

Adolescent Mental Health Crisis: Current Situation, Challenges and Solutions

Keqing Chen

Guangdong Country Garden School, Guangzhou, 510000, China;

Abstract:

This paper explores the mental health issues faced by 10-19-year-olds globally, which remain primarily under-recognized and under-treated. Although depression and anxiety in adolescents cannot be solved quickly, long-term improvements can be achieved. Long-term solutions to the adolescent mental health crisis need to include intergenerational shifts, social reform, medical advances, and public health engagement. The article analyzes the impact of family dynamics, social pressures, technological influences, and external crises on adolescent mental health. It makes policy recommendations, including raising awareness of depression and anxiety symptoms among guardians, establishing robust mental health services, training professional health care providers, and enforcing stricter regulation of cyberspace. And encourage young people to reduce stress through sports, hobbies and social activities. Overall, the paper argues for a policy framework that combines administrative and emotional care to protect young people’s mental health and enable them to reach their full potential.

Keywords: Adolescent mental health; Long-term solutions; Social pressure; Family dynamics; Depression; Anxiety.

1. Introduction

Globally, 1 in 7 (14%) of 10–19-year-olds experience mental health conditions, yet these issues remain largely unrecognized and untreated.^[1] Depression, anxiety, and behavioural disorders are leading causes of illness and disability among adolescents. In 2012, 11.6% of kids had anxiety, a 20% increase from 2007. During the pandemic, this number nearly doubled, with 20.5% of youth worldwide now struggling with anxiety symptoms.^[2] Figure 1 shows an increasing trend of depressive symptoms among

teenagers in the United States. The data indicates that depression and anxiety are becoming widespread among teenagers, posing a significant threat to their cognitive and social development, self-esteem, and overall well-being. These conditions increase the risk of substance abuse, self-harm, and suicidal behaviour,^[3] thereby threatening social stability and peace.^[4] Regarding this unprecedented epidemic of depression and anxiety among young people, can we fix it? How? This essay explores these questions by examining teenage mental health problems from various perspectives.

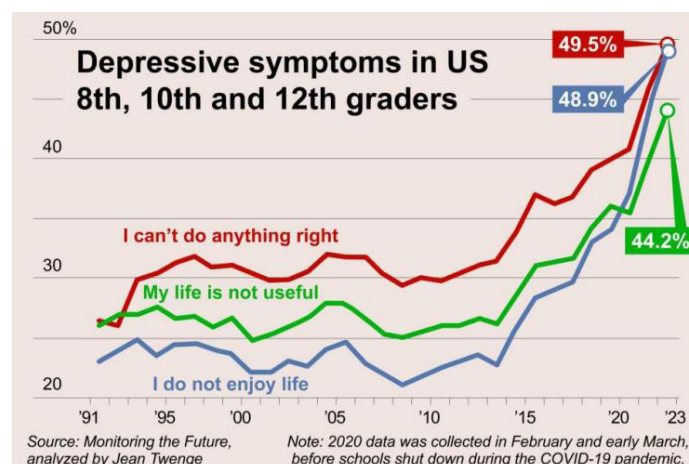


Figure 1. Depressive symptoms in US 8th, 10th and 12th graders^[5]

This essay argues that the adolescent mental health crisis requires long-term solutions, including generational shifts, social reforms, medical advancements, and public health involvement. It highlights the ever-increasing levels of teenage mental illness with global data and examines four key factors: family, society, technology, and crises. The paper provides a comprehensive overview of youth depression and offers practical policy recommendations to address this global challenge.

