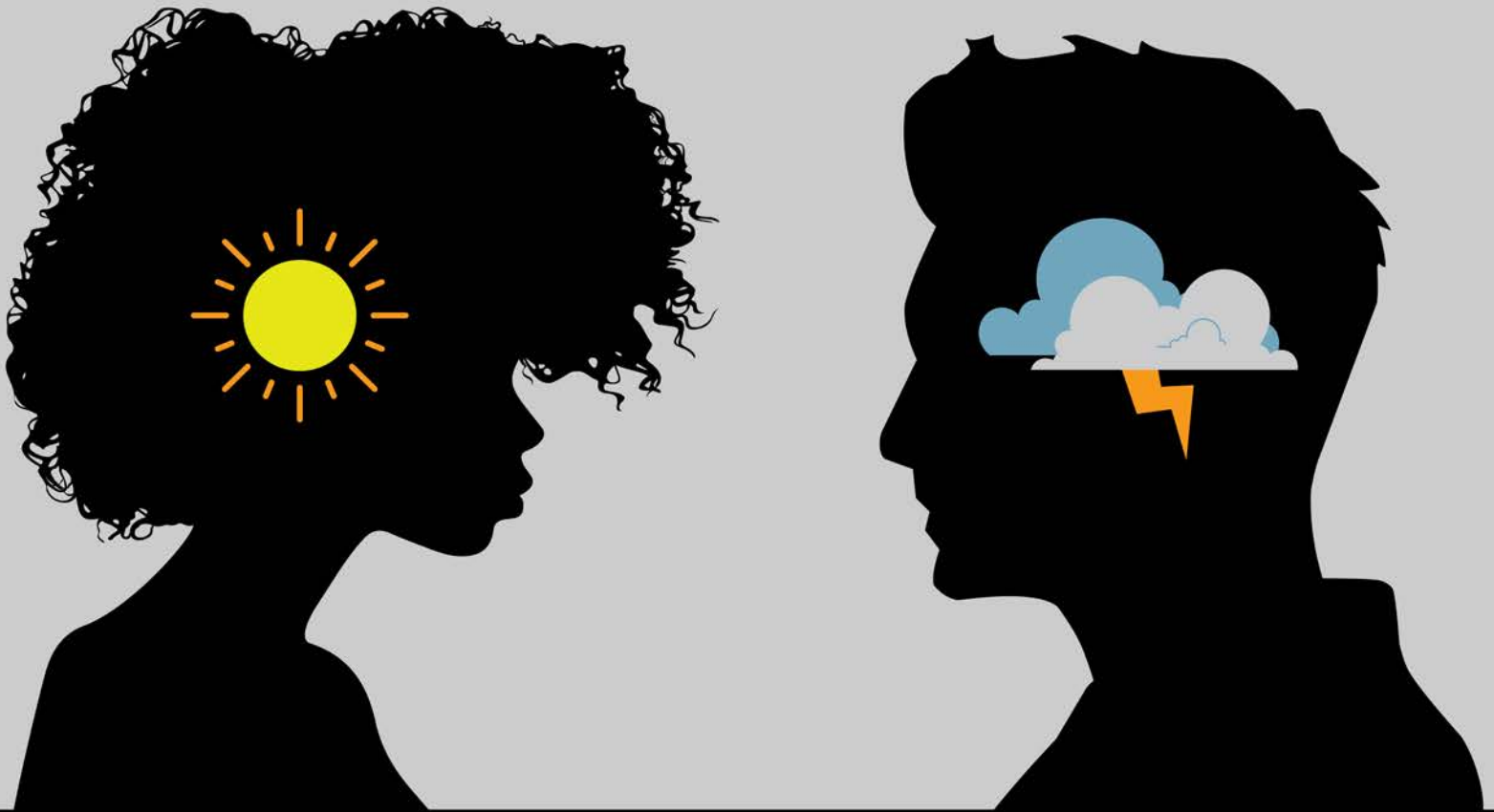


Youth Mental Health IN WESTERN MASSACHUSETTS

Summary of 2022 Community Health Needs Assessment Findings for the
Coalition of Western Massachusetts Hospitals/Insurer



**PUBLIC HEALTH INSTITUTE
OF WESTERN MASSACHUSETTS**

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This report was written by the Public Health Institute of Western Massachusetts for the Coalition of Western Massachusetts Hospitals/Insurer, as part of the [2022 Community Health Needs Assessments](#). It combines existing survey data and information from interviews with mental health providers and youth development professionals.

Several people were given the opportunity to review this report, including representatives from the Coalition of Western Massachusetts Hospitals/Insurer, staff from the Collaborative for Educational Services (a member of the CHNA consultant team that conducted interviews with mental health and youth service providers), two youth from Beat the Odds (a group of youth who advise the Springfield Youth Mental Health Coalition), as well as several staff from the Public Health Institute of Western Massachusetts.





