

## **Vanderbilt Child Health Poll: More parents report children diagnosed with anxiety in 2021 than previous years**

Roughly 1 in 7 parents in Tennessee said their children were diagnosed with anxiety in 2021, an increase from 1 in 10 parents in 2019, according to a new analysis of the annual Vanderbilt Child Health Poll. Tennessee parents are also more concerned that their children have undiagnosed stress or depression than in previous years.

The latest analysis by researchers in the Vanderbilt Center for Child Health Policy explores fall 2021 poll results of more than 1,000 Tennessee parents related to behavioral and mental health in their children, and examines trends over the last three years.

Sixteen percent of parents polled said their children have been diagnosed with anxiety, an increase from just over 10% in 2019. When broken down by race and region of Tennessee, more White parents (16%) said their children had been diagnosed with anxiety than Black parents (10%), and more parents in East Tennessee (17%) said their children had diagnosed anxiety than West (13%) and Middle Tennessee (15%).

In addition to diagnoses of anxiety, parents also reported that 15% of children were diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and 8% with depression.

“The ongoing transitions in the lives of families – precipitated by COVID-19 — produced stress, fear and unpredictability that weigh heavily on children and teens. The pandemic is taking an emotional toll on children. So, it is not surprising that parents are reporting concerns about their children’s mental health,” said Velma McBride Murry, PhD, University Professor of Peabody College, Department of Human & Organizational Development at Vanderbilt University and the Department of Health Policy at Vanderbilt University Medical Center, and member of the Vanderbilt Center for Child Health Policy.

More than 17% of parents polled said they were concerned their child had undiagnosed anxiety, up from roughly 14% in 2019 but down from 22% in 2020. Concerns about undiagnosed stress also showed noticeable increases, researchers said, rising from 10% to 16%.

“The pandemic has caused many disruptions in families’ lives - from parents who have lost jobs to the hospitalization of family members – causing major disruptions in vital support systems. The piling up of these events has taken an undue toll and caused major stress in countless families,” Murry said.

Murry said these disruptions can increase anxiety and stress among both parents and their kids, but policies that improve health, safety and access to support resources, especially in schools, can be important to maintaining proper balance.

Murry’s research has shown that schools can be an important source of support and information, and that school is often one place where children exhibit problem behaviors. Teachers are often the first people to identify and recommend support.

Murry recommends parents keep in close touch with teachers and other support people, like pediatricians or faith leaders, and seek support through resources like school counselors, stress management parenting classes, and other community-based resources.

“For many families, stigma about mental health is a major barrier to seeking assistance. Policy makers can bolster access to preventive interventions to reduce and eliminate barriers to seeking help, including encouraging parents to seek both clinical and non-clinical assistance,” Murry said. “No parent should feel burdened for seeking the help their child needs.”

The Child Health Poll is conducted annually each fall and surveys more than 1,000 parents across the state. It is constructed to provide a statistically representative survey of Tennessee parents.

More analyses will be shared over the next several weeks on key topics in the poll, including children’s insurance status, cyberbullying and other issues.

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