2. Analysis

2.1 Current situation and trend of adolescent mental health problems

Teenage depression and anxiety have dramatically increased worldwide. A 2021 study found that adolescent depression rates nearly doubled over ten years, rising from 9% to 16%.^[6] In the ten years leading up to the pandemic, feelings of persistent sadness and hopelessness—as well as suicidal thoughts and behaviours—increased by about 40% among young people.^[7] Mainly girls, LGBTQ+ youth, and people who had experienced racism were more likely to have poor mental health during the pandemic.^[8] Nowadays, two new trends in teenage mental health problems have emerged. On one hand, gender serves as a measured factor. Specifically, female teenagers report higher rates of sexual violence and worsening mental health.^[9] Moreover, Depression risk is highest among gender minorities.^[10] Pansexual students face 33% greater odds of having multiple suicide risk factors compared to bisexual students, likely due to stigma, prejudice, and

internet bullying.^[11] On the other hand, racial and ethnic background is a critical factor. Teens aged 12 to 17 identifying as more than one race report the highest rates of severe depressive episodes, with a prevalence of 27.2%.^[12] While they are defined as minority groups, anyone can be considered a “minority” from a particular perspective, so the psychological suffering they experience should not be overlooked.

The impact of the issue mentioned above is devastating for both individuals and society in the long term. First, teen depression causes persistent sadness, anger, irritability, low self-esteem, and suicidal thoughts^[13], as shown in Figure 2. Precisely, suicide is the second-leading cause of death for teens and young adults aged 10-34,^[14] with 10% of high school students attempting suicide annually.^[15] Second, anxiety and depression significantly impact school performance, with nearly 40% of undergraduates considering dropping out between September 2022 and March 2023.^[16] Third, depression is the single most significant contributor to worldwide instability.^[17] A study of young offenders found high rates of anxiety (33%), substance use disorders (76%), ADHD (14%), and depression/PTSD (12%).^[18] Last, the rising prevalence of these conditions strains health services and reduces productivity. Globally, lost productivity due to mental illness costs \$1 trillion annually and is projected to reach \$16 trillion by 2030.^[19] The hazards above increase the urgency of addressing youth mental health issues, necessitating detailed analysis and research of its inducements.

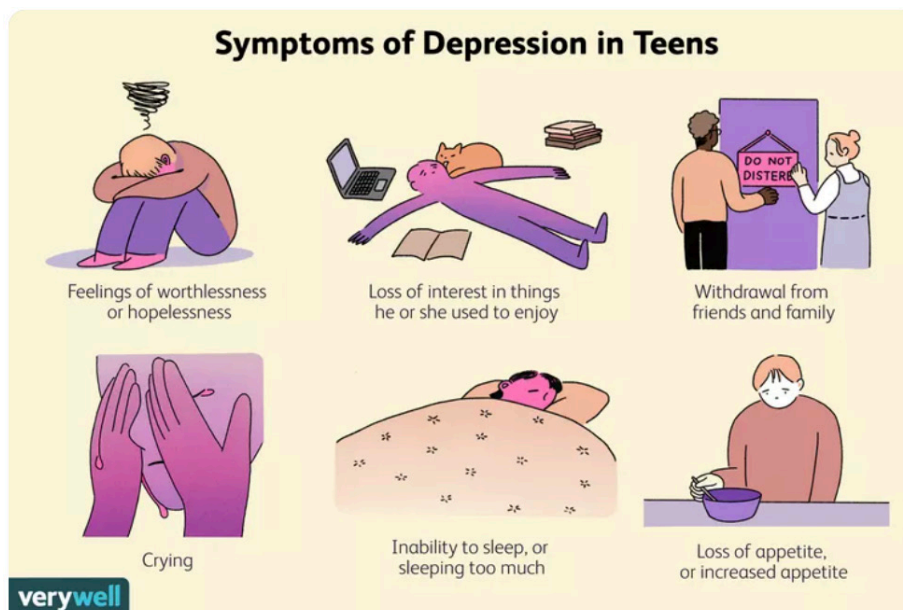


Figure 2. Symptoms of depression in teens^[20]

2.2 Four key factors affecting adolescent mental health

Based on the above, this article argues that family, society, technology, and accidental crises are the four key factors affecting teenagers' mental health.

