



FRIDAY, JANUARY 12, 2024 | TENNESSEAN.COM



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## TN among top child suicide rates nationally

New report also shows other alarming trends

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*Note: This story discusses self-harm. If you are at risk, contact the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline for support at 1-800-273-8255. You can also text the Suicide and Crisis Line at 988 to connect with help.*

Tennessee ranked in the 20 top states for suicide rates in children ages 9-17, according to a new report. Additionally, the rate for suicides carried out with a firearm in that same age group is in the top 10 nationally.

The Tennessee Commission on Children and Youth, an independent, nonpartisan state agency, detailed the latest trends in its State of the Child in Tennessee 2023 report released Monday. The suicide rates reflect data gathered in 2021.

The report also shows other alarming trends when it comes to youth mental health in Tennessee, including an increase in all categories of suicidal ideation among Tennessee high schoolers since 2017. Meanwhile, the report showed that 32% of Tennessee's public school districts had no psychological professionals on staff during the 2021-22 school year, while another 24% had only one.

The National Association of Social Work standards call for at least one psychological support staff member per 250 students. In the 2022-23 school year, the report showed that 511 social workers were serving 975,545 students — which works out to a ratio of one social worker per 1,909 students.

Here are four more key takeaways from the report.

### A snapshot of mental health for high schoolers

Here are a few more key statistics and numbers the report highlighted on the mental health of youth in Tennessee. The data points reflect information gathered in 2021.

- Nearly three in 10 high schoolers said their mental health was not good

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## Lee wants 'ELVIS Act' to protect music vs. AI



Gov. Bill Lee speaks about the benefits of legislation to protect songwriters and performers from the misuse of artificial intelligence Wednesday in Nashville. PHOTOS BY STEPHANIE AMADOR/THE TENNESSEAN

### Governor to submit legislation

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Tennessee Gov. Bill Lee announced plans Wednesday to propose a bill aimed at protecting musicians and songwriters from misused artificial intelligence, with an eye at becoming the first state in the nation to adopt such protections.

Lee announced plans for the legislation at Nashville's historic RCA Studio A, before a veritable who's who of musicians, songwriters, music industry leaders — including CMA Entertainer of the Year Lainey Wilson, songwriter Jamie Moore, Maggie Rose, Matthew West and Tom Douglas.

"This is really a piece of legislation that will protect voices from technology from artificial intelligence that actually rob and steal an artist's gift," Lee told reporters after the announcement event.



Country music star Lainey Wilson, in hat, attends a news conference by Gov. Bill Lee on protections against the misuse of artificial intelligence.

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# THE TICKET

# BRITTNEY SPENCER

TALKS HER NEW ALBUM 'MY STUPID LIFE'



ILLUSTRATION BY BRIAN GRAY/USA TODAY NETWORK; PHOTO BY JIMMY FONTAINE



**Music**  
 Marcus Dowling  
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Brittney Spencer rose up, then sat down and made friends. • In short, that's the simplest way to surmise why the breakout star's major label debut album — "My Stupid Life" is set to release Jan. 19 on Elektra Records — is so refreshing. • It's intentional that she sits down with friend and Grammy-winning producer Daniel Tashian (Josh Turner, Kacey Musgraves, Burt Bacharach), finally occupying space in their shared creative wheelhouse of 2000s-era radio and sound-track-ready pop. Alongside spending three years touring with Jason Isbell, Reba McEntire, Bob Weir and others, this singer-song-writer arrived in 2024, self-aware of her growing talents and ready to fulfill her artistic vision.

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# Spencer

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While conversing with The Tennessean, Spencer mentions her desire to energetically connect in “genuine, organic ways” with creative people who “love making good music and storytelling.”

Returning home from life on the road. Surrounded by an excited, engaged, creative community eager to engage with her. Not a highly-touted musician in two-dimensional social media posts, or an artist hidden in plain view — behind a fourth wall onstage.

“I’m a real person who wants to learn from mistakes and achieve small victories while picking at stuff while sitting on my couch with my guitar or at my keyboard,” she said.

