



THE NEW JERSEY GIRL REPORT

Her Future

In Focus



Presented by the Girl Scouts of New Jersey





We are Girl Scouts.

Girl Scouts bring their dreams to life and work together to build a better world. Through programs coast-to-coast, Girl Scouts of all backgrounds and abilities can be unapologetically themselves as they discover their strengths and rise to meet new challenges—whether they want to climb to the top of a tree or the top of their class, lace up their boots for a hike or advocate for the environment, or make their first best friends.

Backed by trusted adult volunteers, mentors, and millions of alums, Girl Scouts lead the way as they find their voices and make changes that affect the issues most important to them. Find us online to join, volunteer, or donate today.





Presented by the Girl Scouts of New Jersey

Four individual Girl Scout councils collectively serve over 55,000 girls in every zip code across the state of New Jersey. With support from over 30,000 volunteers and contributions from funders and partners, the Girl Scouts of New Jersey ensure every girl can reach her full potential.



Girl Scouts of Northern New Jersey
Sandra A. Kenoff, CEO



Girl Scouts Heart of New Jersey
Natasha Hemmings, CEO



Girl Scouts of Central & Southern New Jersey
Ginny Hill, CEO



Girl Scouts of the Jersey Shore
Heather Coburn, CEO



For girls in New Jersey, life requires resilience.

Motivated to maintain her glowing academic record, a middle school girl in New Jersey studies for tomorrow's math test. Her phone vibrates, nudging her attention to a friend's mental health crisis and the live broadcast of a girl she follows overseas surviving one of many international conflicts. She tunes in briefly to the live stream, overwhelmed by the images, before getting interrupted by a message from mom reminding her to find leftovers for dinner. That, she thinks, can wait. She's watching her weight.

For more than a century, Girl Scouts has created opportunities for girls to develop courage, confidence, and character to make the world a better place. While the girls we serve today have the resources and motivation to make their mark on the world, we also see girls struggling under a combination of circumstances unique to any prior generation.

Accelerated by the onset of a global pandemic, girls are navigating complex social environments, intense mental and emotional health challenges, and unrelenting external messages applying pressure to everything from academic performance to waist size.

The network of adult volunteers and caregivers who enable the Girl Scout experience are often in a position to see or hear about this complex web of lived experiences - a girl's in-person life, her online persona, and her internal monologue. Often, these experiences are incongruent. Almost always, adults who care about girls are also looking for answers.

It is this call for help, coupled with our bold commitment to ensure all girls in New Jersey are able to reach their full potential, that led the Girl Scouts of New Jersey to commission this report.

In these pages, we present the promise and potential of girls who are excelling in the classroom; the stark realities of a generation's mental health and substance abuse crisis; and the harsh truth about violence against girls.

Taken together, we build a Case for Girls: Girls need adult champions. Girls need investments in their future. Girls need advocates in academia and policy-making, effecting change that will support their overall well-being.

Girls need you.



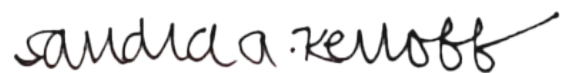
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Join.

A safe space for girls
to learn, grow,
and belong.



Volunteer.

Girls need caring
adult mentors to
prepare them for life.



Donate.

Connect with your
local Girl Scout
council to fund a
girl's future.



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The State of New Jersey Girls

Summary findings from the 2025 New Jersey Girl Report.

Girls across the state of New Jersey demonstrate the resiliency born out of a global pandemic, increasing rates of violence, and pressures driven by social media. While girls are achieving relative success in the classroom, they are engaging in higher rates of substance abuse than their male peers and bearing the crushing pressure of escalating mental and emotional health challenges unrealized in prior generations.

Investigating differences in the lived experiences between girls and boys in areas like academic achievement, adverse childhood experiences, and rates of mental health challenges, this report proves one undeniable fact: **girls and boys have largely different experiences growing up in New Jersey**. Compared to boys, more middle school girls are using controlled substances; more high school girls demonstrate signs of depression; and more girls are survivors of sexual violence.

Yet, against these odds, girls are also outperforming boys in the classroom, exhibiting deeper levels of engagement, a larger pursuit of advanced courses, and higher rates of high school graduation and college enrollment. In short, girls in New Jersey persevere through unprecedented life disruptions, social pressures, and related health consequences to pursue their full potential.

1 in 6

high school girls
reports experiencing
sexual violence.

1 in 4

middle school girls
report using a controlled
substance.

1 in 2

high school girls
demonstrates signs
of depression.

50%

more girls than boys
pursue advanced courses
in school.

3 in 4

high school girls
enroll in college
following graduation.

1 in 3

girls have experienced
at least one adverse
childhood experience.

60%

of Girl Scouts in New Jersey
are challenge-seekers:

“I don’t give up,
even when things
are hard.”

In order to thrive in a rapidly-changing social, professional, and economic environment, girls need the skills and confidence to try new things - even when they’re hard.

The Girl Scout program exposes girls to new experiences in an environment that supports risk-taking and encourages even the most timid challenge-seekers to tackle big goals. The impact is incredible: **95% of tenured Girl Scout alum are now satisfied with their life compared to only 80% of non-alum.**



Dimensions of Wellness

The New Jersey Girl Report offers insight into four key areas of wellness that are critical for the holistic development of girls. With the resources and knowledge to thrive in these areas, girls are set up to reach their full potential.



Physical Health

For girls to thrive, communities should create conditions for girls to develop healthy bodies and live in healthy environments. Proper development of a girl's physical body requires access to nutritional foods, outlets for physical fitness, health education, and more. Girls also need safe, nurturing environments that support their growth, including access to safe housing, quality healthcare, and protective communities of peers and adults who are capable of supporting her overall development.



Emotional Wellness

When girls develop the ability to identify, express, and manage their feelings, they build a foundation for emotional resiliency. Nurturing these capabilities requires safe environments where girls learn to care for the full range of their emotions. This support system, coupled with the presence of caring adults, helps in the reduction of the mental health challenges girls face, including bullying, eating disorders, and depression.



Social Well-being

Robust ecosystems of support including strong family units, adequate economic resources, and opportunities to create and sustain social networks in their communities help girls build social skills and the social connections needed to thrive. In these environments, girls learn both their intrinsic worth – a precursor for healthy self-confidence – and receive necessary support to navigate complicated social situations. Disruptions to this social fabric such as childhood trauma, poverty, or the prevalence of substance abuse in the family can create significant challenges now and later in life.



Life Readiness: Academics and Economics

Encompassing the academic performance observed in classrooms, the skills to pursue career interests, and the personal motivation to succeed, life readiness means girls are prepared to thrive in the real-world. An educational environment which fosters curiosity, champions risk-taking, and encourages girls to try new things prepares them for an evolving job market. Beyond academic success, life readiness also means girls are equipped with practical skills and personal traits needed to make informed decisions, overcome obstacles, and thrive in various environments.

Data Definitions

This report utilizes data from primary sources such as the U.S. Census, Centers for Disease Control, and the New Jersey Department of Education. No original research was conducted for the purposes of this report.

The definition of the most commonly used metrics referenced throughout the report are derived from these primary sources:

Sex: the determination of female/male populations based on the biological attributes of men and women (chromosomes, anatomy, hormones, etc.).

Age: the length of time during which a child has been alive.

Race: a sociological designation that separates people into groups that may share common outward physical appearances and commonalities of culture and history.

Ethnicity: the culture, language, religion, heritage, and customs that a family or people group acquired from a geographic region.

Place of birth: the location where a person was born.

Language: a system of communication (speech, writing, gestures, etc.) used by a particular country or community.

Household type: the composition of the household in which a child under the age of 18 lives. Household type captures makeup such as single parents, married couples, and cohabitating couples as well as the relationship that ties the child to the householder.

The definition of “girls in New Jersey” is defined as youth under the age of 18, unless otherwise noted, whose sex assigned at birth was marked as female.

Throughout the report, Girl Scout outcomes are reported to demonstrate the impact of youth-serving organizations on the well-being of girls. Included metrics are derived from Girl Scouts of the USA’s Girl Scout Research Institute, the annual Girl Scout voice of the customer survey which includes a representative sample of Girl Scouts in New Jersey, or organization measurements from New Jersey Girl Scout councils.





Demographics

Girls living in New Jersey are diverse across every measure. Throughout this report, the experiences of New Jersey girls vary across key demographics, so this section aims to clarify how girls identify and the definitions of these measures used by most reporting agencies cited in the report.

Key Facts: Demographics

- **More than half of girls in New Jersey are girls of color.**
Girls who identify as white make up 41% of the New Jersey girl population. 1 in 5 girls identify with 2 or more races.
- **More than 30% of New Jersey youth do not speak English at home.**
Nearly half a million youth in New Jersey live in a household that speaks a language other than English at home.
- **One-third of New Jersey youth do not live in a two-parent household.**
Over 200,000 youth in New Jersey live in a single-parent or grandparent-led household.
- **3 in 4 girls living in poverty in New Jersey are girls of color.**
Although girls who identify as white make up 41% of the total girl population, they comprise only 23% of girls living below the poverty level.





Total Population Under 18 Years

U.S. Census, ACS 1-Year Estimates, Table S0101, 2023, New Jersey

	Total Youth	Percent of Youth
Female (0-17)	981,048	49%
Male (0-17)	1,028,117	51%

Total Population by Age Group Under 18 Years

U.S. Census, ACS 1-Year Estimates, Table S0101, 2023, New Jersey

	Under 5 Years		5 to 9 Years		10 to 14 Years		15 to 17 Years	
	Total Youth	%	Total Youth	%	Total Youth	%	Total Youth	%
Female (0-17)	251,876	26%	265,620	27%	284,405	29%	179,147	18%
Male (0-17)	266,652	26%	272,842	27%	303,044	29%	185,579	18%

Total Population by Race and Ethnicity Under 18 Years

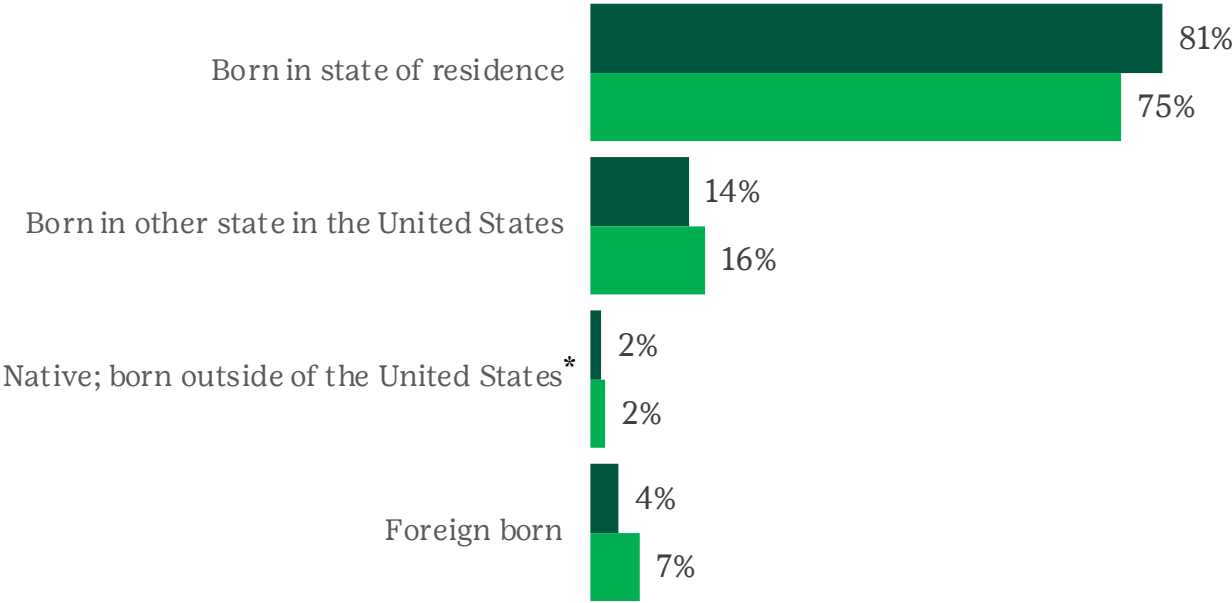
U.S. Census, ACS 1-Year Estimates, Tables B01001A-I, 2023, New Jersey

	Female (0-17)		Male (0-17)	
	Total Youth	%	Total Youth	%
American Indian and Alaska Native	9,166	1%	15,227	1%
Asian	93,789	10%	100,526	10%
Black or African American	126,829	13%	136,316	13%
Native Hawaiian	216	0%	360	0%
Other Race	125,697	13%	127,131	12%
2 or More Races	184,211	19%	183,962	18%
White	399,127	41%	426,669	42%
Hispanic	294,587	30%	301,436	29%

Note: The U.S. Census separates race and ethnicity into two demographic questions. Data presented here represents that separation.

Place of Birth by All Youth Under 18 Years

U.S. Census, ACS 1-Year Estimates, Table B06001, 2023, New Jersey



*Born in another country to a United States citizen or territory of the United States such as Puerto Rico, U.S. islands, or military base.

United States New Jersey

Language Spoken at Home for Total Youth Age 5-17

U.S. Census, ACS 1-Year Estimates, Table B16007, 2023, United States and New Jersey

	United States		New Jersey	
	Total Youth	%	Total Youth	%
Speak only English	42,430,906	78%	1,024,617	69%
Speak Spanish	8,181,135	15%	281,017	19%
Speak other Indo-European languages	1,739,935	3%	101,154	7%
Speak Asian and Pacific Island languages	1,274,054	2%	52,108	3%
Speak other languages	688,709	1%	31,741	2%



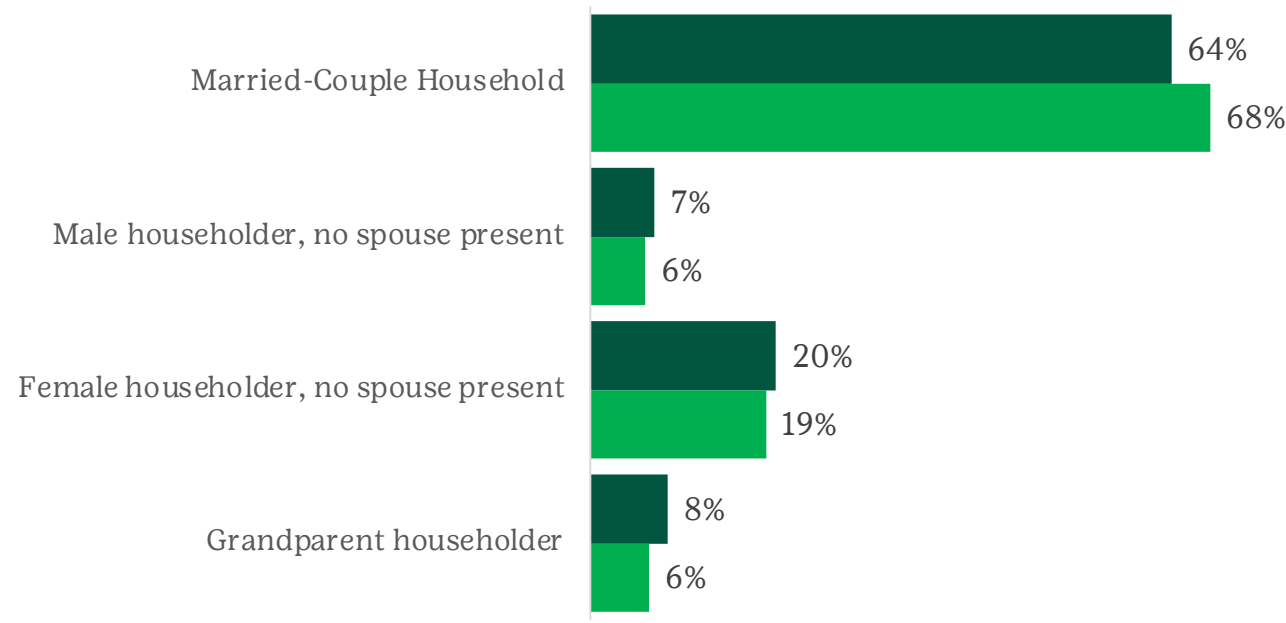
Nearly half a million New Jersey youth speak a language other than English at home. That’s more than 30% of the youth population.





Household Type for Total Youth Under 18 Years

U.S. Census, ACS 1-Year Estimates, Table B09002, 2023, United States and New Jersey



United States New Jersey

Over 200,000 New Jersey youth live in a household led by a non-parent.

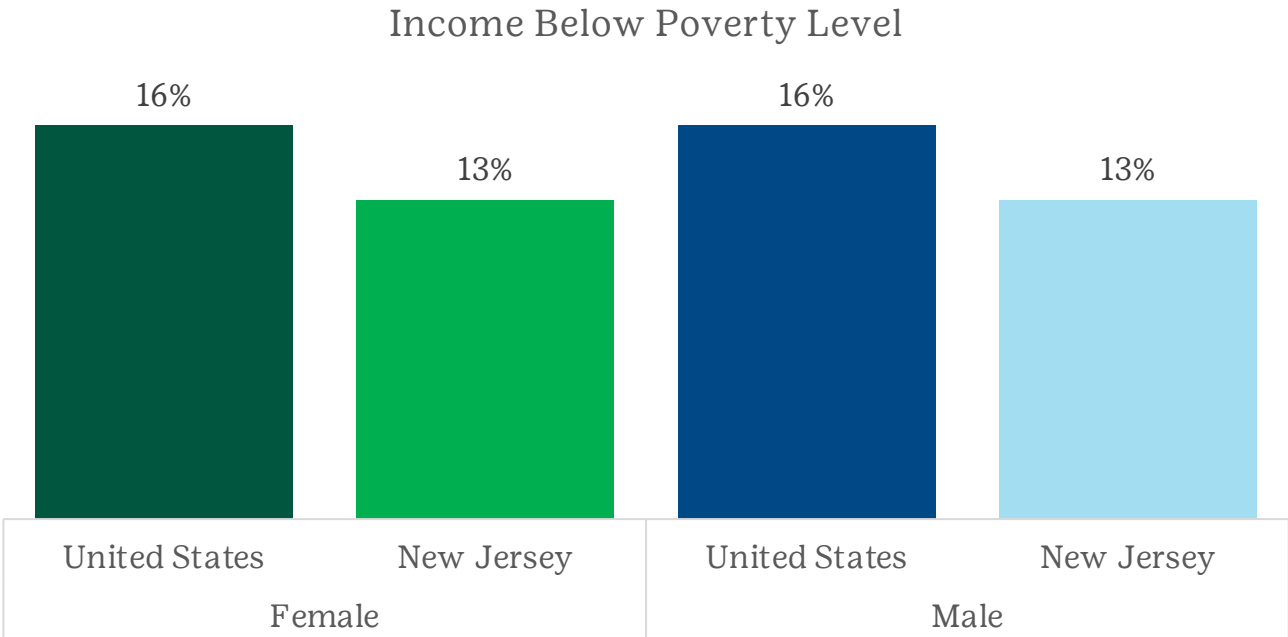
Relationship to Primary Householder for Total Youth Under 18 Years

U.S. Census, ACS 1-Year Estimates, Table B09018, 2023, United States and New Jersey

	United States		New Jersey	
	Total Youth	%	Total Youth	%
Own child	63,483,116	88%	1,801,053	90%
Biological child	59,813,521	83%	1,740,538	87%
Adopted child	1,355,461	2%	19,318	1%
Stepchild	2,314,134	3%	41,197	2%
Grandchild	5,883,593	8%	123,085	6%
Other relatives	1,891,810	3%	55,682	3%
Foster child or other unrelated child	1,210,469	2%	27,054	1%

Poverty Level in the Prior 12 Months, Youth Under 18 Years

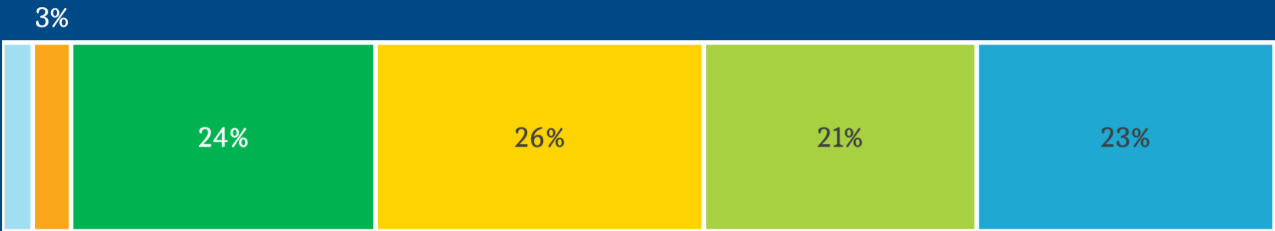
U.S. Census, ACS 1-Year Estimates, Table B17001, 2023, United States and New Jersey



A DEEPER LOOK: Poverty Level by Race and Ethnicity

3 in 4 New Jersey girls living below the poverty level are girls of color.

