

Missouri Youth Mental Health

Readiness Assessment

2026

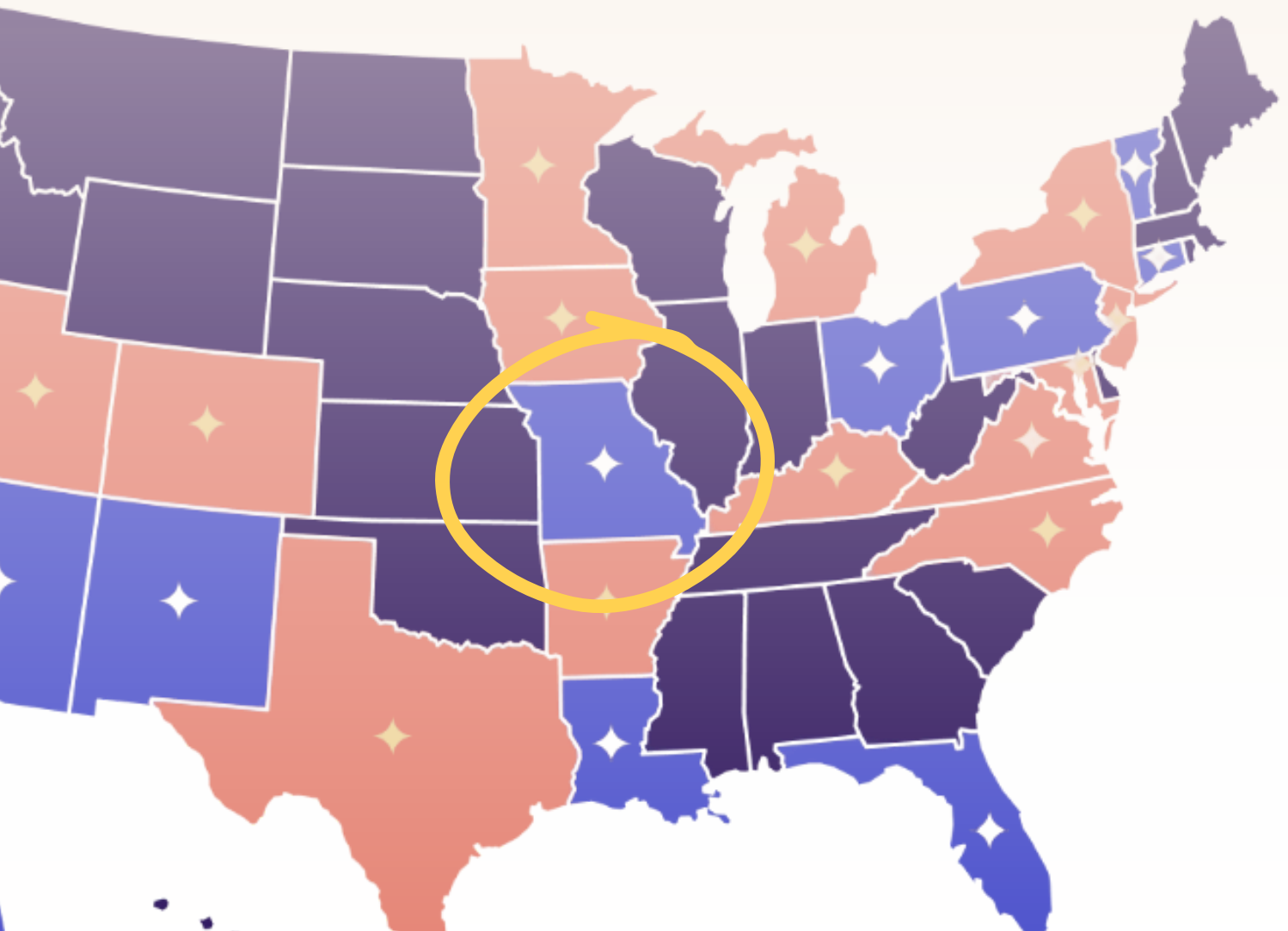


Table of Contents

About Us.....	Page 1
Executive Summary.....	Page 2
Approach.....	Page 4
Theme 1: Needs Across Missouri.....	Page 6
Theme 2: Contributors to Youth Mental Health.....	Page 13
Theme 3: Barriers to Youth Mental Health Needs.....	Page 18
Theme 4: Critical Access Points.....	Page 23
Sources.....	Page 29
Limitations.....	Page 34

About Us

About ServMO

The Missouri Community Service Commission, a bipartisan commission appointed by the Governor and administered by the Missouri Department of Higher Education and Workforce Development, is now doing business as ServMO. Its mission is to strengthen Missouri communities through volunteerism and service. ServMO invests more than \$10 million into Missouri communities annually.

