



Beyond the Crisis

Policy Pathways to Uplift Youth Mental Health and Wellbeing



inseparable



Contents

Introduction	3
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Policies to Promote Youth Wellbeing	6
● Strengthening Social Support Networks	6
● Increasing Sense of Belonging for Youth	7
● Promoting Physical Health for Mental and Emotional Resilience	8
● Addressing Adverse Experiences and Trauma	9
● Equipping Youth with Stress Coping Skills	10
● Strategies for Safe and Supportive Social Media	11

Policies to Support the Improved Access Along Mental Health Care-seeking Journey	12
● Supporting Parents and Caregivers	12
● Ensuring Availability of Appropriate Providers	13
● Integrating Mental Health Services in Schools and Primary Care	14
● Ensuring Comprehensive Insurance Coverage	15

Introduction

Policy Pathways to Enhance Mental Health and Wellbeing Holistically

To effectively support the youth of our nation, we must understand the “why” of the current mental health crisis. Without robust data on the drivers of mental health challenges, opportunities to allocate resources, design effective programs, and focus attention where it is needed most are missed. Existing data primarily emphasizes clinical outcomes—such as rates of depression, anxiety, loneliness, and self-harm—which, while critical, tells only part of the story. These measures often overlook the protective factors that enable young people to thrive. To create meaningful change, it is equally important to capture and address mental wellbeing.



The Youth Mental Health Tracker by Surgo Health is a comprehensive, actionable mental health and wellbeing data platform to empower equitable-youth centered solutions. The Youth Mental Health Tracker is built on holistic data collected from over 4,500 youth across the U.S., with plans to continue surveying youth through multiple rounds until 2026. This ongoing effort will monitor changes over time, providing an evolving, real-time picture of youth mental health and wellbeing.

The Tracker underscores the importance of tracking wellbeing by highlighting the duality of youth mental health and wellbeing. Some key findings on the state of youth mental health and wellbeing today:

- **Almost half of young people are doing well:** 47% of youth reporting they have not experienced significant mental health struggles over the past 2 years, and reflected that they were satisfied with life and happy overall.
- **Young people are more than their mental health challenges:** Even amongst youth who said that their mental health was not good, 50% were still optimistic about their future and felt that what they did in life was meaningful.
- **Wellbeing cannot be overlooked, even in the absence of mental health symptoms:** Even amongst youth who were not reporting significant symptoms of depression and anxiety, 22% of them were not satisfied with their life, not optimistic, or felt that what they did in life was not meaningful.

In order to truly support and empower our youth, policies should not only expand access to mental health care, but also enhance the factors that promote youth and

community wellbeing. This understanding is reflected in the Surgo Health survey, which used a dual-factor model that measured both mental health and wellbeing to gather telling data that allows policymakers to both help prevent mental health conditions from arising and ensure that youth who experience challenges get help early, before conditions become more severe and harder to treat. Surgo Health and Inseparable have teamed up to translate the findings from this data into concrete policy recommendations to drive action.

The policy recommendations and examples that follow are intentionally focused on highlighting ways to improve youth wellbeing and facilitate supportive communities. These policies are grouped according to **1) leading factors that impact youth wellbeing, and 2) strategies to improve the care-seeking journey for youth who experience mental health challenges.** Central to these policies is the need for sustainable and flexible funding streams that support innovative and data-informed models to address youth mental health and wellbeing. To that end, there is a need for the following overarching federal and state policies:

- **Policies to Promote Youth Wellbeing:**

Surgo Health identified 6 critical risk factors for youth mental health and wellbeing which include social support, sense of belonging, physical health, adverse experiences, stress, and social media. The following examples highlight policy recommendations aimed at improving youth wellbeing by addressing these critical areas.

- **Create policies that help youth, parents, and child-serving professionals better understand and act on mental health concerns.**
 - For example, the CDC's "Learn the Signs. Act Early" program has helped make developmental milestones in early childhood widely known and could serve as a model for expanding mental health literacy.
- **Offer grants to help schools and communities foster connections** among students, staff, and families, allowing flexibility to implement preventative strategies and innovative approaches.
 - For example, the Center for Alaska Native Health Research introduced a Native-led suicide prevention initiative that emphasizes community strengths, expands cultural programs, and fosters resilience in Alaska.
- **Enhance funding and resources for physical education** in schools and for sports programs in both school and community settings.
- **Encourage federal and state grant programs related to youth to utilize data on community risks and needs to guide funding decisions.**
- **Expand the scope of federal and state grant programs for youth mental health to include prevention and early intervention initiatives.**
 - For example, federal statute requires Mental Health Block Grant funding to be used for children with severe emotional disturbance and adults with serious mental illness, compromising the ability of states to promote wellbeing.

