

THE STATUS OF GIRLS

A 2026 Update on Middle School girls showing the collective impact of Girl Serving Organizations and the IIGA Helping Girls Thrive Benchmarks

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With support from IIGA member programs and the City of Worcester Division of Public Health

The Status of Girls: Physical Health Benchmark

Physical health and wellness are essential to helping girls thrive during adolescence. Healthy habits related to physical activity, nutrition, sleep, preventive care, and self-care contribute not only to physical well-being, but also to confidence, resilience, and overall quality of life. As girls develop a greater sense of independence, they begin making choices that can shape their long-term health and wellness. This section explores the health behaviors, experiences, and goals of middle school girls and examines how participation in Girl Serving Organizations (GSOs), particularly programs using the Helping Girls Thrive (HGT) Benchmarks, supports the development of healthy lifestyles. Through opportunities for physical activity, positive role models, goal setting, and health education, these programs help girls build the knowledge, skills, and habits that promote lifelong well-being.+



Girls in Girl Serving Organizations (GSOs) are more likely to exercise, and more likely to reach the recommended 60 min/5 days per week standard of exercise than other middle school girls

- In 2025, 16.8% of middle school girls report getting the recommended 60 minutes of exercise 5 days per week.
  - For GSO girls, that percent increased to 17.9*% (almost 1 in 5).
  - For girls in programs using the Helping Girls Thrive (HGT) Benchmarks, this increases to 32.0% or 1 in 3 girls.
- Almost one in 5 (18.3*%) of girls in GSOs report no exercise at all in a typical week; compared to 24.0% (1 in four) of middle school girls overall.
  - For girls in GSOs using the HGT Benchmarks, only 8% report getting no exercise, and 60% report doing something physical every day, even if they don't meet the standard.

- In 2025, 54% of middle school girls report no participation in a sports team, versus 47.2*% of GSO girls.
  - GSO girls are more likely to play multiple sports, with 12.3*% reporting 3 or more sports in a year, versus 8.7% of all middle school girls.

- 61.7% (almost 2 out of 3) GSO girls report that exercise is a way to connect with others.
- 63.5% of girls in a GSO using the HGT Benchmarks report having a role model for getting regular exercise, and 56% report this is a person they know "IRL" (in real life).
  - Another 5.6% report having a role model for regular exercise as someone they follow on social media.

*Indicates statistical significance between groups at p<.05
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Middle school girls in girl serving organizations are more likely to see a doctor for routine check ups

- Overall, 52% of middle school girls describe their weight as "at the right weight", and 29.8% report being "slightly/very overweight".
    - 81.5% of girls in a GSO program using the HGT Benchmarks report that exercise is a way for them to have a realistic view of their weight, their body, and their physical abilities.
- 85.2*% of GSO girls versus 79.9% of girls at large have seen their doctor for a routine visit in the last 12 months.
- Sleep continues to elude our middle school girls, with 53% getting less than the recommended 8 hours per night.
    - For girls in a GSO using the HGT Benchmarks, 54% of girls report getting at least 8 hours of sleep each night, with another 28.7% reporting they get 8 hours of sleep most of the time.

Food security is important for all middle school girls

- In 2025, just 31.6% of middle school girls report eating breakfast every day; 17% report eating breakfast "most of the time/4-6 days).
- in 2025, 20.3% of middle school girls report having at least one soda/caffeinated beverage per day, up from 18.4% in 2023.
- 1.5% of middle school girls worried that their food at home would run out before you got money to buy more; 82.5% report never/rarely worrying about this.
- 3.8% of middle school girls report that food their family bought ran out and they did not have money to buy more; 89.1% report never/rarely having this occur.
    - 6.4*% of middle school girls in girl serving organizations report having had a time when they were hungry but did not have money for food, versus 8.0% of girls at large.