For more information about ServMO, visit <https://serv.mo.gov>.

About Wyman

For 128 years, Wyman has believed in the power of teens. Our mission is to connect teens to their voices, their strengths, and their futures through proven programs and supports – which help teens and young adults build life and leadership skills, establish healthy behaviors and relationships, and achieve educational and career success.

For more information about Wyman, visit www.wymancenter.org/

About Youth Mental Health Corps

Conceived by the Schultz Family Foundation and Pinterest with input from hundreds of experts and practitioners, the YMHC works with established nonprofits, schools, community organizations, and healthcare clinics to train 18-29 year old Corps members to provide near-peer mental health and navigation support to middle- and high-school students, placing them in an array of settings to serve young people. Launched in partnership with state service commissions, national philanthropies, and corporate partners.

For more information about YMHC, visit www.youthmentalhealthcorps.org

Executive Summary

Overview

The readiness assessment synthesizes existing reports and data sources to provide a statewide view of Missouri's youth mental health landscape. It was developed to help the Youth Mental Health Corps Task Force build a shared understanding of current needs, identify opportunities for impact, and inform planning. The assessment focuses on patterns that emerged across communities rather than comparisons between counties or regions.

Assessment Approach

The assessment was conducted through a review and synthesis of existing youth-focused needs assessments, community health needs assessments, youth survey and behavioral health data, school-based mental health information, statewide data, and workforce information. Sources represented urban, suburban, and rural communities in Missouri. Findings were organized around recurring youth needs, contributing conditions, barriers, and opportunities. While this assessment draws upon diverse reports and data sources that vary in methodology and scope, the consistency of findings suggests that the themes represent meaningful considerations for understanding youth mental health needs in Missouri.

Key Findings

Four main themes emerged across the reports and data sources reviewed:

1) Youth mental health needs: Anxiety, depression, and emotional distress were the most consistently identified concerns. Reports also highlighted self-harm and suicide risk, trauma and adverse experiences, and social-emotional and interpersonal challenges, including social isolation, bullying, and lack of belonging.

2) Conditions shaping well-being: Youth mental health is influenced by the environments in which young people live and develop. Poverty, housing instability, economic stress, community violence, family and household stress, and concerns related to technology, social media and social isolation can increase vulnerability and compound existing challenges.

3) Barriers to support: Workforce shortages and limited service availability are barriers to accessing timely, developmentally appropriate care. Geography, transportation, affordability, service navigation, lack of awareness, and stigma create additional barriers, particularly for youth and families in rural and underserved communities.

4) Critical access points: Schools and community-based settings are central to prevention, early identification and connection to support. Positive school climates, trusted adults, safe spaces, and prevention and early-intervention opportunities can strengthen belonging, resilience, and overall well-being.

Conclusion

Missouri youth are experiencing significant and interconnected mental health challenges amid persistent workforce shortages and other barriers related to service availability, access, and navigation. At the same time, the assessment identifies clear assets and opportunities: schools and community-based organizations are critical access points, caring adults and supportive relationships are important protective factors, and prevention and early intervention approaches offer opportunities to reach young people before needs become more severe. The findings provide a foundation for defining an approach to the Youth Mental Health Corps that is responsive to the needs of young people across Missouri.

Purpose

The purpose of this readiness assessment is to identify key youth mental health needs, service gaps, opportunities, and workforce considerations that can inform the implementation of Youth Mental Health Corps in Missouri. The assessment is intended to provide a statewide perspective by synthesizing findings across existing youth-focused needs assessments, community health needs assessments, youth survey data and related resources. This effort leverages existing data to identify common themes and priority considerations. The findings are intended to support the Youth Mental Health Corps Task Force in establishing a shared understanding of the current youth mental health landscape, identifying opportunities for impact and informing future planning.

Approach

The readiness assessment was conducted through a review and thematic synthesis of existing reports and data sources related to youth mental health, behavioral health service access, school mental health, and community well-being across Missouri.