Firstly, the misunderstanding and mistreatment by the older generation worsen the problem. Parents often struggle to understand teenagers' choices, views, and lifestyles, which differ from their upbringing. About 89% of children with depressive disorders experience some form of family disruption, and 71% reported having a sibling or parent with a mental illness.^[21] Moreover, high parental expectations contribute to stress, anxiety, and depression, accounting for up to 15% of mental health problems.^[22] Another issue is parents delaying medical treatment, believing symptoms will resolve independently, or refusing to acknowledge the possibility of mental illness.^[23] A youngster or teen who receives unhelpful advice from parents may feel alone and lose faith in the family, resulting in more profound symptoms of depression and anxiety.^[24] Therefore, absent family support is an essential cause of mental illness in minors.

Secondly, teenagers face pressures from global competition and the pursuit of resources. Technology advancement is developing, and so is our population. In the first place, as the global population grows, rivalry for top resources intensifies, raising achievement standards.^[25] Anxious attachment and social class characteristics were substantially correlated with attempts to avoid feeling inferior, motivating individuals to pretend superiority, there-

by strengthening stress and depression.^[26] Furthermore, educational performance also generates pressure. Today, rank-focused academic evaluation for students increases anxiety by 70% and depression by 40%.^[27] In 2024, over 13.4 million students registered for the Gaokao (College Entrance Exam) in China, showcasing its intense competitiveness^[28] and its correlation with high rates of depression, as reported.^[29] Similarly, aspirations for better jobs or relationships also contribute to these pressures, demonstrating a global trend of heightened competition and its impact on mental health.

Thirdly, excessive social media use has been proven to have a significant negative impact on youth's mental health. Figure 3 demonstrates an increasing time spent on social media in the US. Research on American teenagers aged 12 to 15 found that those who spend more than 3 hours per day on social media are twice as likely to experience mental health issues such as anxiety and depression.^[30] Additionally, the pressure to maintain an idealized image on social media contributes to problems like eating disorders and body dissatisfaction, particularly among adolescent girls.^[31] For example, a study demonstrated that individuals with a higher frequency of Facebook usage also had lower trait self-esteem.^[32] Undeniably, the challenge posed by excessive social media use is exacerbated by its growing popularity. Research shows a 7% increase in overall screen time among teens from 2019 to 2021, highlighting the pervasive influence of social media on adolescents' lives,^[33] posing a lasting challenge to contemporary mental conditions.

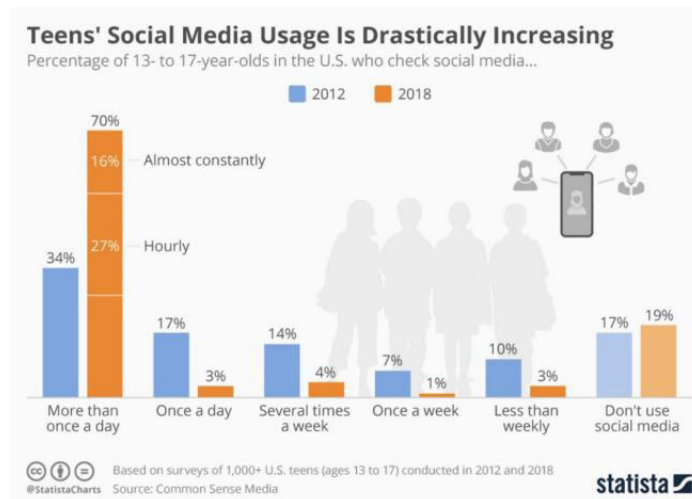


Figure 3. US 13-17 years old social media usage trend from 2012 to 2018^[34]

Fourthly, represented by global health emergencies, accidental crises can also contribute to increasing depression and anxiety among the young generation. For example, it is reported that 21% of people had extreme loneliness

during COVID-19, which increased from 6% in the pre-pandemic era.^[35] Additionally, the World Health Organization (WHO) estimated that COVID-19 has directly or indirectly led to an additional 53.2 million cases of

depression and 76.2 million cases of anxiety globally.^[36] During the lockdown, many teenagers missed out on significant events like prom, graduation, and school dances, leading to expanded anxiety and despair among those with reduced in-person interactions with friends and family.^[37] These statistics display how societal crises can influence the increase of anxiety and depression among adolescents.

