

The Status of Girls in North Carolina Executive Summary

Prior to Meredith College's 2013 release of *The Status of Girls in North Carolina*, little data had been compiled to document the status of girls within the state. The original report closed that information gap by providing details about the dynamics that impact girls' lives in North Carolina. This 2017 report updates the original data and expands the focus areas of the 2013 report. In addition to the original seven content areas—demographics and poverty, education, media engagement, physical health, mental health, sexual health, and leadership and civic engagement—the 2017 report covers juvenile offending and victimization as well as conditions facing LGBT youth. The report pulls together information from more than a dozen different national and state datasets. Meredith also collected data directly from high schools and girl-serving community organizations on girls' leadership activities in North Carolina.

Demographics and Poverty

As in 2013, girls in North Carolina are being raised in increasingly diverse family structures with increasingly diverse incomes. Twenty seven percent of the children in North Carolina are being raised in families headed by a single mother. Almost half of those families are living below the poverty line. The gap between the median family income between all families with children and families headed by a single mother has increased since 2010. The rates of poverty among African American, American Indian, and Latina girls is almost double that of white girls in North Carolina. The rate of poverty among children in North Carolina exceeds the national average, and almost half of North Carolina's children are living at or near poverty—despite notable improvements in a variety of state-level economic measures.

Education

Girls continue to perform on par academically with boys in North Carolina, as measured by end of grade (EOG), end of course (EOC), or SAT exam results. However, isolating the academic performance of girls, racial disparities persist. While the 2011-12 data suggested that the gap between higher performing groups and lower performing groups narrowed as girls moved through high school, this was no longer the case in 2015-16 academic year. Over the last decade there has been a lot of focus on increasing the number of girls in STEM fields. While girls in North Carolina high schools make up over 60% of students enrolled in AP Biology courses, they make up less than half of students in AP Calculus courses and only 1 in 4 students in AP Physics and AP Computer Science courses.

Juvenile Offending and Victimization

Girls in North Carolina are less likely to be involved with the criminal justice or school punishment systems than boys. However, as is true nationally, non-white girls are more likely to be identified as juvenile offenders or to be subject to serious school discipline than their white peers. Among females, the ratio of African American to white school suspensions is six to one for short-term suspensions and five to one for long-term suspensions. Although young women are far less likely than boys to be identified as juvenile offenders, they are far more likely to be victims of bullying and to experience sexual and intimate partner violence.

Media Engagement

The percentage of girls in North Carolina reporting significant amounts of television viewing has decreased slightly in the past five years. However, this decrease has been matched with an increase in girls' usage of computers and electronic devices for non-academic purposes. While in 2011 there was a significant difference in the rates of computer usage between boys and girls, by 2015 the gender difference in likelihood of high-usage had disappeared. As is the case nationally, girls in North Carolina are more likely than boys to have a social media presence—particularly as they move through adolescence into young adulthood.

Physical Health

Girls in North Carolina struggle to stay physically active compared to their male peers. While the number of girls participating in organized high school athletics has increased slightly over the past decade, over 65% of high school females report that they are not regularly physically active. In 2015, rates of obesity increased among high school females. While these are important concerns, young women in North Carolina are less likely than their male counterparts to have a high BMI, yet they are significantly more likely to view themselves as overweight. More than half all middle and high school girls state they are trying to lose weight. Adding to concerns about physical health is the uptick in usage of e-cigarette and similar vaping products among youth.

Mental Health

Young women in North Carolina fare slightly better than teens nationwide in self-reports of depression and are less likely to seriously consider suicide than girls nationally. However, the percentage of young women in North Carolina making a serious suicide attempt has doubled since 2011. African American and Latina girls are more than twice as likely as their white peers to make an injurious suicide attempt. The percentage of girls who report seriously considering suicide peaks in early adolescence—between 7th and 10th grades.

Leadership and Civic Engagement

New data collected for this report indicates that young women are active leaders in their school communities. In both public and private high schools, girls are almost twice as likely as boys to serve as student government officers. Girls are also supported by a number of national organizations working with girls in their local communities across the state. Organizations such as Girl Scouts and Girls on the Run work to foster leadership and enhance self-esteem among thousands of North Carolina girls.

Sexual Health

Rates of teenage pregnancy continue a decades long decline in North Carolina. Between 2010 and 2015, the rate of pregnancy among young women 15-19 has fallen by more than half—from almost 80 pregnancies per 1,000 to 30 pregnancies per 1,000. Parents in North Carolina are talking with their teens about sex. In 2011, three out of four teens reported that a parent or other adult family member had talked with them about sex. By 2015, that number had dipped slightly to 70%. As girls progress through high school, they are more likely to report these kinds of discussions with parents, while boys become less likely. Despite this high level of parental communication, North Carolina female teens continue to have higher STD incidence rates than the national average.

LGBT Youth

Consistent with national rates of sexual self-identification, 12% of young people in North Carolina identify themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or unsure of their sexual orientation. Many LGBT youth in North Carolina experience their school environment as hostile or unsafe. More than 70% of LGBT students in North Carolina have been verbally harassed at school and one in four have been physically harassed. North Carolina youth who identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual are four times more likely than heterosexual youth to seriously consider suicide. While over 90% of public schools have an anti-bullying policy, fewer than half of those policies include sexual orientation or gender identity.

This update of the Status of Girls in North Carolina continues our commitment to providing concise, usable information to help our communities—including lawmakers, fellow educators, and community organizations—foster growth, leadership and safety for the girls of North Carolina.

To read the full report, visit http://www.meredith.edu/about_meredith/college-research/status-of-girls

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