Information was reviewed and organized to identify recurring themes, needs, strengths, and opportunities that emerged across geographic regions and data sources.

Attention was paid to:

- Youth mental health needs and concerns
- Populations disproportionately impacted by mental health challenges
- Barriers to accessing services and supports
- Prevention and early intervention needs
- School- and community-based support systems
- Behavioral health workforce challenges

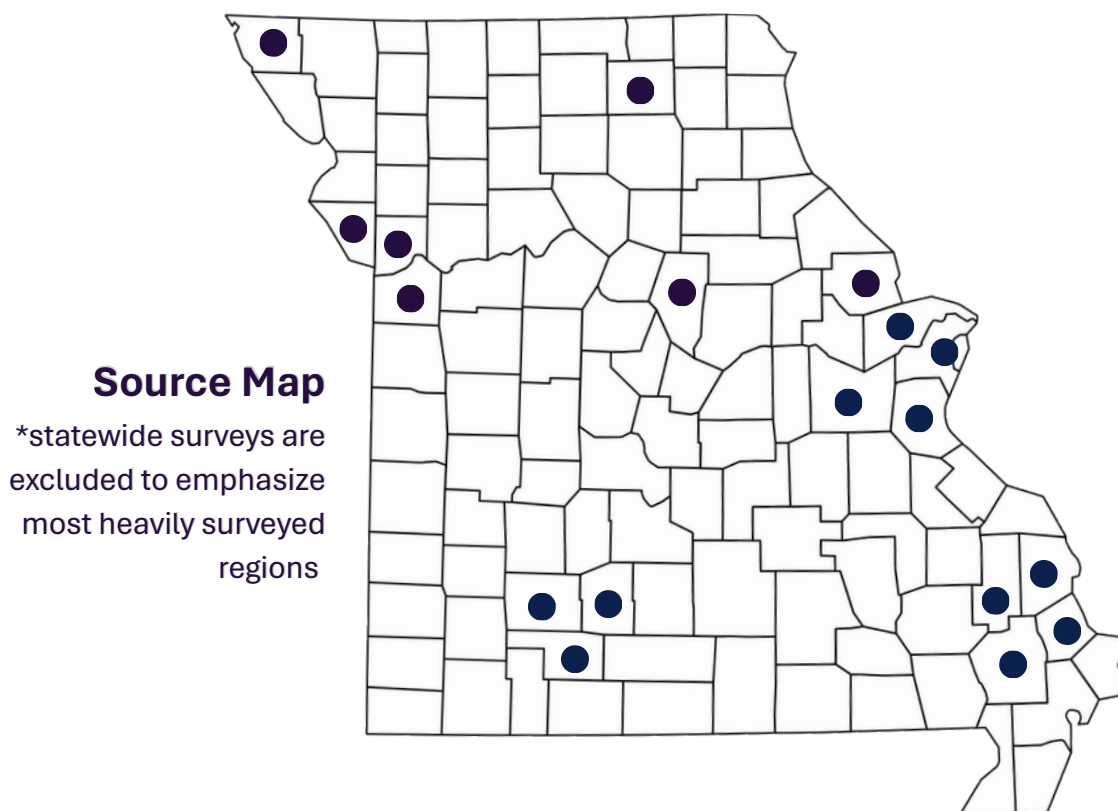
Findings presented in this report reflect themes that emerged consistently across multiple sources and regions. The goal of the analysis was not a comparison of counties or communities, but to identify statewide patterns that may inform Youth Mental Health Corps implementation in the state.

Sources

The readiness assessment drew upon a diverse collection of existing reports and data sources representing urban, suburban, and rural communities across Missouri. Sources reviewed included:

- Children's Services Fund Needs Assessments: Boone, Franklin, Jefferson, and St. Louis County and City, both quantitative analyses and community engagement efforts focused on children, youth, and families.

- **Community Health Needs Assessments:** Representing multiple regions of Missouri including northwest, central, eastern, southeastern and metropolitan communities. These assessments provided information about community priorities, behavioral health concerns, social determinants of health, and access to services.
- **Youth Survey and Behavioral Health Data:** Including the Missouri Student Survey and Missouri Behavioral Health Data resources to understand youth-reported experiences related to mental health, well-being, school climate, substance use, and related risk and protective factors.
- **School Based Mental Health Resources:** The Missouri Framework for School Based Mental Health was reviewed to understand current practices, systems, and opportunities related to school-based mental health supports across the state.
- **Statewide Health and Community Data:** State and regional health assessment resources, community indicator databases and workforce and shortage-area information were reviewed to provide additional context regarding demographic trends, community conditions, behavioral health needs, and mental health workforce challenges across Missouri.