The percentage of New Jersey girls living below the poverty level are disproportionately girls of color: while 41% of all New Jersey girls are white, they make up only 23% of girls living below the poverty level.



U.S. Census, ACS 1-Year Estimates, Table B17001A-I, 2023, New Jersey





Physical Health

For girls to thrive, communities should create conditions for them to develop healthy bodies and live in healthy environments.

Proper physical development for girls requires access to nutritional foods, outlets for physical fitness, health education, and more. Girls also need safe, nurturing environments that support their growth, including access to safe housing, quality healthcare, and protective communities of peers and adults who are capable of supporting their holistic development.

Key Facts: Physical Health

- **1 in 6 high school girls has experienced sexual violence.**
36% more high school girls than boys in New Jersey report experiencing sexual violence.
- **1 in 4 middle school girls consumed alcohol - 50% more than boys.**
Middle school girls engage in substance abuse at a higher rate than boys in every measured category.
- **Girls have a distorted view of their body.**
34% of girls believe they are overweight, but only 27% meet the medical definition of being overweight or obese.
- **2 out of 5 girls are uninsured or under-insured.**
Girls in New Jersey are more likely than boys to face insurance barriers in receiving healthcare.
- **Twice as many girls as boys are visiting an ER multiple times a year.**
7% of girls in New Jersey are admitted to the ER two or more times per year compared to less than 4% of boys.



Healthy Behaviors

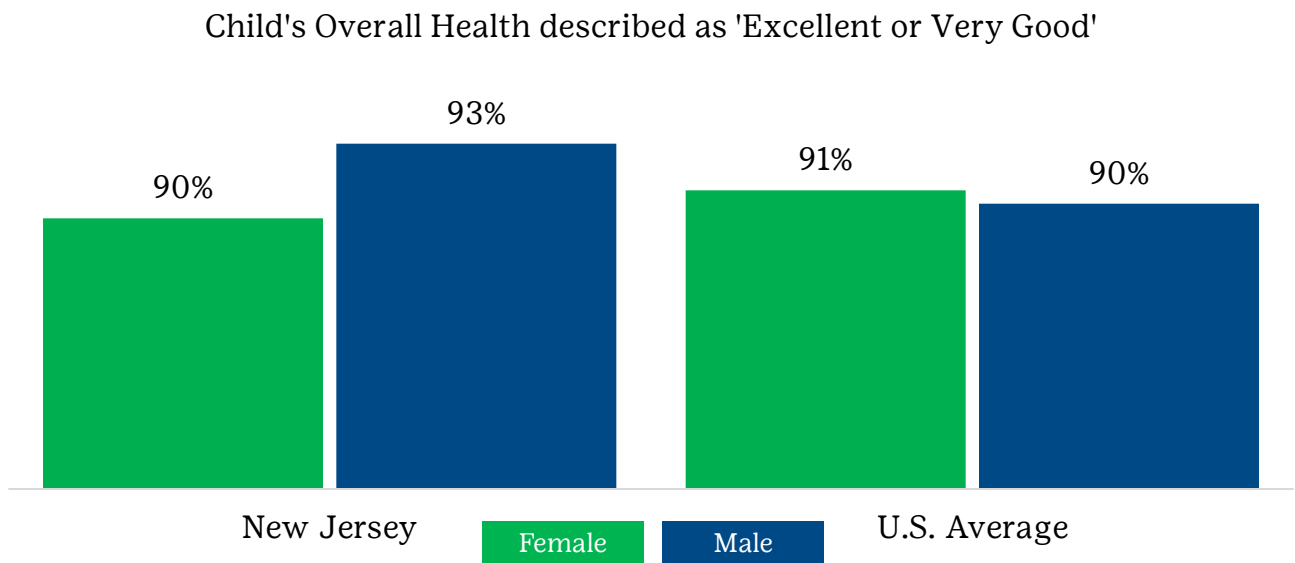
Learning how to care for their physical needs is a foundational skill girls must develop before the independence of young adulthood. Research shows that forming healthy habits like eating balanced meals, getting enough physical activity and sleep, and limiting screen-time overall are proven to support general wellness later in adulthood ([Harris, 2005](#)).

Girls in New Jersey rank lower than boys *and* the national average as being in excellent health. The National Survey of Children's Health found that 90% of parents of girls in New Jersey described their daughter's health as excellent or very good compared to 93% of boys in the state. As a barometer of the general physical health of youth, parents of girls are less optimistic about their child's health.

Supporting the overall physical wellness of girls requires a combination of at-home habits that help girls gain independence in their healthcare, as well as several community factors discussed throughout this section.

Fewer girls in New Jersey are reported as being in excellent health.

National Survey of Children's Health, 2022-2023, United States and New Jersey



Girl Scout Impact

Her Mind *and* Body

Girl Scouts creates a supportive environment for girls to learn healthy habits while loving the skin they're in. Through active, outdoor programming and badges like Fun with Movement and Uniquely Us, girls learn to take care of their body *with confidence*.

72%

of New Jersey Girl Scouts have a positive sense of self:

“I really like the way I look!”

Body Image and Weight

One of the most evident challenges uniquely faced by girls in pursuit of learning healthy behaviors is the relationship between body image and body weight. Girls in New Jersey are facing two competing challenges.

On one hand, a child's weight is an important indicator of overall physical health and well-being. **In New Jersey, 1 in 4 high school girls meet the medical definition of being overweight or obese** - a health issue that poses serious short- and long-term consequences. Children with obesity are more at risk to develop autoimmune diseases such as arthritis and type 1 diabetes; are at an increased risk for cardiovascular disease; and have a mortality rate 3x higher than the normal population ([Marcus, 2022](#)).

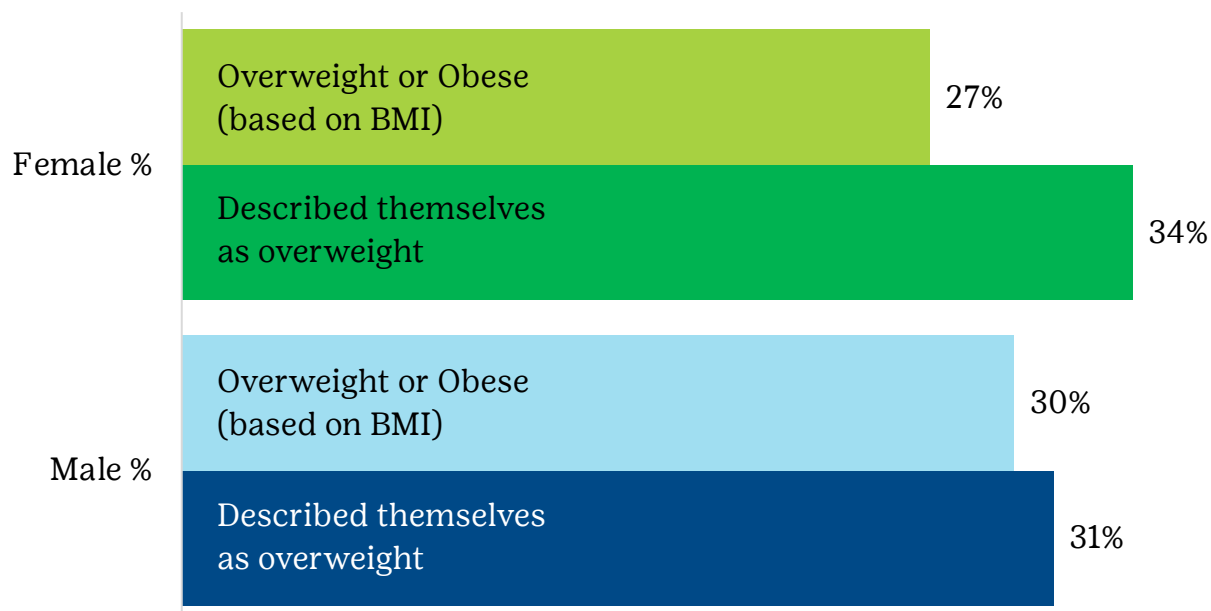
On the other hand, girls hold a disproportionately negative view of their body: 34% of high school girls in New Jersey describe themselves as overweight while only 27% actually meet the medical criteria. By comparison, more high school boys than girls are actually overweight or obese (30%). Body dissatisfaction has been long-linked to serious physical and emotional consequences including eating disorders, depressive symptoms, and lower rates of physical activity ([Gordon, 2021](#)).

The opposing gap in the perception high school youth have of their bodies suggests that, to significant degrees, girls and boys are receiving very different messages about an acceptable body weight. For girls, these messages create a significant risk in persistently carrying a negative - and often, distorted - view of their body.

While high school girls have a more negative view of their body compared to boys, fewer girls are actually overweight.

Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2021, New Jersey

Perceived vs Actual Body Weight among
New Jersey High School Youth



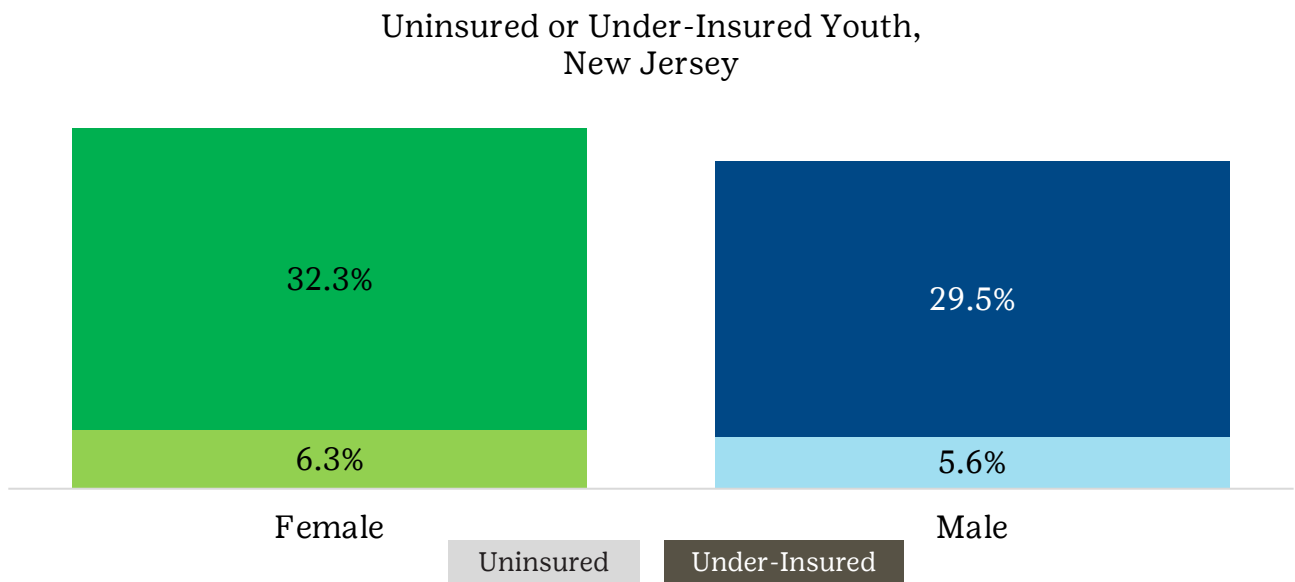
Health Insurance

The availability of affordable, adequate health insurance is a critical component of girls' overall physical well-being. **In New Jersey, 10% more girls than boys face insurance barriers to receiving necessary healthcare** - a total of 2 in 5 girls. In the National Survey of Children's Health, 11% of parents report difficulty paying for their daughter's medical bills. Research shows that the lack of access to health insurance delays young people from receiving healthcare services they need throughout their development, contributing to poorer health outcomes later in life ([Olson, 2005](#)).

At a societal level, communities bear significant costs when children remain uninsured: in the first-ever cohort study to follow the longitudinal outcomes of insuring uninsured youth, researchers found that insuring uninsured children not only improves their health, but saves nearly \$3,000 per insured child per year ([Flores, 2017](#)).

Nearly 2 in 5 girls in New Jersey do not have adequate health insurance coverage. In total, more girls than boys are un- or under-insured.

National Survey of Children's Health, 2022-2023, New Jersey



Lower rates of consistent healthcare coverage are associated with higher rates of emergency medical care services ([Olson, 2005](#)). 7% of girls in New Jersey visit an emergency room 2 or more times in a 12-month period compared to 4% of boys. Research points to a lack of preventative healthcare services among uninsured or under-insured children as the most significant driver of increased use of ambulatory healthcare, which not only drive up community costs but also increase the likelihood of long-term healthcare consequences for children when consistent healthcare providers are unavailable.

2x

more girls than boys
in New Jersey are
visiting an ER
2 or more times
in a 12-month period.

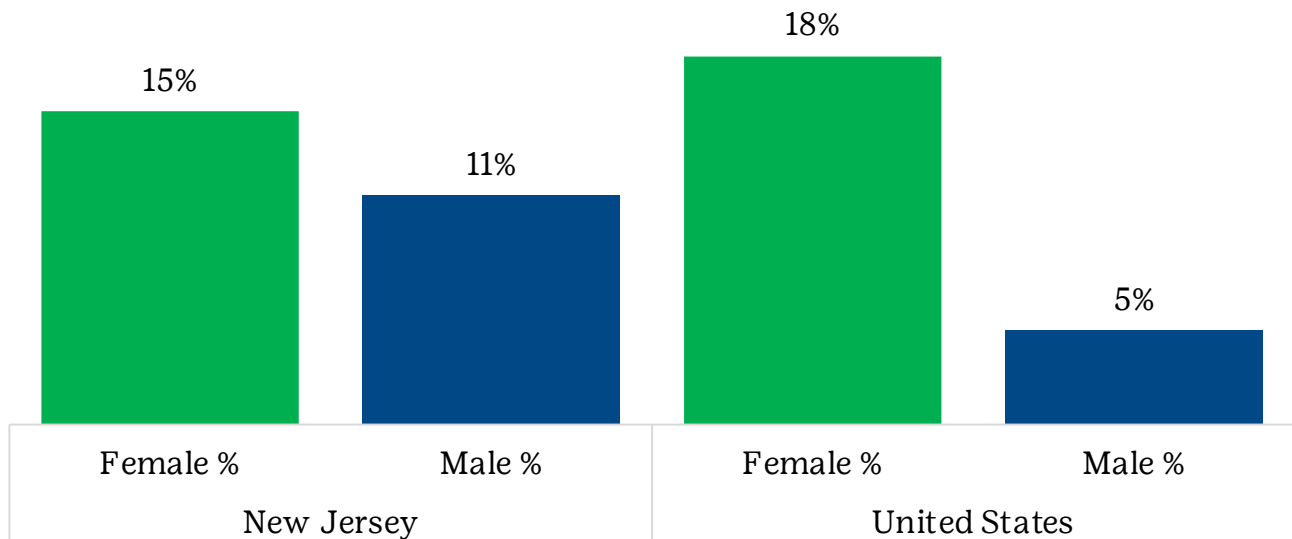
Sexual Violence

The trauma of experiencing sexual violence presents devastating physical and emotional consequences in the short- and long-term. Multiple studies prove that survivors often under-report, so it's particularly notable that even then, 36% more high school girls than boys report having experienced sexual abuse - a total of 1 in 6 high school girls.

1 in 6 high school girls in New Jersey has experienced sexual violence.

Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2021, United States and New Jersey

High school youth
reporting experiencing sexual violence.



The correlation between experiencing sexual violence and other negative health outcomes is significant ([Clarke, 2023](#)). In a study of youth who experienced sexual violence:

- 90% presented with post-traumatic stress symptoms shortly after the assault and 72% continued to show symptoms a year later.
- 89% experienced immediate depressive symptoms, 76% showed signs of anxiety, and those symptoms persisted in more than half of survivors.

The negative effects survivors of sexual violence experience are shown to transcend beyond mental and emotional health consequences, deeply impacting physical health, social relationships, and academic performance ([Clarke, 2023](#)).

- Participants in the study were twice as likely to report problems with sleep than before the incident (87% of teenagers) as well as an increase in headaches, stomach pains, and a loss of appetite.
- The education of teenage survivors was disrupted, with 47% experiencing long absences from school (more than 30 days).
- 25% of teenage survivors report starting self-harm behaviors after the assault.



Substance Abuse

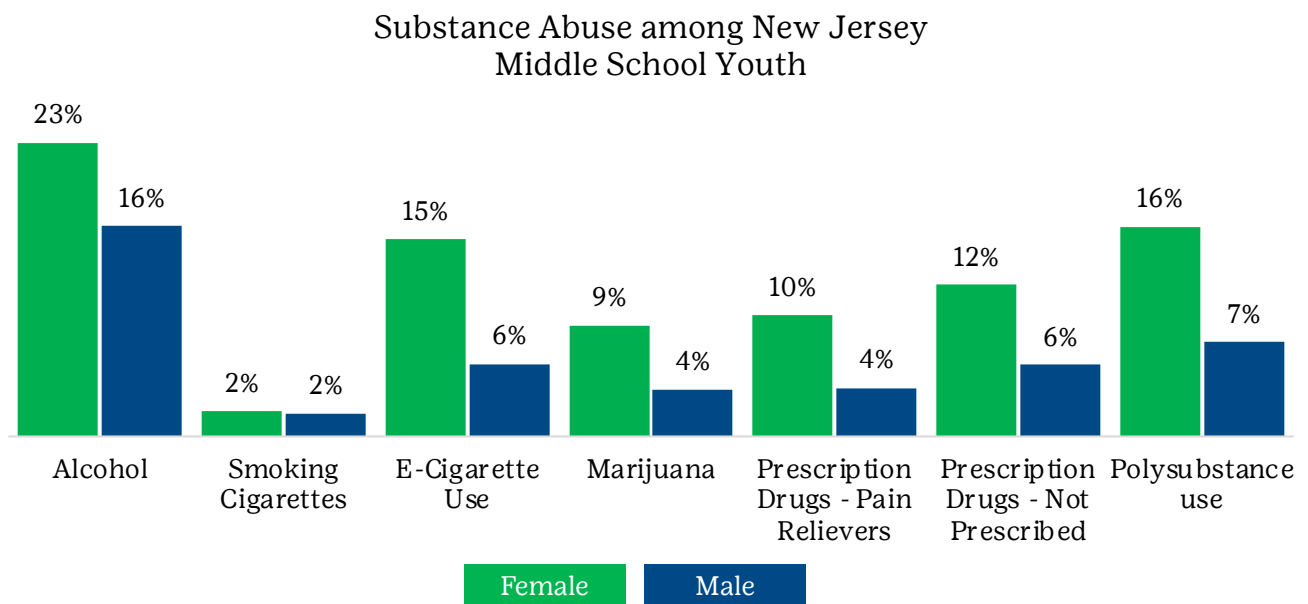
The use of controlled substances such as alcohol, tobacco, illicit drugs, or the misuse of prescription medication by youth can lead to immediate consequences that impact overall well-being and increase the likelihood of poor long-term health outcomes.

Among youth in New Jersey, middle school girls abuse controlled substances more than boys across every measure, including 3x as many girls abusing e-cigarettes and twice as many girls abusing prescription medications. This use of controlled substance early in adolescence poses significant risks for long-term substance abuse.

According to the Surgeon General, people who use alcohol before the age of 15 are four times more likely to develop an alcohol use disorder, compared to those who have their first drink at age 20 or older ([Office of the Surgeon General, 2016](#)).

Across all categories, more middle school girls abuse controlled substances compared to their male peers.