Top goals girls participating in GSO using the HGT Benchmarks have set for themselves around physical health

Make healthier food choices	43%
Get more regular exercise	29%
Try new sports/activities to see if I like them	28%
Meet other people who like the same activity/sport that I like to do	14.2%
Improve my self-care	14%
Get more sleep	14%

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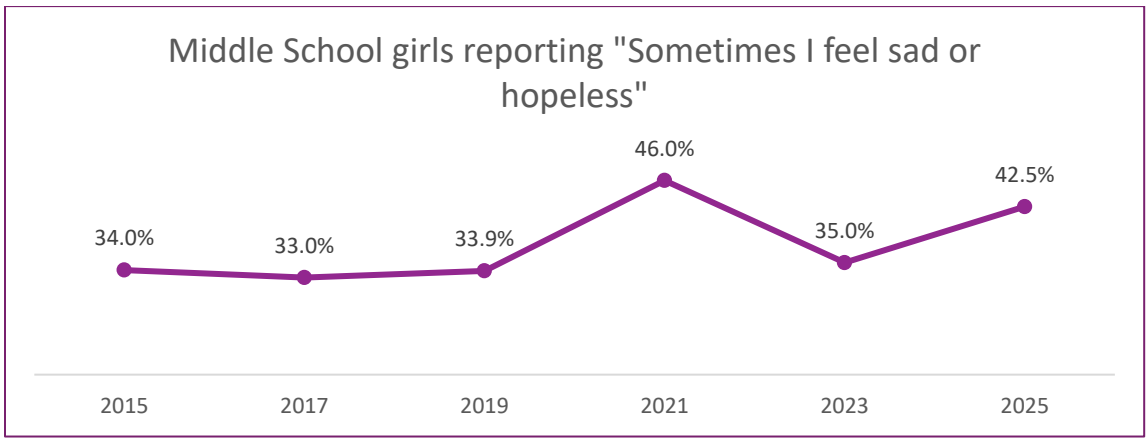
The Status of Girls: Mental Health Benchmark

Mental health plays a critical role in adolescent development, shaping how girls think, feel, build relationships, and navigate challenges. As middle school girls face increasing social, emotional, and academic pressures, concerns about emotional well-being, self-harm, bullying, and access to support have become more prominent. This section examines the mental health experiences of middle school girls and highlights the protective role that Girl Serving Organizations (GSOs) can play in fostering resilience, strengthening connections with trusted adults and peers, promoting healthy social media habits, and helping girls access the support they need to thrive.+

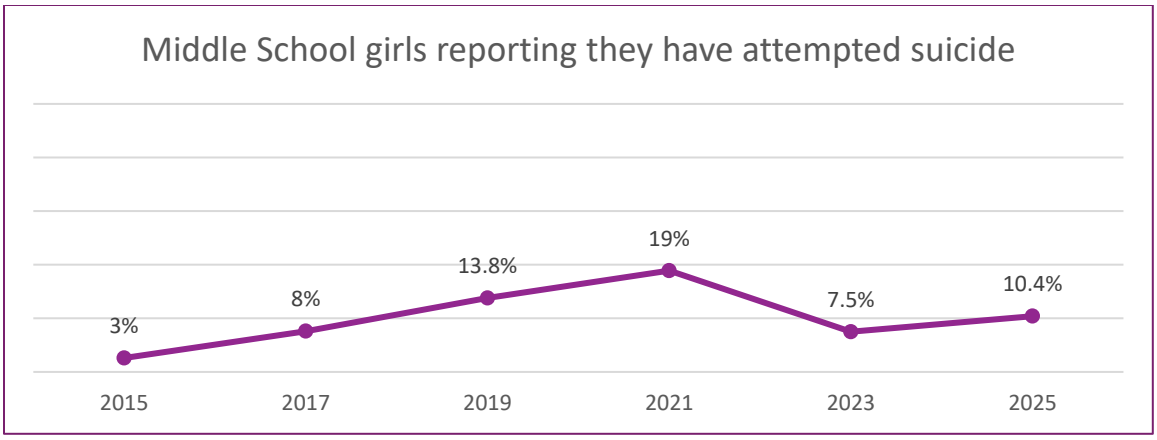
Mental health of middle school girls is in a crisis state

- In 2025, 42.5% of middle school girls report feeling sad or hopeless, with slightly fewer (40.5%) of girls in girl serving organizations reported the same.
  - This percentage has increased since 2015 (34%) with a spike in 2021 to 46% - almost 1 in 2 middle school girls).