- **Expanding regular federal and state surveys of youth to include key factors affecting wellbeing** and encouraging federal entities to consider wellbeing as an area of focus.
 - For example, The Youth Risk Behavioral Surveillance System (YRBSS) and the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) do not include wellbeing measures, which limits the ability to understand and target protective factors.
- **Enhancing investment in programs that leverage research and data on youth mental health and wellbeing.**
 - For example, The Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC) uses the [Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child \(WSCC\)](#), which is student-centered and includes an emphasis on a wide range of factors, including social and emotional climate, physical education and activity, community involvement, and family engagement.

- **Policies to Support Improved Access Across the Mental Health Care-seeking Journey:**

Surgo Health found over 60% of young people struggling with their mental health are not receiving the complete care they need, often dropping off at key stages: initially seeking care, facing delays, and engaging in ongoing treatment. The policy recommendations that follow aim to make mental health care more accessible and effective for youth.

- **Supporting parents and caregivers** by providing federal resources for mental health conversations with youth.
- **Increasing provider availability** by expanding workforce development programs and enhancing school-based mental health services.
- **Integrating mental health services into schools and primary care** to make services more accessible for youth.
- **Ensuring comprehensive insurance coverage** for youth mental health care by streamlining enrollment and extending coverage.

Throughout this report is a set of policy recommendations designed to meet youth where they are and create environments in which they can thrive. From strategies that strengthen social support networks to policies that integrate mental health services within schools and communities, each section offers policy suggestions grounded in data from Surgo Health and concrete policy experience from Inseparable. Together, these recommendations form a roadmap for policymakers, educators, and advocates committed to enhancing youth mental health and wellbeing. We invite you to explore these insights and initiatives, each of which plays a vital role in building a resilient, supportive framework for the future of our youth.

Policies to Promote Wellbeing

Strengthening Social Support Networks

In today's world, youth face unique challenges that affect their mental health and sense of wellbeing. Surgo Health's Youth Mental Health Tracker data reveals that a large number of young people lack the support they need to thrive emotionally. In fact, **1 in 4 young people feel emotionally unsupported by their family**, and this number rises to more than half for LGBTQ+ youth. Family support plays a powerful role and youth without it are 2.6 times likely to experience depression, anxiety, or even self-harm, while those with family support are 1.5 times more likely to find meaning in their lives.

Friendships are also critical, yet nearly 1 in 5 youth feel emotionally unsupported by their friends, and those lacking peer support are 1.7 times more likely to be at risk for symptoms of depression or anxiety. When it comes to discussing their mental health, youth often find it easier to open up to friends rather than family. Many expressed the need for parents and caregivers to listen openly and without judgment, offering support without immediately trying to "fix" the problem.

These insights make it clear for the need of targeted policies aiming to strengthen social support networks. By providing resources and educational tools to families, schools, and communities, we can create a more supportive environment for youth. These recommendations aim to ensure that every young person feels supported, connected, and empowered—within their families, friendships, and communities.

Policies to strengthen social support networks:

1. Support better dissemination of developmentally appropriate resources for parents/caregivers about understanding and promoting mental health and wellbeing.

2. Provide resources to parents/caregivers and youth-serving organizations on promoting life success skills and resilience in youth.

3. Support public/private partnerships that help youth find supportive online communities and resources.

● BRIGHT SPOT

CASEL has an [SEL Discussion Series for Parents and Caregivers](#), in English and Spanish, to support both personal growth and supporting children to practice and gain social and emotional skills.

● BRIGHT SPOT

The National Council for Mental Wellbeing has [Youth Mental Health First Aid](#) courses (designed for adults), as well as [tips on supporting teen mental health](#).

● BRIGHT SPOT

NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness) has a free six-session education program, [NAMI Basics](#), for parents/caregivers of youth experiencing mental health symptoms that is available online or in-person.

Increasing Sense of Belonging for Youth

A strong sense of belonging is essential for youth wellbeing, yet Surgo Health's Youth Mental Health Tracker data reveals that 1 in 4 young people feel they do not belong in a group, whether with friends, at school, or in their neighborhood. The difference that a sense of belonging makes is profound: young people who feel connected are 1.7 times more likely to be happy and find meaning in their lives, while those who lack it face 2.5 times higher likelihood of experiencing symptoms of depression or anxiety. Through policies that strengthen belonging, youth gain more opportunities to thrive both personally and socially.

