



RIPPLE EFFECT

The Impact of Untreated Mental
Health on School Performance
and Educator Retention



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OVERVIEW

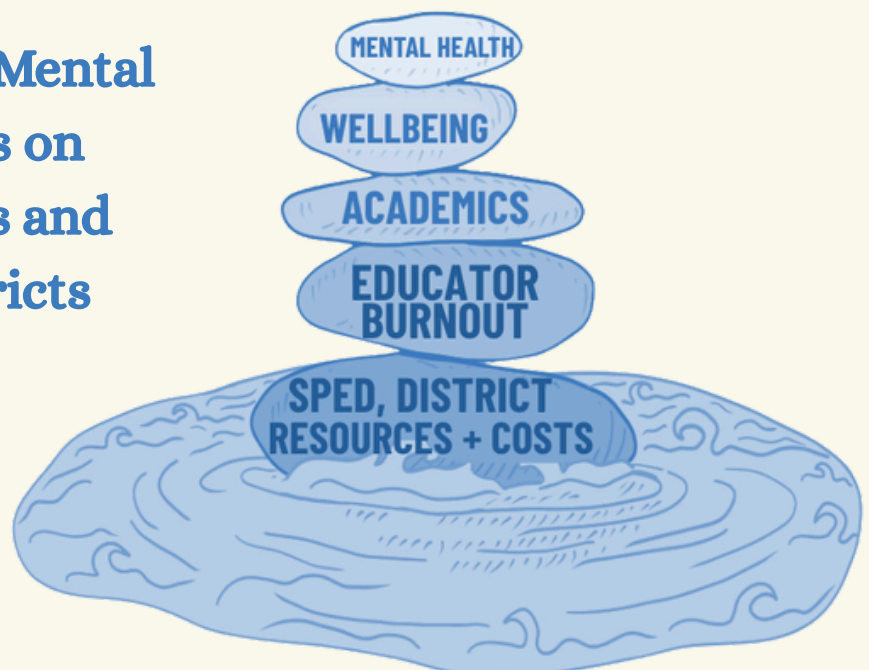
Student mental health is no longer just a challenge — it's causing a ripple effect that's shaping the future of education.

The Ripple Effect: The Current State of Student Mental Health in Schools reveals a startling reality: 71% of superintendents cite student health as their top concern, while 62% see its direct impact on academics. Educators are feeling the strain too, with 69% identifying funding shortages as a major obstacle. Meanwhile, 54% of parents worry about the physical toll mental health is taking on their children.

For Special Education Directors, this issue is even more complex. Many mental health challenges stem from underlying conditions or developmental delays, making early intervention and subsequent support critical. This report explores how untreated mental health issues affect students, educators, and families, highlighting key barriers and opportunities for systemic improvement. It reveals research-driven insights to help school leaders make informed decisions about student support and well-being.

The data in this report highlights the surprisingly far-reaching effects of untreated mental health and special education needs. It equips superintendents across America with the data they need to advocate for mental health and special education budget allocation, while also illuminating the perspective of parents, who feel that new modalities like teletherapy and digital support should be the first options given to students in order to support effective and efficient care delivery.

The Ripple Effect of Mental Health Challenges on American Students and Their School Districts



METHODOLOGY

We developed and administered three distinct questionnaires targeting educators (N = 278), parents (N= 278), and superintendents (N = 165). Each questionnaire consisted of approximately 45 questions and was deployed through the Pollfish polling platform.

We applied screening criteria to our sample. For parents, eligibility required having at least one child currently enrolled in K-12 and residing at home, with the participant affirming that they are the child's parent or legal guardian.

Differentiated screening questions were employed to categorize respondents into classroom educators/specialists and superintendents/administrators. Geographical diversity was ensured by sourcing participants from all four US census regions.

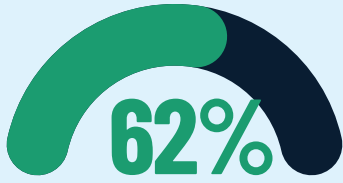
For a detailed breakdown of participant demographics by group, see Appendix.

The surveys were conducted over a four-day period in February of 2024.

In 2025, we revisited this dataset and drew insights based upon current market and ecosystem conditions.

