

COVID-19 and Children's Mental Health

During the COVID-19 pandemic, children and families have experienced tremendous stress driven by social isolation, financial insecurity and grief. Continued disruptions in daily routine, such as childcare and school closures and necessary quarantine periods, are an ongoing source of stress on families which sometimes leaves 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. 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 illustrate that the pandemic has had a significant and 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.ⁱ
- Children's hospitals have seen a 14% increase in mental health emergencies for kids ages 3-18 from Jan. to Sept. 2021 as compared to the same period in 2019.ⁱⁱ
- In the first three quarters of 2021, children's hospitals reported emergency department (ED) visits for self-injury and suicide in children ages 5-18 at a 42% higher rate than during the same time period in 2019.ⁱⁱⁱ
- More than half of adults (53%) with children in their household say they are concerned about the mental state of their children.^{iv}

Increased Demand and Stretched Care Capacity Collide

Children's hospitals have seen a steep rise in the number of ED and inpatient visits for suicidal thoughts or self-harm, with visits more than doubling since 2016. The pandemic has worsened this trend. Currently, hospitals are reporting a shortage of inpatient beds and safe, alternative placement options to support the growing numbers of kids in crisis requiring more intensive psychiatric care. As a result, too many children are boarding in hospital EDs while waiting for space in appropriate services to become available.

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.

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Frontline View from Children's Hospitals

- **Children's Hospital Colorado** reports in 2021, they saw more than 6,500 ED behavioral health visits of children in crisis across the hospitals' pediatric system. From Jan.-Oct. 15, 2021, 70% more children came to the EDs due to a mental health crisis, compared to the same time period before the pandemic in 2019.
- **Children's Wisconsin** in Milwaukee, ED visits for mental and behavioral health concerns have increased by 40% since 2020. Additionally, call volumes to the hospital's Mental and Behavioral Health Access Center tripled between 2019-2021.
- **Wolfson Children's Hospital** in Jacksonville, Florida, experienced a 300% increase in the number of pediatric behavioral health emergency admissions since the start of the pandemic.

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.

ⁱ Mayne et al., "COVID-19 and Adolescent Depression and Suicide Risk Screening Outcomes," *Pediatrics* 148 (June 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2021-051507>.

ⁱⁱ Analysis of Children's Hospital Association PHIS database, n=38 children's hospitals.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} [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.