

UNDERSTANDING BOYS' MENTAL HEALTH



WISCONSIN OFFICE OF CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH

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WHY THIS MATTERS

Much attention is paid to the youth mental health crisis but less focus has been given to the status of half that population: boys and young adult men. There are long-standing societal pressures for boys not to be expressive, not to share their feelings; along with pressure to dismiss their emotions, and refrain from discussing mental health. Each of these pressures contradicts the recommendations and evidence-based practices required for positive mental health.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

Surveys reveal that young men have little optimism for their futures and the lowest levels of social support when compared to other ages and genders. More than a quarter (28%) of young men have no close social connections and most feel misunderstood by young women. They have far fewer friends than men 30 years ago had.

While males make up 50% of the U.S. population, they account for 80% of suicide deaths. Alarming, four in ten (44%) young men have had thoughts of suicide in the last two weeks.

A national study on the rapidly growing problem of sextortion found, of the 15 million reports of sextortion between 2020 and 2023, that 90% of the victims were teen boys between the ages 14 and 17.

Properly identifying mental health problems among boys may require different approaches. Depression in adolescent boys may present as fatigue -- or as anger, as studies of Black boys have found. Research suggests that tailored interventions to address somatic fatigue and aggression are important in reaching young males who are struggling.

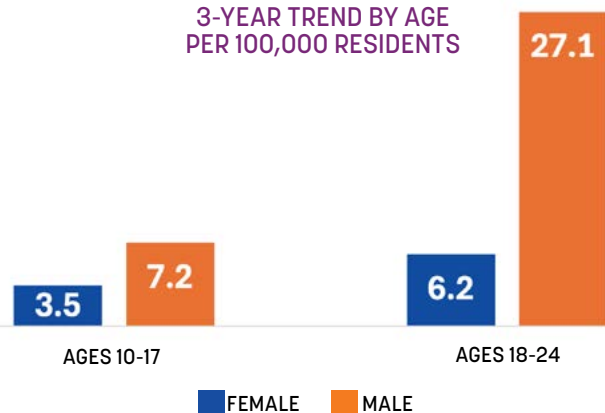
WHAT'S HAPPENING IN WISCONSIN?

Mental health problems are reported by an increasing number of high school boys in Wisconsin. Rates of male anxiety, depression, self-harm and suicidal thinking have all increased over time. In 2023, more than a third (36%) of Wisconsin boys reported anxiety and a quarter (25%) reported feeling persistently sad and hopeless.

Overall, males are nearly four times as likely to die by suicide compared to females in Wisconsin.

DEATH BY SUICIDE AMONG WISCONSIN YOUTH

3-YEAR TREND BY AGE
PER 100,000 RESIDENTS



WHAT HELPS

Research suggests that healthy, caring, trusting relationships are the best way to protect boys' well-being. Positive relationships that model and encourage boys how to be connected, empathetic and pro-social are key, especially when modeled by an adult male.

Teaching healthy coping skills can be highly effective in managing anger and reducing aggression, as well as improving overall mental health.

continued





WHAT HELPS *(continued)*

- ✓ Identifying emotions
- ✓ Releasing tension
- ✓ Calming techniques
- ✓ Communicating thoughts and feelings
- ✓ Solving problems and resolving conflict before escalation

Building resilience to handle obstacles and stress of everyday life is key to helping kids manage their well-being.

- ✓ Sufficient sleep
- ✓ Healthy diet and exercise
- ✓ Social connectedness

Being socially connected allows boys to form friendships with peers, connect with mentors and coaches, and find purpose/contribute to their community.

All youth face stressors, but children of color, and Black boys in particular, face additional obstacles and pervasive stereotypes. When asked about their teachers, Black boys said what they really want is for their teachers to **care about them and to be seen beyond stereotypes of Black masculinity.**

WHAT WE CAN DO

➔ PARENTS/CAREGIVERS

- Adults, especially fathers, uncles, male coaches and mentors, should model wellness, respectful relationships, and healthy coping skills – and engage with boys regularly.
- Encourage participation in organized activities such as sports, band, theatre where coaches and instructors can connect with boys.
- Bolster your own mental health literacy, verbalize your own feelings and normalize mental health conversations at home.
- Ask your son about his feelings, listen without judgement, consider [conversation starters](#).
- Challenge [boyhood and manhood stereotypes](#).
- Understand [digital media's effects](#) on boys health and development, and openly discuss [sextortion](#).

➔ SCHOOLS

- Teach life skills, particularly relationship and social skills, throughout K-12. Address messages of [misogyny and sexism](#).
- Hire male educators.
- Gamify lessons and clarify how learning connects to students' future.
- Invest in vocational pathways to expand post-secondary options.
- Teach digital literacy including how to prevent and respond to [sextortion](#).
- Build interest in caring professions.

➔ PROVIDERS

- Embed mental health discussions into every visit.
- Discuss the range of positive outcomes that come with mental well-being.

➔ POLICYMAKERS

- Support robust family leave policies, including paternity leave across all sectors, and policies that help meet families' basic needs.
- Promote and expand resources for school-based suicide prevention and youth wellness..

➔ COMMUNITIES

- Enlist boys and young men in community service and volunteer opportunities that can provide a sense of purpose.
- Curate spaces and events that are inclusive of boys and their interests.

SOURCES:

Equimundo, [State of American Men 2023 Report](#)
Global Boyhood Initiative, [State of America's Boys: An Urgent Case for a More Connected Boyhood](#)
National Center for Missing & Exploited Children and Thorn, [Trends in Financial Sextortion](#)
Survey Center on American Life, [Men's Social Circles are Shrinking](#)

USC Center for Applied Research in Education, [A Nation's Children at Risk 2024: Insights on Children's Mental Health from the Understanding America Study](#)
Wisconsin Department of Health Services WISH Injury-Related Mortality Module, <https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/wish/injury-mortality/icd10-form.htm>
Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, [2023 Youth Risk Behavior Survey](#)