2025 Ripple Effect Report

KEY FINDINGS



of superintendents and educators are concerned about the impact of mental health on **students' academic performance**

71%

Supt.

62%

Educators

54%

Parents

are concerned about the impact mental health issues have on **students' overall health**

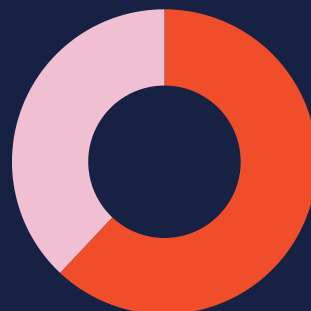
Mental health impacts wellbeing so deeply, it is now an academic issue

Parents tell us **teletherapy and digital tools** are effective

4 out of 5 parents have tried virtual care and are satisfied.



We are losing educators to burnout, and it's **costing our school communities**



62%

of superintendents expressed concern for the wellbeing of educators and staff



SCHOOL FACULTY

**How Untreated Mental Health
Affects the Entire School Ecosystem**



THE RESULTS OF UNTREATED MENTAL HEALTH

Superintendents share that untreated mental health among students can lead to severe repercussions, including significant problems with behavior, socialization, and academic performance, as well as depression, eating disorders, self-harm, and sometimes suicide. With Special Education and IEP provider shortages at an all-time high, students are not getting the consistent care they need.

Superintendents are aware of these risks and are striving to mitigate them despite the challenges they face.

The responses of superintendents : ¹



*"The number of students having behavioral issues within and outside of class is increasing. **Safety is impacted not only for the students who need support, but for the students and staff at whom that behavior is directed.**"*

*"Mental health affects how we think, feel, and act. It also determines how we handle stress, relate to others, and make healthy choices. **Mental health is important at every stage of life, from childhood and adolescence through adulthood.**"*



*"**Undertreated mental health issues have an impact not only on the teacher but also on other students.** Students, as well as the teacher, cannot move forward as well when there are children who are having mental health issues in the classroom."*

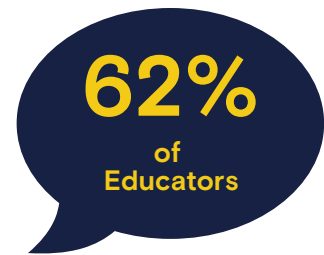
¹ Responses above are responses to an open-ended question asking superintendents to describe the impact of untreated mental health issues among students in their schools.

MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES ERODE THE WELLBEING OF STUDENTS AND FACULTY

Student mental health doesn't just affect students — it impacts the entire school community, including educators and staff. It threatens the very cornerstone of a school or district's mission to provide opportunities for students to lead and excel in a global society and hinders academic achievement. The effects can be devastating on already strained educators.



are concerned about the
impact mental health
issues have on student's
overall health



Superintendents and educators see student health as the top concern, highlighting the physical and emotional toll mental health issues take on students. Educators, especially, regularly see students dealing with physical symptoms like headaches, fatigue, and stomach aches as a result of emotional and mental health distress.



62% of superintendents and educators are concerned about the impact of mental health on students' academic performance

Mental health challenges directly impact students' ability to succeed academically by disrupting their ability to focus and engage in learning. The result is declining grades and increased absenteeism. Superintendents identify academic struggles as a critical issue.

KEY INSIGHT:

Mental health issues are academic issues and can no longer be siloed or deprioritized.

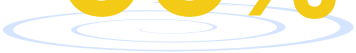




My previous urban school population faced lots of trauma-related issues, which manifested in outbursts, disruptions, absenteeism, and poor academics.



EDUCATORS AND STAFF BEAR THE BURDEN OF SUPPORTING STRUGGLING STUDENTS



66%

of superintendents are concerned about the growing workload for educators

Superintendents recognize the strain that student mental health places on educators, who must take on more responsibilities to support struggling students.



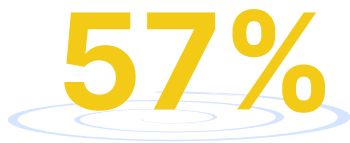
62%

of superintendents expressed concern for the wellbeing of educators and staff

The stress of supporting students also takes a toll on the mental health and emotional wellbeing of educators and staff, with superintendents expressing deep concern about burnout.