Policies to increase sense of belonging for youth:

- 1. Provide grants to support schools and communities in promoting connectedness among students, staff, and families, with flexibility to support more preventative measures and innovative practices.**

● BRIGHT SPOT

In Alaska, the Center for Alaska Native Health Research launched a Native-led suicide prevention program focused on lifting up community strengths, expanding cultural programs, and building resilience.

● BRIGHT SPOT

New Mexico's Manzano High School in Albuquerque has a program of student success teams, with students saying that "the intervention they valued most was having a 'champion' check in with them weekly to support their goals."

- 2. Provide resources to parents/caregivers and youth-serving organizations on promoting life success skills and resilience in youth.**
- 3. Support public/private partnerships that help youth find supportive online communities and resources.**

Promoting Physical Health for Mental and Emotional Resilience

Physical health plays a crucial role in youth mental and emotional resilience. According to the Surgo Health youth survey, while 90% of young people report feeling they are in good physical health, this percentage drops to 73% among LGBTQ+ youth. Physical health and mental health are closely linked: those who report poor physical health are 2.3 times more likely to experience symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Encouragingly, many youth are already taking steps to boost their physical health. Most young people have tried getting enough sleep (95%), exercising (92%), and eating healthy (87%), with over 70% finding these efforts helpful for their mental wellbeing. However, policies are needed to make these healthy habits easier and more accessible for all youth. These policy recommendations aim to ensure youth are better equipped to maintain their physical health, laying the foundation for their mental wellbeing.

Policies to promote physical health:

1. **Increase support for school physical education and community and school sport programs.**
2. **Ensure schools incorporate adequate recess and break time.**
3. **Implement school schedules that promote adequate sleep for youth, as well as exercise and time with friends.**

● BRIGHT SPOT

The Aspen Institute's Project Play produced a report, [How Community-Based Organizations Can Support in Reimagining Schools Sports](#), that highlights multiple public-private partnerships that expand opportunities for students.

● BRIGHT SPOT

The National Conference of State Legislatures, in [New State and Federal Policies Expand Access to Free School Meals](#), highlights multiple efforts to expand access to free school meals across diverse states—from Maine to Minnesota to New Mexico.

4. **Implement school nutrition programs regardless of income, such as offering free, healthy school lunches for all students.**
5. **Expand school health clinics with integrated behavioral health care.**

● BRIGHT SPOT

In Delaware, Colonial School District opened a [health clinic](#), staffed with nurse practitioners, social workers, and a psychologist, in an elementary school and saw attendance and behaviors improve.

Addressing Adverse Experiences and Trauma

Adverse experiences and trauma have a significant impact on youth wellbeing, as shown by Surgo Health's Youth Mental Health Tracker. When young people have gone through times when their basic needs were unmet, they were more than 2 times as likely to feel unsatisfied with life overall.

Financial hardship plays a major role in these adverse experiences as well. Youth facing financial difficulties are not only 7 times more likely to have experienced unmet basic needs, but they are also more than 3 times as likely to have witnessed or experienced violence in the home. By implementing policies that address adverse experiences and provide trauma-informed resources, we can help youth overcome challenging experiences and build a foundation for a healthier, more resilient future.

Policies to address adverse experiences and trauma:

1. **Support policies that reduce childhood poverty and housing instability, such as extending an enhanced child tax credit.**
2. **Promote coverage of health-related social needs in Medicaid.**
3. **Provide rapid access to mental health and substance use disorder services for parents of children and youth by prioritizing admissions and developing family-friendly services.**
4. **Invest in community schools, especially activities and resources that support youth and families in overcoming adverse experiences. Expand school health clinics with integrated behavioral health care.**
5. **Provide training in ACEs* and trauma-informed care for child-serving staff and organizations.**

● BRIGHT SPOT

In Washington State, high school students center youth voices while learning about radio production during their Radioactive internship.

● BRIGHT SPOT

In New Jersey, a healing-centered engagement model to address ACEs and trauma-informed practices was initiated in 26 pilot schools in New Jersey. One teacher said, "The main thing that caught my eye was changing the mindset from 'What's wrong with you?' to 'What happened to you?' and then 'What is right about you?'"

