The US youth mental health crisis demands a community response

Supported by **THE cigna GROUP**

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Introduction

Economist Impact conducted a survey, sponsored by The Cigna Group, of 1,500 US parents of teenagers aged 13-17 in July 2023. The survey explored community efforts to support teen mental health and identify current needs and challenges facing parents and their children.[1] The insights below summarize the findings of this study.

The kids are not alright: continued mental health crisis among America's teens

Well before the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health challenges were the leading cause of disability and poor life outcomes in young people, with up to 1 in 5 US children aged 3 to 17 having a mental, emotional, developmental or behavioral disorder.[2] The pandemic only exacerbated the crisis, leading 80% of parents responding to a 2022 Economist Impact survey to report that they had seen new or increased signals of potential mental health issues from

their teens, including anxiety, depression, behavioral issues and increased problems with social interactions.[3]

Now, three years since the start of the pandemic, this crisis shows few signs of abating. A recent survey by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported that 42% of high-school students experience persistent sadness and hopelessness, and girls are twice as likely as their male classmates to report these feelings.[4] A study of 4.1m youth patients confirms this trend, reporting a 22% increase in emergency department visits among teenage girls for mental health challenges, including depression, anxiety, eating disorders and suicidality, during the second year of the pandemic (March 2021-February 2022) compared to the pre-pandemic baseline (March 2019-February 2020).[5]

The responses of the 1,500 US parents surveyed for this study confirm the mental

1 For the purpose of this study, community was interpreted as a local network of people, places, and organizations, businesses and groups important in child and family well-being.
2 United States Office of the Surgeon General. Protecting Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory. Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2021. Available from: https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-youth-mental-health-advisory.pdf.
3 Economist Impact. Sounding the Alarm: Parent Perceptions of Teen Mental Health in the US. London: The Economist Group, 2022. Available from: https://impact.economist.com/perspectives/sites/default/files/sounding_the_alarm_parent_perceptions_of_teen_mental_health_in_the_us_final3.pdf.
4 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Youth Risk Survey: Data Summary & Trends Report. Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2021. Available from: https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/yrbs/pdf/YRBS_Data-Summary-Trends_Report2023_508.pdf.
5 Overhage L, Hailu R, Busch AB, et al. Trends in Acute Care Use for Mental Health Conditions Among Youth During the COVID-19 Pandemic. JAMA Psychiatry. 2023.

health challenges facing teens. Nearly half (47%) report that their teen is experiencing mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and autism spectrum disorder. Roughly half of parents report significant overuse of screens (social media, TV, etc.) and approximately one in three reports that their teens struggle with sleep. Excessive use of social media has been linked to poor sleep quality and duration, as well as depressive symptoms and suicidal thoughts and behaviors.[6]
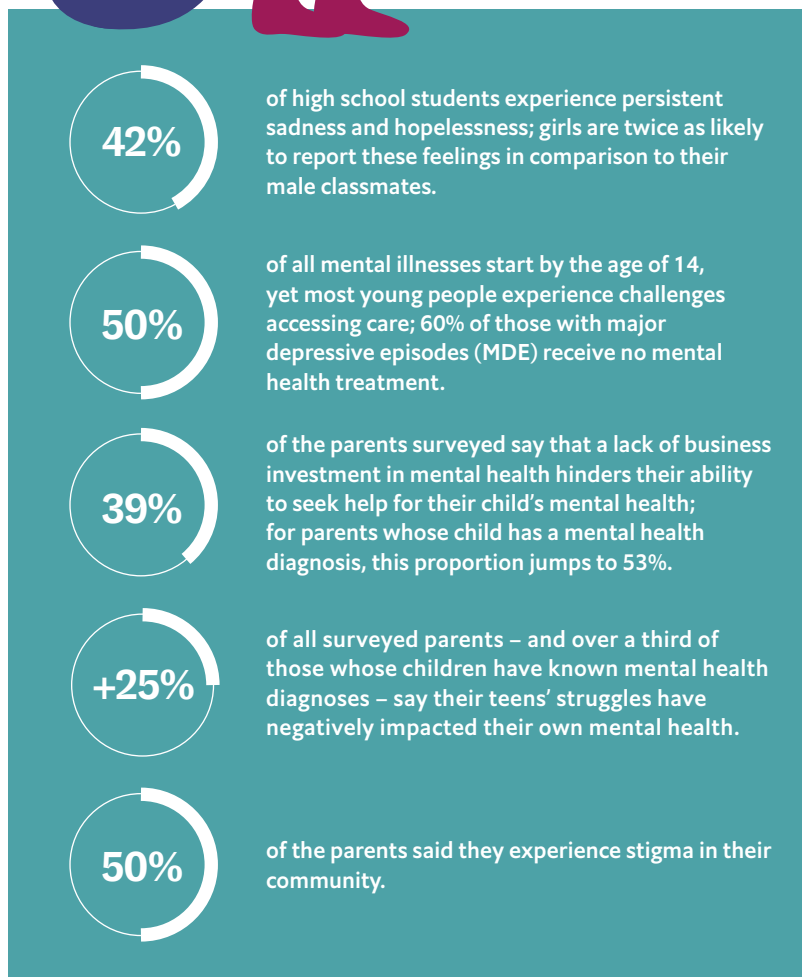
Teens are not the only ones affected by mental health. Parents, too, are struggling and report a negative impact on their own wellbeing and relationships, both personal and professional. Over a quarter of parents said their mental health has been negatively affected by their teen's mental health struggles, with the number rising to over a third for those whose children have been diagnosed with a mental health condition. Parents also report feeling overwhelmed by their child's needs and increased tension with their spouse or partner.

