

YOUNG PEOPLE'S MENTAL HEALTH IN 2020: Hope, Advocacy, and Action for the Future



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Founded in 1909 by Clifford W. Beers, Mental Health America (MHA) is the nation's leading community-based nonprofit dedicated to addressing the needs of those living with mental illness and promoting the overall mental health of all. MHA's work is driven by its commitment to promote mental health as a critical part of overall wellness, including prevention services for all; early identification and intervention for those at risk; integrated care, services, and supports for those who need them; with recovery as the goal. During his stays in public and private institutions, Beers witnessed and was subjected to horrible abuse. From these experiences, Beers set into motion a reform movement that took shape and is known today as Mental Health America.

MHA dedicates this report to the youth and young adult leaders across the United States and around the globe who are working to transform cultures, institutions, and resources to promote the mental health and wellbeing of their peers and communities. Their leadership, creativity, and demand for justice and equity will continue to shape and transform how we engage and support young people by improving their conditions, communities, and resources in the rapidly changing world.

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YOUNG PEOPLE'S MENTAL HEALTH IN 2020

Youth and young adults are struggling. For years, researchers, clinicians, teachers, school administrators, family members, and young people have been sounding the alarm on young people's mental health. Rates of depression and anxiety continue to increase among youth and young adults, while many have limited access to mental health resources like therapists or psychiatrists.¹ At the most extreme outcome of our failure to engage and support young people, an analysis by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) showed that youth suicide increased 56 percent between 2007-2017.²

All of this was before 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting lockdowns and closures have disrupted critical parts of young people's lives like routines, peer relationships, hobbies, and important milestones like proms or graduations. As a result, the generation that was already experiencing incredibly high rates of loneliness has lost many of the crucial ways they connect with others.³ This is particularly impactful for LGBTQ+ youth, who may have lost affirming and positive social connections or may be spending their time in non-affirming households.⁴

For college students, the overwhelming majority report increased stress, anxiety, sadness, and depression as a result of the pandemic. Many also report feeling lonely or isolated.⁵ For students in college and high school facing school closures, many are losing access to the services they received in their school, and those with disabilities may not have access to the same supports or may need different supports, now that they are completing classes at home.⁶

What's more, the pandemic's economic and health impacts have hurt young people and their families. Loss of loved ones and unstable access to basic needs like housing, food, and internet have also impacted young people's mental health, especially Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) youth whose communities have been disproportionately affected by the health and economic impacts of the pandemic.⁷ Among young people who were working, many are experiencing high unemployment rates due to the pandemic as many jobs have been lost due to business closures or shutdowns. According to the Center for Law and Social Policy, over 90 percent of unemployed young people do not have any access to income during the pandemic.⁸

 “To truly discover what works best, we must work directly with young people as partners and leaders, including those who have created programs, those who have received traditional services, and those first looking for support.”

In addition to the life disruption caused by COVID-19, there has been a mental health impact related to the political environment and racial reckoning in the United States. National dialogue and protests on racism and policy brutality after the deaths of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Walter Wallace, and others, have had negative impacts on the mental health and wellbeing of BIPOC youth, especially Black youth.^{9,10}

There was already a mental health crisis among young people, and, given what is known about the mental health impact of trauma and large-scale crises, we will likely see an increasing and lasting effects on

their distress and demand for services beyond 2020.¹¹ Data from the CDC show that since the start of the pandemic, mental health-related emergency department visits increased by 31 percent for 12-17-year-olds, and 1 in 4 young adults contemplated suicide.^{12,13} LGBTQ+ youth, in particular, have experienced high rates of thoughts of suicide and self-harm.¹⁴

SO, WHAT CAN WE DO?

Absent serious action, increased demand and referrals for mental health services will continue to be met with a patchwork system of mental health resources that, if even available, are often difficult to navigate, lack cultural competency, and are not informed or designed with the perspectives and leadership of young people. We will continue to tell young people to take care of their mental health and reach out for support, while providing limited resources and creativity with the things that would help them.

There are necessary social changes, like addressing racism, poverty, and access to housing, that must be addressed in order to improve the mental health of young people. And the rising mental health concerns means that we need to be as efficient and effective as possible in developing resources that promote and address young people's mental health. We cannot just build more of the same when our current systems and approaches fail so many. To truly discover what works best, we must work directly with young people as partners and leaders, including those who have created programs, those who have received traditional services, and those first looking for support.