Our youth are strong and adaptable. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted this. Although it was an extremely challenging time, we swiftly adjusted to a new way of life virtually overnight. Imagine what else we could accomplish...

Youth in our region are struggling with their mental health. The pandemic made their struggles worse.

Regional leaders have long recognized youth mental health as a critical public health issue— one that has been worsened by the pandemic. Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act, including how we relate to others, handle problems, and make decisions.¹ Our physical well-being can affect our mental health, and our mental well-being can influence our physical health. Daily stressors such as managing relationships and performing in school, along with larger issues like climate change, racism, and poverty all have an impact on mental health. When our mental health is good, we are better able to cope with challenges in life.² Signs of poor mental health might include avoiding friends and family, changes in sleeping or eating habits, excessive worry, angry outbursts, loss of interest in things one used to enjoy, marked changes in grades, and engaging in risky or destructive behaviors.^{3 4} When youth don't know about these signs, they may not realize they are struggling with mental health.

45%

Of Western MA Youth
Reported Depressive Symptoms*

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified mental health challenges by disrupting preventive measures that support overall wellness and putting additional strain on already limited mental health resources. The shift to remote schooling in March 2020 and related measures to reduce the transmission of COVID-19 had an enormous mental health impact on families and youth. Isolation and limited in-person interaction, online learning, social distancing, and masking affected many children of all ages.⁵

"The pandemic era's unfathomable number of deaths, pervasive sense of fear, economic instability, and forced physical distancing from loved ones, friends, and communities have exacerbated the unprecedented stresses young people already faced."

-Vivek H. Murthy, MD, MBA
U.S. Surgeon General

* In 2020, 45% of Western Massachusetts youth aged 14-24 who responded to the MDPH Community COVID-19 Impact Survey (CCIS) reported feeling so sad or hopeless almost every day for two weeks or more in a row that they stopped doing usual activities. These high rates of depressive symptoms correspond with the [high rates seen in youth surveys administered across the region in 2021.](#)

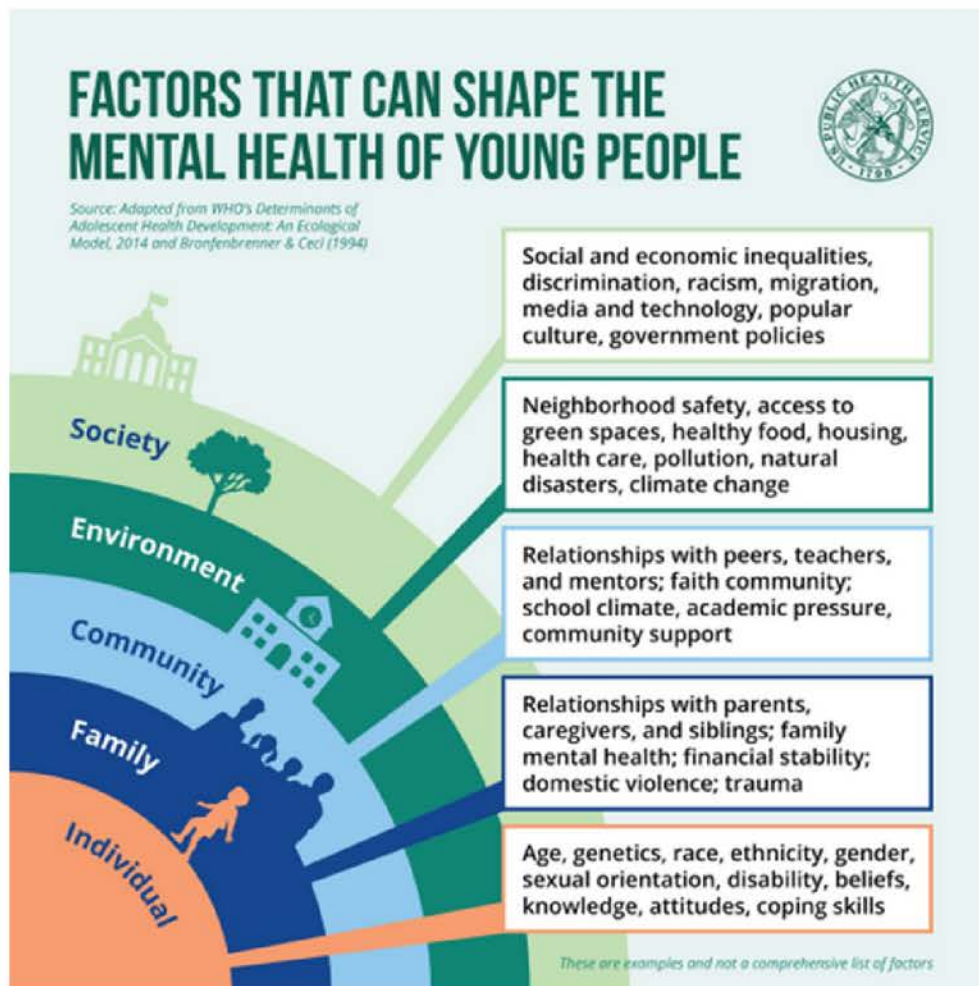
Mental health is shaped by many factors, including social and economic inequities.

