

Special Report on Student Mental Health

Pennsylvania
Office of Attorney General



SAFE  **SAY**
SOMETHING

The Pennsylvania General Assembly established the Office of Attorney General's Safe2Say Something reporting system as a way to mitigate school-based violence and school shootings. The program is one of the largest of its kind in the nation and has given students a platform to have their voices heard.

The Safe2Say Something program has supported critical interventions that have prevented violence in our schools and saved lives. Unexpectedly, a large number of tips the office has received since the launch of the Safe2Say Something program involve concerns that stem from, or relate to, mental health and bullying. **72.9% of the more than 80,000 Safe2Say comments have focused on instances of bullying, suicide and self harm, mental illness, or discrimination and harassment.**

Understanding there is an acute need to improve students' mental health, and schools are one of the best places to provide support before mental health problems escalate, the Office of Attorney General has called for increasing the number of mental health counselors in schools every year since the Safe2Say Something program launched in 2019.



MOBILE APP



1-844-SAF2SAY



SAFE2SAYPA.ORG



What our children and teens are saying

Audited Safe2Say data also shows a notable increase in comments regarding what are considered “Life Safety” matters, where the immediate physical well-being and safety of a student may be at risk. Data in the **2020-2021** school year shows that **20.3%** of all Safe2Say comments were designated “Life Safety” matters - an increase from **15.7%** in the **2019-2020** school year.

Of comments related to mental health that were received by Safe2Say - the top categories in 2020-2021 school year were:

- Bullying and cyberbullying (32%)
- Suicidal thoughts (30%)
- Cutting and self harm (20%)
- Depression and anxiety (12%)
- Anger issues (2%)



80,352
tips submitted
via Safe2Say Something
since 2019

72.9% of tips
are related to
mental health,
bullying, or
harassment



Life Safety Matters: **20.3%**
in 2020-2021
school year

Top Categories:



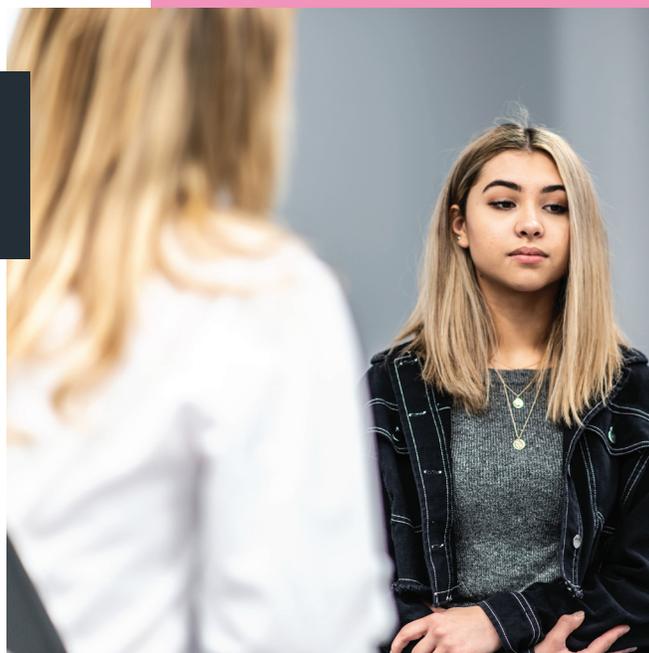
**Bullying/Cyberbullying,
Cutting/Self Harm,
Suicide/Suicidal Ideation,
Anger Issues, and
Depression/Anxiety**

This is unique data, driven solely by students, and it is supported by extensive research that shows there is a mental health crisis affecting Pennsylvania children and teens. Both national and Pennsylvania-specific studies of student health make clear that mental health challenges are a significant issue that both parents and teachers need help addressing.

Mental Health of Pennsylvania Students:

Mental health continues to be an area of serious concern for young Pennsylvanians.

According to the most recent 2019 Pennsylvania Youth Survey (PAYS), a survey sponsored and conducted by the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency, **74.0%** of students reported feeling moderate or high symptoms of depression, **14.4%** of students reported self-harm, **19.9%** of 12th graders and **18.9%** of 10th graders reported considering suicide. In instances where students reported bullying through texting and social media, the number of students seriously considering suicide grew to 39.5%.¹



Research also supports a strong link between regular social media use in teens and poor mental health.² In March 2022, the Office of Attorney General launched a bipartisan multistate investigation into TikTok for promoting its platform despite knowing that it may harm young users. In 2021, the office launched an investigation into the impact of Instagram on Pennsylvania youth and called on its parent company Meta to clearly state how a proposed Instagram for kids would be in compliance with federal law and would meet best practice standards for privacy and online safety.

Recent data strongly suggests that social isolation and difficulties accessing mental health services during the COVID-19 pandemic have had additional negative effects on the mental health of young people. What was once a new challenge facing families and parents has turned into a crisis with broad repercussions. A June 2021 study from the CDC notes that mental health-related emergency room visits increased by 31% from 2020-2021, and the total number of suicide attempts for adolescent girls rose by 51% from February to March 2020.³ According to recent CDC data, 44% of high school students reported feeling persistently sad or hopeless in the past year.⁴

¹<https://www.pccd.pa.gov/Juvenile-Justice/Documents/2019%20PAYS/PAYS%202019%20State%20Report%20Full%20Detailed%20Version.pdf>

²<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7364393/>

³<https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/mm7024e1.htm>

⁴<https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2022/p0331-youth-mental-health-covid-19.html>





Help Parents and Teachers by Increasing the Number of Mental Health Counselors Available to Students:

Clearly, too many of Pennsylvania's children and teens' mental health needs are being underserved. Parents and teachers don't always have the skills, resources or time to address these needs. Neighborhood schools are uniquely positioned to address this crisis. Furthermore, longstanding data trends show that the presence of a school counselor reduces instances of disciplinary action, increases academic performance, and improves attendance.⁵

The American Academy of Pediatrics reports that 1 in 6 students may experience a diagnosable mental health disorder.⁶ While the National Association of School

Psychologists recommends a ratio of one school psychologist for every 500 students, in Pennsylvania, there is one school psychologist for every 1078 students.⁷ Closing this gap is one of the best ways we can help improve the health and safety of every child.

In order to respond to the ongoing mental health needs of Pennsylvania's young people, the Commonwealth should establish sustained, broad support to place mental health counselors in every Pennsylvania school, with a focus on early intervention and preventive care. Hiring more counselors to serve our children will provide needed support for students and improve both school safety and educational outcomes.

⁵<https://www.schoolcounselor.org/getmedia/7d00dcff-40a6-4316-ab6c-8f3ffd7941c2/Effectiveness.pdf>

⁶https://downloads.aap.org/dochw/dshp/Supporting_Mental_Health_in_Schools_Final_Report-June_2021.pdf

⁷https://www.legis.state.pa.us/WU01/LI/TR/Transcripts/2021_0130_0001_TSTMNY.pdf

Conclusion:

Thanks to data from Safe2Say Something, the voice of Pennsylvania's youngest generation can be heard loud and clear and backed up with data – now we need to act.

Our children face increased pressure on their mental health that previous generations have not experienced, from youth gun violence to bullying and isolation on social media. Parents need help to guide their children through these challenges, and our teachers are not able to meet these demands themselves.

Expanding support for mental health in our schools will ultimately keep more students safe and help our youngest generation respond to many of the challenges they face today in a safe and healthy way.



Pennsylvania Attorney General Josh Shapiro

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