This report provides an analysis of young people's wants, hopes for the future, and goals for mental health resources and advocacy. It combines results from an MHA survey that explored what young people identified as most helpful and how they would like to impact the mental health of their communities, with descriptions of youth-driven programs that respond to the needs identified by young people. This report is designed to be a tool to promote the perspectives of young people, expand opportunities for young people's leadership, and spread programs and ideas that can be replicated in other communities.



BUILDING ON WHAT HELPS

While there are significant needs and many negative influences on young people’s mental health, there are also many things helping them. To better understand how to build support, it is essential to understand which resources youth and young adults feel are most supportive. MHA created a Young People’s Mental Health Survey to identify what has been most helpful to young people’s mental health during the pandemic and what needs to be improved, as seen by individuals between ages 14-24. This survey was hosted on our Screening platform in November 2020, where it was primarily seen by individuals accessing MHA’s mental health screens.


According to the 1,906 individuals who completed the survey, hobbies (72%), friends (53%), social media (46%), and online communities (22%) have helped their mental health the most during the pandemic. In the survey, 19-24-year-olds were much more likely to report that self-care (39% vs. 24%) and mental health supports like therapists or psychiatrists (17% vs. 9%) supported their mental health. While 14-18-year-olds were more likely to report that social media (50% vs. 36%), teams or clubs (11% vs. 4%), and identity-affirming spaces (12% vs. 6%) positively impacted their mental health.

What has helped your mental health the most during the pandemic? (Choose 3)

	14-18 year-old	19-24 year-old	Total
Hobbies	73%	70%	72%
Friends	53%	53%	53%
Social Media	50%	36%	46%
Self-care	24%	39%	28%
Online communities	24%	17%	22%
Parents or other supportive adults	13%	17%	14%
Mental health support	9%	17%	12%
Identity-affirming spaces	12%	6%	10%
Teams or clubs	11%	4%	9%

PROVIDE MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES AND BREAKS

The top ways survey respondents identified to help their mental health were access to mental health professionals (54%) and mental health breaks or absences as part of school or work (51%). While increasing the availability of mental health providers is a shared and growing priority among many leaders, advocates, and policymakers, young people felt that mental health breaks or absences as part of school or work were highly important.

 “While increasing the availability of mental health providers is a shared and growing priority among many leaders, advocates, and policymakers, young people felt that mental health breaks or absences as part of school or work were highly important.”

MHA’s previous research showed that, among high school students, 48 percent stated that they were very stressed out about school and included getting good grades, preparing for the future, and juggling priorities as some of their biggest stressors.¹⁵ College students also reported high rates of school-related stress and

mental health concerns before the pandemic.^{16,17} Students with disabilities, both in high school and college, also report high stress and lack of necessary accommodations that often lead them to drop out of school. Further exacerbated by the stressors and life disruptions caused by the pandemic, it is critical to reflect on what is already happening to young people and explore how we can build more supportive environments now and in the future. Young people’s desire for schools and workplaces to accommodate their mental health needs is not new to the pandemic. For example, in 2019, high school students in Oregon led an initiative to allow excused absences for mental health days that gained national interest.¹⁸

In addition to mental health days for individual students, some schools also build mental health breaks into students’ days. One example is through the **Mind Body Ambassadors** club at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, FL. The club, which partners with the Center for Mind Body Medicine, trains students to practice and teach their peers mind-body skills like belly breathing and guided imagery. Before school closures related to the pandemic, group members led mindfulness exercises as part of the daily announcements. Since moving online, members are now offering their “Mindful Minute” in virtual classrooms. As schools move toward comprehensive mental health resources and programs, opportunities to build these breaks into schools and partner with students to lead them can empower students and improve engagement among their peers.

Like schools, workplaces should also accommodate young people’s mental health needs, including allowing excused absences for mental health and imbedding mental health breaks and resources into benefits and daily practices.

MEET YOUNG PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE

Following access to professionals and breaks in work or school, survey respondents reported that learning to support their mental health during their daily lives (47%) and receiving support from other young people (41%) would be most helpful. Making sure that coping skills and communities of peer support are readily available is key to supporting and promoting the young people’s wellbeing. They should not be forced to add more things to their plates to access these supports. Mental health support, skills, and referrals to resources should be built around where young people spend their time. By integrating resources into the areas that youth and young adults report are most helpful, like friends, sports teams, or their online communities, we can ensure that resources come to young people instead of making young people come to traditional resources.