Our mental health is just as important as our physical health. Mental health can be shaped by biological factors such as our genes, and environmental factors such as neighborhood safety.

Building **strong relationships with peers and supportive adults** and practicing **techniques to recognize and manage emotions** are some strategies that support mental wellness.

Many of the mental health providers interviewed as part of the 2022 CHNA noted how **poverty, systemic racism, and a general lack of basic resources** can lead to or keep people in poor mental health.

The image to the right lists factors at the individual, family, community, environment, and societal levels that can shape mental health.



Source: Protecting Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory



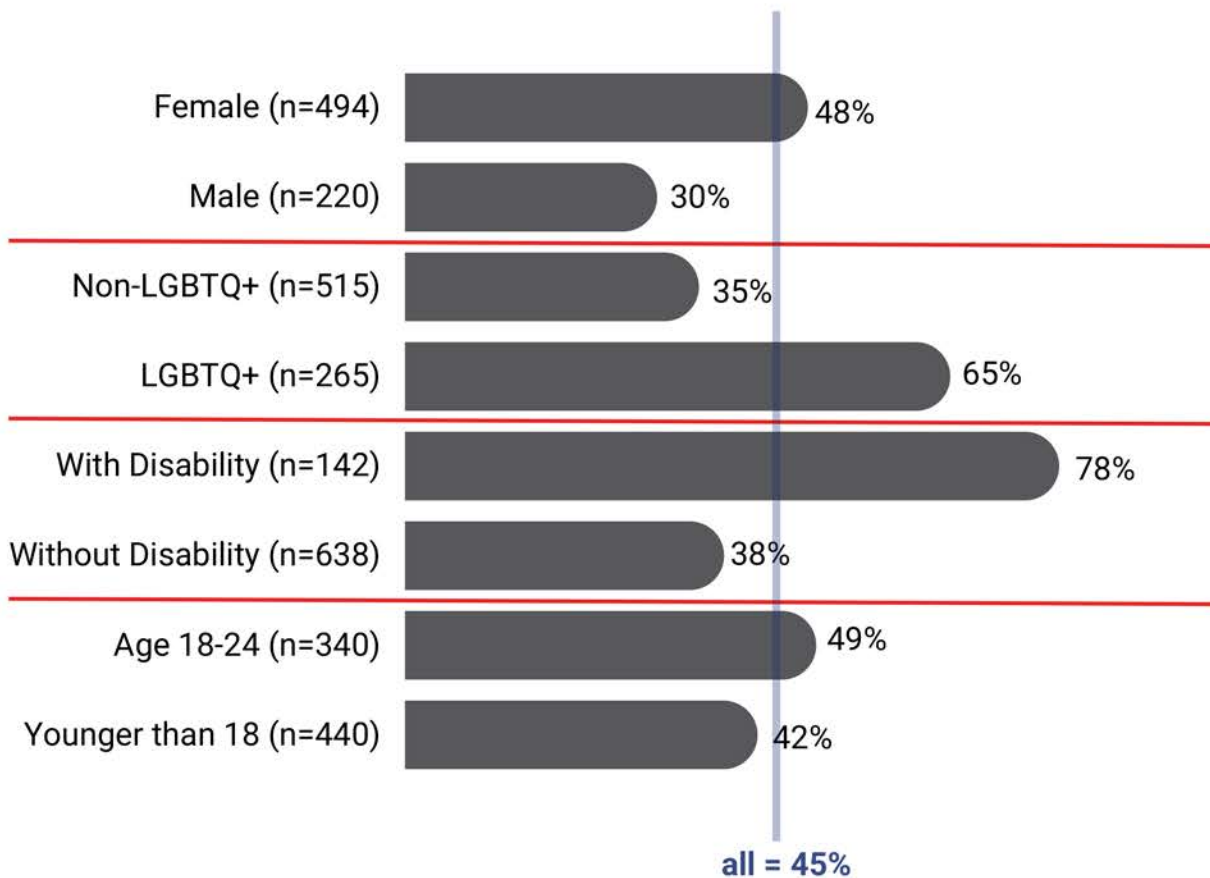
"Poor education, ineffective education systems, inadequate housing - all have a profound impact on the mental health, physical health, economic health, and social health of the families we work with."

-youth development professional

These factors cause some of our youth to struggle more than others with their mental health.