Beyond the home, parents of teens with a mental health diagnosis were also more likely to report challenges at work.[7] These parents said they have had to seek more flexible work arrangements or reduced work hours, that their productivity has been negatively impacted, and that they have experienced increased tension with their boss or supervisor owing to their teen's mental health diagnosis.
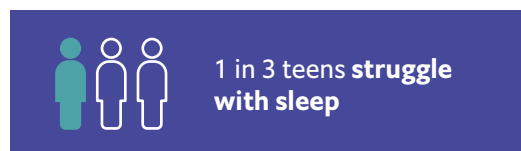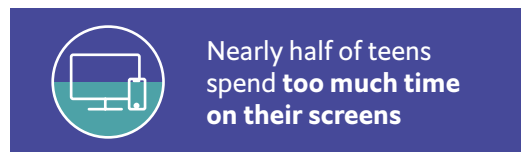
Parents need help getting help for their kids

Half of all mental illnesses start by the age of 14, yet most young people experience challenges accessing care; 60% of those with major depressive episodes receive no mental health treatment.[8] Even among US states with the highest levels of access to care for young people, one in three do not receive the mental health services that they require.[9]

How teens respond to emotional challenges is often shaped by the degree to which parents are attuned to teens' emotional states, hopes and fears, and how they respond constructively to these challenges. When parents do take steps to intervene, they struggle to find support. Parents surveyed report facing multiple barriers to supporting their children's mental

42% of high school students experience persistent sadness and hopelessness; girls are twice as likely to report these feelings in comparison to their male classmates.

50% of all mental illnesses start by the age of 14, yet most young people experience challenges accessing care; 60% of those with major depressive episodes (MDE) receive no mental health treatment.

39% of the parents surveyed say that a lack of business investment in mental health hinders their ability to seek help for their child's mental health; for parents whose child has a mental health diagnosis, this proportion jumps to 53%.

+25% of all surveyed parents – and over a third of those whose children have known mental health diagnoses – say their teens' struggles have negatively impacted their own mental health.

50% of the parents said they experience stigma in their community.

6 United States Office of the Surgeon General. Social Media and Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory. Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2023. Available from: https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/sg-youth-mental-health-social-media-advisory.pdf.
7 For the purposes of this study, mental health diagnosis was interpreted as a diagnosis with anxiety, depression, ADD/AHD, bipolar disorder, reactive stress disorder, autism spectrum disorder, eating disorder, and/or another behavioral/mental health condition.
8 Kessler RC, Berglund P, Demler O, et al. Lifetime Prevalence and Age-of-Onset Distributions of DSM-IV Disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication. Archives of General Psychiatry. 2005;62(6):593-602.
9 Mental Health America. Youth Data 2022. Alexandria, VA: Mental Health America. Available from: https://www.mhanational.org/issues/2022/mental-health-america-youth-data#five.

