

Poll: Tennessee parents are worried about the future for their kids; 1 in 3 say their child has been diagnosed with a mental health condition

Teen mental health, social media, bullying, screen time and school quality top list of parental concerns.

Most Tennessee parents say their kids are healthy, but more than half of parents polled said they are worried the long-term health and well-being of their children will be worse than their own, according to a poll analysis by Vanderbilt Health researchers.

The [Vanderbilt Child Health Poll that](#) surveyed 1,000 parents statewide in late 2025 shows 35% of parents listed teen mental health as a top concern from a list of 15 choices (parents were asked to pick up to three top concerns). From the list, 30% noted social media as a top concern, while about 25% identified bullying, excessive screen time, or school quality in their top three. The poll has been fielded annually since 2020 and is representative of Tennessee's population.

“It is striking that most parents feel their child’s generation may be worse off than their own, a sentiment that is informed by a variety of real concerns ranging from mental and physical health — things like anxiety and depression, nutrition, physical inactivity — to safety and well-being, including social media usage, bullying, gun violence, school quality, access to housing and health care, and discrimination,” said Derek Williams, MD, MPH, professor of Pediatrics at Monroe Carell Jr. Children’s Hospital at Vanderbilt, who leads the research team and holds the Dr. William R. Long Directorship in Child Health Research.

One in 3 parents of a school-age or adolescent child said their child has been diagnosed with a mental or behavioral health condition. Anxiety or depression ranked most common among adolescents (19%), while attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder was most common in school-age children (17%).

Of those reporting one or more mental or behavioral health conditions, 37% said their child is not receiving specialized services for those conditions. In rural regions, almost half (48%) reported not receiving these services, which researchers suggested highlights an important access problem.

“Parents in Tennessee continue to identify mental health as a top concern for their children. Despite consistently high rates of reported diagnoses, parents report barriers to accessing care, and national rankings of mental health care access consistently place Tennessee at the bottom,” said Heather Kreth, PsyD, associate professor of Clinical Pediatrics and clinical director of Inpatient Behavioral Health at Monroe Carell.

“Additionally, suicide death rates for youth in Tennessee are higher than the national average. It is imperative that we listen to parents’ concerns about their child’s mental health and work to bridge the gaps with access to care.”

One-third of parents with an adolescent 13-17 years old said their child spent more than three hours on social media daily; 11% reported five or more hours daily, and 10% said they don’t know. Top social media concerns in this group included exposure to explicit sexual content (48%) and false or misleading content (43%). About 90% of parents feel they need to monitor social media access for their child.

“Recent literature demonstrates that younger teens (ages 11-14) and girls are at higher risk for negative effects of social media. Longer duration of social media use in girls has been more consistently linked to increased anxiety and depression,” said Katherine Spencer, PsyD, associate professor of Clinical Pediatrics and member of the research team. “More frequent exposure to social media for teens is also associated with increased odds of substance use, sexual risk behaviors, and unhealthy eating behaviors.”

Spencer said emerging research indicates particular vulnerability for teens in the hours before bed, with increased risk for suicidal ideation and planning.

“Parents can support reduced risk in their teen through limiting time on social media, managing access to unhealthy or explicit content, and promoting healthy sleep behaviors,” Spencer said.

The research team will publish additional analyses on top concerns identified by parents and other child health issues over the next few months.

About the Vanderbilt Child Health Poll

The Vanderbilt Child Health Poll is conducted annually to gauge Tennessee parents’ concerns about a wide range of health-related topics. The data, collected from a representative sample of Tennessee parents across the state, focuses on issues related to child health and well-being, ranging from top health concerns to health care access and delivery, education, and food security. Roughly 80% of all parents polled identified as registered voters.