What would be most helpful for your mental health? (Choose 3)

	14-18 year-old	19-24 year-old	Total
Access to mental health professionals	53%	57%	54%
Mental health breaks or absences as part of school or work	53%	45%	51%
Learn how to support my mental health during my daily life	48%	46%	47%
Support from other young people	44%	36%	41%
Environments where people can be open about their mental health	29%	33%	30%
Tools to help myself	25%	31%	27%
Train adults to support my mental health	24%	22%	24%
Train my peers to understand and talk about mental health	15%	16%	15%



“By integrating resources into the areas that youth and young adults report are most helpful, like friends, sports teams, or their online communities, we can ensure that resources come to young people instead of making young people come to traditional resources.”

A young-person-led example of this combination is **Mental Health Kingdom (MHK)**, a Discord community that combines hobbies, online communities, and support from other young people. Led by a Kentucky Certified Peer Support Specialist, Shyanne Hoff, MHK uses Discord, a virtual community platform frequently used by people who play video games. MHK integrates peer support, mental health skills, and education into an accessible space for young people who want resources and community. Instead of seeking out resources somewhere else, this platform reaches youth and young adults where they are already spending their time and have built trusting relationships and can make them feel empowered to take whatever actions would support their mental health and wellbeing.



HOPE AND ADVOCACY IN THE PRESENT AND FOR THE FUTURE

With inadequate resources and growing stressors, it can be challenging to feel hopeful. Among survey respondents, 37 percent of 19-24-year-olds and 26 percent of 14-18-year-olds agreed that they felt optimistic about the future. Among LGBTQ+ youth, even fewer reported feeling hopeful, with 20 percent of LGBTQ+ and 14 percent of transgender youth agreeing that they feel hopeful. According to the American Psychological Association, more than half of teens and two-thirds of college students say the pandemic has made planning for their future feel impossible.¹⁹

I feel hopeful about the future.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
14-18-year-old	5.67%	20.71%	28.65%	26.00%	18.97%
19-24-year-old	8.23%	29.16%	28.30%	20.75%	13.55%
Total	6.45%	23.29%	28.54%	24.40%	17.31%

Transgender Youth

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
14-18-year-old	1.59%	11.11%	28.57%	33.33%	25.40%
19-24-year-old	11.76%	5.88%	41.18%	17.65%	23.53%
Total	3.75%	10.00%	31.25%	30.00%	25.00%

LGBTQ+ Youth

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
14-18-year-old	2.71%	14.93%	28.05%	31.22%	23.08%
19-24-year-old	5.83%	23.33%	27.50%	28.33%	15.00%
Total	3.38%	16.73%	27.94%	30.60%	21.35%

 “Only 25 percent of young people believe they can make a difference in mental health in their communities.”

When asked what gives them hope, many young people shared that they want to support their friends or make the world better for others. With the current resurgence of youth activism and the healing power of making a difference in the world around you, many young people feel hope in their potential to create something new or better in their communities and the world. Around the country, youth and young adults are already leading the way to design programs, organizations, and policies to promote their peers’ mental health and wellbeing. Many more young people are eager to contribute but unsure about where to start or how to make a difference. Only 25 percent of young people believe they can make a difference in mental health in their communities.

I can make a change in mental health in my community.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
14-18-year-old	3.55%	17.61%	42.48%	22.45%	13.91%
19-24-year-old	5.66%	28.82%	34.99%	17.32%	13.21%
Total	4.20%	21.04%	40.19%	20.88%	13.69%

When asked about how they could feel empowered to make a change, survey respondents first and foremost wanted to receive support for their mental health (60%) and to learn more about mental health broadly (46%). Beyond receiving support and gaining knowledge, they want to connect with a community of mental health advocates (30%), receive training on how to support their peers' mental health (27%), and receive training to educate their communities about mental health (26%). They are also interested in learning to advocate for changes at school or work (24%) or with mental health laws (21%). In addition, 14-18-year-olds were more interested in learning more about mental health (48% vs. 42%), while 19-24-year-olds were far more likely to want to learn to advocate for changes to mental health laws (27% vs. 12%).

