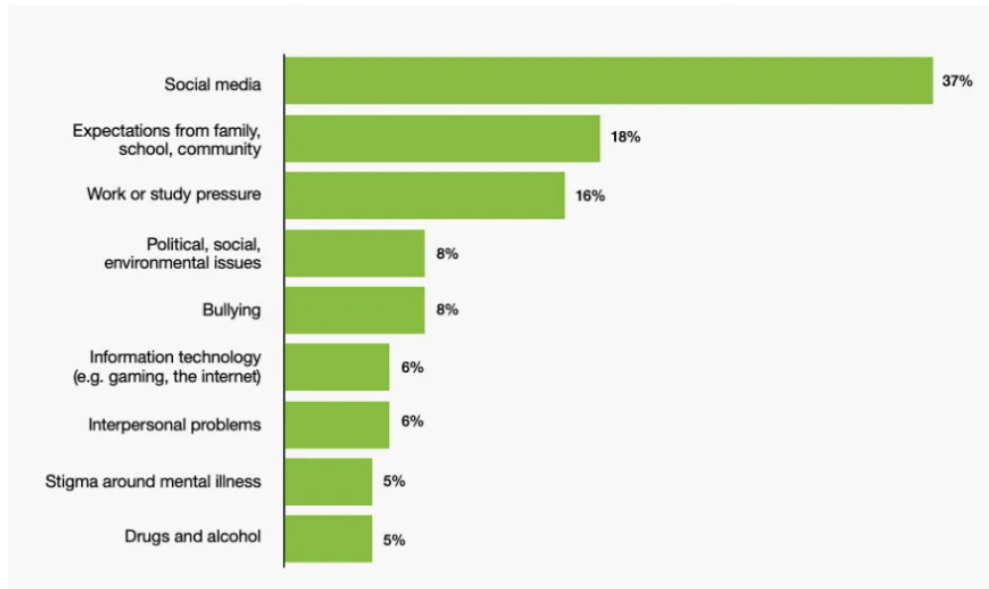
Evidence that social media reduction provides benefits is consistent from multi-week reduction studies that measure anxiety and depression

2.58 Limiting Social Media Use Decreases Depression, Anxiety, and FoMO in Youth With Emotional Distress: A Randomized Controlled Trial

[Christopher G. Davis, PhD](#) · [Wardah Mahboob, MA](#) · [Mohcene Abdessemed, MSc](#) · [Sabrina Perry, BA](#) · [Alex Adams, BA](#) · [Gary Goldfield, PhD](#) 

Youth Today Blame Social Media

Young Australians' Views on the Cause of the Decline in Youth Mental Health



The Youth Rebellion Is Growing

Seven Gen Z Leaders Working to Reduce the Harms Caused by the Phone-Based Childhood

MAY 20 · ZACH RAUSCH AND JON HAIDT

Methods: Ages 12-25, N = 4,000+

Source: [Headspace National Youth Mental Health Survey, 2018.](#)

Teachers Today Blame Social Media

Mental Health Factors

Please rate how much each of the following factors contribute to mental health issues among students at your school.