2023 New Jersey Middle School Risk and Protective Factors Survey, New Jersey Department of Human Services



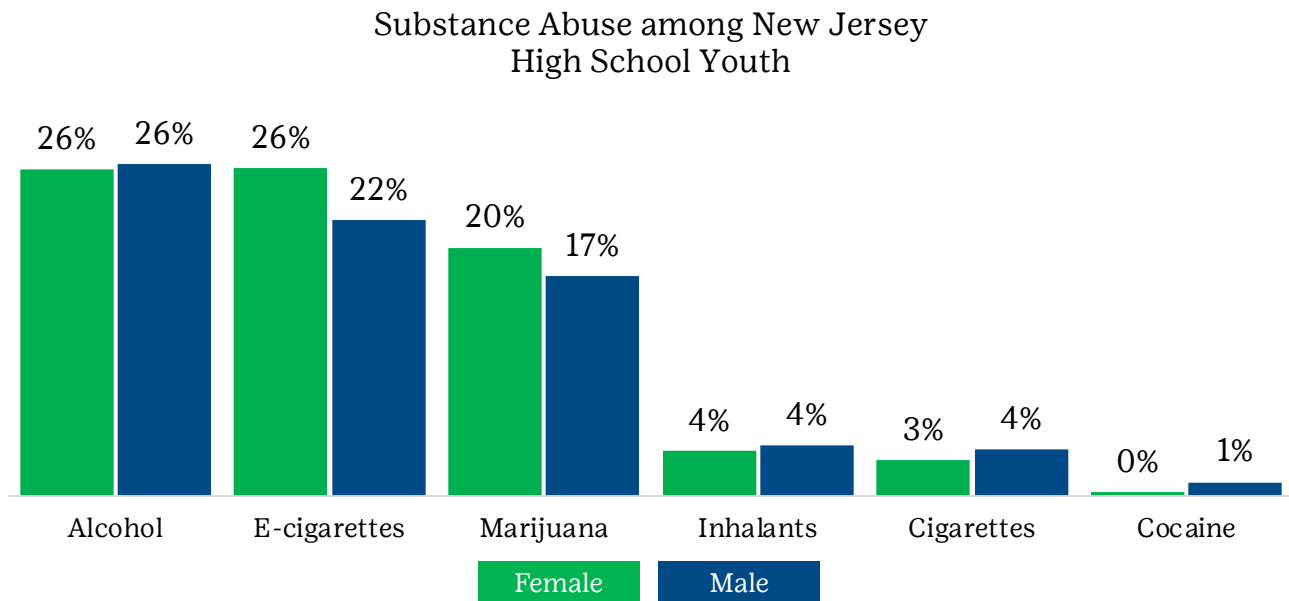
Substance abuse trends among middle school youth in New Jersey persist into high school, with higher rates of abuse occurring across all controlled substances. While the gap in the rate of use closes between girls and boys across some substances, girls continue to abuse e-cigarettes and marijuana at a notably higher rate than boys.

Research suggests that early onset use of marijuana contributes to higher risks of cognitive impacts such as a decline in IQ, memory, and processing speed ([Gonzalez, 2012](#)). Notably, other factors such as the frequency of use also determine the degree of physical impacts, but with 1 in 10 middle school girls and 1 in 5 high school girls engaging in marijuana use in New Jersey, girls are more likely to face long-term health consequences than their male peers.

Substance Abuse, continued

The rate of substance abuse with e-cigarettes and marijuana is notably higher among high school girls compared to boys.

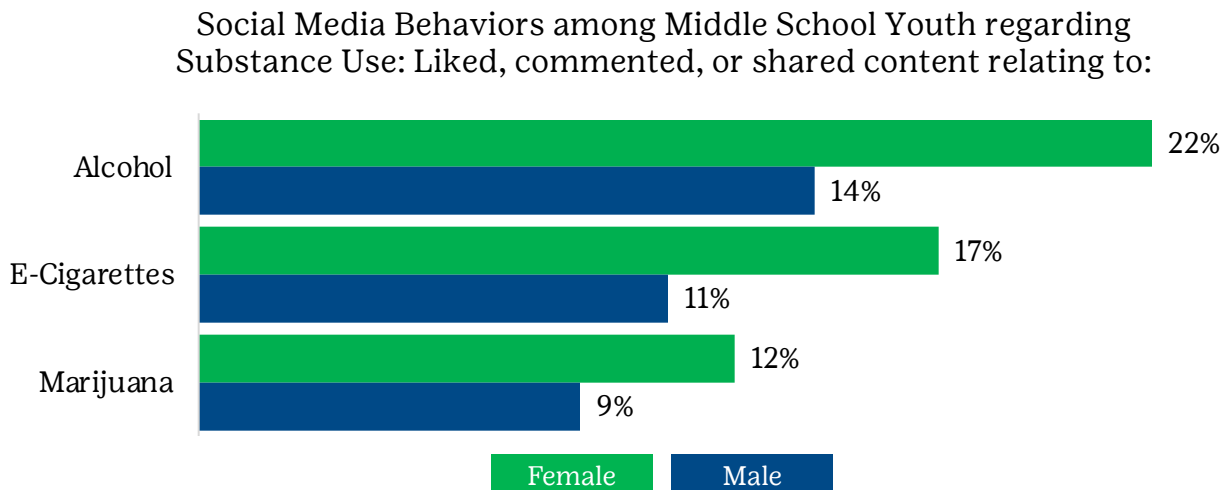
Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2021, New Jersey



One significant challenge communities face in dissuading the use of controlled substances among teenagers is combating the role of social media in positively portraying substance use. Middle school girls are more likely than boys to like, share, or comment on content related to alcohol, e-cigarettes, or marijuana. Studies show that a more frequent use of social media among girls increased the use of controlled substances ([Ohannessian, 2017](#)). This compounding effect between substance use and social media increases the urgency for more direct interventions and conversations among teenage girls.

1 in 4 middle school girls in New Jersey engages with social media content related to alcohol - a rate 50% higher than middle school boys.

2023 New Jersey Middle School Risk and Protective Factors Survey, New Jersey Department of Human Services





Life Readiness

Encompassing the academic performance observed in classrooms, the skills to pursue career interests, and the personal motivation to succeed, life readiness means girls are prepared to thrive in the real-world.

An educational environment which fosters curiosity, champions risk-taking, and encourages girls to try new things prepares them for an evolving job market. Beyond academic success, life readiness also means girls are equipped with practical skills and personal traits needed to make informed decisions, overcome obstacles, and thrive in various environments.

Key Facts: Life Readiness

- **New Jersey girls overcome a gender gap in math proficiency as they progress through school.**
While girls trail boys by 3% in meeting math expectations in 5th grade, by 11th grade, 2% more girls than boys meet math proficiency standards.
- **By 11th grade, New Jersey girls narrow the science proficiency gap.**
29% of graduating girls demonstrated science proficiency compared to 30% of boys. Notably, more than 70% of girls did not meet expectations.
- **New Jersey girls are significantly more likely to take advanced courses compared to boys.**
40% of girls are enrolled in courses such as Advanced Placement compared to 30% of boys.
- **More female graduates enroll directly into a college program.**
76% of all New Jersey female graduates enter a post-secondary program immediately following graduation compared to 64% of boys.
- **Despite promising academic progress, fewer girls pursue STEM.**
Only 31% of New Jersey girls select a Science or Engineering major upon beginning college compared to 45% of boys.

Throughout this section, source data which includes students identifying as nonbinary is provided as a footnote. While the purpose of this report is to identify distinctions between students identifying as female or male, the outcomes of these students is provided in recognition of their achievements and with the intention of transparency.



K-12 Student Proficiency

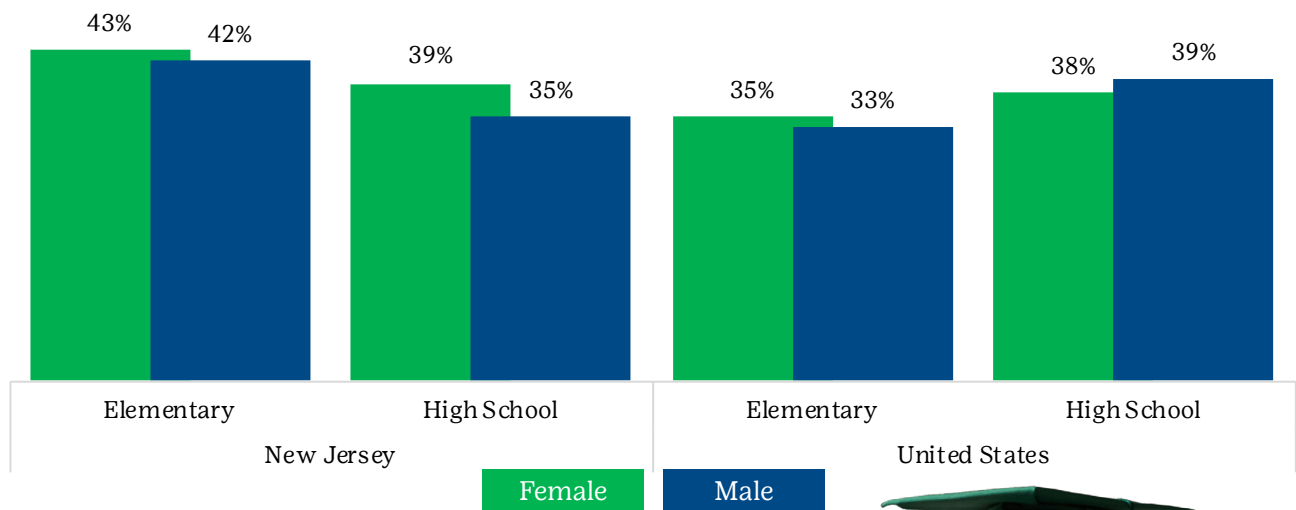
A significant portion of a child's development occurs in an academic setting, creating an entwined relationship between academic performance and personal identity. Researchers consistently draw relationships between overall child wellness and academic performance, meaning, child wellness impacts academic performance and vice versa ([Kaya, 2021](#)).

For girls, this relationship is complicated by a greater level of external pressure to excel academically. Studies show girls face higher expectations than boys to do well in school, driven by female-male stereotypes, historic academic performance, and graduation rates ([Sicard, 2021](#)). In New Jersey, girls are surpassing these high expectations, with girls are more likely to earn A's and B's compared to their male peers and girls across the country.

According to parents, more girls are achieving mostly A's and B's compared to boys, with high school girls outperforming boys 39% vs 35%.

National Survey of Children's Health, 2022-2023, United States and New Jersey

Student Achieves Mostly A's and B's in School



70%

of New Jersey Girl Scouts
are more confident in school
because of Girl Scouts.



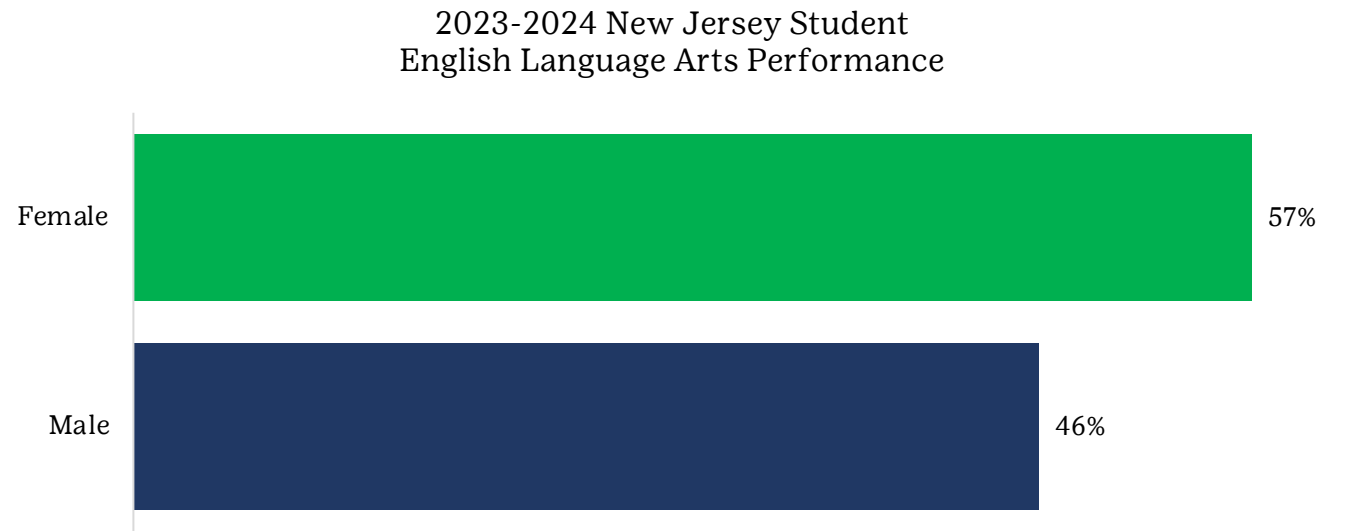
K-12 Student Proficiency: English Language Arts

The New Jersey Learning Assessments measure students’ progress toward the New Jersey Student Learning Standards in English Language Arts (ELA), mathematics, and science. Students participate in state assessments between Grade 3 through high school, with key benchmarks at Grade 3 and Grade 8. In ELA and math, student scores range from 650 to 850, measured against these approved proficiency levels. Level 3 and above is considered proficient.

Indicates on- or above-grade-level performance.				
Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5
Did Not Yet Meet Expectations.	Partially Met Expectations.	Approaching Expectations.	Met Expectations.	Exceeded Expectations.
Score Range: 650-699	Score Range: 700-724	Score Range: 725-749	Score Range: 750-Varies (based on grade and topic)	Score Range: Varies (based on grade and topic) -850

Girls in the United States have consistently surpassed boys in English Language Arts assessments, with researchers offering varying explanations ranging from cognitive development (girls are more easily able to utilize both hemispheres of the brain necessary for writing and reading comprehension tasks) to social pressure (reading and writing are generally regarded as feminine in nature) ([Reilly, 2018](#)). Results of ELA assessments in New Jersey validate this trend, with 11% more girls meeting proficiency expectations than boys. It’s important to note, though, that 43% of girls across the state did not meet expectations, justifying continued focus on increasing ELA competencies for all youth.

Girls outperform boys in the New Jersey English Language Arts assessment, with 57% of girls meeting proficiency expectations compared to 46% of boys.
New Jersey Department of Education, 2023-2024



*296 students identifying as nonbinary completed this exam. 63% met proficiency expectations.

K-12 Student Proficiency: English Language Arts

Achieving reading proficiency by third grade is a critical milestone in education, transitioning from *learning to read* to *reading to learn* in fourth grade. The Annie E. Casey Foundation reports that three quarters of fourth grade students who are poor readers in third grade will remain poor readers in high school, ultimately predicting graduation rates ([AECF, 2010](#)).

While the 69% of third grade girls in New Jersey who meet proficiency standards are outperforming boys, we still see one-third of girls on track to experience academic challenges without the necessary reading skills to excel.

69% of third grade girls perform at or above expectations in reading, nearly 10% higher than boys.

New Jersey Department of Education, 2023-2024

2023-2024 New Jersey 3rd Grade
ELA Performance Levels



K-12 Student Proficiency: Mathematics

Prevailing stereotypes have long-held that girls excel in ELA while under-performing in math and science, often attributed to inherent developmental differences. However, multiple studies have debunked this belief, finding that disparities are more often influenced by social pressures and instructional biases than biological factors. Case in point, countries with the largest gender gaps in STEM assessments present the most overt gender stereotypes ([Kuchynka, 2022](#)).

Social pressures significantly affect students’ academic engagement and self-perception. Research by the American Association of University Women (AAUW) demonstrates that girls often experience a lack of encouragement in STEM fields, leading to lower self-confidence in science and math ([Hill, 2010](#)). In contrast, boys are socialized to embrace competitiveness and assertiveness, traits that enhance their performance in these areas.

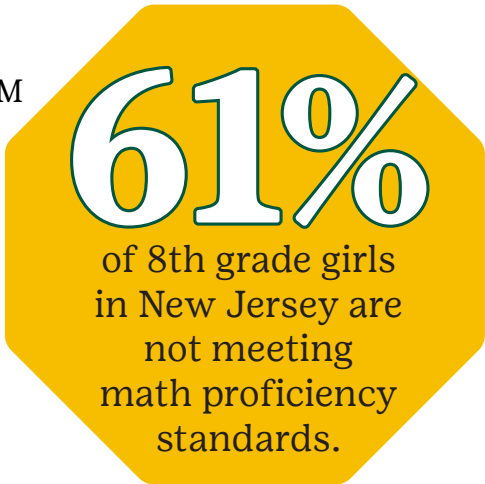
Girls progress to surpassing boys in graduation readiness proficiency in mathematics by 11th grade, narrowing the gender gap.

New Jersey Department of Education, 2023-2024

	Proficiency (Level 3-5) All Grades	Proficiency (Level 3-5) 8th Grade	Graduation Ready 11th Grade
Female	37%	39%	56%
Male	40%	39%	54%
Difference	3% Lower	Equal	2% Higher

On the whole, girls in New Jersey are closing this gender gap. Across the state, girls were within 3% of boys in meeting expectations in math assessments, and at the time of graduation, girls surpassed their male peers in math readiness. This remarkable moment of progress is cause for celebration and an opportunity to cast an even larger commitment to progress STEM skills among New Jersey youth: 61% of 8th grade girls are still not achieving math proficiency.

Continuing New Jersey’s progress in narrowing gender gaps in STEM fields requires a multi-pronged approach including overcoming social pressures proven to significantly affect students’ academic engagement and self-perception. Research by the American Association of University Women (AAUW) demonstrates that girls often experience a lack of encouragement in STEM fields, leading to lower self-confidence in science and math ([Hill, 2010](#)). In contrast, boys are socialized to embrace competitiveness and assertiveness, traits that enhance their performance in these areas.



K-12 Student Proficiency: Science

Academic achievement in science is of particular importance as the nation continues to struggle with the widely-reported gender gap in advanced STEM fields. Studies endeavor to identify the root cause of the low entrance of women into the STEM workforce while technological development grows ([Verdugo-Castro, 2022](#)). The answer to closing the gap is complex, but evidence suggests it requires interventions as early as elementary school to grow girls' STEM confidence and interest, as gender differences in STEM are shown to be developed as a mental model as early as 6th grade ([Brauner, 2018](#)).

The role of adults play a significant part in developing girls' STEM competencies. On one hand, research shows that instructional bias plays a role in creating a STEM divide. Teachers may unconsciously favor boys in science discussions, reinforcing the notion that boys are naturally better in these subjects ([Copur-Gencturk, 2023](#)). On the other hand, a series of studies found that group mentoring with girls and adults involved in STEM fields increased girls' intentions to enroll in STEM electives in school ([Stoeger, 2017](#)).

Sustaining an interest in STEM with the support of adults and peers is a key aspect; so, too, is applying classroom concepts to the real-world. The New Jersey Student Learning Assessment for Science shifted away from an emphasis on measuring a student's ability to remember facts to an emphasis on designing solutions to problems based on an understanding of scientific concepts. This deeper approach reflects three dimensions of foundational scientific principles - science and engineering practices, disciplinary core ideas, and crosscutting concepts. The assessment is scored using a range of 100-300, measured against these approved proficiency levels. Level 3 or above is considered proficient.

Indicates proficiency.			
Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Below Proficient. Score Range: 100-149	Near Proficiency. Score Range: 150-199	Proficient. Score Range: 200-242	Advanced Proficiency. Score Range: 243-300





GIRL SCOUT IMPACT

Interest, Confidence, and Competence in STEM

The Girl Scout STEM program is designed to provide hands-on experiences that spark curiosity for life. With adult guidance, exposure to a wide-variety of activities, and a team of peers, Girl Scouts develop four key skills:

STEM Interest

A positive affect and curiosity towards STEM.

STEM Confidence

Feelings of self-efficacy in relation to STEM.

STEM Competence

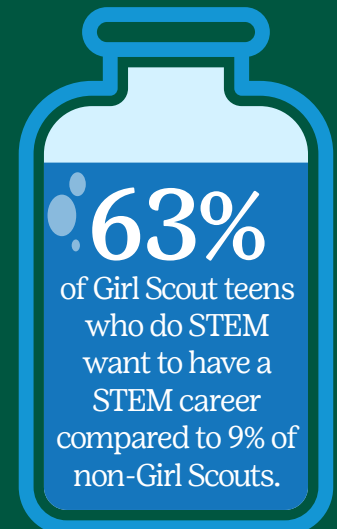
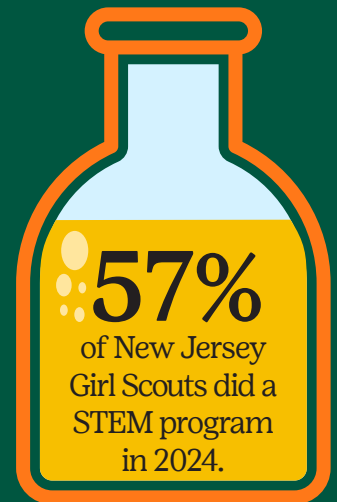
Ability to think scientifically when working to solve a problem.

STEM Value

Understanding the role STEM plays in making the world a better place.

A 2022 study conducted by the [Girl Scout Research Institute](#) found that girls who participate in just one STEM event grow in all four STEM outcomes, **including two-thirds of teenage Girl Scouts expressing an interest in a STEM career.**

By comparison, a study released by [Junior Achievement](#) found that only 9% of all teen girls share a similar interest in STEM.