- In 2025, 26% of middle school girls report having seriously considered suicide; compared to 12.6% pf boys.
  - 10% of middle school girls report having tried to kill themselves; up from 3% in 2015.
  - 19% of middle school girls report hurting or injuring themselves on purpose without wanting to die, up from 4.6% in 2019.



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Bullying continues to be a problem for middle school girls

- 42.3% of middle school girls report having been bullied at school; and 30.1% report being electronically bullied.
  - For middle school girls in a Girl Serving Organization (GSO), this percentage is even higher, with 47.9% report being bullied at school.

Benefits of girl serving organizations and protections against risks

- In 2025, GSO girls are more likely to report that they learn about mental health in school (83.9*% v 81.3%).
- In both 2023 and 2025, girls in GSOs are more likely to report having at least one adult they can talk to about their feelings (83.6*% v 70.1% and 83.2*% v 78.3%)
- For middle school girls in GSOs using the Helping Girls Thrive (HGT) Benchmarks, 41% of girls report having three or more adults they can talk to about their feelings or mental health.
  - Additionally, 91% say they are comfortable talking with the other girls in their program about their feelings or mental health.

Social media overuse/misuse and mental health

- Overuse of social media has been linked to poor mental health in middle school girls. GSO girls are more likely to report no use of social media (14.88% v 9.9%) and are less likely to use social media once per day or more (75.1*% v 80.5%).
  - This suggests the girls in GSOs are more able to moderate use of social media, and better at choosing when and how to use the media they consume.

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Getting support when needed

- In 2025, just one in five middle school girls said they got the type of help they needed when feeling sad, empty, hopeless, angry or anxious.
  - GSO girls were more likely (21.5*%) to report they got the help they needed.
- This is likely due to having more trusted adults, stronger peer relationships, and more education about mental health and wellness due to their GSO experiences.

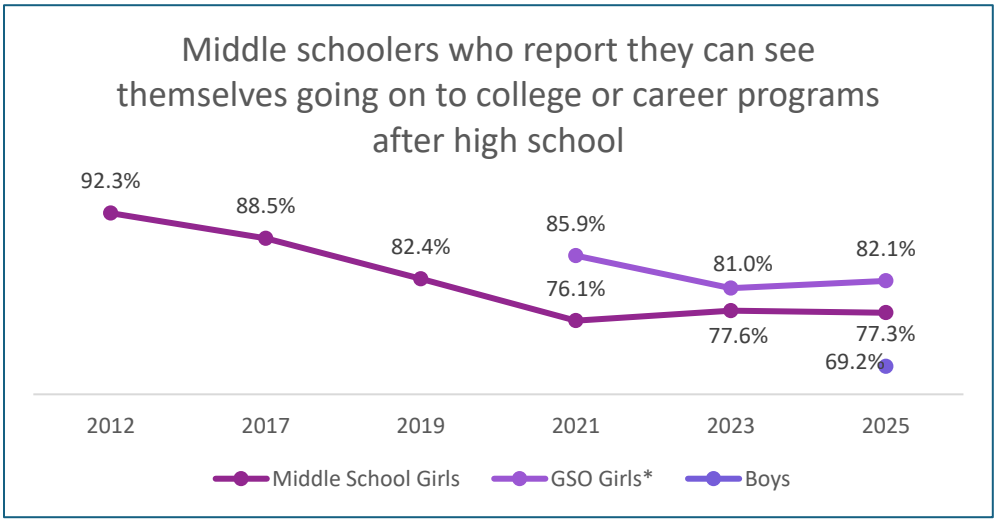
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The Status of Girls: Career Options Benchmark

The middle school years are a critical time for girls as they begin to explore their interests, define personal goals, and imagine the possibilities that lie ahead. Developing a clear sense of direction requires more than academic preparation; it also depends on access to supportive relationships, exposure to career pathways, and opportunities to build decision-making and planning skills. This section examines how girls envision their futures and the role that Girl Serving Organizations (GSOs) play in helping them connect their aspirations to meaningful educational, career, and life goals. Through mentorship, career exploration, and skill-building experiences, these programs help girls develop the confidence and knowledge needed to navigate their future with purpose.+

