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New Mexico students' mental health improving since pandemic, survey finds

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Mental distress, feelings of sadness and hopelessness and suicide attempts among New Mexico public school students have gone down, according to the 2023 results of a biennial survey.

But the survey may be a bit behind the curve on some important measures, including the rates at which students used prevalent forms of nicotine and other substances.

After seeing youth mental health measures spike or stagnate during the COVID-19 pandemic, 2023 saw improvements in those measures, which was cause for optimism Friday among lawmakers on the Legislative Health and Human Services Committee.

“It's very, very encouraging to see the decreases in a lot of the mental health concerns,” said Rep. Alan Martinez, R-Bernalillo.

State Department of Health Public Health Division Director Dr. José Acosta noted the positive results may be in part driven by students' return to school after the pandemic, as well as school-based health centers.

Over 35,700 middle schoolers and high schoolers in 326 schools participated in the 2023 Youth Risk and Resiliency Survey, which asks students about a range of behaviors, including those related to violence, substance abuse and sexual activity.

Department of Health spokesperson David Morgan emphasized in an email the apparent success in mental health and the use of alcohol, nicotine and other substances but noted the agency has seen further improvements in some of those areas, as well as in the prevalence of obesity and v

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among youth.

"We want these to also decrease eventually as they are major youth health concerns," he said, referring to behaviors like fighting, bullying and sexual assault.

Lawmakers got a sneak peek at some results Friday, but the full results of the survey have not been publicly released. Morgan said the agency hopes to have them published online soon.

Lack of data on Zyns, fentanyl

Vaping seems to be on a downward trend among New Mexico students. In 2023, about 19% of high schoolers had vaped in the month prior to the survey. That's down from 25.3% in 2021, which in turn was down from 33.4% in 2019, the highest rate reported in the past five surveys.

But the presentation given to lawmakers did not include survey results from young people who used synthetic nicotine pouch products, which officials earlier this year signaled may take the place of disposable vapes in popularity among youth.

The pouches, including those produced by Zyn, are marketed as convenient smokeless, spitless alternatives.

The survey asked about five forms of nicotine, including chewing tobacco, but Department of Health mental health epidemiologist Dylan Pell said the agency was tweaking a question to specifically address synthetic nicotine pouch products like Zyns.

Morgan also said the Department of Health would rework a question in the survey to address Zyns based on media reports and other credible sources reporting a rise in young people using them.

The survey also did not ask New Mexico youth about fentanyl use. Nationwide, illicitly manufactured fentanyl accounted for 84% of all adolescent overdose deaths in 2021, according to a report published in a 2022 Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Friday's presentation does show a decline in the rate of misused prescription opioids, like codeine, Vicodin and OxyContin, as well as in general cannabis use. But Pell said the next survey would ask about fentanyl specifically.

Morgan added in an email, survey questionnaires must be submitted to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention the year before they're administered. He said data that's now available makes it clear at least one question related to fentanyl will need to be included in the 2025 survey.

Some lawmakers noted the absence of data for nicotine pouches and fentanyl but said in interviews Monday that wasn't something they could fault the department for.

"I think that in '23, fentanyl was just coming on the radar screen as such [an] enormous problem, so that's probably why they hadn't [asked about it]," said Sen. Jerry Ortiz y Pino, D-Albuquerque.

"I think that's definitely something they need to be tracking. We need the data if we're going to make good, sound policy decisions," he added.

Rep. Elizabeth "Liz" Thomson, D-Albuquerque, said New Mexico has always struggled with playing catch-up with tobacco companies, and the survey reflected that.

"We are always behind big tobacco, big pharma, whatever. By the time we figure out what they're doing and get around to a bill, and that bill going into effect, they're already ahead of us," she said.

Suicide attempts higher for LGBTQ+ kids

The percentage of New Mexico high schoolers persistently feeling sad or hopeless has steadily climbed since 2009, and in 2021 reached a high of 44.2%.

Last year, however, saw that rate drop to 36.7%. That's the lowest it's been since 2017 but still higher than 2009's rate of 29.7%, according to the presentation.

From 2015 to 2021, the percentage of New Mexico high schoolers who had attempted suicide in the past year held steady around 10%.

But that rate also went down in 2023, with just 8.4% of respondents reporting they had made such attempts. According to a chart showing results since 2009, it's the lowest the rate has been in the past 14 years.

However, some student groups faced higher rates of suicide attempts than others.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and questioning teenagers were over three times more likely to have attempted suicide than straight students, and transgender or nonbinary students more than quadrupled the rate of their cisgender peers, according to the presentation.

LGBTQ+ students face bullying and a variety of other social pressures, leading to mental health challenges, said Erica McDowell, managing director of Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network New Mexico.

Whether that's through discouragement of a teenager's ability to use the preferred pronouns or names in school or questions over which bathroom they should be using, McDowell said the fact LGBTQ+ students faced higher rates of suicide attempts came as no surprise to her.

Addressing that issue, she said, largely comes down to adults and the things they can be doing to make schools more inclusive, whether that's through training for educators about incorporating inclusive language and curriculum practices or administrative policies regarding bathroom access.

"It's really important to affirm what young people are experiencing and listen. ... What they are experiencing is adults not being willing to listen or not being skilled enough to really hear what they're saying," McDowell said.

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How to get help

If you or someone you know is experiencing severe depression or has thoughts of suicide, call one of the following hotlines, staffed 24 hours a day, to get help:

- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 800-273-8255 (800-273-TALK)
- New Mexico Crisis and Access Line: 855-662-7474 (855-NMCRISIS)

For detailed information about suicide prevention, visit spur.org.

The following local organizations offer crisis response services, counseling, peer support groups and other suicide prevention efforts for youth:

- The Sky Center/New Mexico Suicide Intervention Project, based at Ortiz Middle School; 505-473-6191, nmsip.org
- Gerard's House, 505-424-1800, gerardshouse.org

Takeaways

- Over 35,700 students participated in the 2023 Youth Risk and Resiliency Survey. Full results are not available yet.
- The survey may be behind the curve on some important issues, including the prevalence of fentanyl and synthetic nicotine pouches among young people.
- While mental health among young people statewide has improved, LGBTQ+ students struggle more than others.

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