40% Only 40% of parents report having access to mental health resources

Nearly half of teens spend **too much time on their screens**

Nearly half of teens are experiencing **mental health challenges**

1 in 3 teens **struggle with sleep**

health. Half said that they sometimes or always struggle to determine what help their child needs. Other barriers include difficulties finding a trusted mental health provider (reported by 46% of respondents), a lack of information about services available in the community (45%), long delays and wait times (44%), a lack of government support (43%), a lack of support from school educators/officials (43%), and the cost of diagnosis/treatment (43%).

Parents struggle more when their child has a confirmed mental health diagnosis. More than half (58%) of this group say that they sometimes or always encounter barriers in getting their child help owing to a lack of government support for mental health, and 61% admit to facing barriers when looking for a trusted mental health provider. Other issues include long wait times to access mental health services (61%), not knowing what help their child requires (62%), not knowing where to access available resources (58%), and the cost of diagnosis and treatment (55%). Proximity also creates challenges to access, with 42% of parents in rural areas sometimes or always believing that mental health services are not close enough to their homes.

The need for early intervention

One in five parents surveyed said that their child is experiencing challenges with anxiety, and nearly one in five is experiencing challenges with depression yet these children have not

been medically diagnosed. Timely intervention is critical to supporting optimal mental health. Mental health disorders typically emerge during adolescence and early adulthood, and the longer the period of untreated illness the more impacted the individual will be over their lifetime. Evidence indicates that earlier intervention can significantly impact life outcomes; however, young people are the least likely to access mental health services owing to inadequate access to appropriate services, low health literacy and stigma.[10,11]

Parents worry that stigma remains a barrier to care

Stigma is a key barrier to mental health care.[12] The challenges parents face are exacerbated by the prevailing stereotypes and biases surrounding mental illness. Half of the parents surveyed said that they experience stigma in their community. Similarly, half reported that their child with a mental health diagnosis feels embarrassed or ashamed about needing help at least some of the time, and nearly one in five (19%) said that their children face this barrier all of the time. Shame and fear of discrimination often deter help-seeking and treatment engagement for mental health problems.[13]

Addressing how mental health stigma, commonly held myths and stereotypes create barriers for teens seeking and accessing help is critical. Education at the community level can

[10] Iorfino F, Carpenter JS, Cross SP, et al. Social and occupational outcomes for young people who attend early intervention mental health services: a longitudinal study. Medical Journal of Australia. 2022;216(2):87-93.

[11] McGorry PD, Mei C. Early intervention in youth mental health: progress and future directions. Evidence Based Mental Health. 2018;21(4):182-4.

[12] Corrigan PW, Druss BG, Perlick DA. The Impact of Mental Illness Stigma on Seeking and Participating in Mental Health Care. Psychological Science in the Public Interest. 2014;15(2):37-70.

[13] Schnyder N, Panczak R, Groth N, et al. Association between mental health-related stigma and active help-seeking: Systematic review and meta-analysis. The British Journal of Psychiatry. 2017;210(4):261-8.

play a vital role in fostering an open dialogue and promoting a wider understanding of mental health conditions.[14] There is a need not only to help parents better navigate how, when and where to access care, but also to ensure that parents and teens are empowered and unafraid to seek help.
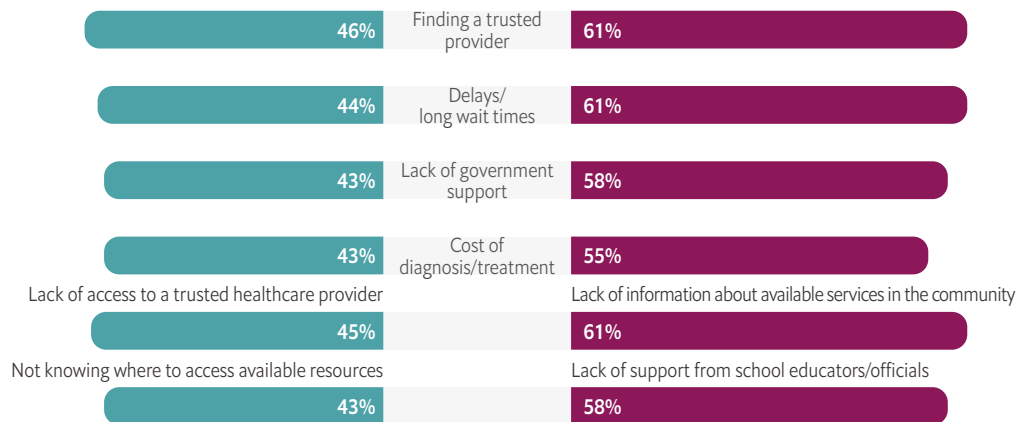
The role of communities

