COVID-19 and Children’s Mental Health

During the COVID-19 pandemic, children and families experienced tremendous stress driven by disruptions in daily routine, social isolation, financial insecurity and grief. School closures and stay-at-home orders left many children disconnected from previous sources of social support and mental health promotion. In particular, children and families in underserved, under-resourced, and racial and ethnic minority communities have been disproportionately impacted by financial uncertainty and the death of family members. As the public health emergency continues into another school year, uncertainty persists for many children and adolescents. These challenging circumstances have contributed to an ongoing and significant crisis in children’s mental health, which predated the COVID-19 pandemic and will continue beyond our national recovery.

Children’s Mental Health During the Pandemic

Mental health concerns in children were relatively common prior to the pandemic, with 1 in 5 children experiencing a mental health condition annually. Emerging data illustrates that the pandemic has had a significant negative impact on the mental health of children and adolescents.

- Symptoms of depression and anxiety and risk of suicide among children and adolescents have increased over the course of the pandemic.¹

- Children’s hospitals have seen a 14% increase in mental health emergencies for kids ages 5-17 in the first two quarters of 2021 as compared to the same period in 2019.²

- In the first half of 2021 alone, children’s hospitals reported cases of self-injury and suicide in children ages 5-17 at a 45% higher rate than during the same time period in 2019.³

- More than half of adults (53%) with children in their household say they are concerned about the mental state of their children.⁴

Increased Demand and Stretched Care Capacity Collide

Children’s hospitals have seen a steep rise in the number of emergency department and inpatient visits for suicidal thoughts or self-harm, with visits more than doubling since 2016. The pandemic has worsened this trend. Currently, children’s hospitals are reporting a shortage of inpatient beds to support growing numbers of kids in crisis, resulting in more children boarding in hospital emergency departments while awaiting alternative placement options.

The lack of capacity is exacerbated by persistent shortages across disciplines within the pediatric mental health workforce. There are too few pediatric mental health providers to meet the mental and behavioral health needs of children and adolescents and ensure access to the full continuum of care, including inpatient care, partial hospitalization, residential and day programs, crisis stabilization, and a robust range of outpatient community-based mental health services and supports.
Frontline View from Children’s Hospitals

- **Children’s Hospital Colorado** reports that emergency room visits for behavioral health reasons shot up 72% statewide between January and April of this year compared to the same period in 2019. They declared a mental health state of emergency in May of 2021.

- **Franciscan Children’s** in Boston reports that requests for outpatient behavioral health services for children of color increased 19% during the first year of COVID-19, compared to the year before.

- **Children’s Wisconsin** in Milwaukee experienced an 80% increase in referrals for mental health services in December 2020 compared to December 2019. Currently, more than 700 children are on the waitlist for outpatient therapy.

- **Wolfson Children’s Hospital** in Jacksonville, Florida, experienced a greater than 200% increase in the number of behavioral health emergency admissions in 2020 compared to the previous year.

Kids Can’t Afford to Wait for Mental Health Care

The importance of investing in services and supports that promote access to necessary pediatric mental health care cannot be understated. Children and adolescents need timely access to developmentally appropriate mental health services and supports within their communities.

To Address the Ongoing Crisis in Children’s Mental Health:

- **Strengthen mental health investment in Medicaid** – Strengthen federal support for pediatric mental health care by increasing Medicaid reimbursement rates for pediatric mental, emotional and behavioral health services to 100% of Medicare levels for similar services.

- **Invest in pediatric mental health infrastructure** – Enact H.R. 4943, the Children’s Mental Health Infrastructure Act of 2021, which provides $2 billion annually for five years in grants to children’s health care providers to increase their capacity to provide pediatric mental health services, including through the construction and modernization of sites of care, as well as enhancements to digital infrastructure and security.

- **Bolster community-based systems of care** – Enact H.R. 4944, the Helping Kids Cope Act of 2021, which provides flexible funding for communities to support a range of child and adolescent centered community-based prevention and treatment services, including efforts to enhance integration and coordination across the continuum of care.

- **Support the pediatric mental health workforce** – H.R. 4944, the Helping Kids Cope Act of 2021, would also provide $100 million in funding annually for five years through HRSA grants dedicated to pediatric mental health workforce training and development across a wide array of pediatric mental health fields where shortages persist.

- **Extend and enhance telehealth flexibilities** – Extend telehealth flexibilities in Medicare beyond the Public Health Emergency, including coverage for audio-only services and lifting originating site restrictions and geographic limitations. Additionally, enact S. 1798, the Telehealth Improvement for Kids’ Essential Services (TIKES) Act, which would promote access to telehealth services for children through Medicaid and CHIP and study children’s utilization of telehealth to identify barriers and evaluate outcomes.

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2 Analysis of Children’s Hospital Association PHIS database, n=38 children’s hospitals.

3 Ibid.

4 Psychiatry.org, “New APA Poll Shows Sustained Anxiety Among Americans; More than Half of Parents are Concerned About the Mental Well-being of Their Children,” May 2, 2021.