**A Critique of “Pediatricians say the mental health crisis among kids has become a national emergency” by Deepa Shivaram at NPR**

Chanell Noise

URL: <https://www.npr.org/2021/10/20/1047624943/pediatricians-call-mental-health-crisis-among-kids-a-national-emergency>

NPR published a story in 2020 about a reported mental health crisis among the youth. While I was researching my final project topic, I did see data and peer-reviewed articles that mentioned a ballooning of poor mental health states in teens and children.

Specifically, the American Psychological Association doubled down on this trend in their 53rd volume. Outside of the peer-reviewed articles and published data from universities, there were not many major publications that picked this story up in 2020. Media outlets like The Hill and BBC did run stories that referenced and cited the data from 2020 but these stories were published in 2021 and 2022, respectively.

NPR did well in publishing ahead of the curve. This article recognizes the urgency in the troubling trend and that is highlighted in its citation of the data in its early or developing stages.

I want to make a quick point that this article’s title is really long. I don’t mind long titles but they don’t make for good links, citations, word of mouth reference- nothing. I don’t even want to keep typing the title out- I’ll refer to this article as “Pediatricians say the mental…”

In “Pediatricians say the mental…” several governing bodies in medicine are cited, not just the APA like I mentioned. I think most readers will appreciate the story, as it’s backed up by experts and aggregated data. The American Academy of Pediatrics, the Children’s Hospital Association and the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry deemed the mental health decline in children a crisis in a published letter. Altogether, these institutions account for more than 77,000 physicians in about 200 hospitals.

So far, the data is there, the experts are present and NPR found this story quickly. The title is long but it probably won’t scare away the casual reader or parents of children and teens.

The first paragraph gives an excellent lede and nut graf. There are no heavy stats that bog the story down before it begins: “A coalition of the nation’s leading experts in pediatric health issued an urgent warning declaring the mental health crisis among children so dire that it has become a national emergency.” The sentence is long, again not anything that would scare away a casual reader, but the meat of the story is present. If someone is not able to read past that or lost interest, they are still informed, less the details.

“Pediatricians say the mental…” is suffering from some style issues. For NPR, this story fits in with the platform's other analytical stories and heavy articles. This article compared to other articles on similar subjects, like Buzzfeed reporting on the housing crisis, is not as punchy and easy to understand. There are several SAT-worthy words and a lot of quoting in the first three paragraphs. Instead of “exacerbated,” the author could’ve chosen “made worse.” Instead of the word “coalition,” the article could have opted for the word “group.” Choosing shorter punchier sentence structure and simpler words makes an article more accessible. For families where english is not their first language or english is not spoken at all- this article is too far in the trenches of academia.

Think about COVID-19 reporting. A good chunk of articles were short and to the point. There were citations, yes. But articles used plain language to reach as many communities as possible.

To the accessibility point, (this is always my grievance with news articles) the NPR could share this in spanish and audio format. NPR is short for National Public Radio and lots of their stories are both audio and the transcript. “Pediatricians say the mental…” is only offered in this wordy, english and digital format.

Moving on, the first three paragraphs are broken up by an ad that runs below on the desktop. I won’t critique the author, Deepa Shivaram, on the website. What I can say is that this is distracting and a lot of articles suffer from it. It’s annoying and I wish advertising, marketing or sales departments at media outlets figure that one out.

Under the advertisement are the next three paragraphs in the story opening. There is an intentional editorial cutout that links to another story on schools reopening and psychiatrists expecting more children to need help.

These three paragraphs are where the statistics come out. These three paragraphs also mention suicide. This topic is warned at the top of the article and the suicide national hotline number is shared, in good taste. These are all smart editorial moves. The warning and the delayed use of statistics improve the readability of this type of analytical article. Being bombarded with triggering or raw data breakdown ASAP will scare off a lot of readers.

The next section of the article pivots, (like a pivot table!) into a story within the story. A subhead, “the crisis affects children of color even more,” highlights a change in the perspective on the same data. A reader that has made it this far now understand that there is a crisis that experts are wary of, there are some numbers that highlight this issue and the crisis is affecting children and teens. Before the subhead, “Pediatricians say the mental…” even points to the control in gender exposing an upward trend in suicides in teen girls, specifically.

At this point in the article, a reader is fairly informed. They are armed with all new information. A reader knows what people to hold space for, share the article with or places to get more information. This subhead alerts a reader for all this information over again with the race in mind.

These are all strong editorial moves. In one article, we’ve got two birds with one stone. There is no need to double back on what experts are backing up this claim or what the claim is. Again, a reader is informed there is a crisis that affects children and now, the article dives deeper into how this affects children of color.

This section reiterates that the same experts in the same letter point out this trend in the data. The statistics or numbers are thrown into the mix and the explanation behind these rates of depression, suicide and anxiety are explained. Unfortunately, native, Black and Latinx children were twice (or more) as likely than their white counterparts to have lost a parent or grandparent caregiver to COVID-19.

Something done well in this section is the punchiness. Finally the author gets really choppy and to the point. The sentences turn into “The data shows…” instead of meandering around who, when and how. To be fair, the setup in the beginning allows for this. So far, so good.

The last two paragraphs of the story wrap up the article and live under another subhead. The article exists ina topical “when,” and makes plain that the “where,” is America. It starts with the “what,” gives us the “who,” and shares some data from “who” that backs-up the “what.” Then the article pivots (I am taking so many notes) and gives the same “what” but centered on a different “who.” Lastly the article explains “how,” shares some data to back that up and ends on “why this matters.”

Personally, I like articles that end on “why this matters,” these stories read so powerfully. Some prefer the “why it matters,” to happen a lot sooner. Give me the what and why ASAP so I can care and continue to read.

NPR has a population they are writing to and this article definitely shows that. The wordiness, the urgency and timeliness this was written and lack of formats points to educated folks who have time to scroll and read about kids having recognized mental health issues. Communities that need visual or language accommodations, folks that had bigger fish to fry at top of the pandemic, folks without children and communities that don’t recognize mental health as a facet of wellness are not reading this.

Unfortunately, that is a lot of people and some of those folks may be able to use the resources mentioned towards the end or linked throughout.

I give this a 5/5. I love NPR. This article informed a lot of edits I made to my own final data story. As both a mother and a person with a mental health diagnosis, I will be sure to heed this national warning.