Girls in a Girl Serving Organization (GSO) are more likely to have a clear view of their future goals and how to achieve them

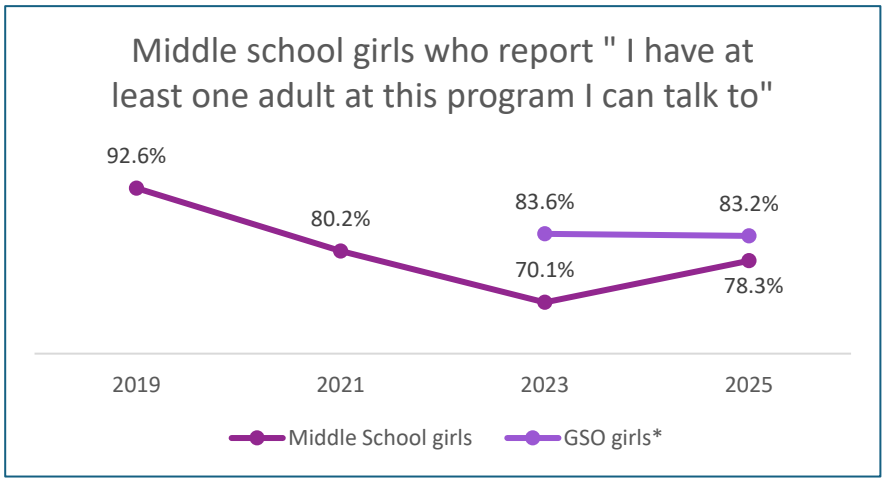
- 82.1*% of GSO middle school girls say they see themselves going to college or another organizational training program after high school, compared to 77.3% of middle school girls at large (and 69.2% of middle school boys).
- 89.0% of GSO middle school girls using the Helping Girls Thrive (HGT) Benchmarks say they can see a variety of future careers for themselves that would support their future goals.
    - 92.0% of GSO middle school girls using the HGT Benchmarks say they can also see future careers they are not interested in pursuing.
    - 55.0% say they can see how their classes and schoolwork connect to their future goals.



GSO girls are more likely to report having adults they can talk to about their future

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- In 2019, 92.6% of middle girls reported having an adult they could talk to; in 2025, just 78.3% of girls at large report this support, compared to 83.2*% of GSO involved girls.
- 95.0% of GSO middle school girls using the HGT Benchmarks report having two or more supportive adults they can ask about school, jobs and career.



GSO girls using the HGT Benchmarks develop critical skills to define their futures

- 47.0% had the opportunity to see what happens inside a workplace in their community.
- 83.0% report understanding how much people in their chosen job typically earn.
- 77.0% report thinking about a future job in terms of the work and the life outside of work they want to have.

Top considerations when middle school girls are thinking about what their future career might be:

Hours and days of work	72.0%
What skills or classes I might need to take now	67.0%
How I might have to act at work	52.0%
Who my coworkers might be	48.0%
Dress code or uniform	38.0%
What certifications or degrees might increase my pay	4.0%

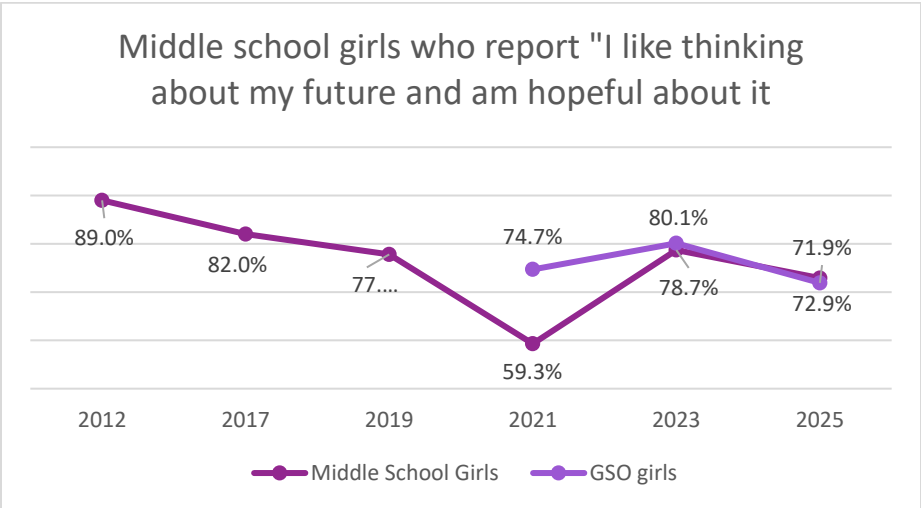
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The Status of Girls: Economic Empowerment Benchmark

