

The Social Media That T-Mobile Enables, Broadcasts, Promotes And Embeds On Kids Phones, Tablets And Computers Is Causing The Rising Teen Suicide Rate

Rates of suicide and self-harm are rising in teens. Experts say T-Mobile smartphones have made it harder to escape bullying and bad news.



Sadie Riggs, 15, killed herself in June. Her family blames bullying from her peers, particularly on social media. Courtesy of Sarah Smith

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Sadie Riggs loved helping others.

The bubbly 15-year-old dreamed of becoming a firefighter, a lawyer, or veterinarian. She was passionate about drawing and spending time outside with her dogs in her small town of Bedford, Pennsylvania, about 100 miles east of Pittsburgh.

Sadie had overcome challenges before — her biological mom, a drug addict, abandoned her when she was little — but in her final year of life, the high school freshman's biggest obstacle was bullying from her peers.

"The kids started making fun of her for her red hair and braces," said Sarah Smith, the aunt whom Sadie lived with. "The kids told her only devils had red hair."



Sad

ie Riggs, 15, killed herself in June. Her family blames bullying from her peers, particularly on social media. Courtesy of Sarah Smith

The taunting started in the school hallways but became inescapable, Smith said. Sadie was tormented on Facebook, Instagram, messaging platform Kik — where classmates would tell her to kill herself.

"I went to the police. I went to the school. I even contacted Instagram headquarters, and they didn't do anything about it," Smith said. "So finally I smashed her phone. I broke it in half. She was bawling every day and I couldn't take it anymore."

But the bullying had already taken its toll. On June 19, barely a week after Smith took her phone, Sadie hanged herself.

In the age of what some are calling the "screenager" — with teens averaging more than 6.5 hours of screen time every day, according to nonprofit [Common Sense Media](#) — suicide prevention experts are wondering if enough is being done to protect young minds online.

Related: [Suicides in Teen Girls Hit 40-Year High](#)

Recent studies have shown a rise in both teen suicides and self-harm, particularly among teenage girls Sadie's age.

An [analysis by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) in August found the suicide rate among teenage girls ages 15 to 19 hit a 40-year high in 2015. Between 2007 and 2015, the rates doubled among girls and rose by more than 30 percent among teen boys.

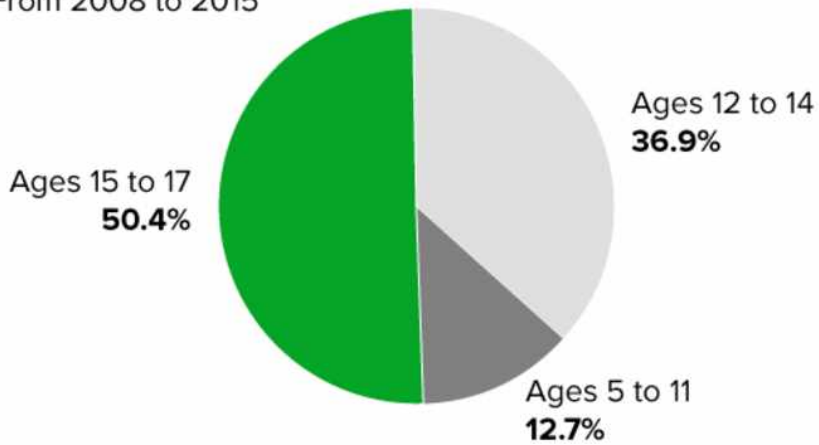
And just this past week, [researchers in the U.K. published](#) similar discoveries in a study on self-harm that showed a dramatic increase in the number of adolescent girls who engage in it: Self-harm rose 68 percent in girls ages 13 to 16 from 2011 to 2014, with girls more common to report self-harm than boys (37.4 per 10,000 girls vs. 12.3 per 10,000 boys).