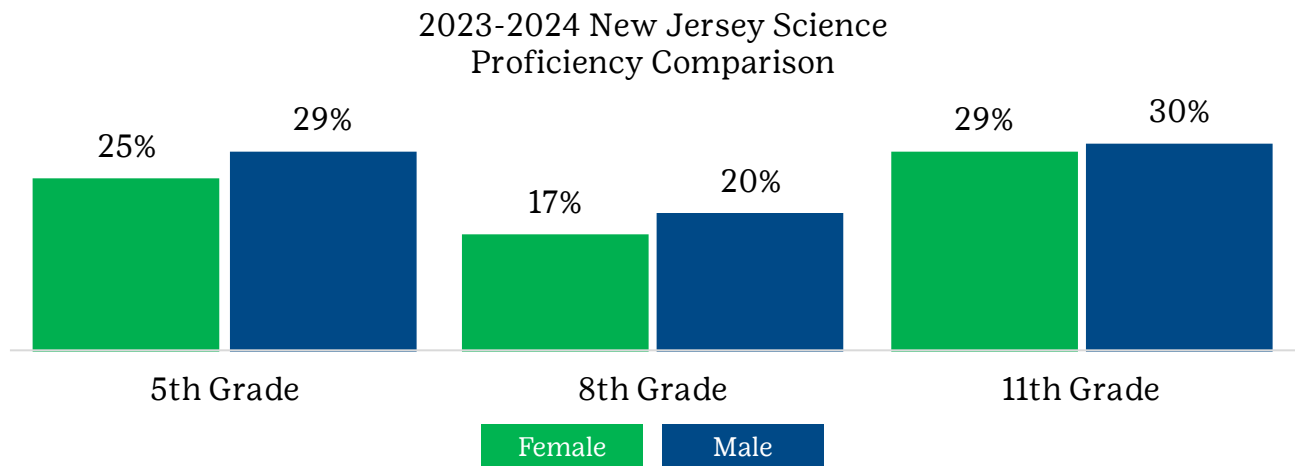


K-12 Student Proficiency: Science, continued

Compared to boys, girls in New Jersey are showing promise in closing the academic achievement gap in STEM. In the 2023-2024 assessment, girls progressively improved in narrowing the proficiency gap in the science assessment, with a (4%) difference among 5th graders closing to a (3%) gap among 8th graders and a (1%) gap among 11th graders.

Girls narrow the STEM proficiency gap as they progress through school.

New Jersey Department of Education, 2023-2024

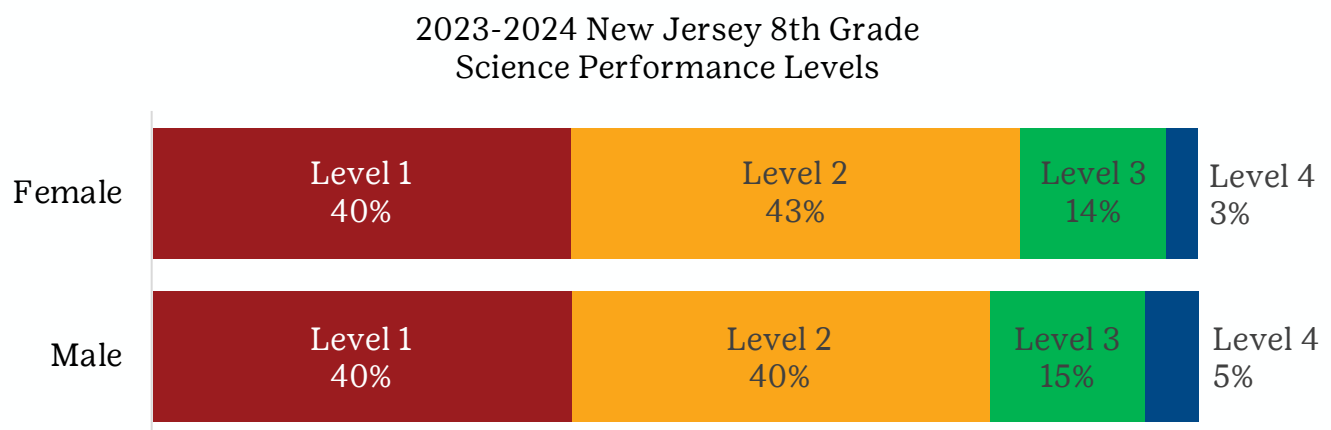


*Less than 100 students identifying as nonbinary completed each exam, with 18%, 40%, and 48% of students achieving proficiency respectively.

While narrowing the gender gap is noteworthy progress, of broader concern is the significant group of girls who are not achieving proficiency in science through the classroom. Looking deeper into eighth grade performance, **83% of girls did not achieve proficiency in the 2023-2024 exam.** Increasing exposure to STEM and confidence among girls must remain a top priority to expand the overall STEM workforce.

8th grade girls trail slightly behind boys in science proficiency, with 17% scoring at a Level 3 or higher compared to 20% of boys.

New Jersey Department of Education, 2023-2024



*Less than 100 students identifying as nonbinary completed this exam. 40% met proficiency expectations.

Student Engagement

Academic success is not a proven indicator of success in life. In fact, in a pivotal longitudinal study, school performance emerged as the least important indicator of life-satisfaction (Layard, 2014). Utilizing 40 years of cohort data, the study identified key variables to being life-ready, defined with key attributes across economic, social, and personal domains. Evaluating variables from family background (economic and psycho-social family dynamics), child characteristics (including intellectual performance and emotional health), and adult outcomes (such as income, employment, and physical health), the research found that emotional well-being including attributes such as self-discipline and social behavior were the reliable indicators of life-satisfaction.

As young people spend a significant portion of their development in a school setting, these critical life-skills are often developed within the context of school. Student engagement includes measures that indicate how young people are developing pivotal attributes such as goal-setting, grit, and personal motivation. As Layard identified, these non-cognitive skills are much more reliable predictors for achieving success later in life.

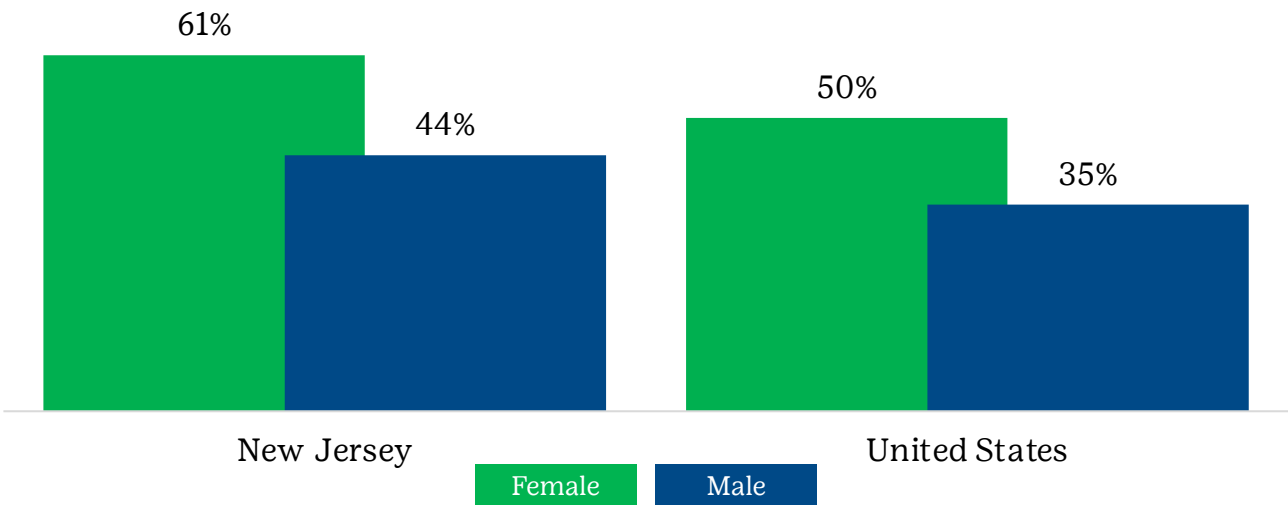
By that measure, nearly two-thirds of girls in New Jersey are poised to succeed. 61% of New Jersey girls are engaged in school according to their caregiver, compared to only 44% of boys. Girls in New Jersey outperform the national average of all girls by 20%.



A higher portion of girls in New Jersey demonstrate academic engagement than boys across the state and all youth across the country.

National Survey of Children's Health, 2022-2023, United States and New Jersey

Parents believe child is always engaged in school.



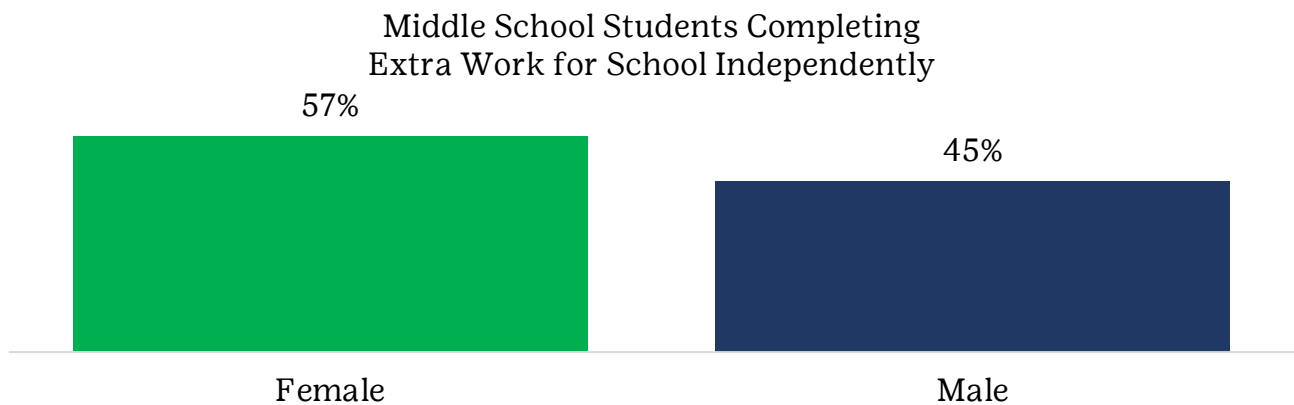
Student Engagement, continued

By design, student independence is intended to increase as a student progresses through school. The development of self-motivation, self-efficacy, and a desire to achieve are necessary for young people to transition from academics to adulthood. When students display a high level of motivation in classroom settings, studies show they develop intrinsic characteristics to succeed ([Gupta, 2017](#)).

Over half of middle school girls in New Jersey display this trait. 57% report going above and beyond to complete school-work, while only 45% of boys share the same self-motivation.

New Jersey middle school girls display a higher level of self-motivation than boys, reporting they often choose to complete extra work.

2023 New Jersey Middle School Risk & Protective Factors Survey, New Jersey Department of Human Services

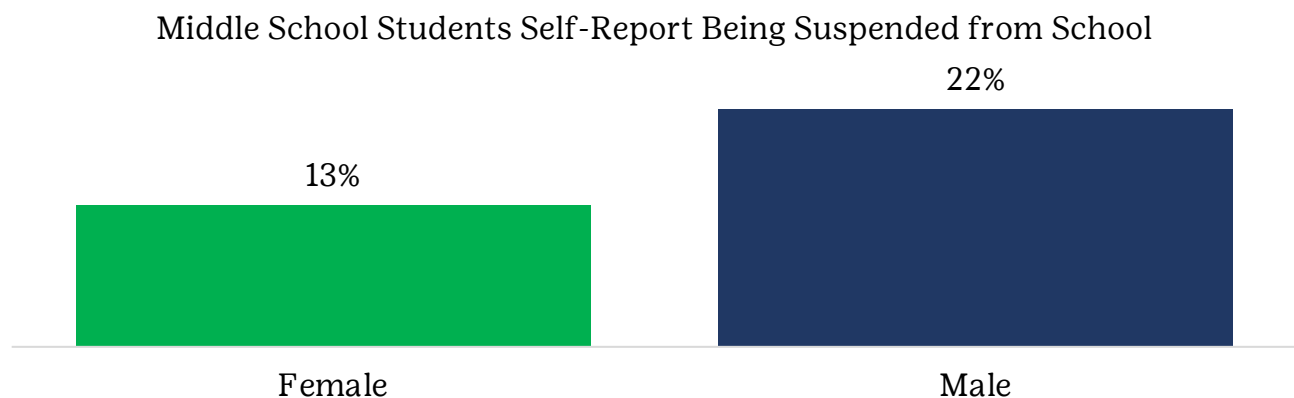


*100 students identifying as nonbinary completed this survey. 49% agreed with the statement.

Similarly, girls are more likely to display self-restraint and adhere to expectations in school. 13% of girls in New Jersey self-disclose being suspended from school compared to 22% of boys. Notably, 1 in 8 girls admit to receiving disciplinary suspension, a possible cause for concern as girls build habits and identity in early adolescence.

40% more middle school boys receive school suspension than girls.

2023 New Jersey Middle School Risk & Protective Factors Survey, New Jersey Department of Human Services



*100 students identifying as nonbinary completed this survey. 16% agreed with the statement.

Student Engagement, continued

A tangible result of highly motivated students is enrollment in advanced courses. In New Jersey, many students have choices for advanced course enrollment through three programs:

Advanced Placement

Rigorous courses offered in high school which allow students to take an Advanced Placement exam at the end of the year. Depending on the student’s score, a college they choose to attend may accept these scores to place out of introductory course and/or receive college credit.

International Baccalaureate

The IB program is an internationally recognized diploma completed through a two-year course of study offered within a student’s high school. Global universities offer college credit or placement for IB courses.

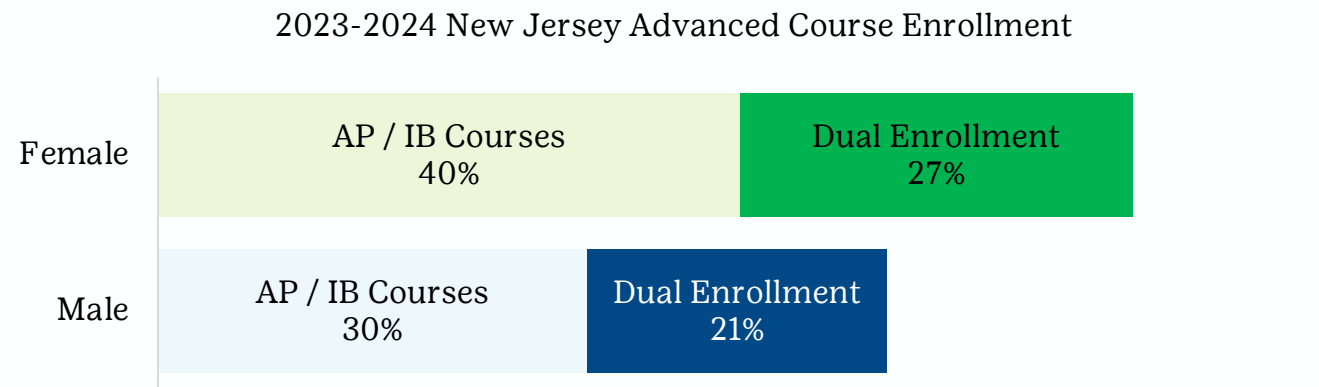
Dual Enrollment

Students enroll in college courses at partnering universities and receive high school credit.

Most studies find strong relationships between enrollment in advanced courses and success during post-secondary education ([Ogut, 2021](#)) but few have found a broader correlation to success outside of higher education - meaning, little linkages exist between advanced courses and life outcomes.

In one of the only comprehensive evaluations of the Advanced Placement program, researchers uncovered two competing truths. On one hand, evidence shows a genuine increase in scientific skill through participation in advanced courses. The study also found that advanced courses increase stress and lower student confidence in their ability to be successful in college and career. While these factors can contribute to increased motivation and skills towards self-efficacy, the added pressure must be weighed against other stressors girls already face.

New Jersey girls are more likely to pursue advanced courses than boys.
New Jersey Department of Education, 2023-2024



*Of the students identifying as nonbinary, 36% and 21% respectively enrolled in advanced courses.

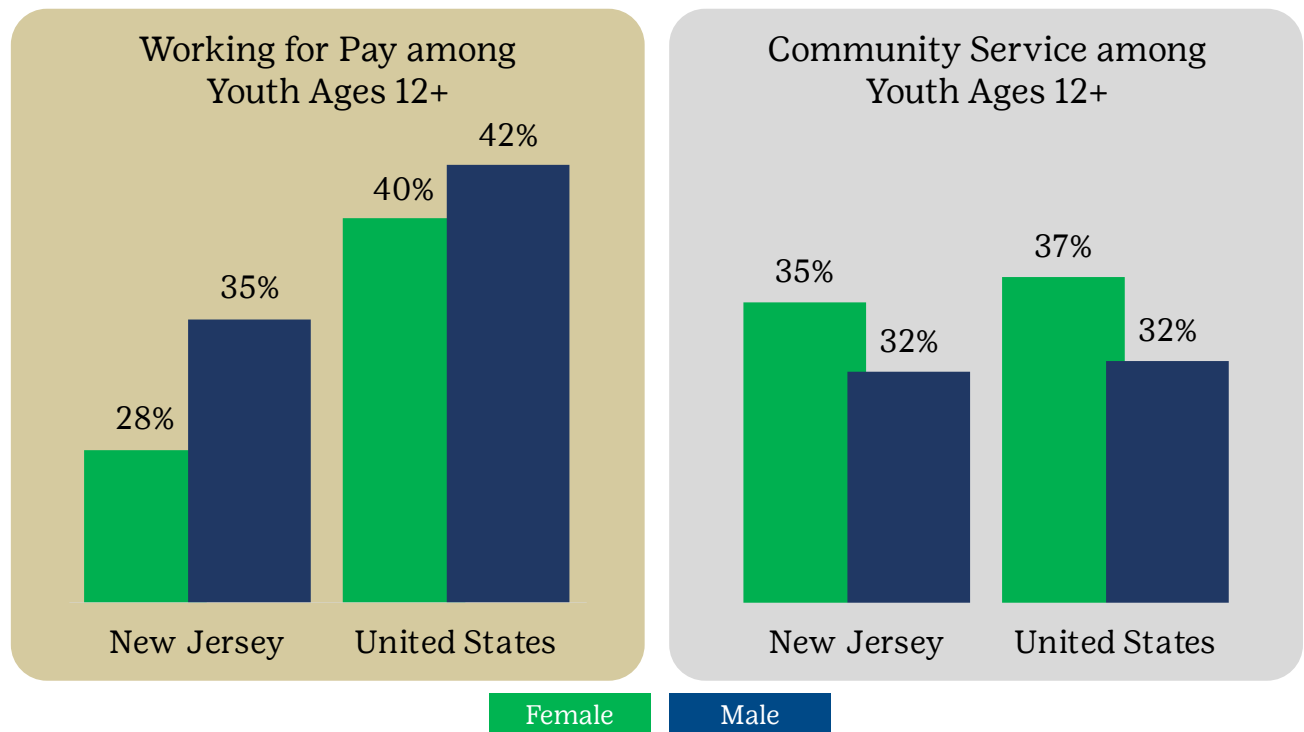
College and Career Readiness

Navigating the school-to-work transition for young people can often feel abrupt, particularly during times of economic or industry turbulence. Many students begin to bridge this gap with work or community commitments outside of school settings. Although researchers are conflicted on whether working during secondary education is beneficial or consequential, it's important to understand the significant differences in participation in these experiences between girls and boys in New Jersey.

Girls in New Jersey are significantly less likely to work for pay compared to their male peers across the state and the national average. Only 28% of teenage girls in New Jersey work for pay, compared to 35% of New Jersey boys and 40% of all girls in the U.S.

Fewer teenage girls in New Jersey are working for pay compared to boys and the national average, while slightly more are engaged in service.

National Survey of Children's Health, 2022-2023, United States and New Jersey



Research regarding the role of working for pay during secondary education largely begins by citing contradictory studies ([Monahan, 2011](#)). A foundational study does begin to uncover the cause of such divergent assessments: the intensity of work demands. Researchers evaluated students with no work commitments compared to students with low-demand and high-demand commitments (>10 hours per week).

Students with high-demand jobs showed the worst outcomes - low academic achievement and low engagement. Importantly, students with low-demand work commitments presented with the most favorable outcomes, exhibiting higher grades, higher motivation, and higher life aspirations compared to non-working students ([Singh, 2007](#)).

College and Career Readiness, continued

Engaging in community service has proven to increase social capital of young people, deepen self-understanding, and increase support systems for young people ([Flanagan, 2014](#)). In preparing girls for the school-to-work transition or increasing the likelihood of achieving success in post-secondary education, community service offers girls experience and exposure to life outside an academic setting.

It's worth noting the underlying gender bias in out-of-school engagements between girls and boys in New Jersey: **early in adolescence, boys are being compensated for their contributions outside the classroom, and girls are not.** 35% of boys are engaged in work-for-pay, and 35% of girls are engaged in community service. This early introduction to the worth of work may contribute to the well-documented challenge of the “pay ask gap,” aiming to combat the U.S. gender pay gap by coaching women to ask for their worth ([Roussille, 2024](#)).