● Contributes A Lot ● Total Contributes

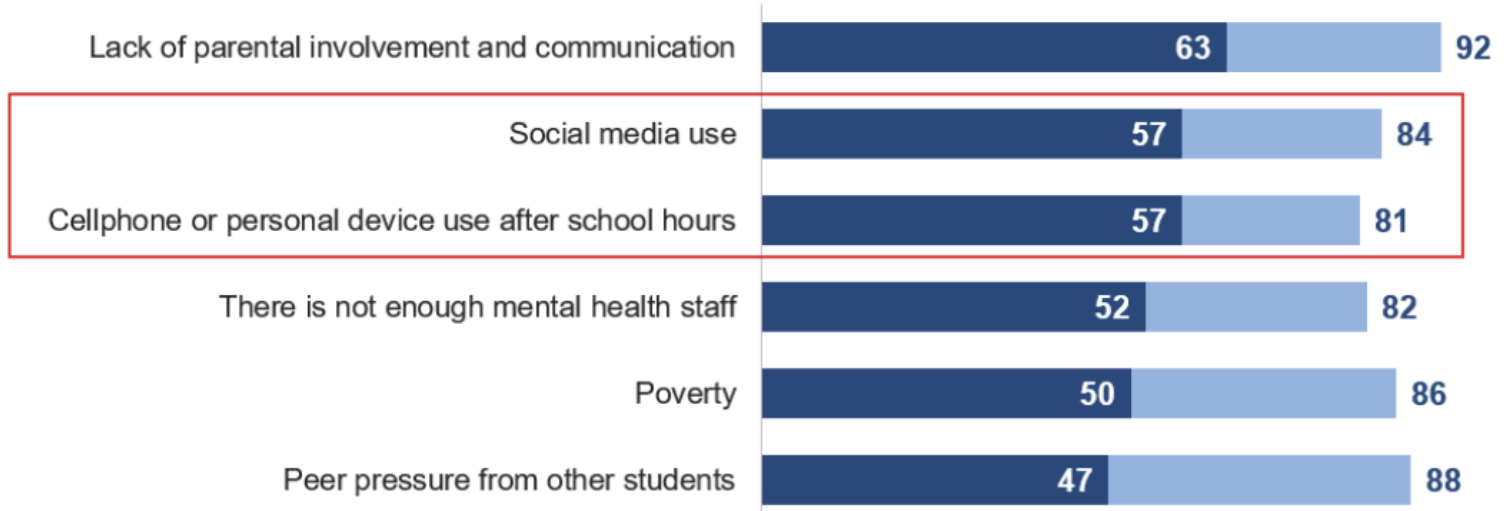
Source: [NEA](#), 2,889 educators who are members of the National Education Association.

Teachers Today Blame Social Media

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Please rate how much each of the following factors contribute to mental health issues among students at your school.

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Source: [NEA](#), 2,889 educators who are members of the National Education Association.

So Many Stories



I won't see my daughter grow up because of social media. Don't let that be your reality too.

By Deb Schmill

'There are no guardrails.' This mom believes an AI chatbot is responsible for her son's suicide



By Clare Duffy, CNN

🕒 6 minute read · Updated 2:17 PM EDT, Wed October 30, 2024

So Many Additional Harms of the Phone-Based Life

1. Opportunity Cost
2. Attention Fragmentation/Learning Loss
3. Problematic Use (~10% of teens)
4. No guardrails (cyberbullying, drugs, dangerous challenges)

Overprotection in the real world,
underprotection online



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When Product Markets Become Collective Traps: The Case of Social Media



**Leonardo Bursztyn, Benjamin R. Handel, Rafael
Jimenez & Christopher Roth**

National Bureau of Economic Research

Condition 1:

How much money would it take to deactivate your IG or TikTok for 4 weeks?

\$50

Condition 2:

How much money would it take to deactivate your IG or TikTok for 4 weeks, *if most others did so too?*

Less than zero

“The [students] prefer the product not to exist,
but **cannot coordinate** to stop using it”