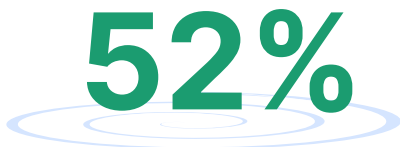
STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH AFFECTS CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT AND DYNAMICS

Classrooms are no longer immune, as mental health issues disrupt learning environments

A large yellow '57%' is centered, with three concentric blue circles below it, creating a ripple effect.

of superintendents expressed concern for the effect of mental health on the entire classroom environment and overall dynamics

Mental health difficulties also create disruptions inside the classroom, affecting student interactions and impacting learning environments.

A large green '52%' is centered, with three concentric blue circles below it, creating a ripple effect.

of educators are concerned about classroom environment and dynamics

Educators often find themselves trying to manage behavioral disruptions, absenteeism, and emotional outbursts that interfere with classroom learning and peer interactions.

KEY INSIGHT:

Mental health issues are driving educator overwhelm and burnout, which in turn, becomes costly to school districts. The average cost to hire one replacement educator is \$20,000 to the school district.



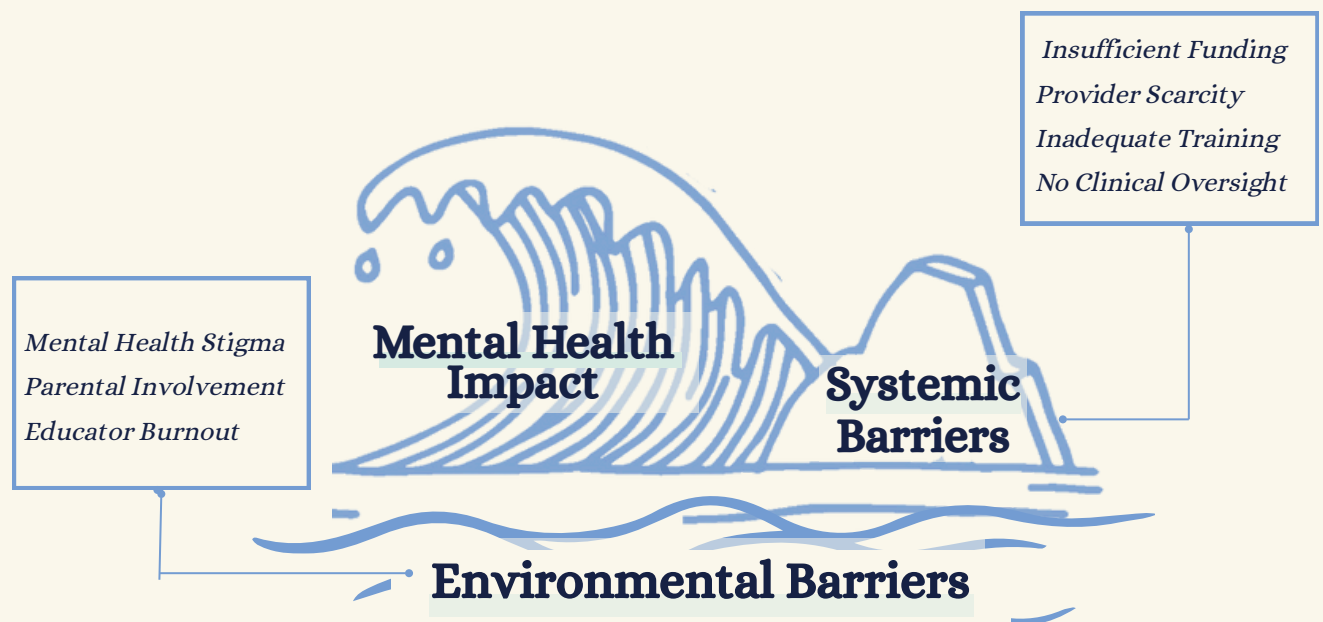
SUPERINTENDENTS FIGHT ON TWO FRONTS: OVERCOMING SYSTEMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL BARRIERS TO CHANGE

While superintendents are committed to improving student mental health, they encounter a complex web of challenges that impede progress.

Systemic barriers such as insufficient funding, provider scarcity, inadequately trained staff, and limited clinical oversight in schools are boulders that break the rising tide of mental health impact. Successfully addressing these barriers will require committing to a long-term vision and forging innovative community partnerships.