What would make you feel empowered to make a change in mental health in your community?

	14-18 year-old	19-24 year-old	Total
Support for my own mental health	60%	62%	60%
Learning more about mental health	48%	42%	46%
Finding a mental health support community or other advocates	29%	33%	30%
Training to support my peers' mental health	26%	27%	27%
Training to educate my community about mental health	25%	29%	26%
Learning to advocate for changes to mental health laws	12%	27%	21%
Learning to advocate for changes at my school or job	24%	24%	24%
Nothing	16%	16%	16%

EQUIP YOUNG PEOPLE WITH TOOLS TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE FOR THEMSELVES AND THEIR PEERS

With so many interested in joining communities and learning how to change systems, services, and social norms, it is essential to create more pathways for young people to get involved or lead advocacy efforts. Investment in mental health for young people must leverage their unique understanding of their peers and their willingness to be of service. Critical to this effort is filling the gap between young people's interest in making a difference and their sense of empowerment to do so. The top concerns of young people were supporting their own mental health and learning about mental health. There is often a gap between direct services and resources for individuals and opportunities for advocacy and activism. For many, it is unclear or even scary to go from seeking help to feeling like they can speak out and make a difference.

One program that effectively bridges the gap between individual wellbeing and community contribution is **UpLift**, a program designed by Youth Era, a national nonprofit that serves youth and young adults. This 5-day virtual event, studied in partnership with The University of Oxford, trains young people to identify signs of distress and connect with their peers, in addition to teaching participants how to build strengths and coping skills. It utilizes fun activities built specifically for a virtual environment - with youth empowerment principles to make sure young people understand key concepts in mental health and peer support, and

feel confident in using what they learned to support themselves and others. As opposed to a formal peer support program, UpLift trains participants to help other young people wherever they are, whether that is online, at school, in sports, or while playing video games.

EMPOWER YOUNG PEOPLE TO CHANGE SYSTEMS AND POLICY

Other young people feel that they do not have time to wait for leadership to change and are organizing themselves to make a difference in their schools or communities. One example is **DMV Students for Mental Health Reform**, a high school student-led coalition dedicated to improving mental health resources for high school students in the Washington, D.C., Maryland, and Virginia region. Ben Ballman, a high school student in Potomac, Maryland, helped create the alliance after launching a survey to understand his peers' struggles and experiences with mental health.

From the survey results, he found that while there was a growing number of mental health clubs in high schools that made some progress, many students felt unsupported and unheard by leadership. His initiative organized the many individual advocates and student clubs across the region to share their ideas and create a larger voice. Currently, five high schools are members of DMV Students for Mental Health Reform. The group's advocacy priorities include instituting excused absences for mental health days, reallocating funds towards increased student support staff – such as school psychologists and social workers – and creating a more uniform and comprehensive school-based mental health education.

In policy advocacy, young people are also organizing at the local, state, and national level to ensure young people receive comprehensive and effective resources shaped by their voices, needs, and wants. One example of an organization organizing young people to advocate for mental health policy is **Young Invincibles Rocky Mountain (YIRM)**, a Colorado-based office of the national organization Young Invincibles (YI). YIRM trains young people who have been historically left out of policy decisions to empower them to organize and demand change on health care, education, and workforce issues. Among its mental health programs, YIRM worked with its young leaders and the Colorado Department of Education to create the Healthy Minds Checklist, a guide to ensure post-secondary students have adequate access to mental health care.

While there are many youth advocacy organizations, non-mental health organizations should integrate mental health throughout their services and priorities. Mental health-focused organizations should build coalitions with policy leaders and organizations. Regardless of the entry point, all young people should have opportunities to learn how to support their peers' mental health and clear pathways to local, state, and federal policy advocacy. To truly address the issues at stake, we must combine resources for empowerment and support with opportunities to inform systems and laws that impact youth and young adults' mental health and wellbeing.

CONCLUSION

Growing up in today's world is radically different than any time before. Data shows that the pandemic has further exacerbated the mental health struggles of young people. With needs that are only likely to increase, research, services, and resources must prioritize young people's wants and needs instead of the traditional approaches or assumptions of the mental health field. To best leverage mental health resources, we must tap into what is most powerful, compelling, and relevant to young people. We must invest in young people's ideas and leadership, including them in decision-making, and working with them to design communities that are mentally healthy and meet their needs. Young people must be included in creating a vision for the present and future of mental health. There is no more time to wait.