Theme 1

Youth Mental Health Needs Across Missouri

Anxiety, Depression, and Emotional Distress

Anxiety, depression, and emotional distress emerged as the most consistently identified set of youth mental health concerns across Missouri communities. The widespread appearance of these issues across many reports and geographic regions suggests they are pervasive challenges affecting youth throughout the state.

Multiple reports identified anxiety, depression and/or emotional distress as among the most urgent mental health challenges facing Missouri youth illustrating the magnitude of the challenge. School personnel, community stakeholders, caregivers and youth described increasing levels of worry, fear, sadness, and emotional exhaustion. In addition, several reports suggested that these concerns are persistent and chronic, not just isolated episodes.

While anxiety, depression, and emotional distress were consistently identified across communities and youth populations, several school-based reports pointed to developmental differences with anxiety and depression becoming increasingly prominent in adolescence. Several community-engagement reports also identified elevated concerns among youth experiencing additional adversity, including LGBTQ+ youth, youth experiencing housing instability, and youth involved in foster care, juvenile justice or other systems of support.

The widespread nature of concerns about anxiety, depression and emotional distress suggests a need for prevention, early intervention, and treatment strategies that support youth before concerns escalate into more serious mental health challenges. Supporting youth well-being should not be viewed solely as a clinical issue but also as a broader youth development and community health priority.

To illustrate how concerns anxiety, depression and emotional distress emerged across reports:

- In the Jefferson County Community Mental Health Fund School Staff Survey Report, 91% of school staff identified student anxiety, worry and fear as the most common mental health concern.
- Recent Missouri Student Survey and Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) reports consistently identified concerns related to anxiety, sadness, hopelessness, poor mental health, and emotional distress among youth. For example, 44% of Missouri high school students reported on the YRBS that they felt so sad or hopeless during the last 12 months they stopped doing some usual activities.
- The St. Louis County Children’s Service Fund Community Engagement Report, youth caregivers, educators and service providers identified emotional distress as a significant concern. The report described youth as “exhausted but not defeated.”

Self-Harm and Suicide Risk

Self-harm and suicide risk emerged as a significant concern across multiple report types and geographic regions throughout Missouri, although findings were less universal than those related to anxiety, depression and emotional distress. Nonetheless, the consistency of findings across sources suggests that suicide risk represents an important challenge within the youth mental health landscape in Missouri.

Several reports identified suicide risk as a major concern, while others documented suicidal thoughts, self-harm behaviors, suicide attempts and suicide-related crises among youth. Reports frequently framed suicide risk within a broader continuum of behavioral health concerns rather than an isolated issue. Findings suggest that suicide prevention requires a continuum of supports that includes prevention, early identification, crisis response, and building the capacity of adults to recognize warning signs and connect youth with appropriate support.

While self-harm and suicide-risk appeared across multiple communities and populations, some reports identified elevated concerns among youth experiencing additional adversity, including trauma exposure, social isolation, bullying, housing instability, involvement in foster care or juvenile justice or other systems, and/or other significant life stressors.

These findings suggest that suicide-related concerns often occur alongside significant challenges and life stressors, highlighting the importance of identifying and supporting youth who may be experiencing multiple forms of adversity.

To illustrate the challenges of self-harm and suicide risk in Missouri:

- In the 2023 Jefferson County Community Mental Health Fund School Staff Survey Report, school staff identified self-harm and suicide as a top behavioral/mental health concern.
- In Missouri's 2023 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, an estimated 25.6% of high school students reported seriously considering attempting suicide during the past 12 months.
- The 2026 Missouri Student Survey state and county reports consistently demonstrated that suicide-related behaviors are a concern across many communities. Among the county reports reviewed, the percentage of youth reporting they had made a suicide plan ranged from 4.9% in St. Charles County to 8.7% in St. Louis City, while the percentage of youth reporting suicide attempt ranged from 1.7% in Boone County to 7% in St. Louis City.
- In the Lincoln County Community Health Needs Assessment, 16.1% of youth surveyed for reported engaging in self-injury.
- The St. Louis County Children's Service Fund Community Engagement Report highlighted concerns about elevated risks of severe anxiety, depression, and suicide among LGBTQ+ youth.

