

Risk factors for mental health challenges are compounded for LGBTQ youth

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The U.S. Surgeon General published a rare report Dec. 7 warning of a

mental health crisis among young people caused in part by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The 53-page public advisory detailed spiking rates of depression, anxiety and mental [health](#) distress that began before the pandemic but have continued to escalate, according to self-reports from adolescents and mental health-related emergency room visits.

Northwestern Now talked to health experts Dr. Aron Janssen, Brian Mustanski and Michael Newcomb to get their reactions to the advisory and its findings.

'Impossible to ignore the suffering'

"It has now become impossible to ignore the suffering kids today are enduring," Janssen said. "What is most alarming is despite improved evidence to support the efficacy of mental health care for children, only half of kids are receiving appropriate care, and often those kids are waiting months to years to get access.

"We have an increasing need for care with a dwindling supply of trained mental health professionals. We need a systemwide approach, which is why this report from the surgeon general is so important. The bright spot is this need is now being acknowledged at the highest level of government. It will take a coordinated response across multiple states and institutions to begin to address the complex challenges children and families are facing."

Additional risk for LGBTQ teens

"Suicide is the second leading cause of death among Americans ages 10–24, and even before the COVID pandemic, deaths by suicide had

been increasing in this age group every year since 2007," Mustanski said. "LGBTQ teens have been known for decades to be at increased risk, largely due to [social factors](#) such as increased bullying and lack of parental support that increase depression and hopelessness—two major risk factors for suicide."

"Many young people have had to rely on parents and families for support during COVID-19 due to [economic issues](#), such as loss of employment or delays in educational attainment," Newcomb said. "This places many LGBTQ young people in a particularly challenging or even dangerous situation that could have a profound impact on their mental health. Many LGBTQ [young people](#) have likely had to move back into family environments that are unaccepting of their gender or sexual identities, exposing them to stigma and harassment. Others have not even had the option to rely on their families due to previous parental rejection, which makes them even more vulnerable to the negative consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic."

Education and guidance for parents

"Our research on gay and bisexual teens during COVID has demonstrated a compounding effect of parental rejection and tension due to sexual orientation on depression among teens living at home with parents during the COVID-19 sequester period," Mustanski said. "In such isolating and stressful times, it is critical to provide parents with culturally appropriate education and guidance on [sexual orientation](#) so they can effectively support their LGBTQ children."

Provided by Northwestern University

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