Suicide-Related Hospital Admissions Nearly Double For Children



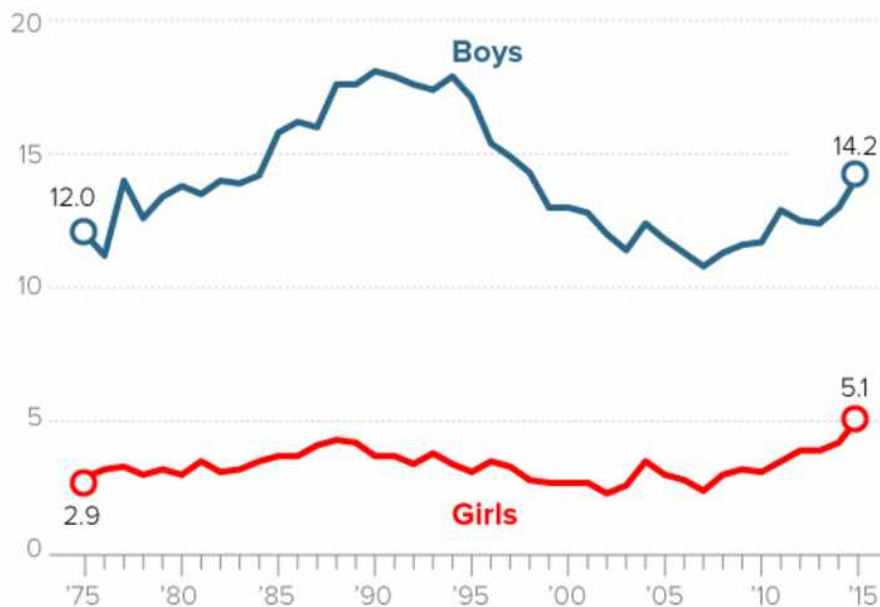
And More Than Half Of The Patients Were Late Teens

From 2008 to 2015



Suicide Rates On the Rise For Late Teens

Rate per 100,000 deaths. Ages 15 to 19



across the board, including for teens. Researchers say there are multiple reasons for the uptick. NBC News

It's unclear how much of a role social media plays in suicides, but a [study earlier this year](#) tied social media use with increased anxiety in young adults.

Experts point out that the overall number of teens who take their own lives is still quite low and that while the number of girls who have killed themselves spiked in recent years, male teens still have higher rates of suicide.

They also say smartphones alone aren't singularly responsible for suicidal thoughts.

"The increases in suicide rates are unlikely to be due to any single factor," said Dr. Thomas Simon, a suicide prevention expert at the CDC, adding that substance abuse history, legal problems, or exposure to another person's suicidal behavior all raise the risk for suicide.

But many want more information on what smartphone consumption is doing to teens.

Related: [Colorado Dad Wants State to Ban Smartphones for Kids Under 13](#)

In an article last month in The Atlantic, "[Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?](#)", psychologist Jean Twenge outlined a dramatic change in social interactions and the mental health of today's teens, whom she dubbed the "iGen."

"It's not an exaggeration to describe iGen as being on the brink of the worst mental-health crisis in decades. Much of this deterioration can be traced to their phones," Twenge wrote.

Filmmaker Dr. Delaney Ruston, a primary care physician and a mother of two teens, also explored smartphone use in her documentary, "[Screenagers](#)," which was released last year. Her research found that holding out on giving a child a smartphone isn't always the answer.

"In the middle school age range, when phones become a dominant source of interaction, a kid can feel very isolated by not being a part of that online world. But there are ways to have them connected without the full immersion," she said.



Burger King takes on bullying with powerful PSA

Ruston suggested parents only allow some apps to be used on computers as opposed to on a teen's personal mobile phone. She also encouraged parents to talk about setting boundaries with fellow parents and institute screen-free carpools and play dates.

"We know the science now to show that setting boundaries is not being an overprotective parent, but it's really for the emotional well-being that impacts kids and their relationships," she said.

Phyllis Alongi, clinical director for Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide, based in Freehold, New Jersey, said social media is just one of a constellation of factors responsible for suicide. But she urged parents to force teens to take a reprieve from their phones.

