

**Girls Inc. is committed to advancing the rights and opportunities of girls and young women**, with a particular focus on the needs of girls from low-income communities and girls who face multiple, intersectional challenges. Informed by the voices of girls themselves, we advocate to break through the barriers girls face and to reform systems that impede their success.

## MENTAL HEALTH IS AS IMPORTANT AS PHYSICAL HEALTH

Mental health is important at every stage of life and is critical for a girl's success in school. Unfortunately, 1 in 5 teens report suffering from a mental illness and many do not feel comfortable asking for help because of societal stigma; others simply may not have access to quality, affordable care.<sup>1</sup> Girls growing up in poverty have an increased risk of mental illness, as well as experiencing depression, anxiety, and poor self esteem.<sup>2</sup> Not addressing mental health issues can have dangerous consequences: suicide remains the third leading cause of death for youth between the ages of 10-24, and the rate of girls committing suicide has tripled in the past 15 years.<sup>3</sup>

## TRAUMA

Girls who experience trauma are at an even greater risk of being diagnosed with a mental illness. In a 2017 survey, girls who reported that they had been hurt or injured on purpose by a family member were overwhelmingly likely to report symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (92%), depression (96%), or generalized anxiety disorder (98%).<sup>4</sup> Normal coping behaviors in response to trauma can often be misunderstood and punished in school settings causing girls to be pushed out of school.<sup>5</sup> Girls who have experienced trauma are also at increased risk of involvement in the juvenile justice system.<sup>6</sup>

## MEDIA

Girls also face limiting and unrealistic representations of female bodies in the media that can impact their mental health and the way they view their bodies. Reports show that 69% of American elementary school girls who read magazines say pictures of women in magazines "influence their concept of the ideal body shape," and 47% say the pictures make them want to lose weight.<sup>7</sup> The negative effects that the media can have on girls' perspectives of their bodies and self-worth have a strong impact on their mental well-being.

## LGBTQ+ YOUTH

LGBTQ+ teens are also at a disproportionate risk of experiencing mental health issues. Girls who identify as LGBTQ+ are much more likely to report experiencing symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).<sup>8</sup> Child abuse is a large cause of this and accounts for 30-50% of the increased PTSD risk for those of LGBTQ+ status.<sup>9</sup> Providing LGBTQ+ teens with support is critical for their mental well-being.

## THE ROLE OF SCHOOLS

Schools can play an important role in connecting girls with the services they need, especially if school staff are trained to recognize the signs of trauma or other mental health concerns. However, there is a critical shortage of school counselors and many high school counselors report being overburdened by huge caseloads, especially at schools where a majority of children are first-generation Americans and low-income students. The American School Counselor Association recommends a student-to-counselor ratio of 250:1 but only three states meet that recommendation.<sup>10</sup> In far too many schools, security officers outnumber school counselors.<sup>11</sup>



## DID YOU KNOW?

- In 2015, suicide was the third leading cause of death among individuals between the ages of 10 and 14, and the second leading cause of death among individuals between the ages of 15 and 24.<sup>12</sup>
- In 2015 there were more than twice as many suicides (44,193) in the United States as there were homicides (17,793).<sup>13</sup>
- In each decade since 1930, there has been a rise in the incidence of anorexia among young women ages 15-19.<sup>14</sup>
- Almost 75% of girls in the juvenile justice system meet the criteria for at least one psychiatric disorder.<sup>15</sup>

## WHY IT MATTERS

Mental health has a huge impact on the lives of girls and young women and their ability to lead healthy, fulfilling, and meaningful lives. Despite the fact that mental health issues are treatable, girls may not receive the services they need if their schools do not know how to spot the warning signs and offer support to students who need help. Girls with unaddressed mental health problems may withdraw from classes or activities and lose access to critical development opportunities. Mental illness can also be isolating given the stigma that still surrounds seeking treatment or even admitting one suffers from a mental illness.

## WHAT CAN WE DO

- Advocate to protect Medicaid and funding for school-based health centers, counselors, social workers, and other programs that help low-income youth access mental health services.
- Combat prevalent stigmas surrounding mental health issues and treatment, including for depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and trauma.
- Promote diverse, empowering images of girls and women of all races, ethnicities, skin colors, sizes, body types, and abilities, and combat limiting depictions of women that contribute to mental health conditions and low self-esteem.
- Support trauma survivors' access to mental health resources in schools.
- Reform disciplinary practices to take into account and address the underlying causes of a student's behavior.
- Update juvenile justice laws so that all girls involved in the juvenile justice system are screened at intake for trauma so they can get the resources and support they need to heal.



## END NOTES

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