Trauma and Adverse Experiences

Trauma, safety concerns, and adverse experiences emerged as a significant concern related to youth mental health needs across Missouri.

Although not as consistently highlighted as anxiety, depression and emotional distress, this collection of concerns appeared across multiple reports and suggests that youth are navigating challenges beyond specific mental health symptoms, including dealing with experiences related to violence, personal safety and other forms of adversity.

Reports describe trauma as a range of experiences that may include exposure to violence, abuse, neglect, housing instability, foster care or juvenile justice involvement, grief and loss, and other significant life stressors.

Several reports noted that youth often experience multiple forms of adversity simultaneously. These findings suggest that concerns related to trauma, safety and adversity represent an important dimension of youth mental health needs in Missouri.

Reports suggest that some youth populations experience greater exposure to trauma, safety concerns and adverse experiences than others. For example, several reports highlighted concerns about safety and trauma among unhoused youth, LGBTQ+ youth, and youth exposed to community violence.

These findings suggest that certain groups of youth may experience a disproportionate burden of trauma and related behavioral health challenges.

The significance of trauma, safety concerns, and adverse experiences is reflected across multiple examples, including:

- The St. Louis County Children’s Services Fund Community Engagement Report identified trauma as a major theme and included community discussion of gun violence, foster care experiences, housing instability, justice involvement, and youth disconnection.
- The Jefferson County Community Mental Health Fund School Staff Survey Report reported substantial concern among school personnel regarding students' needs related to grief, loss, trauma, abuse, and neglect prevention, as well as the availability of trauma-informed services.
- The Cape Girardeau County Community Health Assessment documented homelessness among youth as an important indicator of social vulnerability that may contribute to youth adversity and exposure to trauma.
- The Missouri State Epidemiological Profile identified homelessness, victimization, bullying, and other adverse experiences among youth indicators associated with behavioral health risk.
- The St. Louis MHB Engagement Report described mental health challenges as deeply connected to recent and generational trauma, poverty, racism, violence, housing instability, and community disinvestment, particularly in neighborhoods experiencing longstanding inequities.

Social-emotional and Interpersonal Challenges

Social-emotional and interpersonal challenges emerged as a consistent concern across reports. Commonly identified concerns included peer relationships, social skills, emotion regulation, conflict resolution, self-esteem, social isolation, loneliness and bullying. The consistency of these findings suggests that many youth are struggling with challenges related to connection, belonging and interpersonal functioning.

The magnitude of concern was notable with many reports citing challenges in this area as among the most significant behavioral health concerns facing youth. Community engagement findings repeatedly described youth as feeling disconnected or isolated, while school-based assessments identified concerns related to interpersonal conflict, self-esteem and difficulties with emotion regulation. Reports repeatedly identified bullying, social isolation, and peer relationships challenges as recurring concerns affecting youth across communities.

Reports did not consistently identify demographic differences, instead, they described challenges related to belonging, social connection, peer relationships and emotion regulation across diverse populations, communities and settings, suggesting these are widespread challenges and an important dimension of youth mental health needs across the state.

The importance of social-emotional and interpersonal challenges is reflected across multiple data sources:

- In the Jefferson County Community Mental Health Fund School Staff Survey Report, 82% of school staff identified peer relationships, social-emotional skills, and self-esteem as significant student concerns, while 79% identified emotional regulation and conflict resolution as major concerns.
- The 2024 Missouri Student Survey statewide report includes findings about peer victimization incidents in the most recent 3 months. Among students in grades 6-12, 24.7% reported being made fun of at least once, 22.4% reported that mean rumors or lies spread about them at school at least once, and 14.6% reported they were hit, shoved or pushed by another student at least once. Nearly half of the respondents reported they did not feel they used healthy coping mechanisms.
- The St. Louis County CSF Community Engagement Report identified social connection and belonging as recurring themes and emphasized the importance of safe spaces where youth can build relationships, socialize, and develop supportive peer connections.