2.3 Solutions to challenges

Despite the contemporary challenges mentioned earlier, addressing depression and anxiety issues is possible in the long term.

To begin with, generational shifts could minimize the misinterpretation of depression and anxiety, encouraging adolescents to be open with families about their mental conditions. It is evidenced that people are becoming more inclusive and are more inclined to seek scientific therapy and be open-hearted with medical professionals about common mental illnesses like anxiety and sadness.^[38] For example, from 2011 to 2020, there was a decrease in feelings of uneasiness, anger, and ignorance towards mental

illnesses.^[39] Undeniably, a scientific public perception can effectively reduce the isolation of youth who are suffering from mental issues and objectively accelerate the intervention of medical treatment.^[40] Therefore, over time, a more inclusive and empathetic societal approach toward mental disorders can create a supportive environment for young individuals seeking help, thereby promoting their recovery.

Additionally, social and competitive pressures are expected to ease with the projected decline in global population growth gradually. Figure 4 implies a decreasing global fertility. By 2100, the global childbearing rate may lower to 1.66 children per woman from the current 2.3; by 2300, the world population could reduce significantly to around 2.3 billion people.^[41] Moreover, as procreation rates decline, the average age of the population increases, resulting in a shrinking youth population in the future.^[42] Ultimately, it leads to enhanced opportunities for youth development and better meeting individual needs, thereby reducing stress and competition over resources.^[43]

