



A National Emergency in Child and Adolescent Mental Health

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the need for mental and behavioral healthcare; we must do more to ensure children have access to the full continuum of needed care.

Mental and behavioral health concerns in children and teens have been on the rise for many years.

- According to the [CDC](#), Mental health conditions in youth are common, with 1 in 5 children and adolescents experiencing a mental health condition annually and 50% of mental illnesses beginning before age 14.
- In 2019, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), [reported](#) that 22% of adolescents had a severe mental health impairment. Further, SAMHSA reported the lifetime prevalence of any mental disorder among adolescents was nearly 50%.
- Suicide is the [second leading cause](#) of death of youth ages 10-24 in the U.S. and rates have been rising for decades, with a 60% increase occurring between 2007 and 2018.
- In a disturbing illustration of these trends, [children's hospitals](#) have seen the number of emergency department and inpatient visits for suicidal thoughts and self-harm more than [double since 2016](#).

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the existing mental health crisis.

- Studies have found higher rates of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic symptoms among children during the pandemic, especially among young people of color.
- As of July, nearly 140,000 children in the U.S. lost a [primary caregiver](#) to COVID-19 – with Black youth experiencing the highest rates of loss.
- According to the [CDC](#), between March and October 2020, emergency department visits for children with mental health emergencies rose by 24% (ages 5-11) and by 31% (ages 12-17).
- In June, the CDC reported a 51% rise in suspected suicide attempts among girls ages 12-17 from February 2021 to March 2021 compared to the same time period in 2019.
- In the first half of 2021 alone, children's hospitals reported cases of self-injury and suicide attempts in children ages 5-17 at a 45% higher rate than during the same time period in 2019.

Too many children and teens are not receiving needed mental health care.

- Due to a range of barriers including persistent stigma associated with mental health conditions, lacking or limited coverage for mental health treatment, and severe shortages of pediatric mental health professionals across disciplines, many children and adolescents have difficulty accessing needed mental health services and supports.
- Unfortunately, [only 20% of children](#) that have a mental, emotional, or behavioral health disorder receive care from a specialist. While children benefit greatly from early detection, without treatment, their conditions often worsen and are carried into adulthood.
- Increased demand for inpatient pediatric mental health services has left far too many children and adolescents boarding in emergency departments awaiting placement for appropriate care.

A Comprehensive Approach to Addressing the Mental Health Crisis

Tackling the pediatric mental health crisis requires a comprehensive approach that includes prevention, early intervention, and treatment. To facilitate early identification and intervention, we must ensure that children are able to access care in the settings where they are, such as schools and their pediatrician's office. While many children's needs can be met through school-based services and primary care, a truly comprehensive approach must prioritize timely access to developmentally and culturally appropriate services across the full continuum of care, including for children in crisis or experiencing serious emotional disturbances who may require more intensive services. Greater investment in strengthening systems of care for children and adolescents is urgently needed.

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The challenges facing children and adolescents are so widespread that our organizations have joined together to declare a National State of Emergency in Children's Mental Health and have collectively launched an initiative to [Sound the Alarm for Kids](#). Children cannot afford to wait for care and swift action is needed. We call on policymakers to join us in recognizing the national emergency and working to improve the access to and quality of care across the continuum of mental health promotion, prevention, and treatment for children and adolescents.

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