A positive outlook on the future can help girls navigate challenges, pursue opportunities, and build the confidence needed to achieve their goals. However, developing hope and a sense of possibility often requires access to meaningful learning experiences, supportive relationships, and practical life skills. This section explores how middle school girls view their future and highlights the role that Girl Serving Organizations (GSOs), particularly those using the Helping Girls Thrive (HGT) Benchmarks, play in fostering financial literacy, goal setting, community engagement, and long-term planning. By helping girls connect their aspirations to real-world knowledge and experiences, these programs support the development of confident, informed, and civically engaged future leaders.+

Middle school girls have become less hopeful about their future

- In 2025, 72.9% of middle school girls reported "I like thinking about my future and am hopeful about it", compared to 89% in 2012.
- In 2023, 80.1*% of Girl Serving Organization (GSO) middle school girls reported being hopeful, versus 78.7%.
    - For the first time in 2025, GSO girls are less hopeful than girls at large (71.9% v 72.9%).
    - The bright note is that for GSO girls in programs using the Helping Girls Thrive (HGT) Benchmarks, this percent is 74%.
- Boys remain hopeful at 79.9%.



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Girls in GSO programs using the HGT Benchmarks are building financial literacy

- 77.0% report creating a budget that is based on life situations that match their life now, and one for their expected future life.
- 92.0% used what they learned to tell the difference between something they want now and something they need to save up money for.
- 62.0% created a model to work out a long term plan for a big financial goal they have.
- 71.0% report using a budget to figure out a plan for immediate and long term goals.
- 79.0% report understanding the value and drawbacks of long term debt.
- 78.0% can evaluate a banking app, debit card, or credit card to decide if it is the best plan for their needs.
- 74.0% report knowing what things might change a credit score and how to build and protect a credit score.

Girls in GSO programs using the HGT Benchmarks are future philanthropic and community leaders

- 82.0% can explain how community money functions to support the communities around them (religious groups, local government, charities, local non-profits).
- 72.0% can evaluate the benefits of donating money to organizations or places that they support.

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The Status of Girls: Healthy Risk Benchmark

The middle school years are a time when girls begin making more independent decisions and navigating a growing range of choices, influences, and social pressures. Developing the confidence to make healthy decisions, set personal boundaries, and stay true to their values is an important part of positive youth development. This section explores the challenges girls face as they encounter opportunities for risky behaviors, while highlighting the protective role of supportive relationships, strong community connections, and a positive sense of self. It also examines how Girl Serving Organizations (GSOs), particularly those using the Helping Girls Thrive (HGT) Benchmarks, help girls build self-confidence, strengthen decision-making skills, and develop the resilience needed to make choices that support their long-term well-being and success.+

Middle school girls are surrounded by opportunities for risky behaviors

- 1.5% of middle school girls report having tried cigarettes.
- 10.7% report having tried alcohol (more than a few sips).
- 12.9% of middle school girls report having ridden in a car driven by someone who had been drinking alcohol.
- 4.4% report having used marijuana, compared to 2.1*% of girls in girl serving organizations.
- 2.6% of middle school girls report having had sexual intercourse.
- 9.0% of middle school girls have been asked for a nude or sexually suggestive picture of themselves; 1.8% of middle school girls have sent that photo or video. (Note: 2023 data, question not asked 2025)

Middle school girls in Girl Serving Organizations (GSO) have more self-confidence and self-efficacy

- 57.8*% of middle school GSO girls report "I know I can handle most problems that come my way" compared to 45.5% of girls at large, and 45.1% of middle school boys.
- 70.0*% of GSO middle school girls report "I have something in my life that I am good at" compared to 61.9% of girls at large, and just 36.9% of boys.
- 63.7*% of GSO middle school girls report "I am part of a group in my community that cares about me" compared to 49.5% of middle school girls at large.