Within more immediate reach is addressing **environmental barriers** like mental health stigma, parental involvement, and educator burnout. Survey respondents have found efficacy in trying new creative and scalable treatment methods including mental health teletherapy and other innovative digital solutions.

Addressing the Rising Tide of Mental Health Impact on Our School Districts



Superintendents can potentially reduce environmental barriers by leveraging innovative solutions, while forging long-term partnerships within the community may be necessary to overcome systemic barriers currently blocking mental health impact.

SCHOOL FACULTY FACE OVERWHELMING OBSTACLES AS THEY TRY TO SUPPORT STUDENTS IN NEED

Some barriers are structural in nature, related to the availability of resources, funding, and professional support. These issues are often more difficult to overcome, but are essential to tackle in order to bring long-term change.

Barrier: Insufficient Funding

Percentage of superintendents and educators citing insufficient funding as a significant barrier:

65%

Superintendents highlight the lack of funding as one of the largest systemic hurdles in addressing mental health

69%

Educators often see students in need of help, but lack the financial resources to provide adequate mental health support

We are at a breaking point for academic and budget viability¹:

The escalating challenges related to student mental health and special education needs are placing unprecedented strain on school budgets. For instance, Michigan's per-pupil grants for mental health and school safety plummeted from \$328 million to approximately \$26.5 million, a reduction exceeding 90%. This drastic funding cut has led to significant staffing challenges, including the potential elimination of crisis counselors and social workers. Similarly, Midland Independent School District in Texas faces a \$41.1 million budget deficit, primarily due to the expiration of federal grants, resulting in the loss of 88 positions, including key mental health support roles. Such budget constraints threaten both academic viability and the capacity to provide essential services for students with mental health and special education needs.

¹ Source data: [Campus Safety Magazine](#) (6/2024) and [MRT Star](#) (March 2025)

Barrier: Provider Scarcity

Percentage of superintendents and educators reporting limited access to mental health professionals as a significant barrier:

61%

Superintendents agree. Without sufficient access to trained mental health professionals, many students struggle to receive the support they need

69%

Educators agree. Even when educators identify students in need of professional help, they often lack access to mental health professionals who could provide direct support

Barrier: Inadequate Training

60% of superintendents highlight inadequate training for school staff members as a significant barrier

Without proper training, school staff are often unequipped to identify or address mental health challenges affecting their student body.

Barrier: Limited Clinical Oversight

53% of superintendents report limited access to consults and clinical oversight as a significant barrier

Superintendents struggle to manage ongoing mental health issues effectively with limited oversight and consults from clinical experts.

ENVIRONMENTAL BARRIERS IN SCHOOLS COMPOUND THE MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS

While systemic barriers require broader change, superintendents also face more immediate, environmental obstacles in managing student mental health. These challenges, while difficult, are things we may be able to impact:

Barrier: Educator Burnout

Percentage of superintendents and educators citing educator burnout as a significant barrier:

61%

Burnout among educators, often caused by the overwhelming responsibility of managing student mental health needs, remains a pressing challenge.

65%

Trying to manage these issues without adequate resources adds to educators' workloads, leading to emotional and physical burnout.

Barrier: Low Parental Involvement

Superintendents and educators report inadequate support and involvement from parents/guardians as a significant barrier.

59%

Superintendents express worry about the lack of involvement from parents, making it harder to support students' mental health holistically.

59%

Educators are often left to manage students' mental health issues on their own, without enough engagement from parents or guardians.

KEY INSIGHT:

Despite recognizing the mental health struggles their students face, educators are limited by barriers such as insufficient funding, lack of access to mental health professionals, burnout, and inadequate parental support, making it difficult for them to provide necessary help.



Barrier: Mental Health Stigma

52% of superintendents mention stigma associated with seeking mental health support as a significant barrier

The negative stigma surrounding mental health issues prevents many students from seeking the help they need, further complicating efforts to address these challenges.

Educators are on the front lines, witnessing the mental health struggles of their students unfold every day. They are present to observe the daily impact of mental health challenges on their students, from declining physical and emotional health to disruptions in academic performance, classroom behavior, and peer relationships.