● BRIGHT SPOT

In California, the California Department of Health Care funded the ACEs Aware initiative, which "trains health care providers to screen, recognize, and respond to ACEs and toxic stress."

* ACE= Adverse Childhood Event

Equipping Youth with Stress Coping Skills

Many young people today are struggling with resilience, especially when it comes to managing and expressing their emotions. Surgo Health's Youth Mental Health Tracker data reveals 63% of youth find it difficult to let go of negative feelings, and 61% struggle with expressing themselves to others.

Nearly half of youth surveyed have recently faced challenges that felt overwhelming, but young people who can let go of negative feelings report experiencing significantly lower rates of depression and anxiety. These policy recommendations aim for youth to be better prepared to handle life's challenges with resilience and self-awareness, laying a foundation for improved mental health and wellbeing.

Policies to equip youth with stress management and coping skills:

- 1. Promote life skills training for students, including empathy, building healthy relationships, coping skills and self-management, responsible decision-making, and self-awareness.**
- 2. Provide mental health literacy education for students, families, and staff.**

● BRIGHT SPOT

Arkansas offers the G.U.I.D.E. for Life program to help K-12 students develop skills in growth, understanding, interaction, decisions, and empathy.

● BRIGHT SPOT

The Kansas State Department of Education invested in the Kansas Can Competency Framework, which promotes social and emotional learning in students through a school-wide focus.

Strategies for Safe and Supportive Social Media

Social media is an important part of life for many young people, providing a way to connect with friends and explore their identity. However, it also presents challenges. Surgo Health's Youth Mental Health Tracker data reveals 70% of young people say they frequently see things on social media that make them feel unhappy about the world, and that number rises to 84% among multiracial youth. Exposure to these negative aspects makes youth twice as likely to feel pessimistic about their future and almost twice as likely to report poor mental health.

At the same time, 76% of young people say social media helps them connect with friends, and 72% of LGBTQ+ youth find it important for identity exploration. These policy recommendations aim to create a safer, more empowering digital environment where young people can enjoy the benefits of social media without facing unnecessary risks to their mental wellbeing.

Policies for safe and supportive social media:

- 1. Support public/private partnerships that promote coping skills and resilience-building and assist in helping youth find safe and reputable online resources.**
- 2. Develop and evaluate a national social media literacy campaign aimed toward youth, parents, and caregivers.**
- 3. Further develop tools and resources for youth, parents/caregivers, and child-serving professionals that promote social media literacy.**
- 4. Support standardized, easily understandable disclosures of how users can adjust their online experience.**
- 5. Increase funding for NIH research on the effects of social media on youth.**

● BRIGHT SPOT

The American Academy of Pediatrics' Center of Excellence on Social Media and Youth Mental Health, which has a Youth Advisory Panel, provides a range of resources, strategies, and conversation starters for promoting healthy media habits.

Policies to Support the Mental Health Care-Seeking Journey

Supporting Parents and Caregivers

Many young people facing mental health challenges do not seek help, often because they feel uncomfortable talking to their parents about these issues. In fact, Surgo Health's Youth Mental Health Tracker data reveals a third of youth who struggle significantly with mental health reported that they never sought care, with 83% of these youth citing reluctance to tell their parents as a primary reason.

Despite this barrier, when young people do decide to seek help, parents are typically the first people they turn to, highlighting the essential role parents and caregivers play in youth mental health support. These policy recommendations emphasize guidance and support for parents and caregivers to ensure that youth feel comfortable seeking help when they need it most.

Policies to support parents and caregivers in youth mental health:

- 1. Develop federal resources to help parents/caregivers talk with their child (or youth) about mental health. Develop and evaluate a national social media literacy campaign aimed toward youth, parents, and caregivers.**
- 2. Provide paid family leave for parents and guardians to care for their child with physical and mental health needs.**

● BRIGHT SPOT

The CDC's [Connecting Conversations](#) has tips and conversation starters on mental health for parents.

Ensuring Availability of Appropriate Providers

For many young people, access to mental health support is hindered by long wait times and limited provider availability. In fact, Surgo Health's Youth Mental Health Tracker data reveals 52% of youth who sought professional care experienced delays, with 70% attributing this to long wait times and 30% reporting that no providers were available. This shortage can have serious consequences: leaving young people without timely support during critical moments can exacerbate their condition and lead to worse outcomes, and even lives lost. Lack of available providers can also widen disparities in mental health care access, especially in underserved areas. These policies aim to create a more responsive, accessible mental health system where young people can receive timely and appropriate provider support.