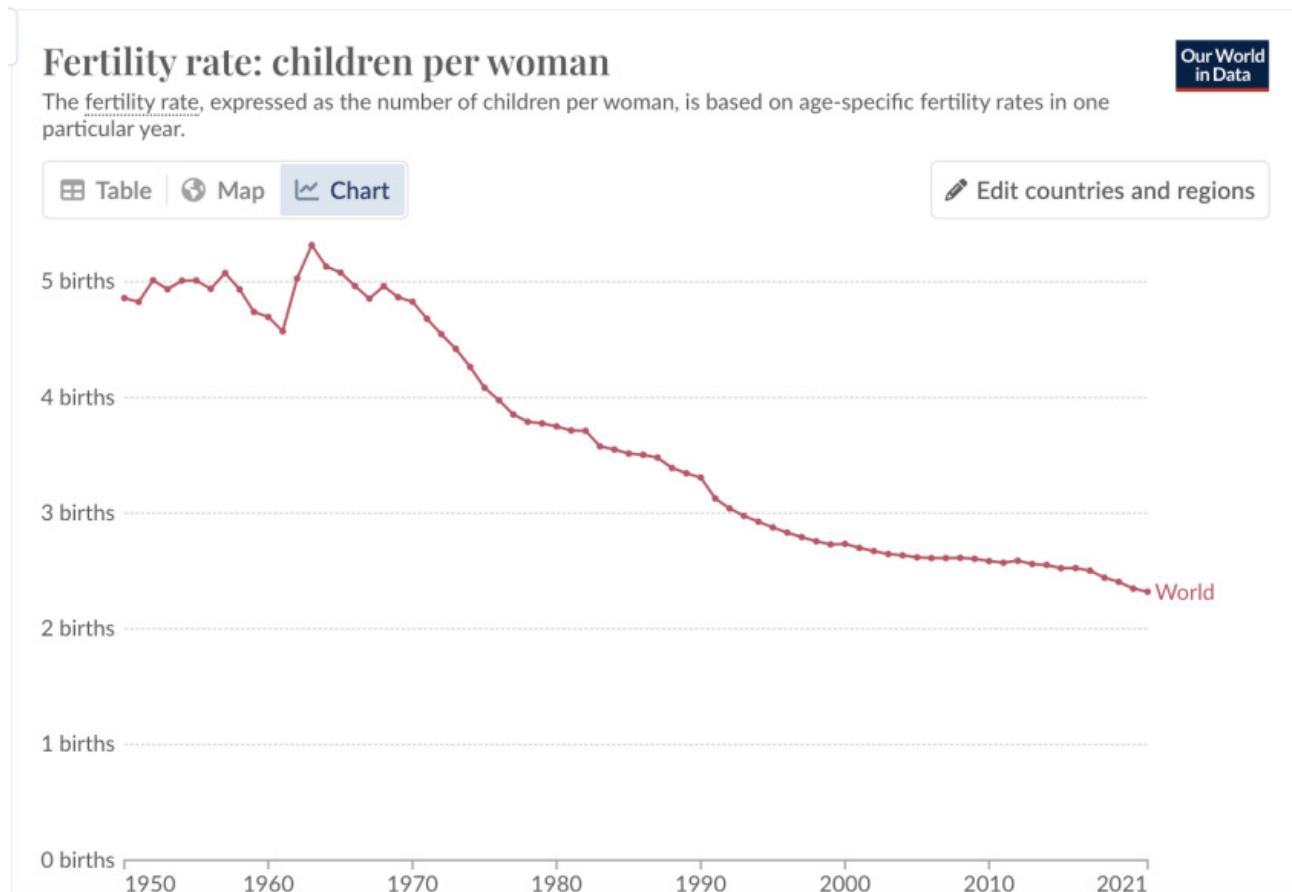


Figure 4. Fertility rate decreasing trend from 1950 to 2021^[44]

Furthermore, future technological advancements hold promise for rapidly addressing depression and anxiety.

Nowadays, technologies like smartphones and tablets have created new opportunities for mental health services,

providing the public, medical professionals, and academics with new options to receive care, track progress, and deepen their understanding of mental health, boosting a simple but powerful way to support mental health.^[45] For instance, the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline provides continuous support via calls, texts, and chats accessible from any phone or computer.^[46] Some apps facilitate communication between users and peer counsellors or healthcare providers.^[47] Notably, Artificial Intelligence (AI) is revolutionizing mental health diagnostics by moving beyond essential pattern recognition^[48], and virtual reality (VR) tools can effectively treat anxiety, phobias, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and other mental problems.^[49] In conclusion, ongoing advancements in technology offer reliable solutions for addressing depression and anxiety more effectively in the near future.

Finally, the negative impacts of accidental crises are expected to decrease gradually with improvements in public health response systems. Indisputably, COVID-19 has raised global consensus to improve the international health response mechanism through increasing investments, robusting infrastructure, and establishing transnational collaborative platforms. In the US, substantial funding—approximately \$7.1 billion—has been allocated between fiscal years 2021 and 2023 to strengthen public health infrastructure in preparation for future crises.^[50] Similarly, European countries have accelerated the adoption of digital health technologies, focusing on health data analysis and the implementation of extensive data-driven systems.^[51] In China, there is a growing awareness of intelligent healthcare following the pandemic.^[52] Consequently, thanks to an improving and multi-dimensional international public health system, the young generation will suffer less from depression and anxiety generated by global emergencies.

3. Conclusion and Policy Implication

This article argues that while youth depression and anxiety cannot be quickly resolved, long-term improvements are achievable. Today, teens face mental health challenges influenced by family dynamics, social stress, technological influences, and external crises. Parental misunderstanding, competitive pressures, social media use, and pandemics significantly contribute to rising mental health disorders among young people. However, generational shifts, declining populations, technological advancements, and better public health systems offer hope for reducing youth depression and anxiety in the future. Based on the above, this article suggests policy implications to accelerate these improvements:

Primarily, it is crucial to raise guardians' awareness of de-

pression and anxiety symptoms, such as anxious distress, melancholic features, increased appetite, excessive sleep, sensitivity to rejection, and a heavy feeling in limbs.^[53]

Furthermore, a robust mental health service system, including school-based and community-based support, is essential for adolescents.^[54] Moreover, Well-trained health service professionals are also needed. Additionally, stricter supervision of cyberspace can protect young people from harmful content that promotes violence, suicide, or insecurity.^[55] Lastly, encouraging youth to relieve stress through physical activity, hobbies, and spending time with friends and family can enhance their well-being.^[56] Overall, by adopting a policy framework that combines administrative and emotional care, people can build a future that protects the spiritual health of young people and enables them to reach their full potential.