GIRL SCOUT IMPACT

Sales Skills + Service

The best outcome for our future is a world where young people do not have to choose between the benefits of learning fundamental job skills and positively contributing to their community. In Girl Scouts, both are embedded into the annual program.

The Girl Scout Entrepreneurship Program, including the iconic Cookie Program, helps girls develop concrete business skills like setting goals and making a plan, as well as social characteristics necessary for success, like upholding commitments and meeting new people.

Evidence of Girl Scouts taking action in their communities is visible in towns and cities across New Jersey. Contributions from Girl Scouts leave an impact in animal shelters, elementary schools, and neighborhood parks. Best of all, a girl's contribution to her community leaves a lasting impact within herself.



71%

of New Jersey
Girl Scouts
participated in
entrepreneurship
programs in 2024.

74%

of New Jersey
Girl Scouts
participated
in community
service in 2024.



Graduation and Beyond

Students in the graduating class of 2024 largely began high school during the first academic year impacted by the COVID-19 global pandemic. Amidst the disruptions to learning and increases in life stressors detailed throughout this report, girls in New Jersey demonstrated impressive resiliency to achieve an on-time graduation rate of 93%. Consistent with national trends, 4% more girls than boys achieved a 4-year graduation rate.

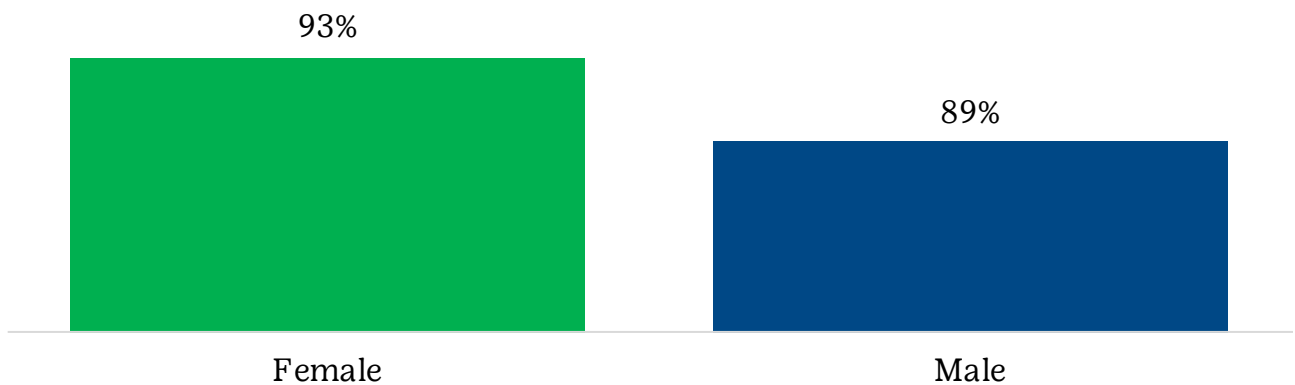
Searching to uncover the reason for persistent differences in graduation rates between girls and boys, the Brookings Institute released a study by Reeves and Kalkat noting the substantial gender gap in high school graduation rates – consistently 6% nationally ([Reeves, 2023](#)). Researchers studying school achievement and graduation rates find that “high school females put greater effort into school” due to the ‘social cost.’

According to a study by Workman and Heyder, boys report negative social outcomes for trying hard and performing well in school while girls report positive results. This leads girls to not only work harder and put more effort into homework, but also place a high level of personal value on academic achievement ([Workman, 2020](#)). In short, the social expectations for girls and boys are different: girls are expected to do better in school, while boys are discouraged from putting in effort to excel academically.

New Jersey girls achieved a four-year graduation rate 4% higher than boys.

New Jersey Department of Education, 2023-2024

2023-2024 New Jersey Four-Year High School Graduation Rate



Graduation and Beyond, continued

Decisions about life after high school mark one of the first pivotal steps towards independence and autonomy for young adults. The path to higher education is chosen by most American high school graduates. The National Center for Education Statistics reports that 62% of high school graduates in 2022 enrolled in college by the fall ([NCES, 2023](#)).

In New Jersey, 3 out of 4 female high school graduates follow this path, 12% more enrollments than boys. As large bodies of evidence suggest, obtaining a college degree leads to several improved life outcomes including higher earning potential and job stability. The Pew Research Center evaluated attitudes and evidence surrounding college completion in 2024, asking, ‘is it still worth it?’ By several measures, the answer is yes ([Fry, 2024](#)).

- 78% of young women holding a Bachelor’s degree or more were employed full time, compared to 69% of young women with a high school education.
- The median household income of young women holding a Bachelor’s degree or more is \$65,000 compared to \$36,000 among young women with a high school education.
- Young women holding a Bachelor’s degree or more experienced less job loss during the COVID-19 recession than young women completing some college or high school graduates.

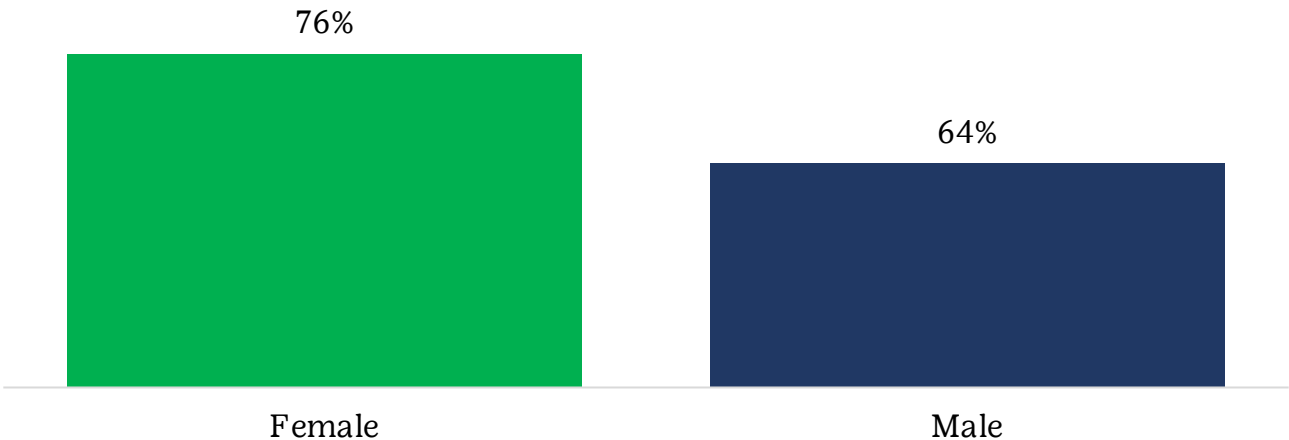
By these measures, most girls in New Jersey continue to obtain the qualifications and experiences necessary to achieve success later in life, continuing the high-achievements observed throughout K-12 education.

However, notable gaps begin to develop as girls select their college course of study.

3 out of 4 female high school graduates enrolled in college the fall following their high school graduation – 12% more than boys.

New Jersey Department of Education, 2023-2024

2023-2024 Fall College Enrollment Percentage,
New Jersey High School Graduates

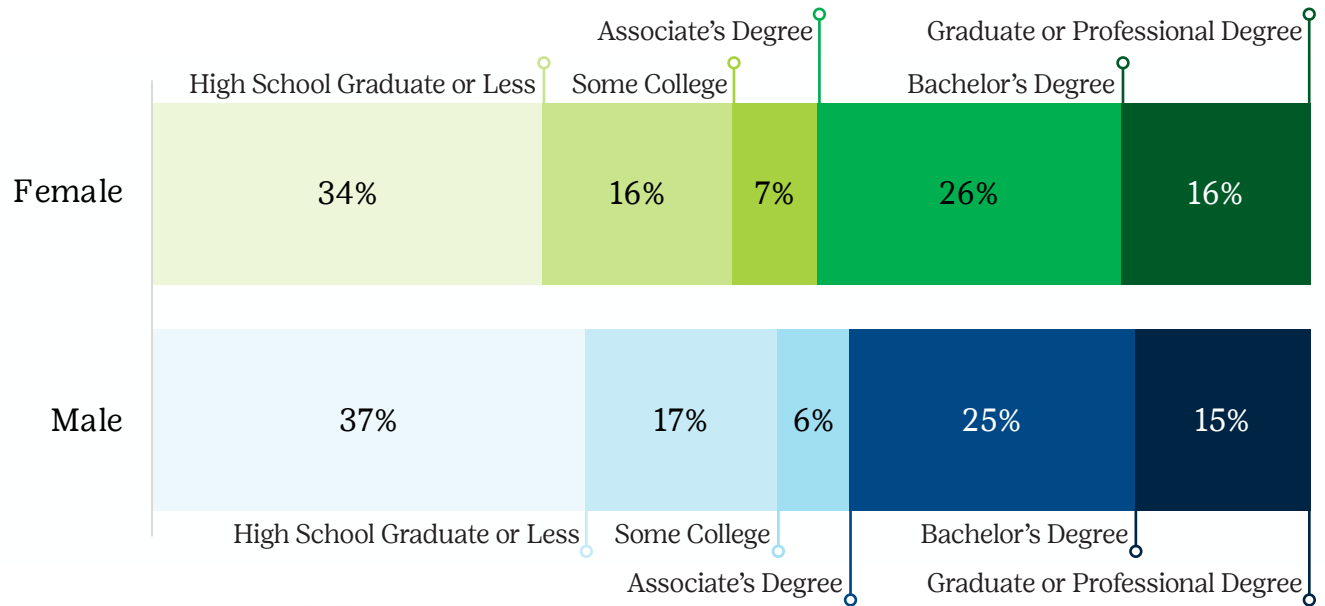


Graduation and Beyond, continued

Consistent with the higher rates of college enrollment among young women, on the whole, more female residents of New Jersey hold post-secondary degrees than men, with 42% of women holding a Bachelor's degree or more compared to 40% of men.

More women than men in New Jersey hold post-secondary degrees, with 42% of female residents earning a Bachelor's or more vs. 40% of men.

U.S. Census, American Community Survey, Table B15001, 2023, New Jersey



90%

of New Jersey Girl Scouts develop a sense of social responsibility:

“I want to make the world a better place to live in.”

Graduation and Beyond, continued

Collectively, by these measures, young women in New Jersey are academically well-positioned to obtain advanced degrees and pursue high-earning careers. As outlined in this report:



Girls narrow the proficiency gap in science to within 1% of boys and surpass boys by 2% in math proficiency at the time of graduation.



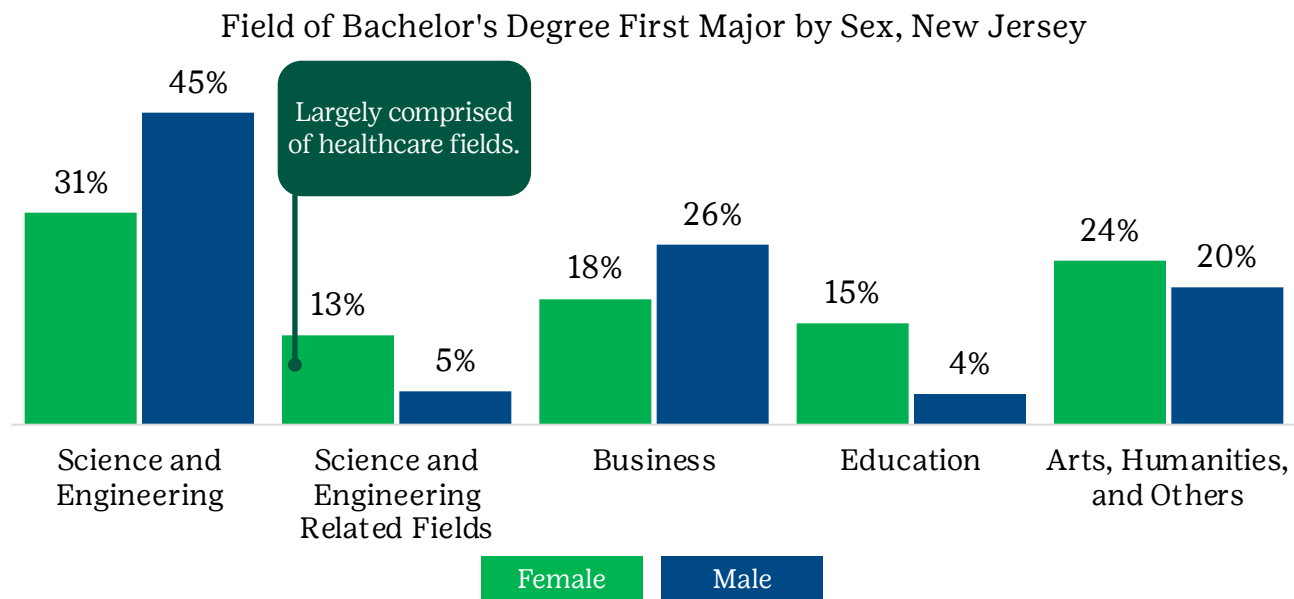
Throughout high school, **more girls are enrolled in advanced coursework**, then graduate at a higher rate than boys.



A larger portion of female graduates **enroll directly into college** and more women than men complete a Bachelor's program in New Jersey.

Yet, young women are selecting advanced degrees in STEM at staggeringly lower rates compared to young men. Evaluating the first major declared by college students, 14% fewer women pursue science and engineering than men - 31% vs 45%. Science and Engineering related fields describe largely care-taking healthcare fields predominately occupied by women. Women in New Jersey are also far less likely to pursue Business degrees, with only 18% of young women declaring Business as a major compared to 1 in 4 young men.

Women are pursuing STEM and business-related Bachelor's degrees at a significantly lower rate than men, trailing 14% in STEM and Engineering.
U.S. Census, ACS 1-Year Estimates, Table S1502, 2023, New Jersey



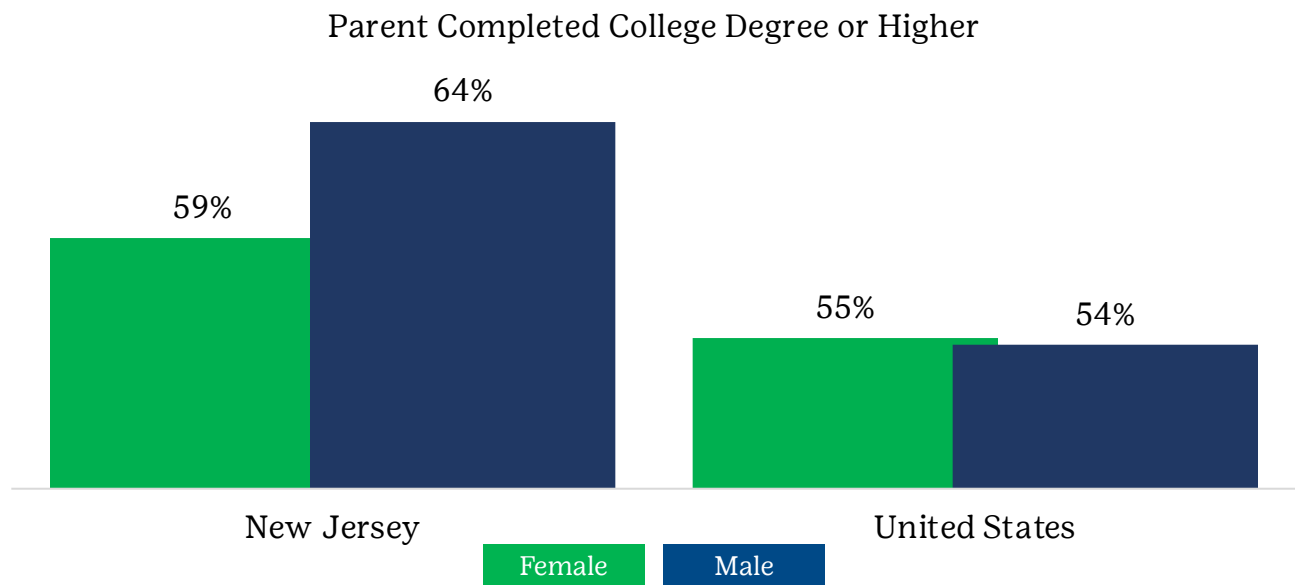
Graduation and Beyond, continued

The academic achievements of New Jersey girls and progress made in historically under-performing competencies like math and science are remarkable advancements, evidence of encouraging progress. The positive trajectory is also indicative of the promise and potential of New Jersey girls. As outlined in [Emotional Wellness](#) and [Social Well-being](#), New Jersey girls are facing significant personal, family, and social stressors that create documented barriers to academic achievement. And yet, they persevere.

Overall academic achievements, and specifically the extent to which New Jersey girls are pursuing higher education, is particularly impressive given family history: fewer than 60% of girls in the state live in a household with a college-educated parent. Empirical research shows that young adults with at least one college-educated parent are far more likely to complete college compared with adults with less-educated parents ([Fry, 2024](#)).

Fewer girls in New Jersey live in a household with a college-educated parent compared to boys.

National Survey of Children's Health, 2022-2023, United States and New Jersey



The study from the Pew Research Center also demonstrates that even after completing a Bachelor's degree program, adults have better economic outcomes on average if they have at least one college-educated parent - they earn more and accumulate more wealth than degree-earners without a college-educated parent.

In summary, girls overcome early-learning gaps in math and science achievement, narrowing or surpassing the margins with boys; complete more advanced coursework than their male peers; graduate at a higher rate and surpass male college enrollment numbers without the same level of generational experience. And yet, even New Jersey girls have not closed the STEM workforce gap in college. This must remain a critical area of focus for stakeholders of girls' well-being.



GIRL SCOUT IMPACT

Academic Success: Lifelong Impact

Girl Scouts is the perfect companion to a strong education for girls, now and in the future.

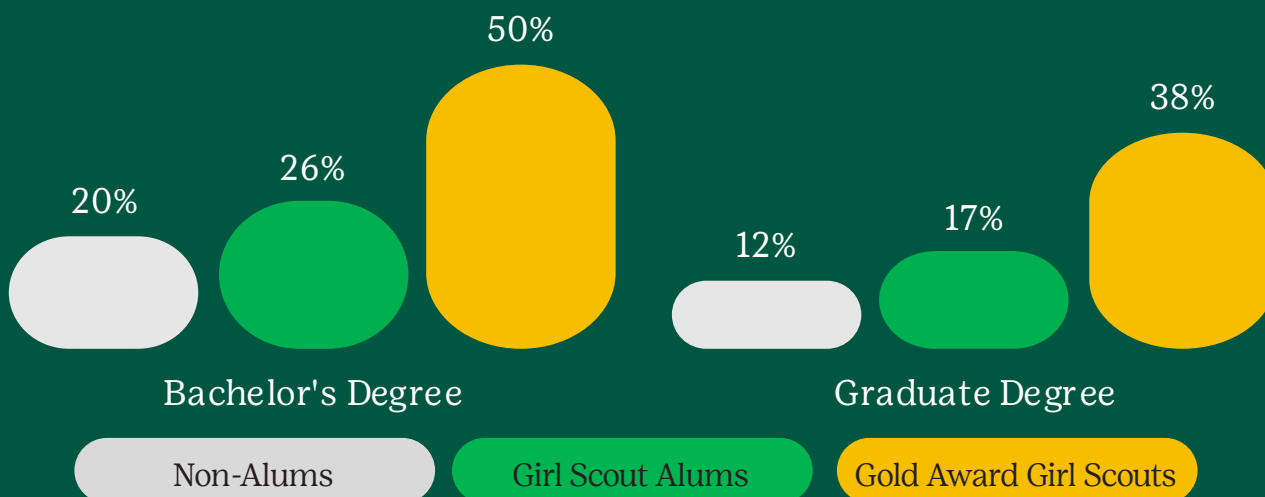
First, Girl Scouts doesn't feel like school, and that's the point! Girls learn skills they won't find in a classroom (like entrepreneurship) through immersive program (like the renowned Cookie Program). These experiences are based on experiential, hands-on activities that build skills, curiosity, and camaraderie with peers.

Importantly, one of the most critical outcomes of the Girl Scout program is increasing girls' confidence and courage to try new things. Emphasizing resilience sets girls up for success in the classroom *and* in life.

Research proves it: The Girl Scout Alum Study found that Girl Scout alums attain a higher level of education than their peers, and the difference more than doubles among girls who complete the prestigious Girl Scout Gold Award.



Highest Education Complete





Emotional Wellness

When girls develop the ability to identify, express, and manage their feelings, they build a foundation for emotional resiliency.

Nurturing these capabilities requires safe environments where girls learn to care for the full range of their emotions. This support system, coupled with the presence of caring adults, helps in the reduction of the mental health challenges girls face, including bullying, eating disorders, and depression.