PROGRAM SUMMARY APPENDIX

MENTAL HEALTH KINGDOM

WEB: <https://discord.gg/PfvgVfV>

Mental Health Kingdom (MHK) is a virtual community where young people can connect and receive support for their mental health. MHA is hosted on Discord, a server and communication platform that initially started as a way for people who play videogames to create community. MHK is a community for individuals with mental health conditions and their supporters, with most members in their mid-twenties. Users can chat in general channels, private channels specific to their mental health condition or concern, and attend voice sessions where they play games, get to know one another, and receive peer support.

In addition to the specific channels and support groups, MHK hosts a few specific programs: Recovery Warriors, Weekend Community Events, Peer Guided Wellness Group, and Healing with Art. Recovery Warriors provides resources and worksheets on specific tools requested by users that participants work through in channels and support groups. Weekend Community Events creates a space for discussion and creativity. Each weekend has a theme, and members share their experiences and original artwork. Peer Guided Wellness Group is a voice channel group with text room access that allows peer-based sharing, encouragement, sympathy, wellness check-ins, and advice. Healing with Art is a video chat group where members come together and follow an art project while discussing mental health themes.

MHK is run and monitored by Kansas Certified Peer Support Specialist, Shyanne Hoff. It has multiple steps to ensure user safety, including multiple-step member verification and moderation staff. It also offers specific spaces for triggering content and utilizes black bars that users must click on to reveal messages on sensitive topics.

“MHK was constructed from the need I saw of many young adults and people of all ages not having a support system or a mental health community they could turn to.”

GETTING STARTED

After seeing how many young people did not have support systems or communities that they could turn to for support, Shyanne Hoff created MHK to be a non-judgmental space where individuals can grow in their mental health journeys and recovery. She was inspired by a support group she attended, hosted by the Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance. After several months of attending the group, the distance and time made the groups inaccessible for her. Noticing both the financial and logistical challenges many looking for help faced, particularly in rural areas, she tapped into her skills as a peer support specialist and her interests in gaming and art to create a space for others.

Her passion for providing more services and strengthening the community drives new projects and better group services. The server is ever-growing and improving to be accessible and to foster friendships.

The server is listed on Disboard.com, where individuals can look for servers using tags or keywords. MHK can be found on Disboard by searching “mentalhealth” or “support”; alternatively, it can also be found with a direct discord link <https://discord.gg/PfvgVfV>.

FAST FACTS

MHK's "PluralKit" allows users with Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) or OSDD to post as their individual alters/headmates.

MHK has over 220 members.

MHK uses gaming and art to engage its community and create more opportunities to share and learn about mental health through users' interests.



Shyanne Hoff

FOUNDER, MENTAL HEALTH KINGDOM

MINDFUL MINUTE

BY MIND BODY AMBASSADORS

INSTAGRAM: [@mindbody.club](https://www.instagram.com/mindbody.club)

Mind Body Ambassadors (MBA) is an after-school club founded by Arthy Suresh, a student at Marjory Stoneman Douglas (MSD) High School in Parkland, FL, alongside her history teacher and an MSD parent. With support and training from the Center for Mind Body Medicine in Washington, D.C., the club is focused on teaching students skills to address trauma and reduce stress and anxiety through practices like soft belly breathing and utilizing movement and imagery for healing. The club offers community workshops and daily mindfulness, and it works with peer counselors at MSD to integrate aspects of mind-body support into peer counseling.

In addition to programs that are open to members and the entire school community, the club also works to embed these practices into all students' daily lives, whether or not they can join the club as members or attend workshops or support sessions. Its Mindful Minute program includes a mindfulness practice led by students during the daily announcements. Since the pandemic started, MBA has continued to offer this practice to students in their virtual learning environments.

The organization also focuses on health care workers and has presented its work to more than 2,000 doctors and health care leaders. A video of its Mindful Minute program is available in hospital break rooms and patient waiting rooms for healthcare workers and patients to support themselves.

“That’s what sets our mental health initiative apart from others: we give participants an opportunity to help themselves.”