*Indicates statistical significance between groups at p<.05
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Girls participating in a GSO using the Helping Girls Thrive (HGT) Benchmarks are exploring healthy risk taking and building skills to avoid risky behaviors

- 79% report having at least one adult with whom they can talk about their decisions and how they might affect them.
- 76% report understanding their own values, boundaries, and what they want to achieve.

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The Status of Girls: Conflict Resolution Benchmark

Safety and freedom from violence are essential for healthy adolescent development. Yet many girls encounter conflict, bullying, aggression, and exposure to violence in their schools, homes, and communities. These experiences can affect their sense of security, well-being, and ability to focus on personal growth. This section examines the ways middle school girls experience and respond to violence and conflict, while highlighting the protective role of Girl Serving Organizations (GSOs). It also explores how programs using the Helping Girls Thrive (HGT) Benchmarks help girls develop conflict resolution skills, strengthen self-advocacy, build healthy coping strategies, and identify trusted adults who can support them through difficult situations. By fostering these skills and relationships, these programs help girls navigate challenges more effectively and create safer pathways toward long-term success and well-being.+

Girls in Girl Serving Organizations (GSO) are not immune to physical violence surrounding them

- In 2025, 26.2% of middle school girls (more than 1 in 4) report having ever been in a physical fight.
- And in 2023, while GSO girls were less likely to have reported this (18.1*% v 23.1%, in 2025, the percentages are nearly equal with GSO girls at 24.3%.
- 5.5% of girls at large report being physically hurt by someone in their own family, with 5.3% of GSO girls reporting the same.
- A slightly higher number of girls serving organization girls (25.5% v 21.6%) report having seen someone in their neighborhood get physically attacked, beaten, stabbed, or shot.
- 7.2*% of GSO girls report witnessing physical violence in their family, versus 6.4% of girls at large.
- 47.9*% of GSO girls report having been bullied on school property, versus 42.3% of girls at large.
- Slightly fewer GSO girls report having carried a weapon such as a gun, knife or club (5.9*%) versus girls at large (6.4%).

GSO girls using the Helping Girls Thrive (HGT) Benchmarks are gaining conflict resolution skills they apply to their real world experiences

- Just 12.1% of middle school girls in a GSO using the HGT Benchmarks report having been in a physical fight.
    - Just 4.5% of these middle school girls report having carried a gun, knife, or club.

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- 2 out of 3 GSO girls report learning about advocating for themselves, identifying feelings before reacting, and using negotiation skills during a conflict.
    - 1 in 2 girls reported being able to stay focused on their goals when there is a conflict, and if they are overwhelmed, they have an adult to seek advice from or to suggest ideas or solutions.
    - And 47% report that if they do lose self-control during a conflict, they have a trusted adult to sort out what happened and practice skills to help the next time they are in a similar situation.

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The Status of Girls: Sexual Health Benchmark

The sexual health benchmark survey does not yet have the minimum 100 surveys collected. Data reported here from the benchmark programs is preliminary and may not be statistically valid yet.

Data reported here from the Youth Health Survey is from 2023 and before; the 2025 WYHS did not include many sexual health questions that were previously included in the survey as the WRYHS.