Parents and Teens are Trapped



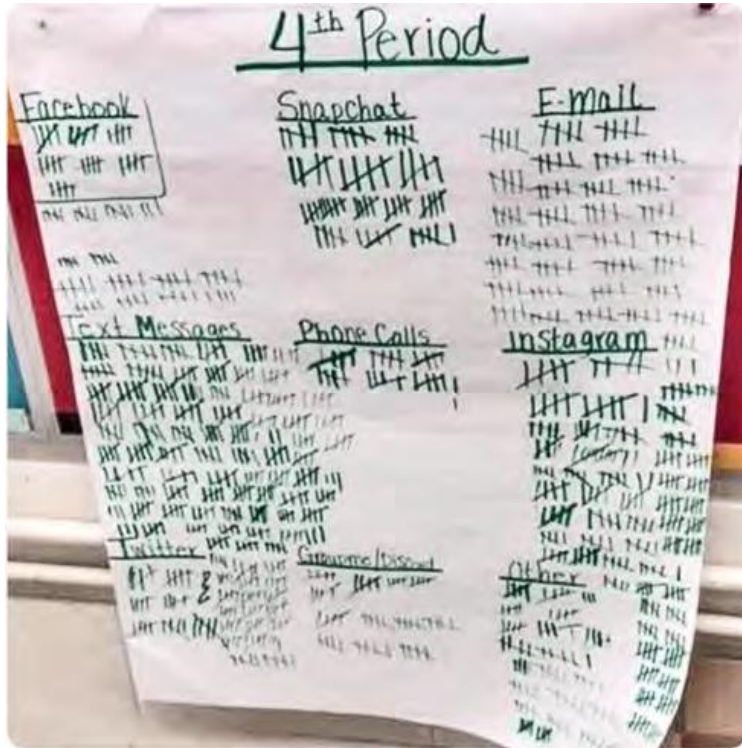
Four Foundational Reforms to Overcome The Collective Action Problem

1. No smartphones until high school (age 14)
2. No social media until 16
3. Phone-free schools
4. Much more independence, free play, and responsibility in the real world

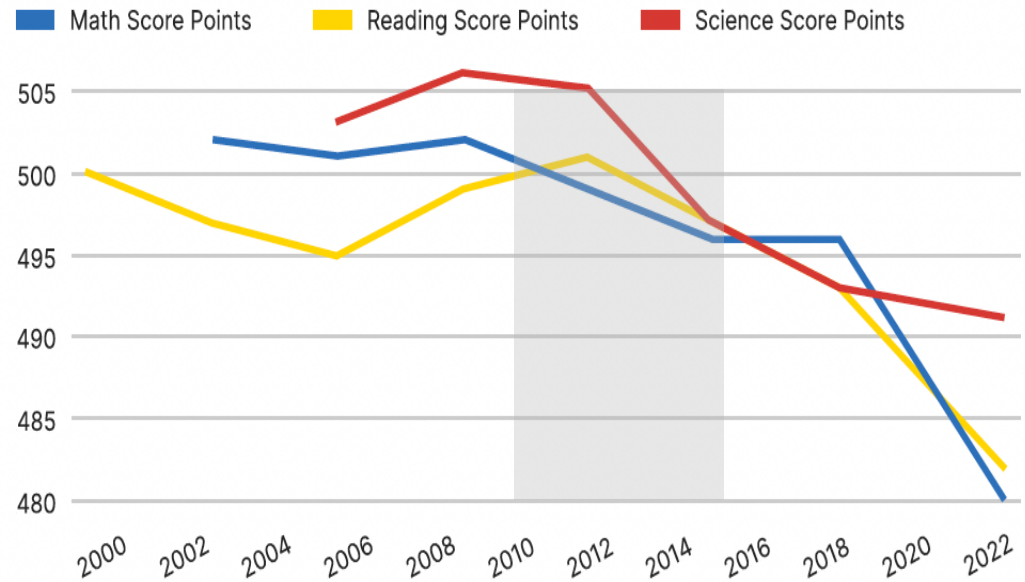
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Phone-Free Schools



It's Not Only Mental Health: Global PISA Test Scores



Phone-Free Schools

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

TECHNOLOGY | PERSONAL TECHNOLOGY | FAMILY & TECH: JULIE JARGON

A Teacher Did All He Could to Keep Kids Off Phones. He's Quitting in Frustration.

Mitchell Rutherford faced a crisis of confidence as smartphones took over his Arizona classroom and students lost the motivation to learn

Phone-Free Schools

Dozens of teachers have told me they spend more time policing kids' phone use than they do teaching. For Rutherford—a 35-year-old teacher who once embraced technology—**seeing kids checked out and, in his view, addicted, robbed him of the joy of teaching.**

Before the detox Isabel Richey, a senior in Rutherford's AP biology class, was spending six hours a day on her phone, most of it watching TikTok. **"I would go on my phone at the beginning of every class and never get off,"** she says.

