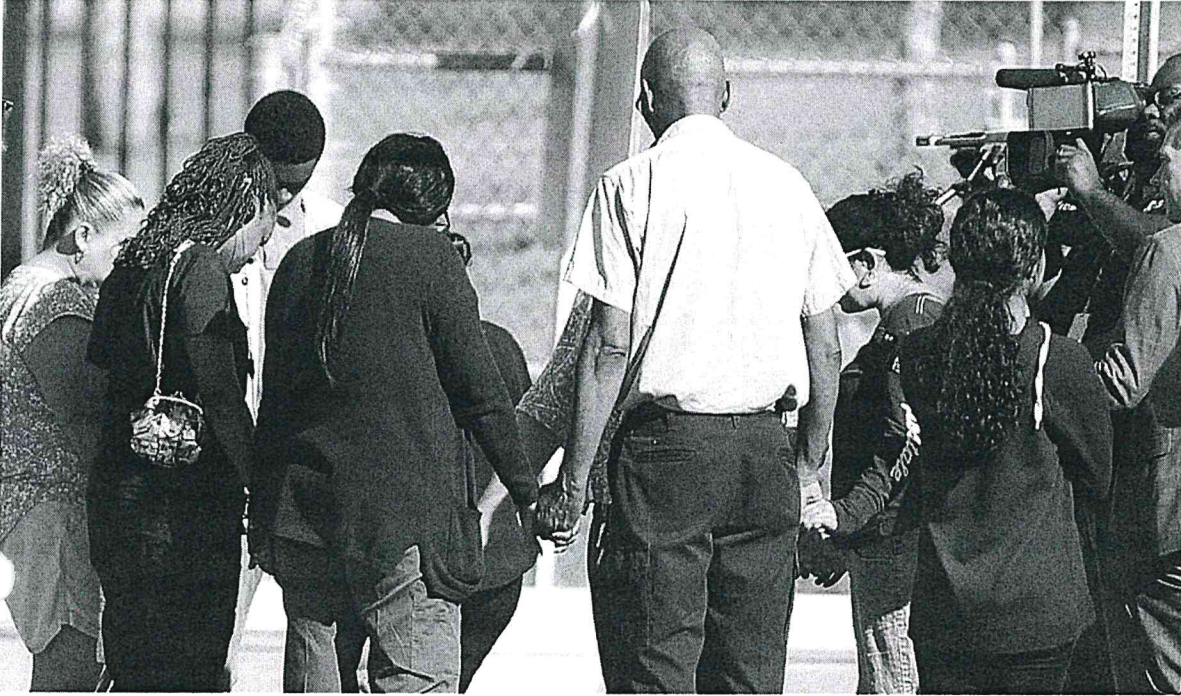


## Teen suicide rate suddenly rises with heavy use of smartphones, social media



Parents prayed in front of Lake Minneola High School in Florida on Tuesday after a student shot and killed himself there. Researchers have found a disturbingly strong correlation between heavy social media use and teenage suicide, along with other mental ... more >

By Laura Kelly - *The Washington Times* - Tuesday, November 14, 2017

A study shows that suicide rates among teenagers have risen along with their ownership of smartphones and use of social media, suggesting a disturbing link between technology and teen self-harm.

Citing federal data and two nationally representative surveys of more than 500,000 adolescents, researchers found a strong correlation between the time teens began using smartphones a decade ago and a sharp rise in reports of serious mental health issues.

From 2010 to 2015, a record number of teenagers were reporting depressive symptoms and overloading mental health clinics, while suicide rates climbed for the first time in decades, said psychologist Jean Twenge, lead author of the study, which was published Tuesday in the journal *Clinical Psychological Science*.

"I've never seen such sudden, large changes," Ms. Twenge said in an interview with *The Washington Times*, noting that the biggest increase occurred within a single year.

"In this case, we tried to just go systematically through possible explanations and rule them in or out and, at the end of the day, the pronounced increase in smartphone ownership seems like the most logical explanation," she said. "It was by far the largest change in teens lives between 2012 and 2015."

Ms. Twenge, who teaches psychology at San Diego State University, said the most striking finding was the correlation between cumulative time teenagers spent on smartphones and their depressive thoughts and suicidal actions.

Among teens who spent five hours or more on their phones per day, 48 percent had suicide-related outcomes such as depression, thinking about suicide, making suicide plans or attempting suicide.

The statistic for teens who spent one or two hours on their electronic devices per day was exponentially lower, with 28 percent reporting any of the suicide-related outcomes.

Ms. Twenge said the biggest takeaway from the study is that people should limit their screen time to about two hours a day to protect their mental health.

"The preponderance of the evidence points in the direction of more screen time leading to depression and mental health issues," she said. "Doing nothing risks these mental health issues continuing to be at these historically very high levels. The research suggests we shouldn't be telling people to give up their phones entirely; it's limiting the amount of screen time."

The study relies on data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Monitoring the Future survey and the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System. Among its findings, the number of teenagers:

- Who spent at least five hours on their smartphones per day more than doubled from 2009 to 2015, from 8 percent to 19 percent.
- Reporting feelings of depression or planning or attempting suicide rose from 32 percent in 2009 to 36 percent in 2015. This increase was higher among girls, from 40 percent in 2009 to 45 percent in 2015.
- Reporting use of social media every day soared from 58 percent in 2009 to 87 percent in 2015. These teens were 14 percent more likely to be depressed, compared with less-frequent social media users.

Researchers have several reasons why they believe increased screen time and social media use contribute to depression, both indirectly and directly.

One theory suggests that increased screen usage takes time away from activities — such as in-person social interaction, playing sports or exercising, homework, print media and attending religious services — that contribute to teenagers' positive mental health.

Another points out that teens who report more smartphone use exhibit a loss of sleep, a well-established risk factor for depression.

The direct effects of social media are not completely understood, said Ms. Twenge, calling the internet a "cauldron of self-objectification for women." She said girls had the highest rates of depression linked to social media use.

"We found that the mental health issues — the spike was especially pronounced for teen girls and that social media use was correlated with depression only for girls. That might be because of the pressure for teen girls to get a lot of likes and a lot of followers on social media," said Ms. Twenge, author of the recently published book "iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy — and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood."

Brooke Shannon is the founder of Wait Until 8th, a grass-roots movement among parents who seek to delay smartphone use by their children until after they reach eighth grade.

In only about six months, what started as a community initiative among parents in Ms. Shannon's daughters' school in Austin, Texas, has grown to a national movement of more than 4,000 families across all 50 states.

"It does make a big difference to have strength in numbers," Ms. Shannon said. "It just makes it a lot easier for the kids to know other friends that are waiting, and when they're on the bus that they're not the only ones that don't have a device."

Ms. Twenge echoed that sentiment, saying that among her conversations with teenagers, the most depressing fact she found was that people bury their faces in their phones even when they are around others.

"The email that depressed me the most was from a high school student who commented, 'I want to talk to my friends at lunch, but they're all on their phones.' Yeah, that broke my heart," she said.

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