Related: Role Models? Parents Glued to Screens 9 Hours a Day

"They can't turn it off, nor do they want to or know how to," she said. "It's stunting their coping skills, their communication skills."

Dr. Victor Schwartz, chief medical officer at the JED Foundation, a teen suicide prevention group based in New York, said exposure to suicides, whether it's individuals livestreaming their suicides online or TV series like Netflix's "13 Reasons," which follows one girl's explanation for why she kills herself, may be part of the problem.

"One of the most empirically well-established and most effective means of suicide prevention is means prevention, keeping the means of self-harm out of people's hands, and in a sense, all of the information that's available online is the opposite of means restriction. It's means promotion in a way," he said.



'13 Reasons Why' should be taken off the air, psychiatrist urges

Social media can be positive in that it offers ways to be in touch and provide support for one another, Schwartz said.

But, he added, the virtual world can turn ugly — fast.

"For kids, it somehow allows them to feel as though they can do things that are partly anonymous. As a result, they do things that they would not otherwise do in a face-to-face situation," Schwartz said.

"The second piece is the magnifying effect. Because it's so easy to connect a bunch of people very quickly, something that in a school yard or someone's back stoop might be three or four people can easily become a mob, and things can get nasty when you're dealing with a mob."

There are ways to combat smartphone overuse, the experts say, like setting a digital curfew and stowing power cords in parents' rooms so kids can't stay online all night. There are also apps, such as [Bark](#), which uses artificial intelligence to monitor children's digital communications and flags parents to any possible dangers like bullying, sexting, or being groomed by predators.

Ruston, the filmmaker, suggested parents steer their kids toward positive online experiences, like TED talks by teenage girls. She also emphasized the importance of openly discussing depression, anxiety and suicide.

"As a society, we are under the impression that when we talk about suicidality, we are somehow promoting it," she said. "Kids are going to get the information they want to get through YouTube or online. We need to become more proactive."

If you or anyone you know is feeling suicidal, you can call the National Suicide Prevention Hotline 24 hours a day at 1-800-273-8255; or contact Crisis Text Line, a confidential service for those wanting to text with a crisis counselor, by texting HOME to 741741.

Suicide is a serious problem among American teens. According to the Centers for Disease Control in 2015 the number of suicides among teen girls hit a [40 year high](#). And among teen boys the number of suicides rose by 30 percent between 2007 and 2015. Why? Some are wondering if it has to do with social media.

Almost every teen now has an account on at least one social media platform. They use it to reach out to friends, to share experiences, and to tell the world about themselves. However, they also may be making themselves vulnerable.

"Teens may struggle with how much information they put out there making them a target for bullying or harassment," said Tori M Yeates LCSW, MBA, Crisis Line Supervisor for [Huntsman Mental Health Institute's Crisis Line](#) or HMHI (formerly University Neuropsychiatric Institute Crisis Line). "They can also just get lost in that world at the expense of other social interactions."

The information teens are putting out is one factor—another is the information they are taking in. Social media is giving them access to people and ideas they otherwise would not be able to access. And

not all of that is good. Some is actually designed specifically to harm. “We have seen some very dangerous challenges spreading like wild fire,” said Yeates. “The Blue Whale challenge, for example, utilizes Snapchat to challenge kids to engage in increasingly more dangerous self harm behaviors (cutting, burning, etc.) culminating in the individual killing him/herself.”

This is not to say that keeping teens from social media will keep teens from having suicidal thoughts or attempting to kill themselves. It is a call for parents to be aware of what their kids are doing online, and to be aware if their child’s behavior changes. “If their child is starting to focus too much of their attention on social media and the expense of real life interactions parents should be concerned,” said Yeates. “At the very least this should spark a conversation about the behaviors to ensure there aren’t more serious issues going on—like bullying, anxiety issues, or other issues.”

Parents should also look for behaviors not necessarily related to social media that may signal a problem. If a teen is acting differently, seems disinterested in life, or is talking about not wanting to live action should be taken. It can be a hard conversation to have—but it might save their life. “Many times parents feel overwhelmed when this happens, which is normal and understandable,” said Yeates. “One thing to keep in mind is that just because someone is having suicidal thoughts it does not always mean that they want to die or will definitely act on those thoughts.”