She's now down to about an hour a day, and **has read nine novels since starting the detox. She's also been doing homework in long chunks,** without breaking to watch TikTok every 10 minutes. She says she's in a better mood and feels less stress.

Phone-Free Schools

Going beyond instructional time bans

Phone Policy Proposals

**Split*

● Strongly Support ● Total Support ● Total Oppose

Phone-Free Schools

Going beyond instructional time bans

Phone Policy Proposals

● Strongly Support ● Total Support ● Total Oppose

**Split*

*A cellphone/personal device policy at your school that prohibits students' use of cellphones/personal devices **during instructional time**



Source: [NEA](#), 2,889 educators who are members of the National Education Association.

Phone-Free Schools

Going beyond instructional time bans

Phone Policy Proposals

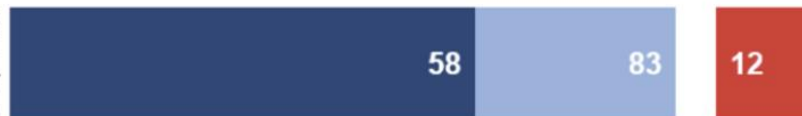
● Strongly Support ● Total Support ● Total Oppose

**Split*

*A cellphone/personal device policy at your school that prohibits students' use of cellphones/personal devices **during instructional time**



*A cellphone/personal device policy at your school that prohibits students' use of cellphones/personal devices **during the entire school day**, with school-approved exceptions for things like medical or assistive-technology needs



Source: [NEA](#), 2,889 educators who are members of the National Education Association.

