

Social media, teen mental health are top concerns for Tennessee parents

Tennessee parents say their own kids are in good health, but are worried about younger generation

New analyses of the Vanderbilt Child Health Poll of roughly 1,000 parents across Tennessee in late 2024 reveal that social media and online activity and teen mental health rank at the top of a list of concerns they have about their children.

Statewide, parents said their top concerns in addition to social media and mental health were bullying, gun violence and school quality. Parents were presented with a list of 15 issues including substance use, screen time, teen pregnancy and motor vehicle accidents, and asked to choose up to three as top concerns.

“Social media can rob us of sleep and be a breeding ground for cyberbullying, misinformation and inappropriate content. It often takes time away from children's physical activity, academics and face-to-face interactions, which are vital for their development,” said Katie Spencer, PsyD, HSP, a licensed pediatric psychologist and assistant professor of Clinical Pediatrics at Monroe Carell Jr. Children’s Hospital at Vanderbilt.

Concern (Statewide)	% Of Parents
Social media & online influence	29%
Teen mental health (depression, anxiety, suicide)	29%
Bullying	27%
School, neighborhood or community gun violence	26%
School quality	23%

Spencer recommends parents establish clear boundaries like age and time limits, regular monitoring, and setting expectations with their children before allowing them access to social media platforms to help ensure they have a healthy, balanced lifestyle. Teens should understand the risks before engaging on social platforms, Spencer said.

There were differences by race and ethnicity in the concerns among parents. Concerns among white parents were similar to overall concerns across the state, but Black parents were most concerned about discrimination (29%), gun violence

(29%), and bullying (25%), and Hispanic parents were most concerned with gun violence (43%), teen substance use (37%), and housing access (30%).

Variability in parental concerns by race and ethnicity aligns with a recent national survey by the independent Kaiser Family Foundation, said Velma McBride Murry, PhD, University Distinguished Professor of Health Policy, which showed that non-white parents are more likely to worry about their children experiencing unfair treatment and discrimination.

“A greater proportion of non-white children grow up in underinvested, low-resource communities,” said Murry, who holds the Lois Autrey Betts Chair in Education and Human Development. “Raising children in these conditions can lead to a range of other issues that affect the everyday life experience of their children, including poverty, low quality schools, exposure to gun violence and increased access to drugs. “

Parent perceptions of their child's health

Most parents across the state feel their own children are in good health, but more than half of parents feel the long-term health and well-being of their children's generation will be worse than their own generations.

Nearly all parents (95%) rated their child's current health between good and excellent. Statewide, 61% of parents believed that their own children's long-term health and well-being would be better than the parent's own generation. But only 34% of parents believed their child's generation would be better than their own; 53% of parents felt it would be worse.

About the Poll

The Vanderbilt Child Health Poll is conducted annually to gauge parents' concerns about a wide range of topics. The data, collected from a representative sample of Tennessee parents across each of the three grand divisions of the state, focuses on child health issues ranging from education to food security, insurance status and mental health. Roughly 80% of all parents polled identified as registered voters.