Developing healthy relationships is an important part of adolescence, helping girls build communication skills, establish personal boundaries, and make informed decisions about their well-being. As young people increasingly navigate relationships both in person and online, access to accurate information, trusted adults, and opportunities to practice decision-making becomes essential. This section explores how middle school girls learn about healthy relationships and sexual health, and highlights the role that Girl Serving Organizations (GSOs), particularly those implementing the Helping Girls Thrive (HGT) Benchmarks, play in helping girls develop relationship skills, understand consent and boundaries, evaluate the influence of social media, and identify reliable sources of support and information. These experiences help girls build the confidence and knowledge needed to form healthy relationships and make choices that align with their values and goals.+



Girls in Girl Serving Organizations (GSO) are more likely to report they have been taught about healthy relationships and sexual health

- GSO girls are more likely to say they have been taught about healthy relationships than girl at large (65.5*% versus 56.5%).
- 54% of middle school girls report learning about sexual health, and 56.7% agree with the statement: the school health curriculum has provided me with many skills and concepts necessary for successful real life choices in and beyond middle school.
- 9.7% of middle school girls report having received a nude or sexually suggestive picture or video of someone else.
- 9.0% of middle school girls have been asked for a nude or sexually suggestive picture of themselves; 1.8% of middle school girls have sent that photo or video.

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GSO girls using the Helping Girls Thrive (HGT) Benchmarks gain life skills to support healthy relationships and build their relationship boundaries

- 4 out of 5 girls reported they considered their social media and how it might be affecting their relationships.
- 100% of middle school girls reported they defined the relationship boundaries that are right for them, right now.
- 82% of girls reported they practiced talking about consent.
- 84% of girls reported hearing from people with gender-diverse points of view and diverse sexual orientations.
- 74% of girls were able to project out what their choices now might mean for their futures.
- 67% reported learning the anatomy and physiology involved in sexual health.
- 69% reported they explored resources for accurate information about sexual health; and 84% explored protection methods for prevention of pregnancy and protection from STIs.
- 3 out of 4 middle school girls reported they could identify at least one askable adult to whom they could bring their relationship and sexual health questions.

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The Status of Girls: Civic Engagement Benchmark

Launched in 2026, the civic engagement benchmark is in use now by IIGA organizations.

- We anticipate sharable data in the next year.

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The Status of Girls: Survey Groups

This data represents the voices of middle school girls in and surrounding Worcester, MA

- In 2025, the Worcester Middle School Youth Health Survey (WMSYHS) shows 1572 middle school girls, of whom 237 (15.1%, or about 1 in 7) self-report that they are part of a Girl Serving organization in their community.
- In 2023, the WRYHS survey was a regional survey including Worcester and the surrounding towns. 2023 had 2134 middle school girls, 26.8% (about 1 in 4) of whom reported being part of a girl-serving organization.
- In 2021, the WRYHS of the same area showed 2347 middle school girls, and 18.0% participated in a girl-serving organization, on par with 2025. 2021 is the first year we asked students to self-report being part of a girl serving organization.
- The Status of Girls report shows the data from all girls (girls at large), girls who self-report being part of a girl serving organization, and girls who are actively participating in a GSO program with an organization that is part of IIGA.
- More than 1662 surveys have been submitted by middle school girls participating in girl serving organizations using the benchmarks since 2023.

Year	Survey	Girls	GSO Girls	% GSO	Boys
2025	Worcester Public Schools Middle School Youth Health Survey	1572	237	15.1%	1509
2023	Worcester Regional Youth Health Survey	2000	536	26.8%	2018
2021	Worcester Regional Youth Health Survey	2134	385	18.0%	2212
2019	Worcester Regional Youth Risk Behavior Survey	2347			2575
2017	Worcester Regional Youth Risk Behavior Survey	2167			2221
2015	Worcester Regional Youth Risk Behavior Survey	1793			1900

Year	IIGA Surveys	MS Girls	HS Girls
2026	Benchmark - Career Options	263	
2026	Benchmark - Civic Engagement	NEW	
2026	Benchmark - Conflict Resolution	95	
2026	Benchmark - Economic Empowerment	535	
2026	Benchmark - Healthy Risk	66	
2026	Benchmark - Mental Health	465	
2026	Benchmark - Physical Health	199	
2026	Benchmark - Sexual Health	39	
2018	Investing in Girls - Healthy Relationships	57	36
2012	Investing in Girls - Healthy Relationships	402	

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