References

- [1] Mental health of adolescents. (n.d.). Retrieved May 28, 2024, from [www.who.int website: https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/adolescent-mental-health/?gad_source=1&gclid=EAIaIQobChMIqKv6riwhgMVBCytBh107AmoEAAYASAEGiUsPD_BwE](https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/adolescent-mental-health/?gad_source=1&gclid=EAIaIQobChMIqKv6riwhgMVBCytBh107AmoEAAYASAEGiUsPD_BwE)
- [2] Benton, Tami D., Rhonda C. Boyd, and Wanjikū FM Njoroge. "Addressing the global crisis of child and adolescent mental health." *JAMA pediatrics* 175.11 (2021): 1108-1110.
- [3] Jaycox, Lisa H., et al. "Impact of teen depression on academic, social, and physical functioning." *Pediatrics* 124.4 (2009): e596-e605.
- [4] Fombonne, Eric, et al. "The Maudsley long-term follow-up of child and adolescent depression: 2. Suicidality, criminality and social dysfunction in adulthood." *The British Journal of Psychiatry* 179.3 (2001): 218-223.
- [5] Schlott, Rikki. "Number of Teens Who "Don't Enjoy Life" Has Doubled with Social Media." *New York Post*, 20 June 2023, nypost.com/2023/06/19/number-of-teens-who-dont-enjoy-life-has-doubled-with-social-media/.
- [6] UCL. "Substance Use and Depression More Closely Linked for Generation Z Teens." *IOE - Faculty of Education and Society*, 23 Apr. 2021, www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/news/2021/apr/substance-use-and-depression-more-closely-linked-generation-z-teens.
- [7] CDC. "Youth risk behavior surveillance system (YRBSS)." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)* (2016).
- [8] Abrams, Z. "Kids' mental health is in crisis. Here's what psychologists are doing to help." *American Psychological Association* (2023).
- [9] Abrams, Z. "Kids' mental health is in crisis. Here's what psychologists are doing to help." *American Psychological Association* (2023).
- [10] Horwitz, Adam G., et al. "Variation in suicide risk among subgroups of sexual and gender minority college students."

- Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior 50.5 (2020): 1041-1053.
- [11] Abrams, Z. "Kids' mental health is in crisis. Here's what psychologists are doing to help." American Psychological Association (2023).
- [12] "NIMH» Major Depression." www.nimh.nih.gov, www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/major-depression#part_2566.
- [13] Mayo Clinic. "Teen Depression - Symptoms and Causes." Mayo Clinic, 12 Aug. 2022, www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/teen-depression/symptoms-causes/syc-20350985.
- [14] Curtin, Sally. Vital Statistics Rapid Release Provisional Numbers and Rates of Suicide by Month and Demographic Characteristics: United States, 2021. 2022.
- [15] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Youth Risk Behavior Survey." 2021.
- [16] Hagan, Ekua. "Depression and School Drop-out Rates | Psychology Today." www.psychologytoday.com, 1 Aug. 2020, www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/two-takes-on-depression/202008/depression-and-school-drop-out-rates.
- [17] World Health Organisation. "Depression." www.who.int, 2024, www.who.int/india/health-topics/depression.
- [18] Chodavadia, Parth, et al. "Prevalence and economic burden of depression and anxiety symptoms among Singaporean adults: results from a 2022 web panel." *BMC psychiatry* 23.1 (2023): 104.
- [19] Chodavadia, Parth, et al. "Prevalence and economic burden of depression and anxiety symptoms among Singaporean adults: results from a 2022 web panel." *BMC psychiatry* 23.1 (2023): 104.
- [20] Poncelet, Barbara. "Facts, Symptoms, and Causes of Teen Depression." *Verywell Mind*, 2019, www.verywellmind.com/teen-depression-3200844.
- [21] Behere, Aniruddh Prakash, Pravesh Basnet, and Pamela Campbell. "Effects of family structure on mental health of children: A preliminary study." *Indian journal of psychological medicine* 39.4 (2017): 457-463.
- [22] "How Do High Parental Expectations Impact the Mental Health of BVANHS Students? | 5 Answers from Research Papers." *SciSpace - Question*, typeset.io/questions/how-do-high-parental-expectations-impact-the-mental-health-ft9w83sb4b. Accessed 17 June 2024.
- [23] "Parent Views on Addressing Mental Health Concerns in Adolescents." *National Poll on Children's Health*, 21 Mar. 2022, mottpoll.org/reports/parent-views-addressing-mental-health-concerns-adolescents.
- [24] Bhat, Jyothsna. "When Parents Deny Their Kids' Mental Health Struggles | Psychology Today." www.psychologytoday.com, 26 May 2022, www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-psychology-the-south-asian-diaspora/202205/when-parents-deny-their-kids-mental-health.
- [25] Helmbrecht, Jordan. "We Live in a Society That Is Constantly Becoming More and More Competitive." *The Central Trend*, 22 Nov. 2019, thecentraltrend.com/76590/uncategorized/we-live-in-a-society-that-is-constantly-becoming-more-and-more-competitive/.
- [26] Gilbert, Paul et al. "The dark side of competition: How competitive behaviour and striving to avoid inferiority are linked to depression, anxiety, stress and self-harm." *Psychology and psychotherapy* vol. 82,Pt 2 (2009): 123-36. doi:10.1348/147608308X379806
- [27] Posselt, Julie R., and Sarah Ketchen Lipson. "Competition, anxiety, and depression in the college classroom: Variations by student identity and field of study." *Journal of College Student Development* 57.8 (2016): 973-989.
- [28] Gan, Nectar. "Record 13 Million to Sit "World's Toughest" College Entrance Exam." *CNN*, 7 June 2024, edition.cnn.com/2024/06/07/china/china-gaokao-2024-record-number-intl-hnk/index.html. Accessed 17 June 2024.
- [29] Zhang, Xiaozhi, et al. "Descriptive analysis of depression among adolescents in Huangshi, China." *BMC psychiatry* 23.1 (2023): 176.
- [30] Katella, Kathy. "How Social Media Affects Your Teen's Mental Health: A Parent's Guide." *Yale Medicine*, 8 Jan. 2024, www.yalemedicine.org/news/social-media-teen-mental-health-a-parents-guide.
- [31] Choukas-Bradley, Sophia, et al. "The perfect storm: A developmental–sociocultural framework for the role of social media in adolescent girls' body image concerns and mental health." *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review* 25.4 (2022): 681-701.
- [32] Vogel, Erin A., et al. "Social comparison, social media, and self-esteem." *Psychology of popular media culture* 3.4 (2014): 206.
- [33] Moyer, Melinda Wenner. "Kids as Young as 8 Are Using Social Media More than Ever, Study Finds." *The New York Times*, 24 Mar. 2022, www.nytimes.com/2022/03/24/well/family/child-social-media-use.html.
- [34] Richter, Felix. "Infographic: Teens' Social Media Usage Is Drastically Increasing." *Statista Infographics*, Statista, 9 Oct. 2018, www.statista.com/chart/15720/frequency-of-teenagers-social-media-use/.
- [35] O'sullivan, Roger, et al. "Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on loneliness and social isolation: A multi-country study." *International journal of environmental research and public health* 18.19 (2021): 9982.
- [36] Kämpfen, Fabrice, et al. "Predictors of mental health during the Covid-19 pandemic in the US: Role of economic concerns, health worries and social distancing." *PloS one* 15.11 (2020): e0241895.
- [37] University, Utah State. "Impact of Covid-19 on Teen Anxiety and Depression." *Extension.usu.edu*, 1 Sept. 2022, extension.usu.edu/mentalhealth/articles/impact-of-covid-19-on-teen-anxiety-and-depression.
- [38] Venters, Nick. "The Past, Present and Future of Innovation in Mental Health." *NHS Digital*, 2018, digital.nhs.uk/blog/

transformation-blog/2018/the-past-present-and-future-of-innovation-in-mental-health.