53% of educators are concerned about students' interpersonal relationships

Educators also observe how mental health issues affect students' relationships with their peers, causing isolation and strained friendships.

KEY INSIGHT:

While superintendents oversee systemic and environmental barriers impacting mental health, educators see the day-to-day realities of student mental health issues unfolding in real-time inside the classroom. They witness firsthand how anxiety, trauma, and absenteeism directly affect students' health, academic performance, and relationships.





PARENTS

**Highly-Concerned Parents are Willing
to Try Creative Solutions, Including
Digital Tools and Virtual Care**



PARENTS SEE THE RIPPLE EFFECT OF THEIR CHILDRENS' MENTAL HEALTH UNFOLD TO CRISIS LEVELS

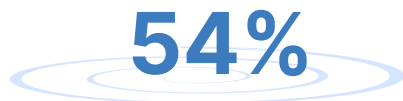
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The biggest impact I've experienced is my child being super reserved and quiet. They stop talking about what's going on and internalize everything.



Parents are increasingly alarmed by the impact of mental health challenges on their children's health, academics, and relationships, with many seeing the toll it takes every day.



of parents are concerned about their child's health

Parents are increasingly alarmed by the physical toll mental health issues take on their children, such as chronic fatigue, headaches, or stomach aches.



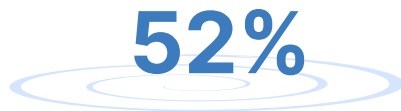
of parents are concerned about their child's academic performance

Parents witness how mental health issues disrupt their child's ability to focus and succeed academically, resulting in declining grades and missed school days.

¹ Responses above are responses to an open-ended question asking superintendents to describe the impact of untreated mental health issues among students in their schools.

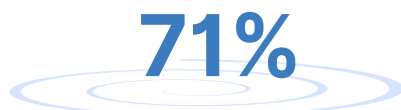


If it isn't addressed at an early age, it will impede a child's education, personal development, relationships, and overall mental health.



of parents are concerned about their child's interpersonal relationships

Many parents worry that mental health struggles are isolating their children, making it difficult for them to form meaningful friendships and engage with peers.



of parents report their children have asked to miss at least one school day because of mental health or stress

37% asked more than once per month, and 10% asked more than once per week. This indicates there's learning loss and high levels of anxiety in the learning environment.

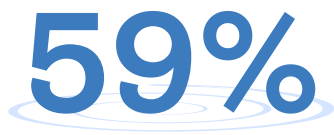
KEY INSIGHT:

When mental health issues go unaddressed, parents see their children becoming withdrawn, struggling academically, and facing severe emotional consequences.




PARENTS POINT TO WHAT SEEMS TO BEST SUPPORT THEIR CHILDREN THROUGH MENTAL HEALTH STRUGGLES

Despite these challenges, many parents find creative outlets, social-emotional learning, and virtual therapy to be highly effective in supporting their children's mental health.

59%

of parents report that creative expression outlets (such as art, music, or writing) engage their child the most

Creative outlets are often one of the most engaging ways to support children's mental health, giving them a productive and emotional release.

49%

of parents find social-emotional learning (SEL) curriculums most effective

SEL programs help children build emotional intelligence, improve self-awareness, and navigate their feelings in a healthy way.

80%

of parents who have experience with their child using virtual services for mental health therapy report satisfaction

Virtual therapy is emerging as a favored option for parents, providing a flexible and accessible way to address their child's mental health needs.

CONCLUSION: KEY CALLS TO ACTION AND TAKEAWAYS

The report "The Ripple Effect: The Current State of Student Mental Health in Schools" underscores four critical takeaways for school leaders, educators, and policymakers:

Mental health challenges for students are causing a “ripple effect” throughout the entire school community. We are at a breaking point for academic and budget viability:

The rising mental health challenges faced by students are significantly straining both academic success and school budgets. According to the report, 71% of superintendents cite student health as their top concern, and 62% see its direct impact on academic performance. Additionally, 65% of superintendents report insufficient funding as a significant barrier to addressing these mental health needs. With 66% of superintendents concerned about educators' workload and 62% concerned about educator and staff well-being, the impact on both students and educators is clear. This has compounded the financial strain already experienced by school systems struggling with dwindling budgets. The physical and emotional toll on students, as well as the increasing disruptions in classrooms, are putting both educational quality and student well-being at risk. As mental health issues grow, 71% of parents report their children have missed more than one day of school due to stress or mental health concerns, highlighting the real-world consequences of the crisis.

