Concerns around youth mental health and safety have recently taken front stage because of pandemic-related upheavals in children’s schooling, socializing, and access to school-based supports. The news media has helped draw much-needed attention to these issues and may have influenced recent boosts in federal funding for school-based mental health services. In the context of careful, credible reporting, we can feel confident that the public and policymakers have an accurate view of what is known about the state of youth mental health, including risk for substance use and its consequences. Unfortunately, some recent media coverage of research on these topics, especially as portrayed in news stories’ headlines, underscore the all-too-common problem of misleading media representation of scientific research.

Misleading news coverage about research can pose a potential threat to youth health and well-being by offering summaries of research findings that (1) minimize a real and ongoing problem, (2) exaggerate the severity of a problem, or (3) distort the cause of a problem. Such coverage can divert scarce attention and resources away from pressing issues and the solutions most needed for addressing them.

**Problem Minimization**

At times, the media extrapolates sweeping conclusions from a single study’s finding about the seeming resolution or abatement of a long-standing public health problem. Coverage of recent national data on youth vaping rates [1], for example, has been dangerously misleading. Headlines in reputable news outlets touted “a big drop in U.S. teen vaping” [2] and “youth vaping declined sharply for second year,” [3] despite study authors’ explicit warnings against making comparisons to prior years because of coronavirus disease (COVID)-related methodological changes in data collection. Implying a statistically significant drop in youth vaping, without solid evidence, can impede efforts to address the youth vaping crisis just as the Food and Drug Administration is reviewing the risk-benefit ratio of allowing vaping products to remain on the market. Indeed, the vaping industry pounced on such coverage, suggesting youth use of their products is not a significant problem [4].

With the Food and Drug Administration issuing its first authorization in October 2021 for the marketing of R.J. Reynolds’s VUSE tobacco-flavored e-cigarettes—a high-nicotine-content brand popular among youth—this is not the time to be lulled into a false sense of resolution around the youth vaping epidemic.

**Problem Exaggeration**

Just as minimizing the severity of a threat such as youth vaping can lead to inadequate responses or divert attention from the problem, headlines representing a problem as worse than it might be also can be harmful to young people’s health. For example, a recent headline [5] reported no significant decline in teens’ marijuana use or binge drinking amid pandemic lockdowns. While the study [6] upon which this and similar news articles were based did find that marijuana use and binge drinking among a sample of 12th-graders, as a whole, stayed at prepandemic levels, there are crucial nuances not reported in the media: Perceived availability of these substances and reported ease of access to and use of nicotine vaping products did decrease during the pandemic. Furthermore, results differed based on respondents’ reported social distancing practices, such that those who were social distancing engaged in significantly less binge drinking than those who were not. Highlighting the lack of change in marijuana use or binge drinking but not the decline in vaping gives extra weight to the findings that suggest the presence of a problem, at the expense of those that may tamp down concerns.

Failing to mention the decline in binge drinking among those who engaged in social distancing or to highlight in the headline the decline in youth vaping during the pandemic also obscures critical findings supporting the known protective effect of reducing the accessibility and availability of substances to youth [7]. The news coverage makes the problem of youth substance
use seem intractable when, in fact, there are significant, evidence-based solutions that have been accentuated by pandemic-imposed social circumstances.

**Problem Distortion**

Headlines ascribing a problem to something that is not necessarily the cause can misdirect responses and waste scarce resources. For example, recent news articles [8,9] reported concerns of a national wave of youth suicides due to the pandemic. These reports were based on local anecdotal information, fears expressed by mental health professionals, and studies of increased youth anxiety, depression, and emergency room visits for mental health concerns assumed to be predictive of suicide risk. The pandemic has undeniably worsened mental health for many youth, but adolescent suicide rates had been trending upward before the pandemic and appeared to be plateauing ordeclining according to recent national estimates [10,11].

Misattributing youth suicide to COVID-related shutdowns can dangerously pit measures critical to protecting people from a disease such as COVID against measures to protect youth mental health. It can derail focus and prevention resources dedicated to less salient but more direct contributing factors to youth suicide that are unrelated to the pandemic. Furthermore, stressful life events, such as those experienced by many young people during the pandemic, do not typically translate to increased suicide risk in the absence of underlying mental illness [12]. Distorting the presentation and implications of evidence can contribute to a misdirection of resources sorely needed to address the full continuum of youth mental health and substance use problems, from prevention to early intervention and treatment.

**Recommendations**

Both researchers and journalists bear responsibility for improving the accuracy of media coverage of scientific findings. In communicating with the media, researchers should clearly articulate the main message of the study, explain both what the study has found and what it has not found, identify the most important qualifiers or methodological limitations, and explain why the findings are still important despite the study’s limitations [13].

While journalists might not have a background in science or statistics, speaking with the researchers, as well as outside experts, can help them accurately report study findings. Because editors, rather than reporters, often write headlines, reporters can include suggested headlines as well as methodological caveats with their submitted articles and ask to review headlines before publishing to help prevent inaccurate or misleading reporting.

In addition, journalists should use the guidance provided in resources such as the AP Stylebook. The section on research provides information on how to recognize research worthy of reporting, explains types of study designs, instructs on reporting numbers (e.g., risk, statistical values, percentages), and provides writing tips. Critically, it stresses that reporters should read the actual research rather than rely on press releases, which may exaggerate or otherwise misrepresent claims [14]. For additional help and guidance, journalists can avail themselves of several other resources provided by reputable organizations that seek to support journalists in accurately reporting health- and science-related research findings [15–20].

**Conclusion**

With alarm bells justifiably ringing about the precarious state of young people’s mental health, misrepresenting data-based findings on these issues is dangerous. Research should guide how we address youth mental health and substance use, but media coverage that misinforms about what is most pressing and what needs to be done can divert the limited attention and resources away from what we know works.

Catchy headlines reporting a major threat, seemingly good news, or a source of blame can attract attention and readers. However, with most readers not reviewing source material or even reading through to the end of a news article, headlines must better reflect research findings. Increasing accessibility of research through media reports is laudable and necessary to capture the public’s attention and convey the urgency needed to address youth mental health and substance use, but it is counterproductive to do so in a way that goes beyond or against what the research actually finds or what young people actually need to thrive.

**References**


