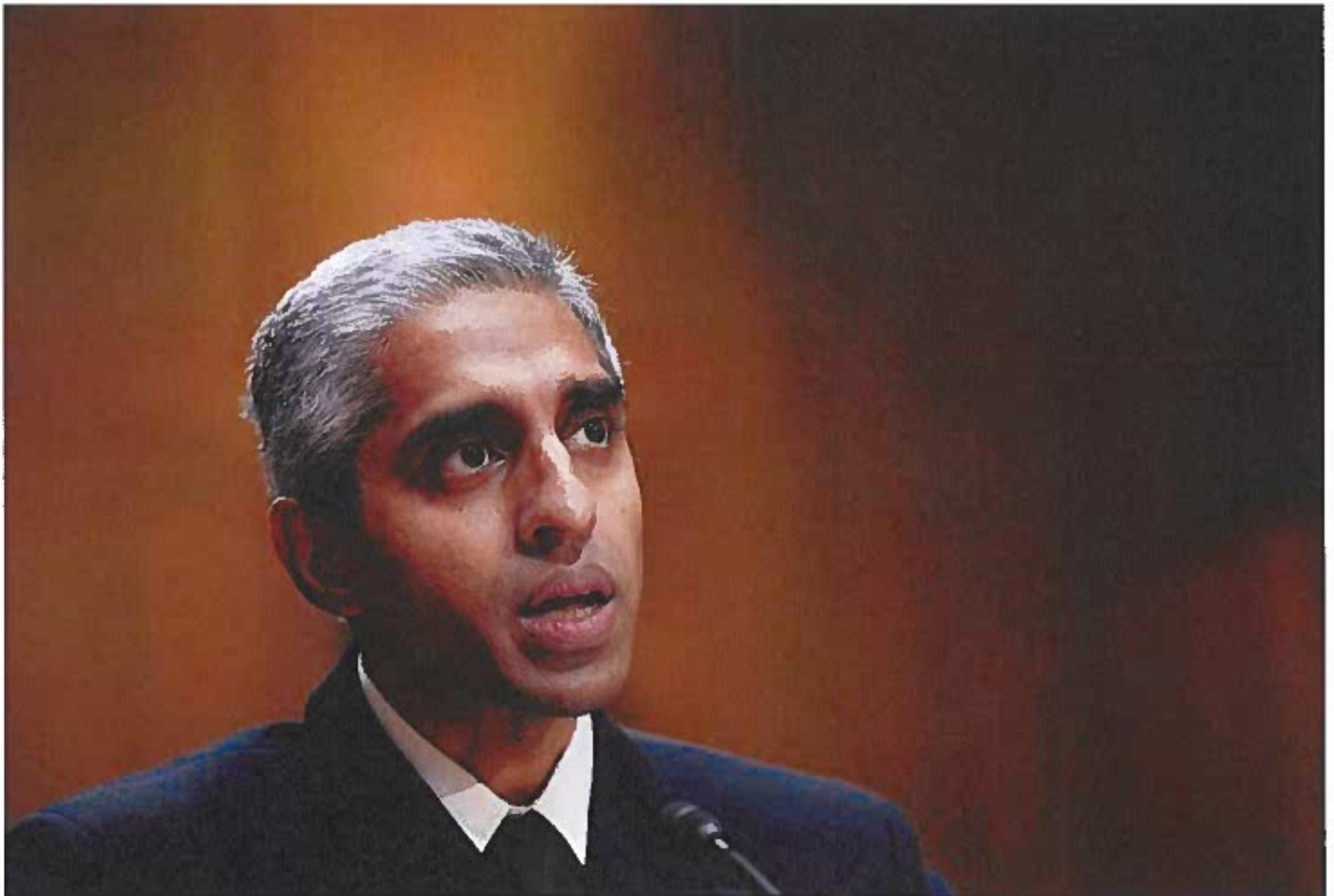


## STUDENT WELL-BEING

# Kids' Declining Mental Health Is the 'Crisis of Our Time,' Surgeon General Says



By [Caitlynn Peetz](#) — April 25, 2023 ⌚ 6 min read



Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy testifies before the Senate Finance Committee on Capitol Hill in Washington, on Feb. 8, 2022, on youth mental health care.

— Susan Walsh/AP

U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy called out social media as a driving force behind the surge in children's mental health challenges on Tuesday, and encouraged lawmakers to regulate how the platforms are marketed to and used by kids.

In a conversation with Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders livestreamed on Twitter, Murthy called the increase in youth mental health needs “the defining public health crisis of our time,” and

underscored that kids' mental health has taken a hit as they turn to social media more often and at younger ages. The increased use has led to more feelings of isolation, stress, and inadequacy as they constantly compare themselves to others, he said. It also keeps kids awake well into the night when they should be getting much-needed rest and makes it harder for young people to focus.

