

# Girls are in crisis and their mental health needs to be taken seriously, says researcher

May 22 2023, by Alexe Bernier

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

An article in the Washington Post recently declared "[a crisis in American girlhood](#)." Girls in the United States are experiencing alarmingly higher rates of sexual assault, mental health issues and suicidality than ever before.

Data collected in 2021 by the [Centers for Disease Control](#) (CDC) demonstrates how dire the circumstances of American girlhood are. Fourteen percent of [teenage girls](#) in the United States shared that they had been forced to have sex, and 60 percent had experienced [extreme feelings of sadness or hopelessness](#). Nearly a quarter of [girls](#) had considered and planned suicide.

While these findings are based on U.S. data, the story is consistent with what girls in Canada have been saying for the past decade. In Canada, [over 50 percent of female students in Ontario have reported](#) moderate to severe psychological distress. [One in four girls](#) has been sexually abused by the time they turn 18.

Suicide is the [fourth leading cause of death](#) for girls up to 14 years old, an annual statistic that has remained relatively consistent since 2016.

The gendered wage gap in Canada has been found to [start as early as 12 years old](#). The situation is worse for girls who are [racialized, living in poverty, disabled](#), or [LGBTQ+](#).

The dire state of girlhood has historically been attributed to the usual suspects: [unrealistic beauty standards](#), [pressures of social media](#), [living in a rape culture](#), and more recently, the [COVID-19 pandemic](#).

In interviews conducted by the Washington Post with girls themselves, however, they point to another, perhaps unsuspected culprit: that when girls do speak up, they aren't listened to or taken seriously.

## **Why don't we listen to or take girls seriously?**

I am a former community [social worker](#) with experience working directly with girls between the ages of 10 and 18 years old. My current doctoral research focuses on girls between the ages of eight and 12 years

old who engage in activism, exploring ways that adults can better listen and support them when they tell us what they want for their lives and their worlds. I have heard countless stories from girls themselves about when they had felt dismissed by adults.

This dismissal was often directly tied to their identities as girls, attributed to claims that girls were just going through a phase, not accurately sharing what had happened or that they were being dramatic.

Put simply, when girls tell us what is happening in their lives, we have a tendency not to believe them.

Dismissing the credibility of an entire group of people because of [prejudices](#) that we may have about their identities is what philosopher Miranda Fricker has described as [epistemic injustice](#).

In this type of epistemic injustice, a speaker's credibility is dismissed because of prejudices that others have based on the speaker's identity. This means that the speaker's testimony is not listened to or taken seriously because of who they are.

Adults tend to doubt girls' credibility as speakers because of prejudices about girls and girlhood. These prejudices against girls are rooted in the construction of girlhood as a time of frivolity, fun and emotionality.

## **Do girls just want to have fun?**

For a long time, girlhood—and specifically [white, middle- and upper-class, able-bodied girlhood](#)—has been seen as a time of inherent innocence, [frivolity](#) and [fun](#).

Constructions of girlhood are linked to expectations we have about girls as children and as gendered subjects. As children, we expect girls to

have a sort of [wide-eyed wonderment](#) about the world around them. As gendered subjects, girls are additionally stereotyped in ways typically associated with womanhood, such as [emotionality](#).

In a world that [dichotomizes rationality and emotionality](#), with rationality being considered more credible than emotionality, girls are dismissed because of the way girlhood is viewed.

When girls tell us what is happening in their lives, such as when they've experienced sexual assault or are feeling suicidal, these views become especially harmful.

If we want to see improvements in the lives of girls in Canada and beyond, we need to first think critically about why we tend to dismiss and invalidate their concerns. Challenging our own prejudices about the credibility of girls is a vital first step in this process.

When considering the crisis in girlhood, girls have been clear about the way forward. In my own community practice work, girls shared that they feel most supported by adults while "[being listened to and feeling like I am being heard](#)." In the Washington Post article, girls called for adults to "[stop dismissing their concerns as drama](#)."

Girls have never just wanted to have fun. They want—and need to be—listened to and taken seriously.

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