Social isolation has proven links to deteriorating mental and physical health, and the COVID-19-pandemic significantly impacted today's teens at a critical juncture in their social and mental development.[15]

Against this backdrop, community-based organizations can play a significant role in supporting parents and teens. Local networks offer mental health help and resources, as well as opportunities for social interactions, which have been shown to improve relationships and wellbeing.[16] Parents surveyed confirmed the benefits that communities can offer to improve their teens' mental wellbeing. When asked about the potential benefits of mental health resources, parents rated community-based activities as equally important as traditional therapy resources. In fact, when asked to select their top choices for solutions, parents said that among the resources available to them in their communities, "access to mental health resources for group, family or individual therapy" had the greatest positive impact (selected by 37% of parents), followed closely by athletic programs (36%), youth organizations like YMCA or Boys and Girls Clubs (34%), safe outdoor spaces (34%), and life-skill classes (33%).

There was a difference of opinion based on race, with black parents (44%) being significantly more likely than white parents (33%) to

Top barriers parents face when getting mental health help for their teens

These numbers become even more troubling when a teen has a confirmed mental health diagnosis

Barrier	%	%
Finding a trusted provider	46%	61%
Delays/long wait times	44%	61%
Lack of government support	43%	58%
Cost of diagnosis/treatment	43%	55%

Lack of access to a trusted healthcare provider — 45%

Lack of information about available services in the community — 61%

Not knowing where to access available resources — 43%
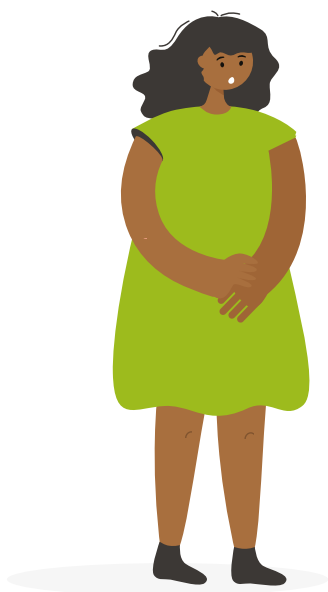
Lack of support from school educators/officials — 58%

[14] Office of the Surgeon General (OSG). Protecting Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory [Internet]. Washington (DC): US Department of Health and Human Services; 2021. PMID: 34982518.
[15] Ni Y, Jia F. Promoting Positive Social Interactions: Recommendation for a Post-Pandemic School-Based Intervention for Social Anxiety. Children (Basel). 2023;10(3).
[16] Ni Y, Jia F. Promoting Positive Social Interactions: Recommendation for a Post-Pandemic School-Based Intervention for Social Anxiety. Children (Basel). 2023;10(3).

Top 5* among a set of listed solutions that, if offered by their local communities, parents believe would have the greatest positive impact on teens' mental health:

1	Access to mental health resources for therapy	37%
2	Athletic programs	36%
3	Youth organizations like YMCA or Boys and Girls Clubs	34%
4	Safe outdoor spaces	34%
5	Life skill classes	33%

* Note: frequency selected

see youth organizations as a key offering to positively impact teens' mental health. Additionally, black parents (35%) were more likely than white parents (26%) to emphasize access to mentorship, apprenticeship and internship programs. These differing opinions underscore the importance of considering cultural and contextual factors when developing mental health interventions and support systems. It is crucial to recognize and respect the unique perspectives and experiences of different racial and ethnic communities to ensure that mental wellbeing resources and strategies effectively address specific groups' needs. Additionally, these findings highlight the significance of promoting diversity and inclusivity in local mental health initiatives. By acknowledging and valuing diverse perspectives and experiences, it becomes possible to develop comprehensive and culturally responsive approaches to mental health care. This can help to bridge the gaps in access, awareness and utilization of mental health services, ultimately leading to more equitable and effective support for teens and families.[17]