Inequities in mental health challenges that preceded the pandemic continued, especially among youth with a disability and LGBTQIA+ youth. **Rates of depression and anxiety were much higher for girls, LGBTQIA+ youth, and students with disabilities.** Although not shown in CCIS data, there were inequities among students of color in some youth surveys administered across the region.

Western Massachusetts Youth Who Reported Feeling Sustained Sadness or Hopelessness that Disrupted Their Usual Activities, 2020



Source: MDPH COVID-19 Community Impact Survey, 2020

Notes: The sample size was too small to show data for respondents who identified as non-binary, questioning, or some other gender. The “n” in parentheses refers to the number of respondents within the specified group. For example, there were 494 female respondents.

We can work together to improve the mental health of youth in our region.

The pandemic strained the already strapped mental health provider systems. Our **healthcare system cannot do this alone**. We all have a role to play!

"When you are paired with a therapist a lot of times it's not a good fit. There aren't very many therapists...who show cultural humility to Black and Brown folks."

-youth development professional

Mental health and youth development professionals in the region said that the pandemic further strained mental health systems in several ways:



Shortage of culturally humble and representative mental health professionals

High turnover among therapists



Health care system difficult to navigate

Shortage of acute care services and beds for youth



"Partial hospitalization has a waitlist that's older than me. If sometimes we had a fast track where kids can do those two weeks, that would help, but we can't get them on the list."

-mental health provider

There are many great things happening in our region to support young people, both in the community and in clinical settings, that we can build upon and learn from.


Mental health and youth development professionals urged leaders to expand upon these local efforts going on in different parts of our region:

Community

- Culturally responsive youth-centered programs that are committed to youth empowerment.
- **Formal and informal youth connections such as support groups and peer mentoring.**
- Adult-youth mentoring programs, especially with adults who share youth identities and experiences.
- **Training for adults who interact with youth to look for symptoms and connect youth to services.**
- School-based social-emotional learning, after-school programs, and referrals to mental health services.
- **Meeting youth where they are in community spaces to build trusting relationships.**
- Parental education so caregivers can help their children navigate mental health challenges.

Clinical

- Mental health providers who are sensitive to different cultures and languages, along with programs that support them to enter and succeed in mental health professions.
- **Enhanced training for primary care and pediatric providers to screen for mental health concerns.**
- Expansion of access to telemental health services, especially for families with transportation barriers.
- **Professional networks and coalitions to support culturally diverse therapists entering the workforce.**
- Integrated community-based services that address physical and mental well-being, substance use and social determinants of health.
- **Acute care beds at hospitals and partial hospitalization programs for youth with mental health crises.**

A black silhouette of a person's head in profile, facing right, positioned to the left of a speech bubble.

"Always keep in mind that it is important to find out directly from youth what is impacting them, what challenges they are facing, keep them in the forefront, keep them in the decision-making process."

-mental health provider

Join the effort!

Find mental health resources and programming
at 413Cares.org.

The Coalition of Western Massachusetts Hospitals/Insurer is a partnership formed in 2012 to coordinate resources and activities. It currently consists of 10 nonprofit hospitals, clinics, and insurers in the region. The Coalition members coordinate to conduct their Community Health Needs Assessments, which the federal Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act requires tax-exempt hospitals and insurers to conduct every three years. Findings are used to inform Community Health Improvement Plans and other community-based initiatives. This year the Coalition members decided to choose a common issue for deeper focus in their CHNAs, to facilitate coordinated activities to address identified needs. The shared assessment focus was on youth mental health. This report was developed to address that prioritized health need.

For more information,
read the [full CHNAs](#):





References

In addition to the 2022 CHNAs, the following resources were consulted to create this report:

1. About mental health. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. April 25, 2023. Accessed August 24, 2023. <https://www.cdc.gov/mentalhealth/learn/index.htm#:~:text=Mental%20health%20includes%20our%20emotional,childhood%20and%20adolescence%20through%20adulthood.>
2. Mental health. World Health Organization. June 17, 2022. Accessed August 24, 2023. <https://www.who.int/en/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-strengthening-our-response.>
3. Know the signs: Recognizing mental health concerns in kids and teens. Mental Health America. Accessed August 24, 2023. <https://mhanational.org/know-signs-recognizing-mental-health-concerns-kids-and-teens.>
4. Mental health for adolescents. HHS Office of Population Affairs. Accessed August 24, 2023. <https://opa.hhs.gov/adolescent-health/mental-health-adolescents#:~:text=Common%20mental%20health%20disorders%20in%20adolescence%20include%20those%20related%20to,deficit%2Dhyperactivity%2C%20and%20eating.>
5. Murthy VH. Protecting Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory. 2021. Accessed July 12, 2023. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-youth-mental-health-advisory.pdf>

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