Policies to ensure availability of appropriate providers:

- 1. Expand workforce development programs to prioritize diverse child-serving mental health professionals and paraprofessionals.**
- 2. Increase the availability of school mental health professionals and school-based and -linked services.**
- 3. Provide financial incentives to providers serving in rural and other underserved areas.**

● BRIGHT SPOT

Delaware enacted three bills, [HB 100 \(2021\)](#), [HB 300 \(2022\)](#), and [HB 200 \(2024\)](#) that establish target ratios of school mental health professionals to students in grades K-12 and, in budget bills, provided funding to implement.

● BRIGHT SPOTS

Nebraska's legislature created the [Behavioral Health Education Center of Nebraska](#), which has made significant progress in recruitment, training, and retention of mental health providers, including engagement of high school students.

Integrating Mental Health Services in Schools and Primary Care

For young people, mental health support often starts close to home, with parents typically being the first point of contact. However, the Surgo Health's Youth Mental Health Tracker data reveals that many youth seek help from other accessible resources: 15% initially turn to mental health professionals, 14% to friends, and 10% to school counselors. This finding underscores the importance of integrating mental health services into schools and primary care settings, where youth can find support in a familiar environment. These policy recommendations aim to create a seamless, supportive network, ensuring that youth have multiple, accessible entry points to receive the help they need.

Policies to integrate mental health services in schools and primary care:

- 1. Implement school wellness screenings with follow-up and connections to appropriate mental health resources. Promote and provide access to regular screenings for physical and mental health.**
- 2. Require training of primary care providers in youth MH/ SUDs and effective interventions.**
- 3. Provide enhanced payments to primary care pediatric providers that effectively integrate mental health care.**

● BRIGHT SPOT

The REACH Patient-Centered Mental Health in Pediatric Primary Care program (PPP) partners with organizations like the Virginia AAP and the Montana AAP to provide interactive training to pediatricians.

● BRIGHT SPOT

The American Academy of Pediatrics has a range of courses to enhance pediatricians' ability to support patients with mental health problems.

● BRIGHT SPOT

Illinois passed HB 4343 (2022) to establish a program for wellness checks (mental health screenings) in grades 7-12 to identify youth who may need support.

● BRIGHT SPOT

Colorado enacted HB23-1003, the "Sixth Through Twelfth Grade Mental Health Screening Act" to identify youth at risk and provide resources and referrals.

Ensuring Comprehensive Insurance Coverage

For many young people, financial concerns are a major barrier to accessing mental health care. Surgo Health's Youth Mental Health Tracker data reveals cost is a significant issue preventing youth from seeking and receiving the mental health care they need. Among youth who struggled seriously with their mental health, a third never sought care, with 40% reporting they could not afford it, and 36% unsure if insurance would cover it. Additionally, of those who faced delays in receiving professional help, 40% cited cost as the primary obstacle. These policy recommendations aim to remove cost as a barrier, enabling all young people to access the mental health care they need to thrive.

Policies to ensure comprehensive insurance coverage for mental health care:

1. **Streamline enrollment of youth in health coverage and extend coverage period without requiring reenrollment to promote continuity of coverage and care.**
2. **Provide connection to, and coordination of, care for youth transitioning from school to work or higher education.**
3. **Cover annual behavioral health wellness exams as preventive services with no cost-sharing.**

● BRIGHT SPOT

California's SB 855 (2020) requires insurers to only use criteria and guidelines developed by the relevant nonprofit clinical professional association to make care or placement decisions.

4. **Require Medicaid coverage of certain mental health services without requiring a formal mental health diagnosis.**

5. **Require health plans to use only evidence-based clinical treatment guidelines developed by nonprofit professional medical societies to make coverage decisions.**

6. **Expand access to MH/SUD care, both in-person and virtual mental health services, for youth, including no-cost care out-of-network if in-network providers are not available.**

7. **Provide access to evidence-based Coordinated Specialty Care for First Episode Psychosis (CSC-FEP) programs.**

● BRIGHT SPOT

Since 2021, Massachusetts' Medicaid program covers short-term preventive behavioral health services for youth under 21 without requiring a formal diagnosis, though services must be recommended by a licensed practitioner.

● BRIGHT SPOT

Colorado enacted SB23-174, which provides certain Medicaid mental health services for youth under 21.

● BRIGHT SPOT

Texas has been building CSC-FEP program capacity and now notes 32 providers serving about 171 counties.

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