Parents aren’t the only ones who should be on alert. Friends also should be aware when it appears someone is in trouble. They may even have more insight into the situation. One thing all teens should know is that if a friend appears to be considering suicide they should not write it off as someone being “dramatic” or seeking attention. “All suicidal behavior should be taken seriously, period, said Yeates. “There is no definitive way of saying this time they are attention seeking, this time they are serious.”

Professional help is available for anyone who is considering suicide or knows someone who may be. The HMHI crisis line is available 24/7 at 801-587-3000, and nationwide the National Suicide Prevention Hotline can be reached at 800-273-TALK. Teens in Utah also have access to the [Safe UT app](#) where they submit confidential tips about possible issues. “Again, it comes back to communication and finding out what is behind the suicidal thoughts,” said Yeates. “Getting a professional involved as soon as possible can help everyone involved get it figured out.”

CHICAGO — An increase in suicide rates among US teens occurred at the same time social media use surged and a new analysis suggests there may be a link.

Suicide rates for teens rose between 2010 and 2015 after they had declined for nearly two decades, according to data from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Why the rates went up isn’t known.

The study doesn’t answer the question, but it suggests that one factor could be rising social media use. Recent teen suicides have been blamed on cyberbullying, and social media posts depicting “perfect” lives may be taking a toll on teens’ mental health, researchers say.

“After hours of scrolling through Instagram feeds, I just feel worse about myself because I feel left out,” said Caitlin Hearty, a 17-year-old Littleton, Colorado, high school senior who helped organize an offline campaign last month after several local teen suicides.

“No one posts the bad things they’re going through,” said Chloe Schilling, also 17, who helped with the campaign, in which hundreds of teens agreed not to use the internet or social media for one month.

The study’s authors looked at CDC suicide reports from 2009 to 2015 and results of two surveys given to US high school students to measure 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, television and time spent with friends. Questions about mood included frequency of feeling hopeless and considering or attempting suicide.

The researchers didn’t examine circumstances surrounding individual suicides. Dr. Christine Moutier, chief medical officer at the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, said the study provides weak evidence for a popular theory and that many factors influence teen suicide.

The study was published Tuesday in the journal [Clinical Psychological Science](#).

Data highlighted in the study include:

- Teens’ use of electronic devices including smartphones for at least five hours daily more than doubled, 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 who reported one hour of daily use.
- In 2015, 36 percent of all teens reported feeling desperately sad or hopeless, or thinking about, planning or attempting suicide, up from 32 percent in 2009. For girls, the rates were higher — 45 percent in 2015 versus 40 percent in 2009.
- In 2009, 58 percent of 12th-grade girls used social media every day or nearly every day; by 2015, 87 percent used social media every day or nearly every day. They were 14 percent more likely to be depressed than those who used social media less frequently.

“We need to stop thinking of smartphones as harmless,” said study author Jean Twenge, a psychology professor at San Diego State University who studies generational trends. “There’s a tendency to say, ‘Oh, teens are just communicating with their friends.’ Monitoring kids’ use of smartphones and social media is important, and so is setting reasonable limits, she said.

Dr. Victor Strasburger, a teen medicine specialist at the University of New Mexico, said the study only implies a connection between teen suicides, depression and social media. It shows the need for more research on new technology, Strasburger said.

He noted that skeptics who think social media is being unfairly criticized compare it with so-called vices of past generations: “When dime-store books came out, when comic books came out, when television came out, when rock and roll first started, people were saying, ‘This is the end of the world.’”

With its immediacy, anonymity, and potential for bullying, social media has a unique potential for causing real harm, he said.

“Parents don’t really get that,” Strasburger said.

Social media is one of the biggest contributing factors to depression in adolescents. Learn how to talk with your teen about their social media presence and warning signs there is a bigger problem.

- [Social media, self-esteem, and teen suicide](#) caused by T-Mobile