GETTING STARTED

Following the tragic events of the mass shooting at her high school, Arthy Suresh knew that she had to help her peers. They had been traumatized, and many were struggling with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and fear. She noticed that, while many students had access to counseling and therapists at school, they were still struggling. Arthy Suresh started MBA after seeing and experiencing the anxiety and stress faced by other students at her school.

With a grant, Arthy worked with the Center for Mind Body Medicine to train student leaders to become Mind Body Ambassadors for their peers. Student leaders go through a 6-week training to learn different skills to become certified Mind Body Ambassadors and then use their skills by leading their own groups or working with the broader community. Since the creation of the program, Arthy has received grants to establish clubs across the state of Florida and partners with Broward County, the 6th largest county in the nation, to integrate mental health resources into a county-wide curriculum. She is now organizing national summits to reach more young people interested in bringing these tools to their schools and communities.

FAST FACTS

MBA partners with the Center for Mind Body Medicine to train students to teach and practice mind-body skills.

Students completed six weeks of training across different meditative practices to become certified as Mind Body Ambassadors.

The MBA club offers community workshops, and daily mindfulness practices, in addition to working with peer counselors.



MIND BODY AMBASSADORS



UPLIFT BY YOUTH ERA

WEB: www.upliftpeers.com INSTAGRAM: [@theyouthera](https://www.instagram.com/theyouthera) FACEBOOK: Youth Era

Uplift is a five-day virtual event that empowers young people to support their mental health, identify signs of distress in their peers, and make a difference in other young people's well-being. The program was designed and studied by Youth Era, a national nonprofit dedicated to creating breakthroughs in the systems that serve young people, alongside the University of Oxford. Uplift integrates music, 22 activities, and best practices in positive youth development and peer support to create naturalized peer support for young people.

As opposed to a more formal peer support specialist program, Uplift allows young people with any level of experience to use and apply what they learn in any context, whether at school, online, or in their communities. It fills the gap between initial interest in mental health and mental health education by including youth empowerment principles that help young people feel confident in their mental health and abilities.

“Uplift is designed to help young people master the most modern psychology hacks to support their peers going through difficult times.”

GETTING STARTED

In response to concerns about young people's mental health during the pandemic, The University of Oxford identified Youth Era to develop a training for young people based upon its expertise in peer support training and virtual youth and young adult peer support. Youth Era developed the Uplift model specifically to be used online, even relying on bugs in virtual software to create the 22 activities used as part of the 5-day event.

Uplift utilizes the 40 Developmental Assets, a framework for positive youth development from the Search Institute. This approach ensures that young people are not just learning about distress and peer support but that they also feel confident in themselves and their ability to make a difference. An additional strength of the program's approach is its portability to be used in different settings and by diverse populations of young people.

The initial training, conducted with 100 young people in the United Kingdom, was studied by Oxford's Department of Psychiatry. It is now being replicated with plans to expand access to the training to the United States and other countries.

FAST FACTS

UpLift was studied and launched by Youth Era and The University of Oxford.

UpLift combines positive youth development and peer support to motivate youth to take charge of their lives and help those around them.

UpLift's 22 activities were designed specifically for virtual environments.



DMV STUDENTS FOR MENTAL HEALTH REFORM

WEB: <https://www.dmvsmhr.org/>

DMV Students for Mental Health Reform is a coalition of student advocates, clubs, and schools dedicated to improving students' mental health in the Washington, D.C., Maryland, and Virginia region. The student-led group has a three-part mission:

- Understand students, school staff, and best practices from other communities.
- Connect student leaders in the DMV area.
- Advocate for changes that address the needs of high school students.

With the current surge in mental health needs and rise in mental health advocacy among young people, the group brings together student groups and individual advocates across high schools to create a collective voice to demand change from schools, counties, and states.

Through rallies, letters, and petitions, DMV Students for Mental Health Reform is leading the way in creating better and healthier schools for students. Their current advocacy priorities include instituting excused absences for mental health days, reallocating funds towards increased student support staff – such as school psychologists and social workers—and creating more uniform and comprehensive school-based mental health education. In addition to their broader priorities, some are also developing peer support programs. These programs aim to meet student needs in the short-term and create more robust resources for young people looking for support, regardless of whether they are receiving formal mental health services.