Key Facts: Emotional Wellness

- **Half of high school girls meet a clinical definition of depression.**
53% of high school girls report feeling sad or hopeless for two or more weeks in a row - 11% higher than boys.
- **1 in 4 high school girls seriously considered attempting suicide.**
30% more girls than boys experience suicidal ideation - 26% of all high school girls vs 20% of high school boys.
- **Parents struggle to obtain mental health care for their daughter.**
52% of parents of girls find difficulty in obtaining needed mental health treatment, with 1 in 5 noting it is extremely difficult or impossible.
- **1 in 4 middle school girls feel unsupported by adults at school in stopping bullying behavior.**
Girls increasingly struggle with cyberbullying, leaving them feeling isolated from adult support at school.



Mental Health and Suicide

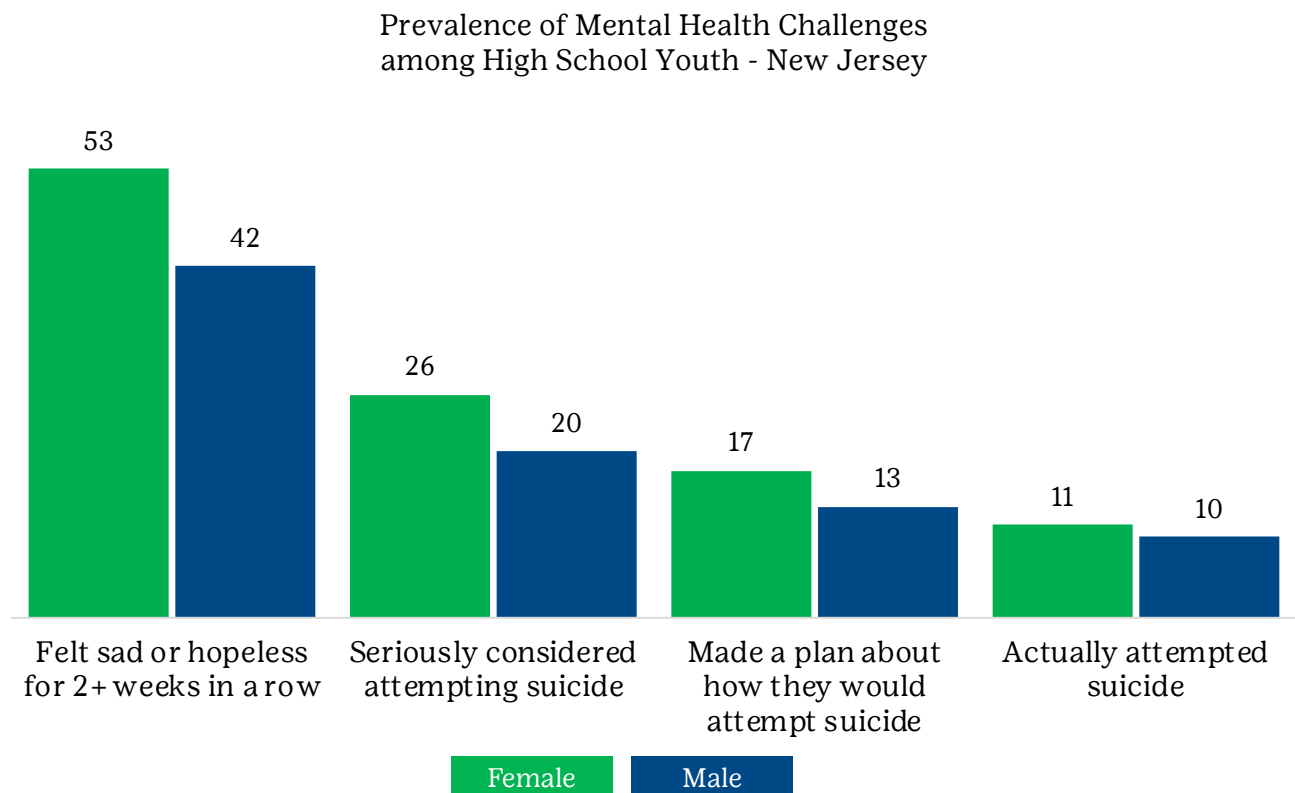
Across the country, challenges with youth mental health are visible in tragic headlines of suicide rates and school shootings. Experts warn, however, that this crisis is “broad and deep in almost every community in the country” ([Lowrie, 2023](#)). In 2023, the Washington Post published a summary of results from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Youth Risk Behavior Survey. Administered to a nationally representative sample of students in public and private schools, the report demonstrated that “girls are engulfed in a growing wave of sadness, violence, and trauma,” according to the CDC ([St. George, 2023](#)).

New Jersey youth are similarly struck by this national crisis. In all four measurements, high school girls are more likely to experience mental health challenges compared to boys, including more than half of teenage girls demonstrating signs of depression and one in four seriously considering attempting suicide.

Experts were sounding alarm bells about the growing disparity among girls’ and boys’ mental health before the global pandemic. COVID-19 exacerbated “cracks that were already present” in the lack of adaptive coping skills of youth ([Slomski, 2023](#)). Coupled with difficulty developing emotional regulation skills, girls are also experiencing “a higher rate of stressful events” which contribute to a disproportionate prevalence of mental health challenges ([Vucenovic, 2023](#))

More than half of high school girls in New Jersey report showing signs of depression. 1 in 4 seriously considers attempting suicide.

Youth Risk Behavior Survey, New Jersey, 2021



Mental Health and Suicide, continued

While research shows early detection and support for youth experiencing mental health challenges prevent worsening symptoms, mental health issues among girls often go unrecognized. Symptoms such as increased irritability, low-mood, and social isolation are often mistaken as traits associated with puberty ([Vucenovic, 2023](#)).

In addition, girls often exhibit more internalized symptoms like deep sadness and a prolonged sense of hopelessness, while boys tend to exhibit more externalized behaviors. Research shows that children experiencing internalized concerns are rarely identified for targeted interventions in schools, and in fact, they may actually be “academic superstars using perfectionism to cope with significant underlying distress” ([Weist, 2018](#)).

There is a growing need to improve the skills and mechanisms by which mental health challenges are identified in girls; but so is the need to nurture preventative factors. A key aspect of shifting from intervention-based solutions to prevention-based solutions focuses on the role of youth-adult relationships ([Sieving, 2017](#)). Extensive research supports the role of positive parent-child relationships, relationships formed with adults in school settings, and mentor-based relationships formed with adults in out-of-school settings.



Death by suicide is
**the second leading
cause of death**
among young people
in New Jersey ages
10-24 (CDC).



86%

of New Jersey Girl Scouts
have a positive self-identity:

“I am glad I’m me.”

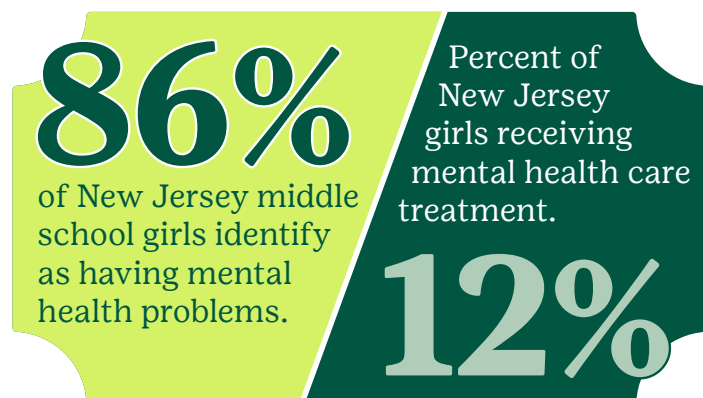


Access to Mental Health Care

As the severity of mental health challenges increases, so does the need for specialized treatment, illuminating another layer of the crisis in New Jersey: access to care. Mental Health America published data for all 50 states measuring access to specialized services such as psychologists, psychiatrists, counselors, and therapists, finding a ratio of 500:1 for New Jersey, indicating a more significant challenge in finding providers than nearby states such as Massachusetts with a ratio of 180:1 ([Zaheer, 2022](#)).

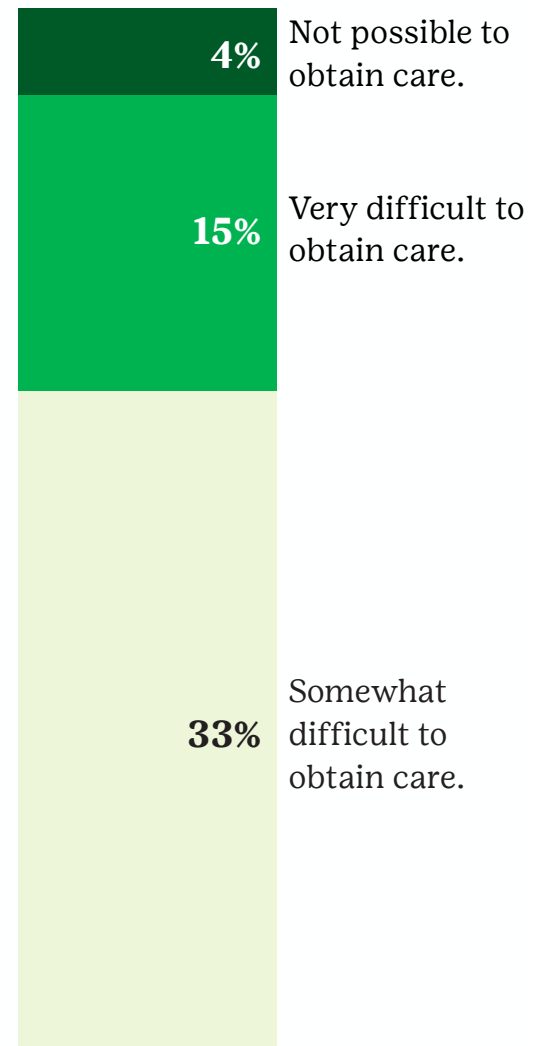
Caregivers reported this shortage in the 2023 National Survey of Children's Health: **52% of parents of girls age 3-17 experience difficulty obtaining necessary mental health care**, with nearly 1 in 5 caregivers noting it is very difficult or not possible to obtain mental health treatment. Delays in obtaining early interventions for youth displaying mental health challenges often creates long-term consequences. Youth are more likely to require more intensive, expensive services in the near future if left untreated and also display a higher prevalence of experiencing a major depressive episode in adulthood ([Vucenovic, 2023](#)).

Mental health needs are particularly acute for girls of color in New Jersey who are more likely to live below the poverty line and, research shows, are less likely to access basic mental health care ([Lowrie, 2023](#)). While the school system generally plays a critical role in identifying students' mental health needs and connecting students with services, girls of color are also less likely to be recognized as needing mental health care in school settings ([Alegría, 2015](#)). Recognizing the role of gender and race in identifying mental and emotional distress in young people is an important step in improving access.



Difficulty obtaining mental health treatment

52% total



Female, New Jersey
Age 3-17



A DEEPER LOOK

Mental Health by Race and Ethnicity

Girls of color report higher rates of mental health challenges than girls who identify as White. Among high school girls identifying as Black or African American, 66% report exhibiting signs of depression compared to 49% of girls who identify as White. Girls who identify as Hispanic or Latina are nearly twice as likely to attempt death by suicide as girls who identify as White.

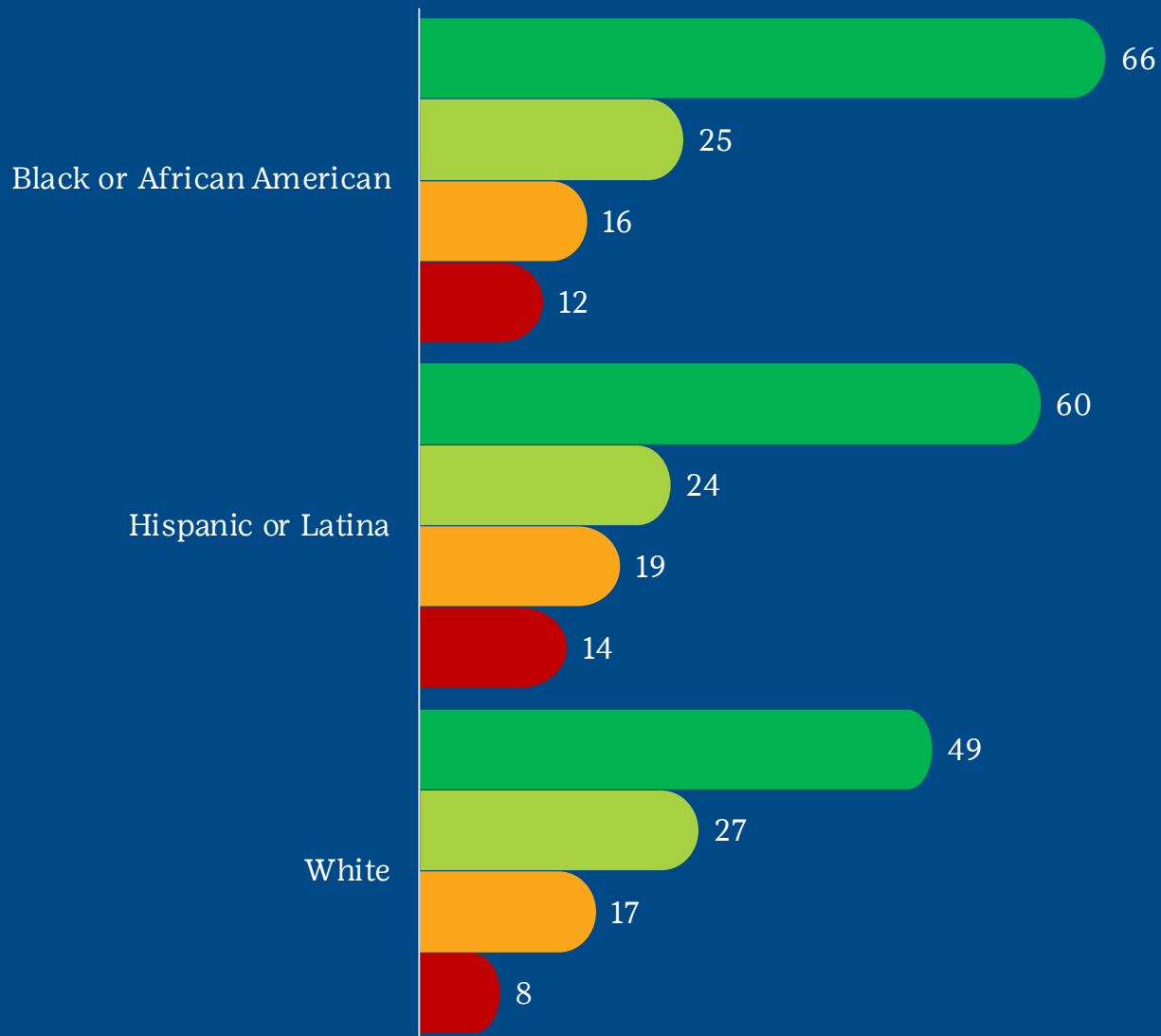
Felt sad or hopeless
2+ weeks in a row

Seriously considered
attempting suicide

Made a plan about how they
would attempt suicide

Actually attempted
suicide

Prevalence of Mental Health Challenges among
New Jersey High School Girls by Race and Ethnicity



Family Mental Health

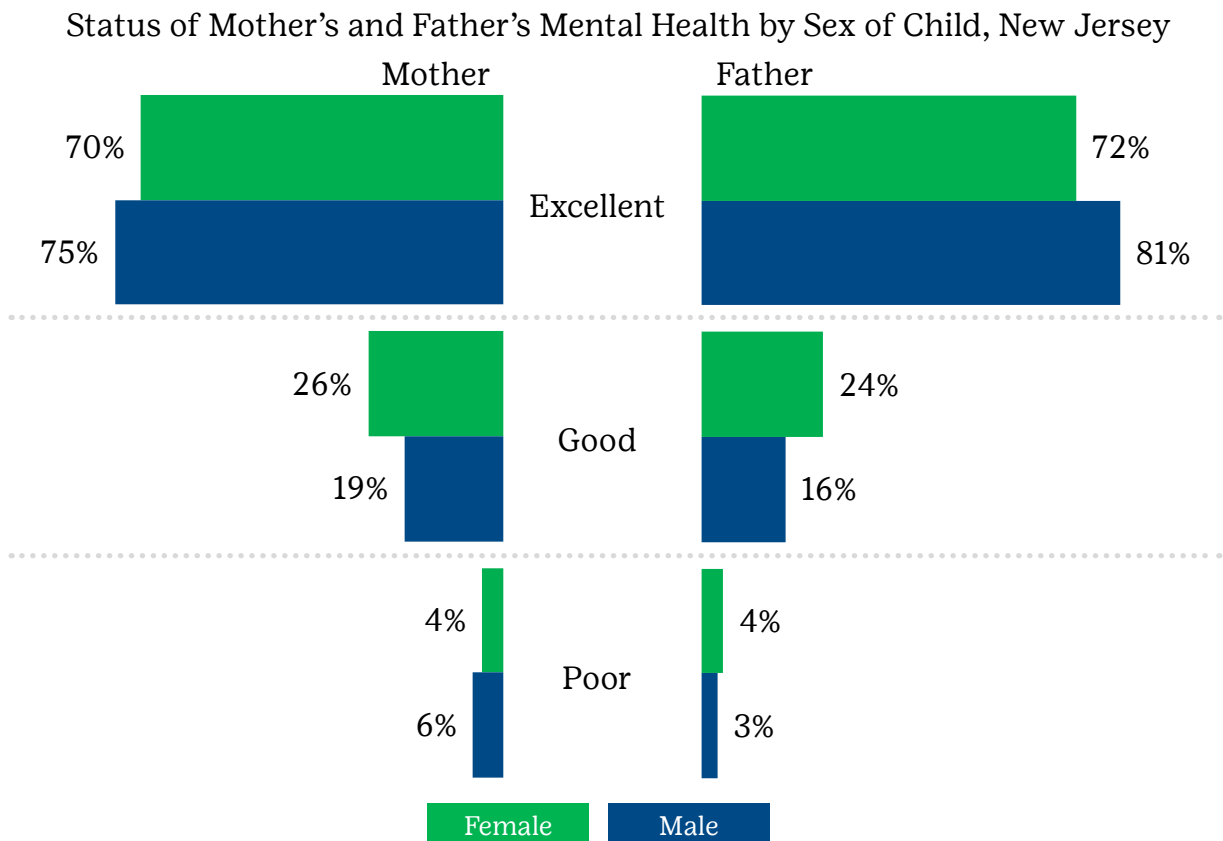
Girls' mental health is intricately linked to that of their parents. First, research shows that positive parent-adult relationships are an important preventative factor in mental and emotional wellness ([Sieving, 2017](#)). Strong parental connectedness protects adolescents from poor health-related outcomes and promotes positive development.

Research has also established that intergenerational patterns develop for mental health; meaning, children whose parents have mental health problems are more likely to present with similar problems themselves ([Landstedt, 2019](#)). Parents and caregivers play a crucial role in modeling appropriate emotional regulation and similar adaptive responses to life's stressors. In addition, many mental health disorders are proven to be hereditary, increasing the likeliness of child diagnoses.

More girls than boys are living in households with a mother or father who are, themselves, experiencing mental or emotional health problems: 30% of girls' mothers vs 25% of boys' describe their mental health as only "good or poor." Similarly, 28% of girls' fathers vs 19% of boys' describe their mental health as "good or poor." Based on these findings, the significant increase in mental and emotional health challenges faced by young women risk an even larger portion of future generations experiencing the same intergenerational cycle.

Girls are more likely than boys to live with parents who are experiencing mental or emotional health challenges.

National Survey of Children's Health, New Jersey, 2022-2023



Family Mental Health, continued

A family’s ability to promote positive mental and emotional wellness of its children is also characterized by the interactions and inter-workings of the family. Family dynamics serve to model important relationships for children and also insulate children from extreme stressors (Zhuo, 2022). Research shows that families can frame even significant stressors as temporary and changeable, while also relying on inter-family relationships to create comfort and calm.

