

American Universities Have Been in the News, But High School Conditions Also Need Attention

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Global Research, May 17, 2024

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

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US universities have been in the news recently for three reasons, all of which are worrying and are also related to each other.

Firstly, recent protests in the context of the Israeli assault on Gaza have drawn attention also to the endowments of prestigious US universities having close links to weapons and wars related industrial and financial interests.

Secondly, university administrations have been not at all sympathetic to students and faculty members getting mobilized to raise issues of larger social concerns, even though these issues are related to protecting and saving precious human life, and have acted with undue haste to bring in police and make too many arrests, apart from victimizing student protesters in many other unjust ways.

Thirdly, and this concerns a very persistent woe, student debts have generally continued to remain at very high levels, despite sporadic efforts to provide relief. These have become a huge burden for young people starting their professional and family life. In fact debt burden saddles even those who are unable to complete their graduation.

As this writer had argued earlier, this is not just a matter of rising university costs and other such factors. A country as well-endowed as the USA with all sorts of riches is perfectly capable of educating its youth without getting them entangled in such difficult debts. Instead these heavy debts are a reflection of the increasing tendency of capitalism to try to tie up younger people in such a way with debts that they feel more and more compelled to follow the establishment path and their chances of instead following their ideals (related for example to creating a safe and justice-based world) are minimized by the compulsion of paying back loans (apart from high and increasing costs of living).

Hence the capitalist system, despite making occasional concessions in the form of some debt-relief for mobilizing political support, particularly during election years, is in system terms more committed to perpetuation of student debt.

The university system under these circumstances keeps getting closer to academic factories whose main purpose (output) is to turn out suitably trained higher level managers and officials of the capitalist-imperialist system (although despite such efforts due to the human spirit idealism still survives and occasionally asserts itself).

While the university system has thus been in news, the prevailing conditions in high schools also deserve attention.

According to the data of the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Data Survey and Trends Report released by the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention, USA for years 2011-21 (an earlier version of this report was also quoted by the USA Surgeon General in the advisory issued by him in 2021), in 2021 42% of all high school students and 57% of female students reported experiencing “persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness.” What is more, within a decade (2011-2021), this had increased in a big way, rising from 28% to 42%, a very fast rate of increase. Why is sadness and hopelessness so widely pervasive in one of the richest countries with relatively very high educational and health spending?

At the same time, this data base has revealed that in 2021 22% of high school students “seriously considered” attempting suicide. This was as high as 30% for female students.

Most tragically, in 2021 10 per cent of all high school students (13% of girls students) actually attempted suicide.

Such alarming official data raises a very serious question—in such a rich country with such a high exposure to an immense diversity of entertainment and sports, why should such high levels of distress and stress prevail among high-school students?

According to the Advisory on Mental Health issued by the USA Surgeon General in 2021, there was an even higher rise in the suicide rate in the age-group 10-24 in the USA from 2007 to 2018—57%. In 2018, suicide became the second leading cause of death in this age-group.

According to the Surgeon General Advisory as well as several other reports, on top of the very serious situation existing already by 2019 there was a further very rapid deterioration during the COVID period. To give an indication, according to the USA Surgeon General advisory, in early 2021 there was a further 51% rise in emergency department visits by adolescent girls in the USA relating to suicide attempts, compared to the similar period in 2019.

In the fall of the same year 2021, a coalition of the USA’s leading experts in pediatric health, asked for declaring a national emergency in child and adolescent mental health.

All these are alarming facts and figures. The surgeon general has also used the word ‘alarming’ for this. He has stated, “Even before the pandemic, an alarming number of young people struggled with feelings of helplessness, depression and thoughts of suicide—and rates have increased over the past decade.”

However while the data is there, no comprehensive, credible explanation appears to have emerged yet at a wide level of why, in one of the richest countries enjoying very special privileges, children and adolescents are in such an extreme stage of sadness, hopelessness and desperation, and why is there such rapid recent increase in this. Of course in a country with so many capable, resourceful researchers and research institutions, several explanations have been offered. Several of these draw attention to important aspects and offer helpful insights (the Surgeon General's Advisory has also contributed much to this), but not an understanding that is comprehensive and deep enough to provide a very effective, hope-giving base for remedial action.

One explanation that has emerged is that the social media and accompanying gadgets contributed much of this increase in the decade preceding the pandemic, but this is more of a manifestation of the basic problems rather than being the root cause itself. One aspect of the worrying situation is the negative perception by students of school life. A nationwide survey of 21,678 US high school students by the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence and the Yale Child Study Center found that nearly 75% of the students' self-reported feelings related to schools were negative. Stressed, bored, tired—these were the most frequent expressions used by students.

A Pew Research Center survey of teens in 13-17 age group (year 2018) found that 57% of them (64% of girls) were very worried or somewhat worried that a shooting could happen in their school.

Many studies of problems of high schools are more concerned about achievement levels. The Program of International Student Assessment, in a ranking of 35 OECD or rich countries, ranked USA at 30 in terms of Math learning of 15 year olds. Other studies have noted that those high school students who make it to college very frequently need remedial education, particularly in the context of Math and English. In recent years about 60% of all community college students and 40% of undergraduates in four-year colleges have needed remedial education, which has been used as an indicator of inadequate learning at high school. This is despite the fact that several educationists have also criticized the high school education system for becoming increasingly obsessed with preparing students for college instead of trying to provide holistic school education that prepares students for many-sided challenges of life. Other studies have lamented that despite spending more per student compared to other OECD countries, the USA school system is recording lower performance, and that performance, in reading proficiency for example, did not improve despite the doubling of expenditure during 1970-2004.

While these studies no doubt have their own importance, in our humble opinion what is more important is the persistent feeling of sadness and hopelessness among about 42% of all students (57% of girls) and this should get more importance in terms of remedial steps. This in turn should be done in terms of not isolated understanding but in terms of questioning the distortions in the entire society. This sad situation should not be examined in terms of any mistakes of kids but rather in terms of the highly flawed system the adults have created with too many distortions, above all a society which lacks clear ideals, a society in which huge numbers of entirely innocent people are killed in wars and then lies are routinely pushed at very high levels regarding this. Such deceit and injustice causes a dark shadow over the entire society and kids are harmed by this. Such wider relationships are ignored in most studies, and hence deeper understanding of such tragic aspects is also missed. Any true seeker of truth would certainly find that creating a society based on truth, justice and peace is the real solution to this and other serious social problems.

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