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CORRESPONDENCE

MENTAL HEALTH AND POLITICAL POLARIZATION AMONG YOUTH

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Abstract

Echoes of Division: The Impact of Polarization on Youth Mental Health Political polarization is not just a social problem, it is a youth mental health crisis. According to a survey conducted in 2025 by Hopelab and Data for Progress, 61% of Americans aged between 13-24 believe that loneliness takes a heavy toll on their mental health. 35% stating that it interferes with their day to day life; moreover, a study in 2024 by Trevor Project revealed that politics has had a negative impact on 90% of the LGBTQ+ youth, among which 39% have seriously considered trying to kill themselves. These findings showcase the scorching psychological toll of political polarization. The continuous torrent of political animosity has flourished as a breeding ground for anxiety, depression and despair. The Impressionable Years hypothesis proposes that individuals are highly vulnerable to forming and changing their fundamental beliefs, attitudes and values during adolescence and early adulthood, making these young people particularly at risk for mental health issues due to political polarization. To control this issue, it would require us to focus on mental health services, media literacy and ensuring inclusive spaces.

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Introduction:-

Young people have felt the effects of political polarization deeply and it has worsened over the years. The American Psychological Association carried out a study in 2024 which came to the conclusion that there have been rising rates of depression and anxiety among young adults caused due to election-related stress. This anxiety is further intensified by the existence of echo chambers on social media, where people encounter content that aligns with their existing beliefs, widening political divisions and increasing loneliness.

The Impressionable Years hypothesis also tells us how late adolescence and young adulthood is a period of identity formation and active participation in political issues, during which, stress can be added due to exposure to partisan discussions. The youth mental health crisis has also aggravated due to poor availability of mental healthcare and stigma around seeking help among other systematic issues. In a survey by Hopelab and Data Progress in 2025 of youth in school, 25% of the students felt that their school does not offer enough mental health support. This combination of limited mental health support and constant political messaging creates a vulnerable situation for young people to develop mental health problems.

Research has consistently demonstrated the negative impact of political polarization on the mental health of youth. According to a 2022 study by ScienceDirect, adolescents who have specific political ideologies face mental health gaps, suggesting political views do impact mental health. Similarly, an article in 2021 by Scholarly in Social Science & Medicine, confirmed that individuals who recognize high levels of political polarization among state elites are at a higher risk of depression and anxiety. Social media also plays an important role in this dynamic. Julie Jiang among others stated in a 2021 paper, it has been found that Twitter users who had right-leaning leaned biases were more engaged in producing and consuming COVID-19 content which led to increase in their polarized views. This further promotes echo chambers, reinforcing perceptions of isolation. To combat the impact of polarization on the mental health of youth, multiple sensible and implementable initiatives can be taken:

Implementation of Media Literacy Programs:-

Schools and other community organizations should initiate media literacy modules in which young adults would be taught how to review online information thoughtfully, identify bias and acknowledge and consider different diverse perspectives. This would help countering echo chambers and supporting healthy online conversation which is helpful for mental health among teens.

Broaden Mental Health Care Access:-

Investing more funds in schools and community organizations for mental health services would make help more accessible for teens. This is attainable through hiring of more professionals who specialize in mental health among teens. The teachers and school staff can be trained to recognize signs of worsening mental health in teens and handle such situations, making a more comfortable and secure environment for the students.

Foster Inclusive Environments:-

Creating secure and inclusive spaces for vulnerable groups, e.g., LGBTQ+ youth, where they can feel free to express themselves without the fear of judgement or bigotry. This can be accomplished by implementing inclusive policies, community support groups and public awareness programs. This would prevent isolation amongst teens which could have led to a worsened mental health state.

Encourage Political Empathy:-

Initiating programs that teach teens to understand the different viewpoints of other people. This would help in teens acknowledging different perspective which could reduce polarization. This can be achieved through social media platforms, by applying features in these platforms that encourage users to connect with content from various different political viewpoints, rather than engagement with just the political views the user is leaned towards.

Encourage Family and Community Participation:-

Implementing programs that helps build strong family and community connections would provide young adults stability and support. These would include mentoring, family counselling and community engagement. This would help teens feel more seen, feel more secure in confiding in their families for mental health support. All of these recommendations can help achieve countering political polarization and its negative impact on teen mental health. This would help build a more inclusive and healthy society, especially for the vulnerable youth.