

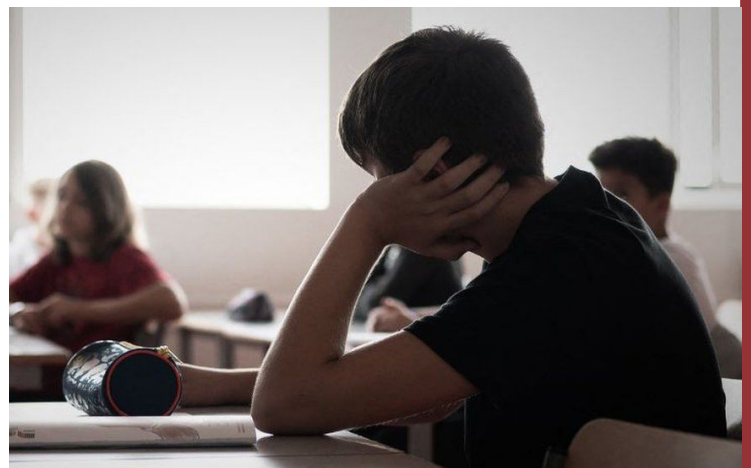


## The Growing Crisis of Children's Mental Health

### Background

Early childhood, adolescence, and the transition into adulthood are dynamic phases marked by immense potential for growth and development yet also characterized as periods of inherent vulnerability. Adolescents, in particular, face physical, emotional, developmental, and social changes that significantly influence their behavioral health, especially when coupled with adverse experiences like poverty, abuse, violence, family instability, and parental mental health struggles. Additional risk factors like hormonal fluctuations, academic stress, and societal pressures can further exacerbate challenges. Research indicates a clear correlation between the number of risk factors and the potential impact on behavioral health, with pathways leading from early symptoms to diagnosable disorders.

Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reveals a concerning reality: nearly 1 in 5 children grapple with mental, emotional, or behavioral disorders (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021). This vulnerability intensifies for adolescents aged 13 to 18, with an estimated 49.5% facing a mental health challenge at some point in their lives. These challenges encompass a wide range of issues, including anxiety, depression, ADHD, conduct disorders, mood disorders, substance use disorders, eating disorders, and self-harm behaviors. Tragically, suicide is the second leading cause of death for US adolescents (Hoffmann, et al., 2023), often linked to pre-existing mental health problems. Additionally, youth facing mental health challenges may encounter subsequent difficulties with drug use and risky sexual behaviors, increasing their vulnerability to HIV, STDs, and unintended pregnancy.



Every young person's path is unique and fraught with potential challenges, some beyond their control. There is no single roadmap for navigating these difficulties. The factors influencing concerning trends are multifaceted and intertwined. Research explanations concede increased awareness and reduced stigma have encouraged more young people to seek help, which may contribute to an increase rates of disclosed mental health experience. However, research also points to the detrimental effects of excessive social and digital media use, academic pressure, limited access to mental health care, and unhealthy behaviors. Moreover, broader societal issues such as economic inequality, racism, gun violence, and climate change are believed to play a significant role in exacerbating the prevalence of mental health problems. It's crucial to acknowledge that the pandemic's long-term impact on children and young people remains unclear, adding another layer of complexity to the issue.

Compounding this crisis is an overburdened behavioral health system ill-equipped to address the growing needs of children and youth. Advocates stress overburdened behavioral health systems only exacerbated what many have dubbed a "Children's Behavioral Health Crisis" (AACAP, 2023). Consequently, the mental health concerns of many youths remain unaddressed until they escalate into acute emergencies (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (U.S.), 2022), leading to children being hospitalized, placed in equally stressed residential facilities, or even becoming involved with the juvenile justice system. Due to the scarcity of accessible mental health treatment options, emergency rooms have become the default—and often the only—recourse for many families. While all families generally face difficulties accessing behavioral health services, low-socioeconomic status households and minority communities experience even greater barriers to obtaining quality mental and behavioral health care. This disparity further compounds the crisis, as these populations are often disproportionately affected by the social determinants of health that contribute to mental health challenges.



## National Landscape

Nationwide, the landscape for alternative behavioral health treatment options appears bleak, leaving families desperate for solutions. The nationwide shortage of child and adolescent mental health professionals, coupled with inadequate funding for community-based services, has created a dire situation. This "Children's Behavioral Health Crisis" demands urgent policy attention.

**Policy Implications: Building Capacity to Address the Youth Mental Health Crisis.** The following recommendations offer valuable steps towards a more comprehensive understanding of adolescent mental health, but they represent just a starting point in addressing the complex challenges young people face. The unprecedented nature of these challenges demands a multifaceted and comprehensive approach that goes beyond individual policy solutions. Ensuring the well-being of children and families requires collaboration across multiple disciplines, including federal, state, and local entities. This collaborative effort must encompass policy, institutional, and individual changes in how we perceive and prioritize behavioral health. By working together and embracing a multi-pronged approach, we can create a society that better supports the mental health and well-being of our youth, empowering them to thrive in the face of adversity:

**Workforce Development:** In 2022 the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) released updated workforce maps illustrating the severe national shortage of child and adolescent psychiatrists. The report shows there are only 14 child and adolescent psychiatrists per 100,000 children in the country (AACAP, 2023). Similarly, a December 2023, revealed more than half (169 million) of the U.S. population lives in a Mental Health Professional Shortage Area (Health Resources & Service Administration, Health Workforce , 2023). Addressing the shortage of child and adolescent mental health professionals is crucial to ensure adequate treatment capacity. Expanding training programs, incentivizing specialization in child and adolescent mental health, and offering loan forgiveness programs for providers who practice in underserved areas have emerged as viable solutions. Some states are also exploring innovative approaches such as task-sharing and collaborative care models that leverage the expertise of other healthcare providers (e.g., pediatricians, social workers) could help bridge the gap in care.