“This work represents a community of students who are tired of waiting for the people in power to make the changes they need. It represents a group of young people coming together and putting in the work to reform the world around them.
That’s a powerful thing”

GETTING STARTED

After hearing many of his peers talk about struggles with their mental health and the limited support from school counseling services, Ben Ballman, a high school student in Potomac, MD, created a survey to better understand his peers' experiences. The initial survey, completed by more than 500 high school students in his area, validated many of the things he was already hearing. Students reported that they were not getting their mental health needs met by the available resources. Alongside a team of peers, Ben continued his research into the counseling department's efficacy, namely through interviews with county faculty and students. He compiled the team's findings into an open letter for county officials, which resulted in meetings. However, Ben did not feel like he was being taken seriously and decided he would have to do something else.

He partnered with another local student to create DMV Students for Mental Health Reform. There were multiple student mental health clubs in different high schools, but they did not communicate with one another to organize around shared goals. The coalition represents students' voices and brings members together to engage more students in direct advocacy to their schools and state and local governments.

FAST FACTS

Over 1,000 high school students completed the series of surveys that led to the launch of DMV Students for Mental Health Reform.

DMV Students for Mental Health Reform has three current priorities for schools: adopt mental health sick days; reappropriation funds towards student support personnel; and increased mental health education in schools.

Currently, five high schools have joined DMV Students for Mental Health Reform.



Ben Ballman

CO-FOUNDER, DMV STUDENTS FOR MENTAL HEALTH REFORM

YOUNG INVINCIBLES ROCKY MOUNTAIN

WEB: younginvincibles.org INSTAGRAM: [@younginvincibles](https://www.instagram.com/younginvincibles) TWITTER: [@younginvincible](https://twitter.com/younginvincible)

Young Invincibles Rocky Mountain (YIRM) is a regional office of Young Invincibles (YI), a national nonprofit focused on advocacy and policy for 18 to 34-year-olds. YI's work organizes young leaders to create economic opportunities for their peers and empower them to participate in the political process. Its focus areas include health care, higher education, workforce, and civic engagement. YIRM's office, located in Colorado, has several key programs, including the Young Advocates program, the Denver Youth Leadership Academy, and a Youth Advisory Board. Through its leadership program, it works with opportunity youth and young adults from historically underprivileged backgrounds to empower them to make a difference in state-specific policy. It connects directly with a selected group of leaders to shape and respond to its policy priorities and programs through its Youth Advisory Board.

Among its work on mental health, YIRM developed the Healthy Minds Checklist for college campuses. Designed with the Colorado Department of Higher Education's support, the Healthy Minds Checklist provides an overview of the recommendations and best practices to ensure post-secondary students' mental health care.

Since the start of COVID-19, YIRM took its programs virtually, allowing it to engage with young people from even more locations throughout the state. It updated its policy priorities, including ensuring colleges provide teletherapy for students and utilize its Healthy Minds Checklist to promote mental health. Additionally, YIRM hosted webinars and virtual roundtables focused on mental health.

"YI Rocky Mountain is a leader in creating economic opportunity for young adults by amplifying their voices in the political process."

GETTING STARTED

As a national organization, YI was founded in 2009 by a group of young people who felt young people's voices were not represented in the debate over health care reform. YIRM launched in 2016 and has since trained hundreds of advocates around the state of Colorado. Through in-person and virtual events and digital engagement, the organization has had a significant impact on some of the areas that impact young people the most, all informed and led by young people. Their work has included campaigns on preventive health care and insurance literacy, in addition to formal policy work on topics like substance abuse treatment access, reinsurance, and telehealth.

In addition to applying for its formal programs, local advocates can get involved by following YI on social media and attending virtual events. Other youth and equity-focused organizations can work alongside YI and its many coalition partners. Advocates outside of Colorado can get involved with the national office in Washington, D.C., or one of YI's regional offices in California, Illinois, Network, or Texas.

FAST FACTS

YIRM developed a Healthy Minds Checklist that serves as a guide for colleges to ensure students have access to mental health care.

Over 500,000 people are part of YI's network across the US.

In addition to Colorado, YI has regional offices in California, Illinois, New York, and Texas and a headquarters in Washington, D.C.

YOUNG INVINCIBLES



ENDNOTES

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- ¹¹ Lake, J. (2020). A Mental Health Pandemic: The Second Wave of COVID-19. *Psychiatric Times*. Retrieved from: <https://www.psychiatrictimes.com/view/a-mental-health-pandemic-the-second-wave-of-covid-19>
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