And, Murthy said, the companies that own the platforms aren't doing enough to address the damage they're causing.

The companies could—and should have long ago, Murthy said—develop safety features that would help protect children from exposure to harmful content, and limit how much time children spend on social media. He specifically mentioned the ability to “scroll infinitely” through posts, and the ability to access them at all times, regardless of age.

Asked by Sanders, chair of the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, if regulating social media standards should be a function of the government, Murthy said: “I don't think it's a need that has been met so far, so I think it is important for policymakers to step in here.”

“These platforms have been around for more than a decade, and we are still seeing, in my view, insufficient action when it comes to putting these kinds of safety standards in place,” Murthy said. He added that 13 years old—is “too young” for children to access many social media platforms as they are designed now.

“A lot of these platforms have been designed by some of the most talented players in the world to maximize the amount of time that kids spend on them, and then, frankly, that adults spend on them, too. ... That might be, from a business perspective, a reasonable model, but from a public health perspective that is not actually what we want because it's having a bad effect on our kids.”

## **School district lawsuits**

Neither Murthy nor Sanders named any specific social media companies during Tuesday's event. But Murthy's comments come on the heels of several school districts taking legal action against the owners of platforms including Twitter and Snapchat.

The Seattle school district filed a lawsuit in January against social media companies including Meta (which owns Facebook and Instagram), Snap (which owns Snapchat), Google (owner of YouTube) and Twitter, alleging the companies have designed addictive apps and marketed them to children. The result, according to the lawsuit, is a surge in mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation that school districts are forced to address by diverting funds from academics to hiring mental health professionals.

A Google spokesperson told Education Week earlier this month that the company has “invested heavily in creating safe experiences for children across our platforms and have introduced strong protections and dedicated features to prioritize their well being.”

At least nine additional school districts and municipalities in Arizona, California, New Jersey, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Washington state have filed similar lawsuits and that number could grow as at least five other school districts are considering whether to file their own lawsuits or join existing ones, according to an EdWeek analysis.

While it's unlikely the cases will be successful in court, experts say, because it's difficult—if not impossible—to pin kids' mental health challenges to one cause, they do underscore that schools are the ones tasked with addressing students' increasing mental health needs, regardless of the cause.

And the needs, undoubtedly, are on the rise.

The most recent results of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Youth Risk Behavior Survey showed an alarming increase of self-reported mental health challenges, most notably among girls and children who identify as LGBTQ+. The survey was conducted in 2021, when many schools were still in remote or hybrid learning, but illustrates how sharply children's mental health needs have increased in recent years.

In 2021, for example, 42 percent of high school students said they experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness during the past year, according to the report. This was a 13.5 percent increase from 2019 and a 50 percent increase from 2011.

Nearly one in five high school students had seriously considered attempting suicide during the previous year, while 18 percent made a suicide plan, and 10 percent attempted suicide.

The CDC's report does not explore what is driving the increased challenges. The rates were higher among girls and students who identify as LGBTQ+.

Murthy highlighted each of these data in Tuesday night's discussion with Sanders, saying that the "fire" that is the youth mental health crisis was "burning prior to the pandemic" but COVID-19 "poured fuel on the fire."

The effects of the pandemic and the strain of social media, paired with increased exposure to trauma, particularly gun violence—the leading cause of death for children—are incredibly challenging for kids to process, Murthy and Sanders said.

The pandemic, especially, has presented unique challenges. Hundreds of thousands of children experienced the death of a parent or primary caregiver to COVID-19, and millions more felt worried or anxious that someone they care about could die. That stress can have lasting impacts.

"The worry is enormous," Murthy said.

## Increased focus on youth mental health

Murthy first sounded the alarm about youth mental health in December 2021, issuing a public health advisory calling for "an all-of-society effort, including policy, institutional, and individual changes in how we view and prioritize mental health."

In the months and years to follow, attention has stayed focused on the youth mental health crisis, and President Joe Biden has made improving youth mental health a priority in recent months.

He said during his annual State of the Union address in February that the rising rates of anxiety and depression among children should be a top concern for the country. That followed an announcement that the U.S. Department of Education will develop a \$280 million grant program to help schools hire more mental health counselors.

While the statistics are daunting and it can feel as if the problems children are facing are insurmountable, Murthy said, it's important for parents to familiarize themselves with 988, the suicide prevention and crisis intervention hotline established by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

But the most important thing parents can do is to simply remind their children that they're ready to listen.

“The most important thing that you can do for your child during turbulence is to make sure that they know you love them and that they can talk to you,” he said. “For them just to know it’s OK for them to talk to you, it’s not something to be ashamed of, and there are people they can go to for help ... can go a long way to helping a child feel that they’re not alone.”



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