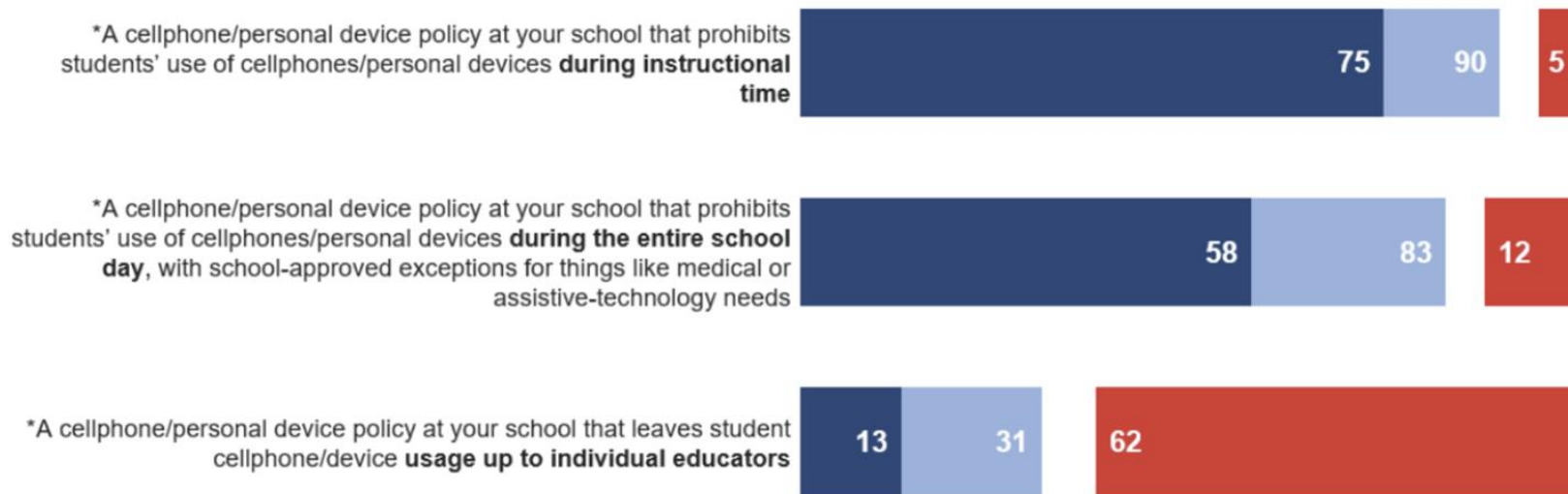
Phone-Free Schools

Going beyond instructional time bans

Phone Policy Proposals

● Strongly Support ● Total Support ● Total Oppose

*Split



Source: [NEA](#), 2,889 educators who are members of the National Education Association.

Phone-Free Schools

Going beyond instructional time bans



What We Are Hearing

- Laughter in the hallways. “We hadn’t heard that in ten years.”
- Teachers having to tell students to quiet down
- Much less distraction
- Teachers love it
- Students have a hard time at first, but grow to see its value

Phone-Free Schools

1. Encouraging schools to go phone free
2. Funding phone lockers and pouches
3. Funding research





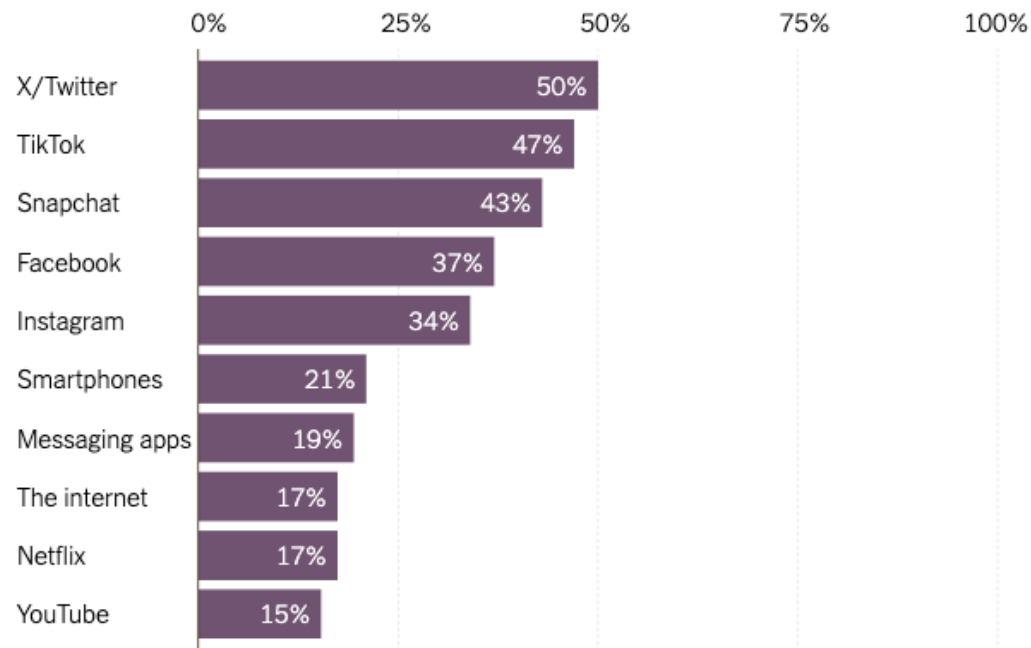
The Anxious Generation:

How the Great Rewiring caused an epidemic of mental illness

1. The surge of suffering
2. The costs of the phone-based childhood
3. What we can do

Almost half of Gen Z wishes social media platforms like X and TikTok didn't exist

Percentage of Gen Z respondents who agree with the statement "I wish ___ had never been invented"



Source: Harris Poll; survey questions by Zach Rausch



“71.5% regretted starting to smoke” ([Nayak 2014](#))

Catastrophic Failure

Bring an end to the Phone-Based
Childhood

Restore the Play-Based Childhood

**We need to do
better for the
next generation.**



Learn more at

Anxiousgeneration.com

Afterbabel.com