The National Survey of Children’s Health measures the resiliency of a family through a composite score of four key characteristics:

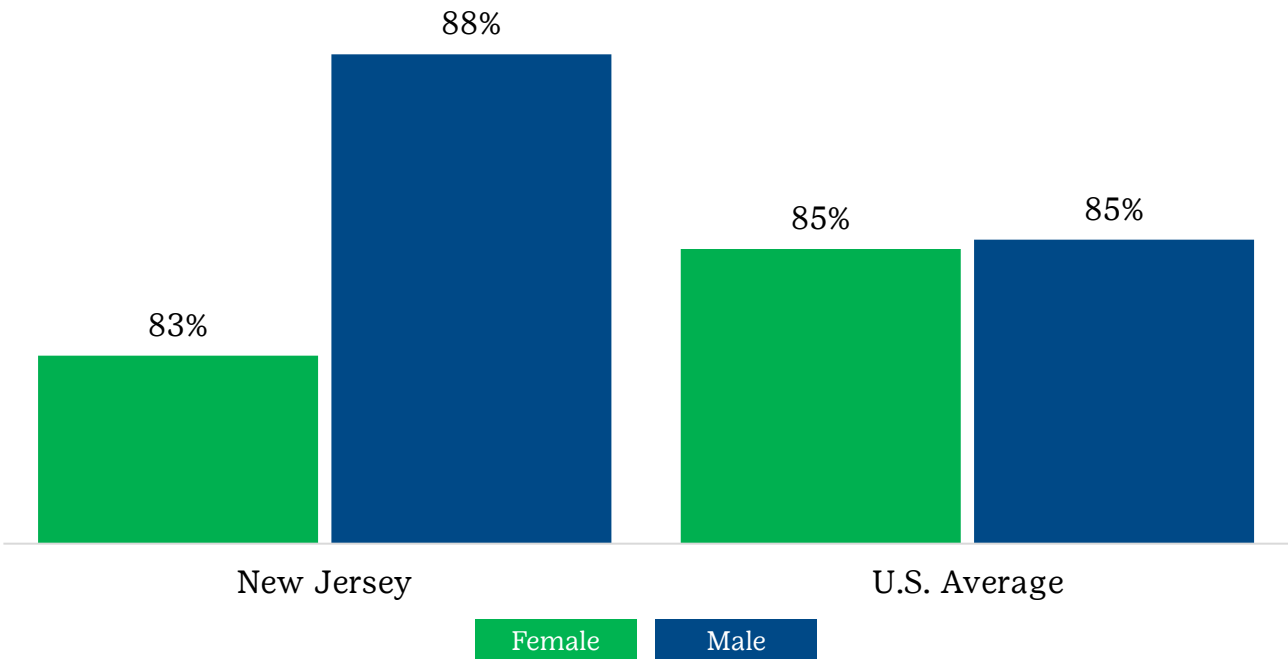
- Talk together about what to do when the family faces problems;
- Work together to solve problems;
- Draw on the strengths of the family to overcome problems;
- Stay hopeful even in difficult times.

Studies show that family resilience is an important protective factor against adversities and stressors (Bethell, 2022). A strong parent-child connection and resilience skills practiced within the family create an environment for persevering through relational challenges like conflict and even systemic challenges such as food insecurity or threats to safety.

Girls are less likely to live in households where the family demonstrates qualities of resilience.

National Survey of Children’s Health, New Jersey, 2022-2023

Percent of New Jersey children who live in a home where the family demonstrates qualities of resilience.



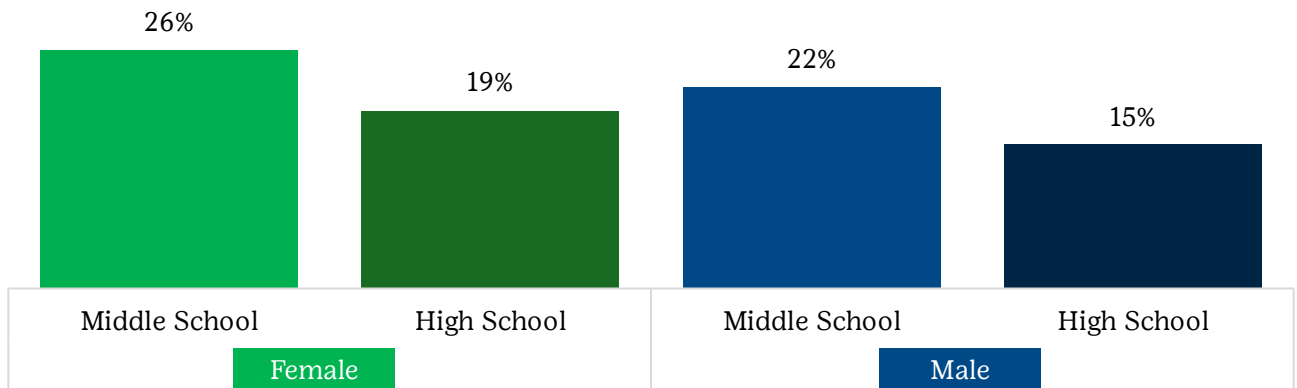
Bullying

The Pew Research Center has found bullying ranked among the top concerns of parents for over a decade ([Minkin, 2023](#)). During that same timeframe, bullying has evolved significantly, with a growing number of students experiencing electronic bullying, more commonly known as cyber-bullying. As bullying behavior among youth migrates to digital channels, schools and parents struggle to identify and mitigate the challenge.

Cyber-bullying is more pervasive among girls compared to boys.

New Jersey Middle School Risk & Protective Factors Survey, 2023, New Jersey Department of Human Services; Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2021, New Jersey.

Prevalence of experiencing electronic bullying among New Jersey youth

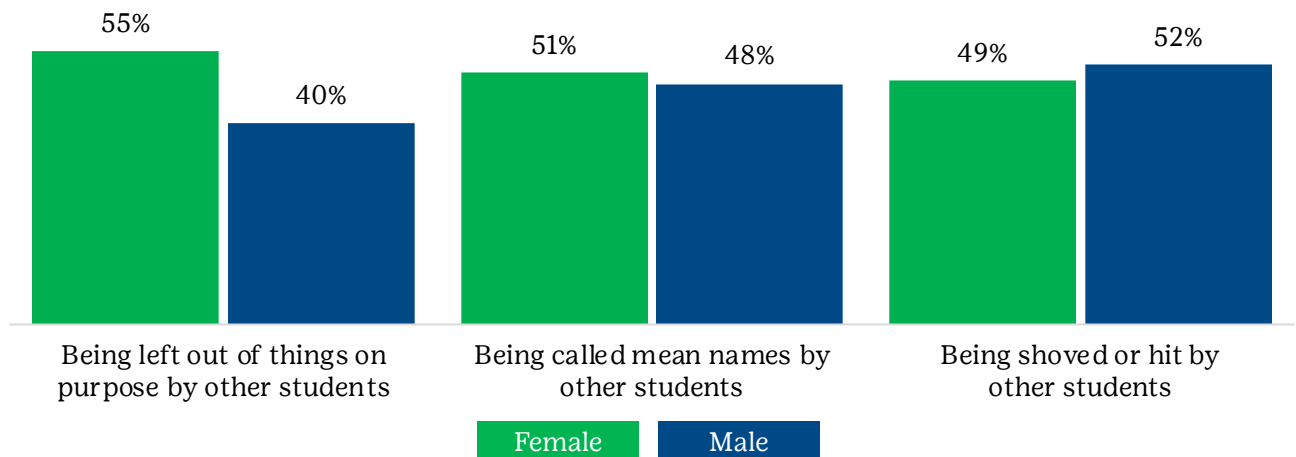


Starting in middle school, New Jersey girls report higher rates of cyber-bullying. 1 in 4 middle school girls report being bullied online, with particularly devastating consequences. Due to the “enduring nature of electronic content,” which can be viewed repeatedly and shared widely, these bullying interactions often generate intense emotional reactions with significant social and emotional consequences ([Horner, 2015](#)).

Girls experience bullying more often than boys; though, more subtle.

New Jersey Middle School Risk & Protective Factors Survey, 2023, New Jersey Department of Human Services

Prevalence of bullying among middle school youth, New Jersey





GIRL SCOUT IMPACT

Caring Adults. Lifesaving Relationships.

Positive, caring relationships between girls and adult mentors can create a life-changing bond, protecting against mental health challenges and the turbulence of adolescence.

In Girl Scouts, these relationships have been part of our ethos for over a century.

A 2020 study from the Girl Scout Research Institute found that girls cite their troop leader as the #1 source of positive mental health - above friends, family, and school.

92%

of New Jersey Girl Scouts say their troop leader cares about them as a person.



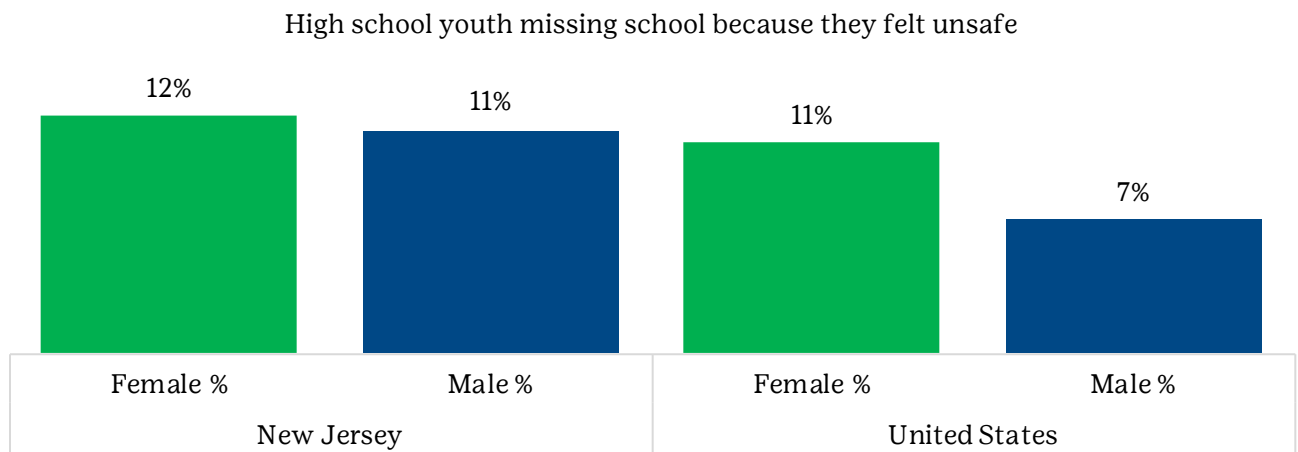
Bullying, continued

Research has long proven the negative ramifications of bullying, inspiring policies and programs to curtail the toxic behaviors in schools and online. The increase in stress, anxiety, and depression as a result of bullying can manifest in physical symptoms such as headaches, stomach aches, and sleep disturbances ([Holt, 2015](#)). Moreover, youth who are bullied may engage in harmful behaviors, including substance abuse and self-harm ([Horner, 2015](#)).

While school prevention programs have little purview over the spaces where cyber-bullying thrives, school attendance and performance are still negatively impacted. 1 in 8 high school girls miss school due to feeling unsafe - slightly more than boys and the national average.

1 in 8 high school girls miss school due to feeling unsafe.

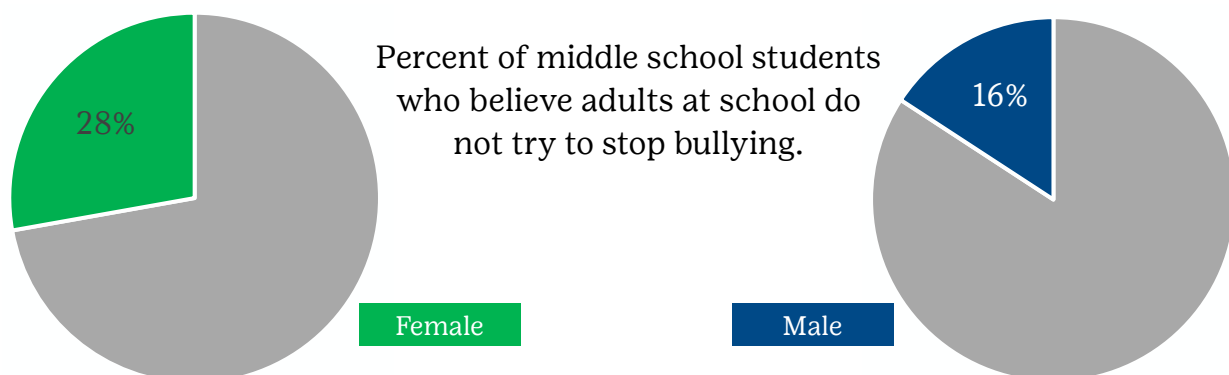
Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2021, New Jersey.



Feeling safe in spaces like home and school are fundamentally necessary for positive mental and emotional development ([Valente, 2022](#)). When this feeling of safety erodes, the psychological distress it creates can undermine academic achievement and create a wide range of mental health problems ([Bayram, 2024](#)). As girls are engulfed by cyberbullying outside the reach of adults, 28% of female students do not believe adults at school can stop bullying.

Middle school girls are more likely to feel unsupported by adults at school in stopping bullying behavior.

New Jersey Middle School Risk & Protective Factors Survey, 2023, New Jersey Department of Human Services



Bullying, continued

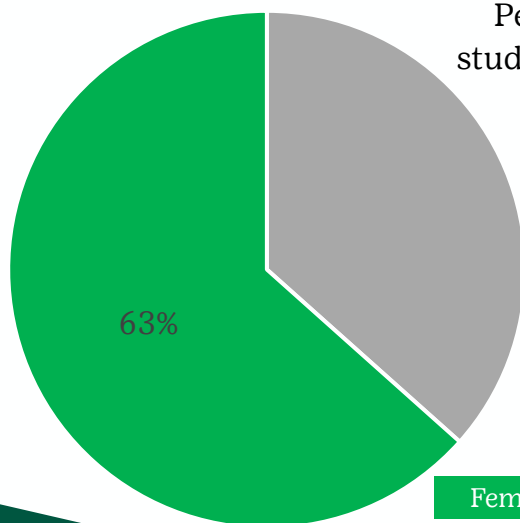
Importantly, protective factors against the negative mental health effects of bullying are different for girls and boys. A study evaluating the types of social supports proven to mitigate the negative effects of stressors such as bullying delineated between family members, teachers, neighbors, and peers in offering support to girls and boys. While relying on adults from family and school are important for both boys and girls, girls are more capable and reliant on drawing support from their peers ([Valente, 2022](#)).

New Jersey middle school girls demonstrate this tendency to advance toward a supportive network of peers earlier and faster than boys. More middle school girls than boys report intervening when a peer is being teased (63% vs 57% respectively). An important determinant to overcoming the negative effects of adolescent bullying for girls is creating a safe, supportive network of peers to defend and be defended by.

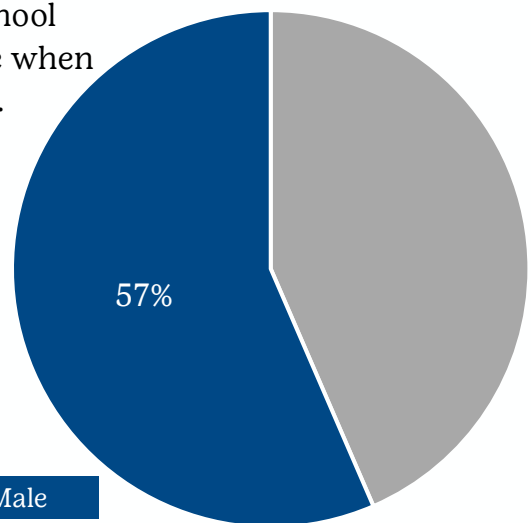
Girls are less likely to be passive bystanders: nearly 2 in 3 middle school girls intervene when others are teased.

New Jersey Middle School Risk & Protective Factors Survey, 2023, New Jersey Department of Human Services

Percent of middle school students who intervene when others are teased.



Female



Male



96%

of New Jersey Girl Scouts say they feel safe in the organization.





Social Wellbeing

Robust ecosystems of support including strong family units, adequate economic resources, and opportunities to create and sustain social networks in their communities help girls build social skills and the social connections needed to thrive.

In these environments, girls learn both their intrinsic worth – a precursor for healthy self-confidence – and receive necessary support to navigate complicated social situations. Disruptions to this social fabric such as childhood trauma, poverty, or the prevalence of substance abuse in the family can create significant challenges now and later in life.

Key Facts: Social Well-being

- **Adverse Childhood Experiences have impacted 1 in 3 girls.**
As reported by parents, one third of girls in New Jersey have been impacted by at least one adverse childhood experience.
- **High school girls report struggling to feel connected to an adult.**
74% of high school girls say they are not able to talk with an adult about their feelings - 69% of boys report the same.
- **Parents report that 1 in 5 girls lack an adult mentor.**
18% of New Jersey girls do not have a supportive adult in their lives according to parents, compared to 15% of boys.
- **Girls are more likely to be engaged in out-of-school activities...**
More girls in New Jersey are involved in activities outside of school compared to boys (80% vs 77%).
- **...participating in lessons like dance and music more than sports.**
While 49% of girls participate in sports, 58% are involved in lessons.



Adverse Childhood Experiences

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are potentially traumatic events that occur during childhood when youth directly experience tragedy such as:

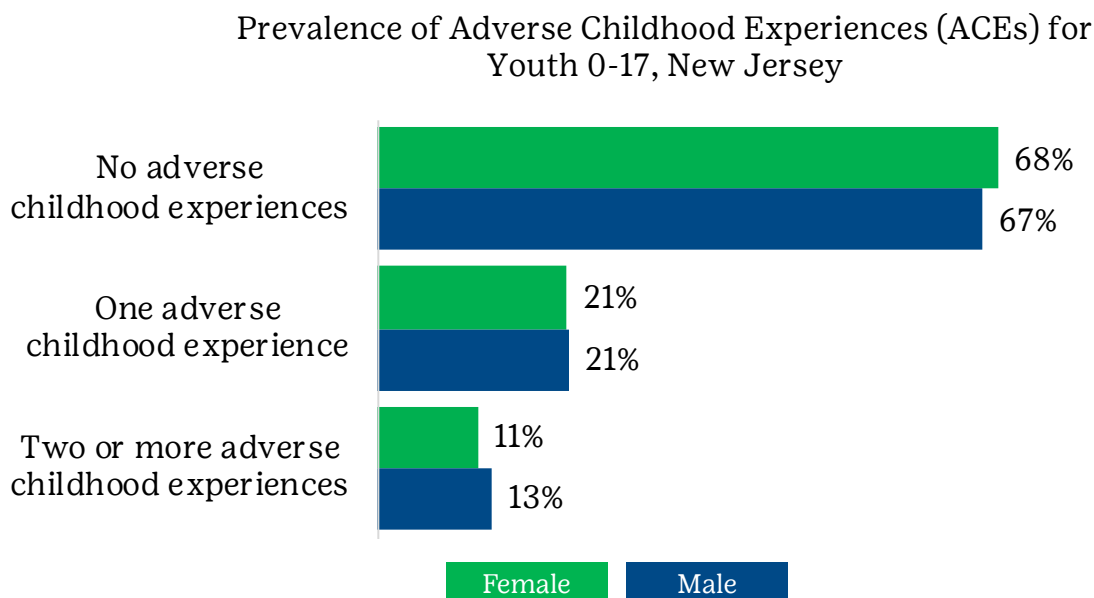
- violence, abuse, or neglect;
- an environment which undermines their sense of safety, stability, and bonding such as growing up in a household with substance abuse problems;
- situations that impact physical well-being such as not having enough food to eat ([Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024](#)).

The presence of multiple ACEs throughout a child's life has been repeatedly linked to short- and long-term negative life outcomes. For example, research finds that ACEs are related to poor mental health and suicidal behaviors in adolescence, as well as increasing risk for heart disease and depression. ACEs can also negatively impact education and job opportunities, which directly and indirectly affects health and well-being ([Merrick, 2015](#)).

The landmark ACEs study in 1998 found that children who are subject to four or more ACEs are up to 12 times more likely to experience consequences such as alcohol and drug abuse or chronic diseases such as cancer and diabetes ([Felitti, 1998](#)). While data measuring that level of prevalence is not available for New Jersey youth, it's notable that available data does suggest that more than 10% of New Jersey girls have experienced two or more ACEs according to parents, who often under-report children's tragedies. Importantly, first-person youth surveys administered to middle and high school youth in New Jersey exclude ACEs measurements, creating a gap in available data to evaluate girls' ACEs risk.

1 in 3 girls in New Jersey have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience according to parents.

National Survey of Children's Health, New Jersey, 2022-2023



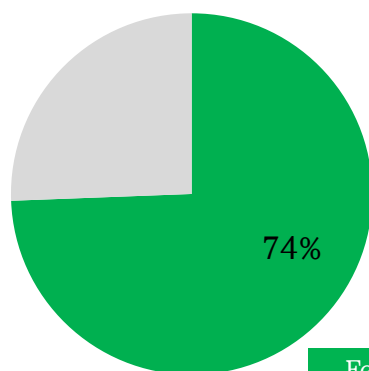
Social Connection: Parents

A child's first meaningful relationship is typically formed with their adult caregiver. Throughout early childhood development continuing through adolescence, a significant body of research demonstrates the lifelong importance of children building strong relationships with parents and other adults. One pivotal longitudinal study confirmed that early secure parental relationships are the building blocks of emotional regulation skills. Additionally, children with more secure parental attachment early in life later showed to display a higher value of adults overall in early adolescence ([Boldt, 2020](#)).

