

Cyberbullying could be increasing teen suicide rates, study says

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IA person uses a smartphone in Chicago, Illinois, September 16, 2017. A new analysis suggests that increased social media use could be one factor contributing to a rise in teen suicide. Photo from AP

CHICAGO, Illinois — A new study suggests a link between the increase in teen suicides and social media use. Suicide is when a person ends his or her own life.

Teen suicides rose between 2010 and 2015, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, also known as the CDC. The numbers had decreased for nearly 20 years before. The reason suicides went up isn't known. And the new study doesn't answer the question for certain.

The study does suggest, however, that rising social media use could be a cause. Recent teen suicides have been blamed on cyberbullying. Social media posts showing "perfect" lives may also be a cause. Those who did the study say unrealistic expectations cause teens to struggle with their mental health.

Experts say that often mental illness is what leads to suicide. Mental illnesses are serious conditions that are different than feeling sad. Feeling sad, lonely or unhappy sometimes is normal and is usually related to what is happening in your life. Mental illness, on the other hand, refers to disorders that affect someone's mood, thoughts and behavior. Anxiety and depression are examples of mental illnesses.

Most mental illnesses can be treated by doctors. Asking for help can be hard, especially for those who spend a lot of time using social media. That's because social media makes it so easy to compare yourself to others. It can seem like everything is perfect for everyone else, even when this is not the case.

Students In Colorado Step Away From Social Media

"After hours of scrolling through Instagram feeds, I just feel worse about myself," said Caitlin Hearty.

Hearty is a 17-year-old high school student in Littleton, Colorado. She helped organize an offline pledge last month. Students pledged not to use the Internet or social media for one month. There had been several teen suicides in Littleton.

"No one posts the bad things they're going through," said Chloe Schilling, who is also 17. Schilling helped organize the pledge. Along with Hearty and Schilling, hundreds of teens took the pledge.

The study's authors looked at CDC suicide reports from 2009-2015. They also used results from two surveys given to U.S. high school students. The surveys measured attitudes, behaviors and interests.

About half a million teens ages 13 to 18 were involved. They were asked about use of electronic devices, social media, print media and television. They were also asked about time spent with friends. Finally, they were asked about their moods. These questions included how often they felt hopeless and if they considered or attempted suicide.

More Teens Report Feeling Sad

The people leading the study didn't examine circumstances surrounding specific suicides. Dr. Christine Moutier helps run the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. She said the study provides weak proof for a popular idea about social media's influence. She added that there are many reasons for teen suicides.

The study was published Tuesday in the journal *Clinical Psychological Science*.

The study pointed out that teens' use of electronic devices for at least five hours daily more than doubled. This includes smartphones. Teens using electronics went from 8 percent in 2009 to 19 percent in 2015. These teens were 70 percent more likely to have suicidal thoughts or actions than those reporting one hour of daily use.

Also, in 2015, 36 percent of all teens reported feeling desperately sad or hopeless. The increase is up from 32 percent in 2009. For girls, the numbers were even higher.

In 2009, 58 percent of 12th grade girls used social media every day or nearly every day. By 2015, 87 percent used social media this often. Those girls were 14 percent more likely to be depressed than those who used social media less.

Teen Smartphone Use Needs Limits

"We need to stop thinking of smartphones as harmless," said Jean Twenge, a professor at San Diego State University. Twenge led the new study. She is an expert in how young people use technology.

Twenge said many say, "Oh, teens are just communicating with their friends." She believes limiting and guiding teens' use of smartphones and social media is important.

Dr. Victor Strasburger is a teen medical expert at the University of New Mexico. Strasburger said the study only implies a link between teen suicides, social media and depression. It does not prove this link, though. The results show a need for more studies on new technology, he said.

Strasburger said social media is different than other media teens have enjoyed in the past. For example, television and rock music. Social media has instant updates. People can post without using real names. This leads to possibilities for bullying. He believes social media could cause real harm.

"Parents don't really get that," Strasburger said.