“Or, I want to sit at home and while watching TV with my friends, come up with some random melody and figure out a song.”

## 2000s-era films and pop music

“My Stupid Life” is best described as a film soundtrack to Spencer’s existence. After 11 years in Nashville after moving from Baltimore, it is a heartwarming, hopeful story involving falling in and out of love while unwinding trauma, sitting in her apartment, playing her guitar and occasionally opening her front door to welcome friends such as Abbey Cone, Mickey Guyton, Isbell, Maren Morris and Grace Potter.

These artists are among many who appear as players, vocalists or otherwise contributors to the release.

That metaphorical film could easily play in the same cineplex with Julia Stiles’ star-making moments in romantic films such as 1999’s “Ten Things I Hate About You” and 2001’s “Save The Last Dance,” plus Omar Epps and Sanaa Lathan’s work in 2000’s “Love & Basketball.” As a middle schooler, Spencer loved those films, part of her multi-genre, musical awakening.

Spencer’s adoration of country music specifically arrived via listening to The Chicks, McEntire, Brad Paisley and Shania Twain, spurring her to watch Dolly Parton’s work in the 1989 film “Steel Magnolias.”

The space where commercial coun-



Critically-acclaimed musician Brittney Spencer’s debut album, “My Stupid Life,” arrives on Jan. 19. JIMMY FONTAINE

try, hip-hop, rock and soul remained undiluted but merged into mainstream pop during the era still serves as the creative core of her work.

Couple that with her singing sanctified gospel in church, Broadway standards, jazz and opera at school and she believes that she’s been “living in a musical world” for at least two decades.

One time, “vibing” with Tashian in his home studio grew into many two-person, multi-instrumental jam sessions.

Then, Spencer opened up her iPhone voice memos and a “sonic spectrum” of country lyricism-inspired pop-rock songs, including the album’s title track and “First Car Feeling,” emerged.

## The connective power of melodic, relatable songs

Spencer’s album benefits from her time on the road as an opening act, melding well with the music she grew up hearing.

Last year’s “Bigger Than The Song” appears on the album and as noted in The Tennessean’s top songs of the year feature, is “delivered with country’s

songwriting fundamentals present, front and center,” as a refrain like “makes you wanna be fancy like Reba, a queen like Aretha, in love like Johnny and June” -- plus name-checking Janet Jackson, Alanis Morissette and Dolly Parton — feels refreshingly autobiographical.”

She cites the subtleties in lyrical delivery and chorus changes in Brad Paisley’s 2003 Alison Krauss duet “Whiskey Lullaby” and his solo 2007 hit “Letter To Me” as critical inspirations for the sleeper hit.

Her catalog’s growth in melodic songs with “light” choruses has grown her fanbase significantly in the past year compared to her more lyric-dense work from her Dec. 2020 “Compassion” EP.

“Thoughtful, wordy songs that discuss [her] world views” (such as “Thoughts and Prayers,” a song about gun violence) allowed for her mainstream renown to arrive.

Now, to grow that work, she’s relying upon introspective but relatable material like the anti-misogyny anthem “Desperate,” “I Got Time,” current single and homebody paean “Night In” and album

closer “Reachin’ Out.”

## The value of ‘having more fun as a songwriter’

Also, there’s “My First Rodeo,” a power ballad that highlights where her talents could be headed. It’s described by Spencer as a “stream of consciousness [writing session]” that budded from a one-day piano-driven session in Los Angeles where telling “wild [love-lorn] stories” distilled into a song about being a night owl and falling into a “go to hell and back again”-type romance.

“My Stupid Life” features Spencer sharing the most about herself she has ever had on a recording.

She’s also doing so while wanting to enjoy an era in which she feels personally and professionally unhurried and can engage with her talents freely.

“When stories between friends become lyrics, sometimes magic happens,” Spencer said.

“Elements of previous music I’ve put out remain, but I’m also growing both as an artist and in vulnerability as a person, plus allowing myself to have more fun as a songwriter.”