As discussed throughout this report, the presence of a caring adult - either caregivers or other important adult relationships - also serve as a protective factor against stressors such as mental health challenges ([Sieving, 2017](#)). Among high school girls in New Jersey, three out of four report struggling to talk with a caring adult. Some girls report they are “never or rarely” able to talk with an adult about their feelings.

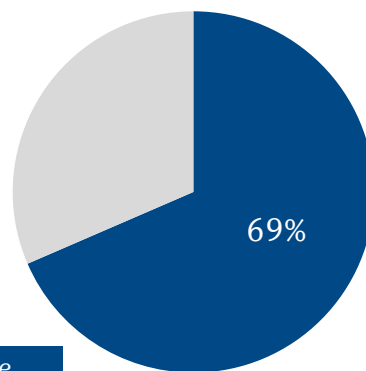
High school girls are more likely to report lacking a caring adult to talk with compared to boys.

Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2021, New Jersey.



Female

Presence of a Caring Adult
Percent of high school students reporting they “never, rarely, or sometimes” are able to talk with an adult in their family or another caring adult about their feelings.



Male



90%

of New Jersey Girl Scouts say their troop leader makes them feel like part of the group.



Social Connection: Adult Mentor

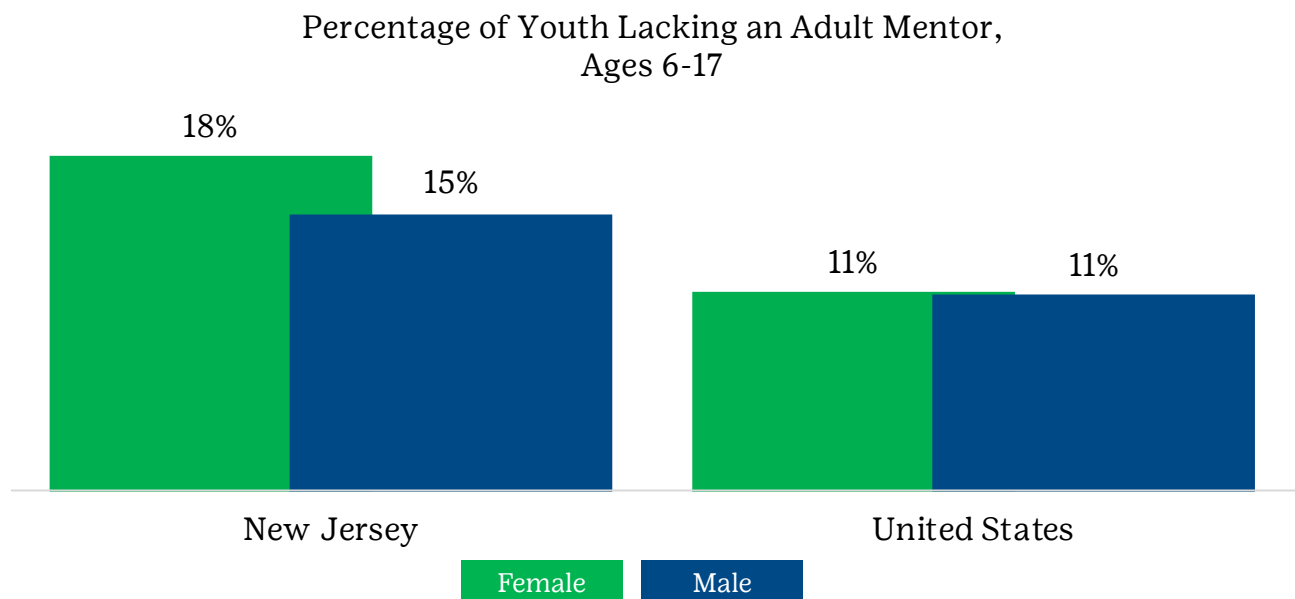
Decades of research suggests youth obtain a multitude of benefits in expanding key adult relationships beyond immediate caregivers. An adult mentor is defined broadly as a non-parental adult promoting positive youth development through a relationship with a specific child ([DuBois, 2002](#)). Among the extensive list of benefits, mentors generally:

- **Prevent poor youth outcomes.** The presence of an adult mentor is shown to reduce behaviors such as substance abuse ([Thomas, 2013](#)).
- **Promote academic achievement.** Students receiving informal mentorship at school attain higher academic proficiency and attend college at a higher rate ([Kraft, 2023](#)).
- **Promote positive mental health.** Mentors cultivate positive self-esteem and emotional well-being, serving to protect against mental health challenges ([Claro, 2021](#)).

Girls in New Jersey are more likely than their male peers and girls across the country to lack an adult mentor. As reported by parents, 18% of girls in New Jersey do not have an adult in their life outside of their family to rely on for advice or guidance, compared to 15% of boys in New Jersey and an 11% average across the country.

Parents report that 1 in 5 girls in New Jersey lack an adult mentor.

National Survey of Children's Health, New Jersey, 2022-2023



In addition to the benefits of mentorship for youth, research also indicates the evolving nature of positive mentor relationships. Research shows the solution to creating a wider network of support for girls in New Jersey does not require formal, long-term mentor relationships. In fact, recent studies demonstrate short-term relationships with adult mentors can serve as transitional support through specific periods of time or targeted support to meet specific objectives ([Cavell, 2021](#)).

Social Connection: Neighborhood

Although the definition of neighborhoods and ways in which families participate in their local communities continues to shift across generations, studies still conclude that deeper connections to neighborhoods contribute to positive youth outcomes. Research finds that neighborhoods which promote intersections and create activity spaces for multi-generational interactions generate a higher level of social capital for young people and present positive implications for behavioral and emotional health ([Browning, 2014](#)).

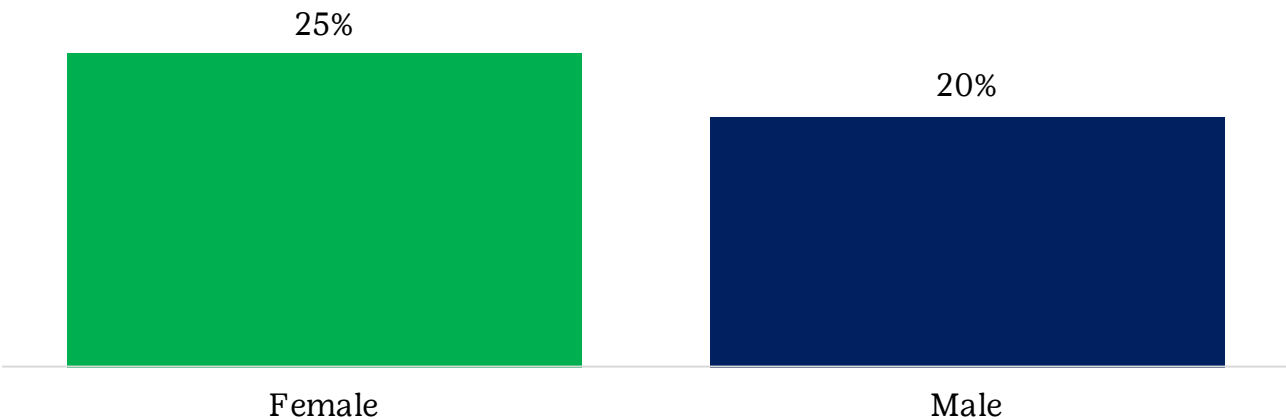
Especially for girls, a feeling of attachment to their neighborhood is associated with higher academic outcomes and deeper relationships with caring adults ([Plybon, 2003](#)). Many girls in New Jersey lack this important tether to their community, with 1 in 4 middle school girls feeling a low attachment to their neighborhood compared to 1 in 5 boys.

Improving connectivity to local communities requires a multi-faceted approach, including coalition-building across organizations and institutions that control activity spaces, promoting community engagement, and ensuring safety for children and families.

1 in 4 middle school girls feels a low attachment to their neighborhood.

New Jersey Middle School Risk & Protective Factors Survey, 2023, New Jersey Department of Human Services

Low Neighborhood Attachment,
New Jersey Middle School Youth



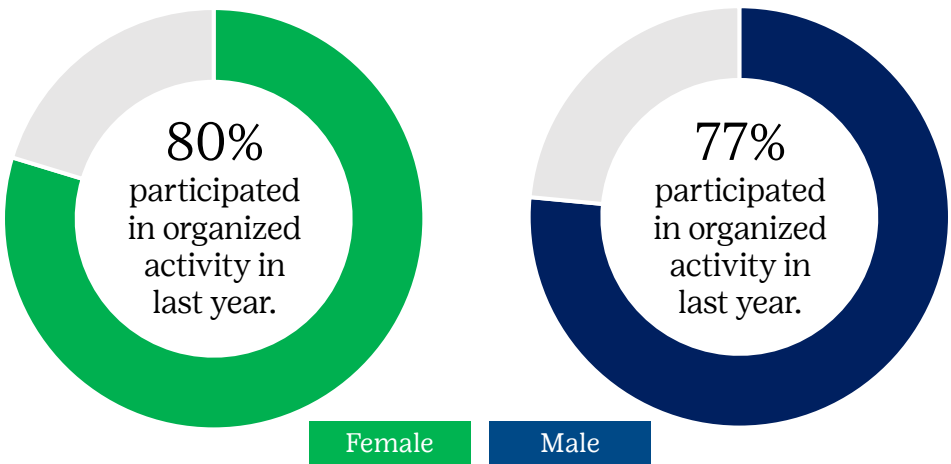
Afterschool Programs & Organized Activities

In 2024, the Afterschool Alliance found that 97% of New Jersey parents are satisfied with their child’s afterschool program ([The Afterschool Alliance, 2024](#)). The high praise is unsurprising given the proven benefits: 89% of students enrolled in formal afterschool programs receive homework help; 77% are receiving STEM learning opportunities; and 75% are working on reading and writing skills.

Beyond skills and knowledge outcomes, participation in afterschool programs or organized activities is an important component of a young person’s social development. These experiences offer youth opportunities to practice social skills and nurture supportive relationships, with research demonstrating these programs accelerate students’ academic performance and aid in improvements in mental and physical health.

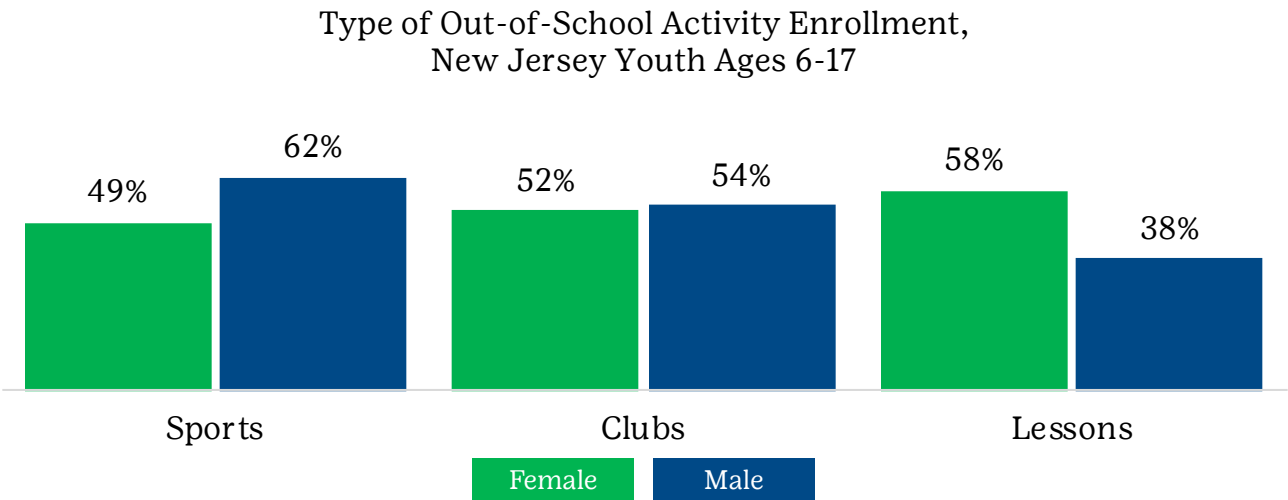
Girls in New Jersey have a higher participation rate in organized activities than boys, with 4 out of 5 girls engaged in activities.

National Survey of Children’s Health, New Jersey, 2022-2023



Girls disproportionately participate in lessons, such as music or dance, while boys are more likely to participate in competitive sports.

National Survey of Children’s Health, New Jersey, 2022-2023





89%

of Girl Scouts in New Jersey participate in activities they would not have done otherwise.





GIRL SCOUT IMPACT

The Well-being of New Jersey Girls

Girl Scouts partners with families, schools, and other youth-serving providers to improve girls' holistic development, and we are on a mission to grow the network of girl champions in communities across New Jersey. Girls need experts, financial support, and advocates. Join us to build momentum that furthers the well-being of girls.

After supporting girls for more than a century, we know our program must adapt as their needs change. This report proves it's time for Girl Scouts and those who care about girls to, again, evolve as we create a world where every girl thrives.



Girl Scouts + Physical Health

- ✓ Challenge: Physical Activity.
84% of Girl Scouts move their body through outdoor activities they've never done before.
- ✓ Challenge: Substance Abuse
74% of Girl Scouts develop personal integrity, "doing what is right, even when it's hard."



Girl Scouts + Life Readiness

- ✓ Challenge: STEM Gap in College
75% of Girl Scouts who do STEM activities want to take STEM in college.
- ✓ Challenge: STEM Proficiency
53% of Girl Scouts develop confidence in STEM after just one STEM event.



Girl Scout Badge Spotlight

The My Best Self badge helps girls in grades 2-3 learn introspection - listening to their body to stay happy and healthy.





Girl Scout Badge Spotlight

The **Good Neighbor** badge helps girls in grades K-1 learn what makes their community special and practice being a good neighbor.

The **Finding Common Ground** badge helps girls in grades 6-8 practice civil debate and understand the role of compromise in community decisions.

The **Coding for Good - App Development** badge helps girls in grades 4-5 discover the needs of others to design and improve an app.

The **Financial Independence** badge helps girls in grades 11-12 make wise money decisions, learning to budget, save, invest, and give.



Girl Scouts + Emotional Wellness

- ✓ **Challenge: Mental Health**
Girls rank Girl Scouts as having a more positive view of mental health compared to family and school.
- ✓ **Challenge: Cyberbullying**
92% of Girl Scouts find community in the organization: “In Girl Scouts, I feel like I belong.”



Girl Scouts + Social Well-being

- ✓ **Challenge: Adult Mentor**
82% of Girl Scouts feel their troop leader helps them think about their future.
- ✓ **Challenge: Neighborhood Attachment**
58% of Girl Scouts feel it's important to make a difference in their community.



Girl Scout Badge Spotlight

The **Body Appreciation** badges transform the ways girls think about their bodies, appreciating their abilities to boost confidence and mental wellness.





CALL TO ACTION - PHYSICAL HEALTH

Boys as Girl Advocates

Many pressing threats to the physical and emotional well-being of girls is the risk of abuse. 1 in 6 high school girls reports experiencing sexual violence - a call to action for male advocates.

Improving the lives of girls in New Jersey will require changing patterns of abuse and promoting healthy relationships, modeled by the men who care about girls.

Male Role Models. Both girls and boys must see male adults actively support, encourage, and appreciate girls.

Body Autonomy. All youth must receive consistent messages about the respect of a person's body, understanding consent and autonomy.

Safe Spaces. Girls benefit from single-gender peer groups which recognize the unique experiences of girlhood in America.



CALL TO ACTION - LIFE READINESS

Close the STEM Gap



Careers in science, technology, engineering and math are projected to grow twice as fast as all other occupations through 2030. By that time, the acceleration of AI technology alone is expected to create a workforce shortage of 1.4 million technicians. New Jersey needs a passionate, trained, and representative STEM workforce - and this report shows, girls are ready.

Early Introduction. Girls form their STEM identity by 3rd grade. We must nurture interest in STEM early and often.

Group Experiences. Girls' intentions to pursue STEM benefit from group experiences with supportive peers and STEM mentors.

Variety. Girls must be exposed to the vast field of STEM and its value in everyday life to sustain interest and progress through advanced topics.





CALL TO ACTION - EMOTIONAL WELLNESS

Rally for Mental Wellness

At the risk of creating ongoing generational mental health challenges, our community must come together to holistically support positive mental wellness for girls. Death by suicide is the second leading cause of death among young people in New Jersey. A challenge of this magnitude requires a web of support sewn into the everyday experiences of girls across the state.

Caring Adults. Girls need the team of adults involved in their daily lives to advance their own understanding of promoting positive mental health, identifying warning signs specific to girls, and offering support.

School Support. Education institutions need the resources and training required to identify signs of distress in girls, especially high-achieving girls often overlooked for interventions and extra support.

Normalize. Girls must feel safe and supported in bringing concerns to trusted adults. Caregivers should normalize conversations around mental health and promote practicing emotional regulation.



CALL TO ACTION: SOCIAL WELL-BEING

Mentor Girls



The strength of a girl's network of adult relationships can shape her self-image, resiliency, and overall well-being. These connections, when imbued with empathy, trust, and understanding, serve as both a safety net for life's challenges and a springboard for girls to reach their full potential. For most girls in New Jersey, these networks are not yet strong enough.

Get Informed. Adults must invest sincere effort into understanding the realities girls face. Read, ask questions, and proceed with curiosity.

Lean In. The most daunting challenges girls are facing are also the most internalized. Addressing mental health, self-image, and even traumatic experiences will require adults to lean in with empathy.

Reach Out. Creating a network of support outside of a girl's family requires that adults reach beyond their immediate circle to volunteer, engage, and nurture new relationships with girls in their community.





CALL TO ACTION: DEMOGRAPHICS

Collect Girl Data

The ability to evaluate the status of girls in New Jersey throughout this report was made possible through publicly available data with the ability to disaggregate by sex. Institutions must commit to collecting and reporting youth data with differences by sex made available. As demonstrated throughout this report, beneath that data are important distinctions to understand and address.

First-Person. Prioritize and expand data collection directly from adolescent youth. Girls understand their experience best.

Data Availability. Curators of youth data hold a special responsibility to benefit youth advocates and providers: make data publicly available.

Coalition Building. Institutions and organizations involved in the lives of girls must come together around research to mobilize on behalf of girls.



Methodology

The New Jersey Girl Report is a comprehensive collection of metrics that serve as indicators of well-being for New Jersey girls. Metrics are grouped into four distinct categories - Physical Health, Life Readiness, Emotional Wellness, and Social Well-being - leveraging publicly available data from primary sources and peer-reviewed research included in adjacent citations. Sources of charts and graphs are included beneath each heading or parent table, derived from data collected by credible sources such as the U.S. Census Bureau, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the New Jersey Department of Education. Data visuals are intended to present data in an easily readable format to understand comparisons or trends over time.

Agency Data

The report includes vignettes regarding the impact of Girl Scouting on girl members in New Jersey. All Girl Scout outcomes or participation measurements are derived from the Girl Scouts of the USA's Girl Scout Research Institute; Girl Scout Voices Count, an annual voice of the customer survey; or Girl Scout councils serving New Jersey. Cited research of the Girl Scout program is intended for programmatic reporting only and is not intended to inform the status of all girls in New Jersey.

Data Collection

In an effort to present an unbiased and factual account of the status of girls in New Jersey, all data was obtained from publicly available primary sources including the U.S. Census Bureau, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the New Jersey Department of Education. Data sets were downloaded from open sites and analyzed using common mathematical formulas and computations. All data is anonymized and not based on any single individual experience. No primary research was conducted for the purposes of this report.

Disaggregating Data

To meet the objectives of the report in understanding differences between girls and boys in New Jersey, data are disaggregated by several variables including state, sex assigned at birth, and race and ethnicity. Definitions of each variable are derived from its source. The ability to disaggregate and report on data is limited to the availability of statewide, empirical sources. As such, the Girl Scouts of New Jersey acknowledges the limitations of this data collection and reporting method as being unable to report on the multiple intersectionalities of the target audience and marginalized populations not often included in such analysis.

Process

The New Jersey Girl Report is commissioned by the Girl Scouts of New Jersey. The CEOs of the independent Girl Scout councils serving the state and their respective staffs determined the scope of the report and included metrics and an independent analyst assembled metrics as outlined above.

Accuracy

Primary data accessible through publicly available sources were assembled for this report. All reasonable efforts were made to ensure accuracy and to remove research bias from the final findings. However, readers should be aware of the limitations and possibility of tabulation errors that exist in source data. National, state, and local agencies often depend on individuals and communities for reporting accuracy and as such, metrics may be under-reported or unavailable. Data from different sources should not be compared due to different methodologies employed in each data source.



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