The survey also revealed variations between the resources that are available in local communities and the resources that parents believe are the most helpful in addressing the mental health needs of teens. While mental health resources were the top choice for proposed solutions for teens, only 40% of parents reported having access to such resources. Athletic programs were also a top choice, and a much higher proportion of parents (60%) said that sports programs are available in their communities. The importance placed on athletic programs in local communities is critical, as research has continuously shown the positive effect of physical exercise on mental health and overall health and wellbeing.[18] In addition, given the priority placed by parents on access to mental health resources, the survey sheds light on the need to prioritize and improve access to mental health resources at the community level.

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[17] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Prioritizing Minority Mental Health. Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Health and Human Services. Available from: https://www.cdc.gov/healthequity/features/minority-mental-health/index.html

How businesses can help

The youth mental health crisis requires a multi-faceted approach, and businesses have a role to play. Research indicates that employer-sponsored mental health programs are beneficial, yet the survey reveals that many parents feel a lack of business investment in mental health.[19] Four in ten parents (39%) surveyed reported that the absence of business investment in mental health, such as wellness programs, mental health coaching and internship/mentoring opportunities, hinders their ability to seek help for their child's mental health. For parents surveyed whose child has a mental health diagnosis, this proportion jumps to 53%.

Addressing the youth mental health crisis requires more than just traditional behavioral solutions. Non-traditional approaches,

such as wellness programs and mentorship opportunities, can provide valuable support and resources for young people struggling with mental health issues.[20,21] By actively investing in these areas, businesses can contribute to creating a more supportive and inclusive environment for young people.

Businesses are critical to improving the health and wellbeing of their employees and the communities in which they operate. The mutual dependency of business and communities is inescapable: businesses offer employment, health benefits, financial stability, skills development and social cohesion, and thrive when communities are healthy and engaged.[22] Given this synergistic relationship, they are uniquely well positioned to invest in initiatives to improve the mental health of the communities that they serve.[23]

[18] Mikkelsen K, Stojanovska L, Polenakovic M, et al. Exercise and mental health. Maturitas. 2017;106:48-56.

[19] Bondar J, Babich Morrow C, Gueorguieva R, et al. Clinical and Financial Outcomes Associated With a Workplace Mental Health Program Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic. JAMA Netw Open. 2022;5(6):e2216349.

[20] Khong S. Impact of Mentoring on Youth: Why Every Kid Needs a Mentor. Atlanta, GA: Boys & Girls Clubs of America. Available from: https://www.bgca.org/news-stories/2021/November/impact-of-mentoring-on-youth-why-every-kid-needs-a-mentor

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[22] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Community Health and Economic Prosperity Engaging Businesses as Stewards and Stakeholders— A Report of the Surgeon General. Available from: https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/chep-sgr-full-report.pdf

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Conclusion

The prevalence of mental health conditions among young people has reached alarming levels, and it impacts us all. It demands shared responsibility and collective community engagement. While progress has been made in recognizing the importance of supporting youth mental health, there is an urgent need for innovative approaches and collaborative efforts. Addressing the mental health crisis among young people requires individuals, families, businesses and organizations to work together. Businesses can play a crucial role by implementing flexible work policies, investing in health benefits and wellness programs, and providing opportunities for individual, family and community engagement.

In addition to individual and organizational efforts, innovation and collaboration are essential to address the complex challenges of youth mental health. This includes developing new and effective interventions and fostering partnerships between mental health professionals, educators, community organizations, business leaders and policymakers.

By viewing youth mental health as a collective responsibility, communities can work towards creating a future where young people have the support, resources and understanding that they need to thrive mentally and emotionally. Only through sustained commitment, collaboration and a culture of prioritizing mental wellbeing can we effectively tackle the mental health epidemic among young people and build a healthier future for all.

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