[39] Schomerus, Georg, et al. "Changes in mental illness stigma over 30 years—Improvement, persistence, or deterioration?." *European Psychiatry* 65.1 (2022): e78.

[40] Why Mental Health Awareness Is so Important | Shawmind. 29 July 2022, shawmind.org/why-mental-health-awareness-is-so-important/.

[41] Liljenberg, August. "A World without Youth." *Farsight*, 28 Apr. 2023, farsight.cifs.dk/a-world-without-youth/. Accessed 19 June 2024.

[42] "How Will We Cope When There Are Too Few Young People in the World?" *Brookings*, www.brookings.edu/articles/how-will-we-cope-when-there-are-too-few-young-people-in-the-world/.

[43] Nater, Olivia. "World Population Day: Five Reasons to Stop Panicking over Low Birth Rates." *Population Connection*, 7 July 2023, populationconnection.org/blog/world-population-day-five-reasons-to-stop-panicking-over-low-birth-rates/.

[44] Roser, Max. "Fertility Rate." *Our World in Data*, 2014, ourworldindata.org/fertility-rate.

[45] National Institute of Mental Health. "Technology and the Future of Mental Health Treatment." *Www.nimh.nih.gov*, 2019, www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/technology-and-the-future-of-mental-health-treatment.

[46] 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. "988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline." *988lifeline.org*, 2022, 988lifeline.org/.

[47] Foley, Gillian, and Rosemary Ricciardelli. "Views on the Functionality and Use of the PeerConnect App Among Public Safety Personnel: Qualitative Analysis." *JMIR Formative Research* 7 (2023): e46968.

[48] Raizada, Astha. "Top 5 Mental Health Tech and Innovations

in 2024." *Copper Digital*, 5 Mar. 2024, copperdigital.com/blog/top-5-mental-health-tech-and-innovations-in-2024/.

[49] Raizada, Astha. "Top 5 Mental Health Tech and Innovations in 2024." *Copper Digital*, 5 Mar. 2024, copperdigital.com/blog/top-5-mental-health-tech-and-innovations-in-2024/.

[50] Office, U. S. Government Accountability. "Public Health Preparedness: Building and Maintaining Infrastructure beyond the COVID-19 Pandemic | U.S. GAO." *Www.gao.gov*, 7 Nov. 2023, www.gao.gov/products/gao-24-105891.

[51] Negreiro, Mar . "The Rise of Digital Health Technologies during the Pandemic." 2021.

[52] Wu, Qi, Beian Chen, and Jianping Zhu. "Insights from COVID-19: reflecting on the promotion of long-term health policies in China." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 20.4 (2023): 2889.

[53] Mayo Clinic. "Teen Depression - Diagnosis and Treatment - Mayo Clinic." *Mayoclinic.org*, 12 Aug. 2022, www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/teen-depression/diagnosis-treatment/drc-20350991 .

[54] Mayo Clinic. "Antidepressants for Children and Teens." *Mayo Clinic*, 19 Mar. 2022, www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/teen-depression/in-depth/antidepressants/art-20047502.

[55] American Psychological association. "Health Advisory on Social Media Use in Adolescence." *Apa.org*, American Psychological Association, May 2023, www.apa.org/topics/social-media-internet/health-advisory-adolescent-social-media-use.

[56] Robinson, Lawrence, and Melinda Smith. "Social Media and Mental Health." *HelpGuide.org*, *HelpGuide.org*, 5 Feb. 2024, www.helpguide.org/articles/mental-health/social-media-and-mental-health.htm.