



## A Series on Mental Health's Connection to Other Social Issues



# A Primer on Youth Mental Health and Well-Being

Today's youth are experiencing very different social and environmental factors that affect their mental health than previous generations. This time in history is filled with economic uncertainty, a rapidly evolving social and political context, public health crises, and environmental concerns. These stressors are amplified by greater access to information through the internet, as well as challenges such as peer pressure that social media increasingly poses for young people.

Philanthropy is well positioned to support today's youth through a variety of entry points, including schools, homes and families, community engagement, sports and extracurricular activities, and online. This primer introduces the most pressing issues facing youth today, as well as key approaches for philanthropy to make an impact on youth well-being from the perspective of issue areas funders are already supporting.



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## Youth in Schools

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Schools are not only a physical location for learning, but also provide a social ecosystem that includes positive adult relationships, peer engagement, and life skills. Healthy school environments can also combat isolation by providing a shared community and connecting youth and families to necessary resources, especially for those living in poverty. Young people who feel more connected to their school report fewer negative indicators of well-being, such as depressive symptoms, suicidal ideation, social anxiety, and risky sexual activity, while also reporting higher levels of self-esteem and more adaptive use of free time.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, disruptions to the school environment can have a lasting impact, whether they be from temporary suspensions or more persistent factors such as community violence, homelessness, or COVID-19.<sup>2</sup>

Intentionally integrating mental health in schools benefits not only indicators of well-being, but also those of academic achievement and community development.<sup>3</sup> Whether by addressing school mental health provider shortages or ensuring that social skill-building programs like arts, athletics and extracurricular activities are not disrupted, funders can support efforts in educational settings that address the whole student.

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## Youth at Home

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A safe and consistent home environment is a key determinant of youth well-being. This includes access to appropriate housing, healthy and supportive relationships, caregiver mental health, community safety, and food access. For example, a 2021 study reported that 1 in 14 children aged 0–17 years had a parent who reported poor mental health. Those children were more likely to have poor general health, to have a mental, emotional, or developmental disability, to have adverse childhood experiences, and to be living in poverty.<sup>4</sup> Each of these factors is greatly influenced by family socioeconomic status, with poverty being both an influencing factor and outcome of poor well-being.

Avenues to impact for funders looking to support youth at home include increasing support to families immediately following the welcoming of a child, providing access to mental health supports that consider the needs of the whole family, and reducing the financial burden of having a family. Other avenues to impact include supporting organizations that promote positive parenting practices, combat homelessness, and end child hunger.

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1 Foster, C.E., Horwitz, A., Thomas, A., Opperman, K., Gipson, P., Burnside, A., Stone, D. M., & King, C.A. (2017). Connectedness to family, school, peers, and community in socially vulnerable adolescents. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 81, 321–331. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2017.08.011>

2 Dorn, E., Hancock, B., Sarakatsannis, J., & Viruleg, E. (2021, July 27). COVID-19 and education: The lingering effects of unfinished learning. McKinsey & Company. <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/education/our-insights/covid-19-and-education-the-lingering-effects-of-unfinished-learning>

3 Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (n.d.) Mental Health and Academic Achievement. [https://www.education.nh.gov/sites/g/files/ehbemt326/files/inline-documents/mental\\_health\\_and\\_academic\\_achievement.pdf](https://www.education.nh.gov/sites/g/files/ehbemt326/files/inline-documents/mental_health_and_academic_achievement.pdf)

4 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2022, April 19). Mental health of children and parents. <https://www.cdc.gov/childrensmentalhealth/features/mental-health-children-and-parents.html>

## Youth in the Community

Strong community connections in adolescence are linked to positive outcomes in adulthood. Youth interactions with their peers and the community at large also build crucial life skills for adulthood. Yet, 61% of young adults feel serious loneliness, and a third of people feel like there is no place where they feel a strong sense of belonging.<sup>5</sup> Community is not only a geographic location, but also social groups linked by race or ethnicity, religion, gender identity or sexual orientation, and/or common interests.

The absence of such connections puts youth at risk for criminal justice involvement, isolation, and unhealthy coping mechanisms such as substance use. Funders can increase connection by supporting community-based activities, such as the arts or recreation, that foster positive peer and adult relationships, build a healthy identity, and/or reduce the likelihood of criminal justice involvement. Funders can also support opportunities that empower youth voices to be heard in their community.

## Youth at Points of Transition

Young people are often most at risk for experiencing a mental health crisis during periods of intense change and transition. Going from high school to college, entering the workforce, or aging out of the foster care system means leaving previous support systems

and grappling with new challenges such as financial independence. A study on the mental health of college students found a 135% increase in depression and 110% increase in anxiety from 2013 to 2021, and overall the number of students who met criteria for one or more mental illnesses in 2021 had doubled from 2013.<sup>6</sup>

Funders can invest in efforts to help young people develop life skills and better coping mechanisms for high stress times. Funders might also consider supporting campus and workplace mental health efforts, funding supportive services for youth aging out of foster care, or integrating mental health components into workforce readiness programs.

## Youth Online

Young people today interact with technology more frequently and in ways that previous generations never have. On average, teens spend more than 8 hours online every day.<sup>7</sup> The effects of social media use on mental health are still not fully understood by researchers. While social media and the use of technology can have both positive and negative influences on youth, it can serve as a powerful entry point for funders to support their mental health. For example, gaming communities,<sup>8</sup> social media engagement, internet searches, and texting services can all be leveraged to help youth access online mental health resources. Funders interested in education can support programs that use technology to provide services such as mental health screenings.

5 Kuile, C., Thurston, A., Phillips, S., Scott, D. (2022). A Call to Connection: Rediscovering the Transformative Power of Relationships. Einhorn Collaborative. <https://einhorncollaborative.org/call-to-connection/>

6 Colarossi, J. (2022, April 21). Mental health of college students is getting worse. The Brink. <https://www.bu.edu/articles/2022/mental-health-of-college-students-is-getting-worse/>

7 Moyer, M.W. (2022). Kids as Young as 8 Are Using Social Media More Than Ever, Study Finds. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/24/well/family/child-social-media-use.html>

8 Usmani, S.S., Sharath, M., & Mehendale, M. (2022). Future of mental health in the metaverse. *General Psychiatry*, 35(4). <https://doi.org/10.1136/gpsych-2022-100825>



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## Key Considerations for Funding Youth Mental Health

Youth mental health and well-being is fundamentally connected to outcomes across a multitude of major philanthropic cause areas, such as early childhood development, education, and support for families. **Investing in youth is a crucial upstream investment with lifelong implications for well-being.** Youth mental health is shaped by various settings where young people spend their time, each of which serves as a key entry point for impact while furthering the causes that funders already care about.

The following questions are intended to be self-reflective to help you achieve greater impact across your portfolio by integrating support for youth mental health and well-being in other focus areas.

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Which of my current funding priorities most align with youth mental health and well-being? In what ways can my funding enable current grantees to better address the mental health and well-being needs of the young people they serve?

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Where does my grantmaking to other populations also influence the mental health and well-being of young people? How can I integrate mental health and well-being support for other populations that influence youth?

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What barriers do I face in effectively funding youth or mental health issues? How would funding youth mental health advance the outcomes that I seek in other issue areas?