Progress is possible through creative resource allocation:

While systemic barriers such as funding and access to trained professionals remain major challenges, school districts can still make progress in the short term. By being creative with existing resources—such as optimizing staff training, reallocating funds, and forming community partnerships—schools can begin to mitigate some of the challenges caused by mental health issues. With 59% of educators citing inadequate parental involvement and 52% citing stigma around seeking mental health support as barriers, schools can focus on fostering stronger connections between educators, parents, and communities to create more holistic support systems.

Parents are willing to embrace virtual therapy and digital tools

The report highlights that 80% of parents who have utilized virtual mental health services report satisfaction with the outcome. This demonstrates a growing openness to digital solutions, providing schools with an opportunity to expand their offerings. With 59% of parents finding creative expression outlets such as art, music, and writing helpful for their children's mental health while 49% support the use of social-emotional learning (SEL) curriculums, integrating these types of tools into the classroom or using them as virtual resources can better provide students with the support they need to succeed.

The intersection of mental health and special education

Mental health challenges are especially relevant within special education because many students with disabilities face additional emotional and behavioral difficulties. Untreated mental health issues can exacerbate learning challenges, making early intervention and specialized support critical. The report underscores the importance of addressing both mental health and special education needs simultaneously to ensure that all students—especially those with underlying conditions—receive the necessary care and academic support.

Conclusion

Addressing the mental health crisis in schools requires a coordinated effort across the entire school community. With 54% of parents concerned about their child's health and 55% worried about their child's academic performance, it is clear that the stakes are high. By acknowledging the challenges that students, educators, and families face and working together to remove barriers, we can create an environment that supports the well-being and success of every child. The data clearly shows that mental health issues are not only a personal concern but also a systemic one, affecting not just the students who face these challenges but the entire school community.

This calls for urgent, creative solutions that involve all stakeholders working together to prioritize mental health and well-being.



APPENDIX



SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS

Superintendents

Ultimately, we sampled 165 (N = 165) superintendents. The sample included respondents from the majority of US states and all four US Census regions. A complete breakdown of respondents by state is available. Our sample consisted of predominantly White (83%) respondents and included Black (5%), Hispanic (5.5%) and Asian (1%) participants. All respondents selected their career as being in the field of Education with 34% holding a University Degree and 49% holding a postgraduate degree, and 100% of the respondents in the sample worked in school or district leadership or administration. A majority of respondents (54%) identify as female with 46% identifying as male. A small percent-age (4%) was age 18-24, while the 24-34 range represented 14%. Age 36-44 (33%) was the most represented while 45-54 was 18% and 53+ was the highest at 31%.

Parents

We sampled 278 parents (N = 278). Most of the parents in our sample were White (71%), followed by Black (15%), Hispanic (5%) and Asian (3%). The sample included respondents from the majority of US states and all four US Census regions. A complete breakdown of respondents by state is available. 100% of the participants in the survey have at least one child currently enrolled in K-12 for whom they affirm they are the parent or legal guardian. 36% hold a University Degree and 51% hold a postgraduate degree. A majority of respondents (56%) identify as female with 44% identifying as male. A small percentage (3%) was age 18-24, while the 24-34 range represented 28%. Age 36-44 (46%) was the most represented while 45-54 was 18% and 53+ was the highest at 7%.

Educators

We sampled 278 educators (N = 278). The sample included respondents from the majority of US states and all four US Census regions. A complete breakdown of respondents by state is available. The majority of respondents were White (76%), followed by Black (9%), Hispanic (6%) and Asian (4%). All respondents selected their career as being in the field of education, and 100% of the respondents in the sample worked as a educator or another classroom specialist. All respondents selected their career as being in the field of Education with 36% holding a University Degree and 51% holding a postgraduate degree, and 100% of the respondents in the sample worked in school or district leadership or administration. A majority of respondents (56%) identify as female with 44% identifying as male. A small percentage (6%) was age 18-24, while the 24-34 range represented 18%. Age 36-44 (22%) was the most represented while 45-54 was 19% and 53+ was the highest at 35%.