**Investment in Prevention and Early Intervention:** Expanding access to mental health screenings, promoting early identification of disorders, and providing timely interventions are crucial to mitigating the long-term consequences of untreated mental health conditions in children and adolescents. State Medicaid programs have been instrumental in this effort, implementing various approaches to promote access to behavioral health services. Several states have taken the initiative to improve access to youth mental health care by promoting school-based Medicaid behavioral health services, which can provide critical support to students in a familiar and convenient setting. Additionally, initiatives to connect youth with virtual care options at no cost have been implemented to overcome barriers related to transportation and stigma. Some states have also enacted provisions to expand access to mental health services through Medicaid, such as leveraging Medicaid funding to further develop school-based behavioral health programs and integrating mental health care into primary care settings. These efforts are essential for ensuring that young people receive the support they need early on, which can significantly improve their long-term well-being and reduce the strain on overburdened emergency and residential treatment facilities.

**Data Collection and Research:** Current research practices on youth behavioral health are often fragmented across multiple agencies, resulting in delayed data releases, subsequently hindering effective responses. Prioritizing timely data collection and research is crucial for understanding the evolving needs of young people and developing targeted interventions. Investing in research to better understand the causes and risk factors associated with mental health disorders in this population can inform the development of evidence-based prevention and intervention strategies. The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on Protecting Youth Mental Health emphasizes the importance of access to timely data for shaping policies, programs, and practices that cater to the unique needs of children and adolescents, particularly those from at-risk populations (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021). Despite existing evidence highlighting the suffering and crisis among young people, there are still significant gaps in our understanding of their health, experiences, and the most effective interventions. Historically, data on youth mental health has been limited, and when available, it often relied on parents or guardians completing survey questionnaires on behalf of youth in their household. However, the recently released Teen National Health Interview Survey (NHIS-Teen) represents a significant advancement by directly surveying adolescents (ages 12-17), providing a more direct and accurate

representation of adolescent mental health (National Center for Health Statistics, 2023). Continued investment in research and data collection initiatives like NHIS-Teen is paramount to improving the mental health outcomes of this vulnerable population.

## Helping Youth In Connecticut Thrive

The alarming rise in children’s behavioral health challenges demands immediate and comprehensive action. Access to necessary mental health treatment has been a stark challenge nationwide, and Connecticut is not an exception. In response, the state has established the Transforming Children’s Behavioral Health Policy and Planning Committee (TCB), a multi-sector collaboration aimed at prioritizing children’s mental well-being. The TCB is structured into five workgroups focusing on prevention, services, school-based initiatives, system infrastructure, and strategic planning, all crucial areas for improving the behavioral health landscape for young people. Over the past several months, the TCB has made significant strides in understanding the scope and complexity of the issue. The committee has received reports and presentations from various state agencies and stakeholders, providing a foundation for future action. The TCB’s work has also highlighted the importance of data collection and research to better understand the needs of children and families, as well as the efficacy of existing programs and services. Enhancing the committee’s research and analysis capabilities the TCB also receives valuable technical assistance (TA) support from the Innovations Institute at the University of Connecticut (UConn).

Looking ahead, the TCB’s focus will shift towards developing a comprehensive strategic plan that will outline their priorities and goals for the next three years. This plan will encompass various approaches to address the children’s behavioral health crisis, including investing in prevention and early intervention, expanding access to services, strengthening system infrastructure, and bolstering the behavioral health workforce. The committee’s collaborative approach, which leverages the expertise of diverse stakeholders, is essential to creating a comprehensive and effective strategy to meet the unique needs of Connecticut’s youth. By working together, the TCB aims to ensure that all young people in the state have access to the support and resources they need to thrive.

The workgroups that have been formed and started working are the following:

**Strategic Planning Workgroup:** Task with developing a three-year strategic plan that will identify strategies and goals to transform children’s behavioral health across the state. Identified priority areas, objectives, and primary measures that will guide the work of the various workgroups and subcommittees to ensure committee efforts are coordinated and are not duplicative against similar legislatively appointed behavioral health initiatives. The strategic planning workgroup will sunset upon approval of the TCB strategic plan. Oversight of the TCB strategic plan is charged to the TCB committee.

**Infrastructure Workgroup:** Guide TCB activities and provide advisory recommendations to promote maximized efficiency in achieving children’s behavioral health needs. Prospective work may include a landscape analysis to identify emerging needs and/or service implementation gaps relating to the allocation of resources, state insurance structures, funding, licensing requirements, workforce, and children’s behavioral health system



governance.

**Services Workgroup:** Focus on accessing service issues related to the continuum of care. This may include inpatient, and outpatient acute services and intermediate services provided to children and families. The workgroup may review the needs and strategies for an effective continuum of care, service availability, and system capacity.

**Prevention Workgroup:** Examine and provide TCB with advisory recommendations to improve children's behavioral health prevention services and programming. The group priorities may include: 1) preventing substance use and overdose; 2) enhancing access to suicide prevention and behavioral health services; 3) promoting resilience and emotional health for children, youth, and families; and 4) integrating behavioral and physical health care.

**School-Based Workgroup:** Advances efforts to ensure all school districts integrate trauma-informed approaches that provide equitable academic, social, emotional, behavioral, and physical well-being. This workgroup will strengthen collaborations across schools and community initiatives to improve school mental health services.

The Transforming Children's Behavioral Health Policy and Planning Committee is excited to be planning for a set of recommendations for the 2025 legislative session.

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