Note that while the four subtopics discussed above emerged as among the most consistent youth mental health concerns across reports reviewed, other challenges were also identified that are important dimensions of youth mental health to consider:

1) Substance use and misuse were discussed in multiple statewide reports, student surveys, and community assessments, particularly with respect to alcohol, vaping, marijuana and other substances, and

2) several reports also highlighted concerns related to technology and social media, including cyberbullying, excessive screen use, online safety and the influence of social media on youth well-being.

In addition, while youth mental health concerns were identified across communities and populations, several reports pointed to elevated concerns among specific groups of young people. Statewide youth survey data suggest that female students report higher levels of poor mental health, sadness, hopelessness, and emotional distress than male students. Community engagement reports also identified concerns about the well-being of LGBTQ+ youth, youth experiencing housing instability, foster-care or juvenile justice involvement, and youth exposed to multiple forms of adversity.

“We don’t have safe places to just be kids and talk about what’s going on. Everything feels like it’s about punishment, not support.”

-student highlighted in the St. Louis MHB Engagement Report

Theme 2

Social, Family, School, and Community Contributors to Youth Mental Health

Poverty, Housing Instability, and Economic Stress

Poverty, housing instability, and economic stress emerged as some of the most consistently identified influences on youth mental health across Missouri communities.

These issues appeared in multiple reports, identifying financial hardship, housing instability, food insecurity, transportation challenges, limited access to childcare and other economic stressors as factors increasing vulnerability to mental health concerns. Collectively, reports indicate that economic conditions exert an important influence on daily experiences, opportunities, stability and overall wellbeing of young people living in Missouri.

Many reports emphasized that economic hardship affects families' ability to meet basic needs, access services, and provide stable environments for youth. Community engagement findings frequently described ways that financial stress and unstable housing create ongoing challenges for youth and families. Several reports also identified housing affordability, homelessness, transportation barriers and limited access to resources as persistent community concerns.

Some population differences emerged across reports. Several reports highlighted disparities among communities experiencing poverty and other social and economic disadvantages. Rural communities may experience greater transportation barriers, less access to resources and greater difficulty accessing services than non-rural areas.

Lastly, youth experiencing poverty, housing instability, homelessness, food insecurity, or other forms of economic hardship were repeatedly identified as having additional challenges that may impact their mental health and well-being. The influence of poverty, housing instability and economic stress is reflected across multiple reports, such as:

- The St. Louis CSF and MHB Community Health Needs Assessment identified youth socioeconomic status and social drivers of health are important factors shaping overall well-being of youth. The report documented disparities in poverty and economic conditions affecting youth across the region, including substantially higher rates of youth poverty in parts of St. Louis City than the national average.
- The Clay, Jackson and Platte Counties Community Needs Assessment identified affordable housing, childcare, transportation, poverty and financial hardship among its highest-priority community needs. Focus group participants repeatedly described these economic challenges as affecting stability, opportunities and overall well-being of children, youth, and families.
- In the Lincoln County Community Health Needs Assessment, “low income/poverty” was listed as the top social issue that has the greatest effect on quality of life in their community, and the report documented increasing rates of childhood homelessness in the county.

Community Safety, Violence, and Exposure to Trauma

Community safety, violence, and exposure to trauma surfaced as important influences on youth mental health across multiple report types and geographic regions. Further, the magnitude of concern was notable. Several reports identified violence and safety as significant concerns facing youth and families.

Community engagement findings frequently described concerns about gun violence, bullying, neighborhood safety, and lack of safe spaces where youth could spend time and build healthy relationships. Other reports documented domestic violence, violent crime, victimization and community trauma as ongoing concerns affecting communities across Missouri. Collectively, the reports suggest that these are important community conditions that can exert a negative influence on youth well-being.

Population differences also surfaced. Several assessments highlighted elevated concerns among youth experiencing community violence, housing instability, foster care or juvenile justice involvement, or other adverse circumstances. Community engagement reports also identified heightened concerns about safety among unhoused youth and youth living in communities with higher levels of violence. These findings indicate that some youth may experience a disproportionate amount of exposure to unsafe environments and trauma-related stressors. Examples of community safety, violence and exposure to trauma are reflected across multiple reports, including:

- The St. Louis County Children’s Service Fund Community Engagement Report identified gun violence, bullying, fighting, and concerns about safety as recurring themes affecting youth and families. Parents described gun violence as a form of trauma that is “stacked upon youth already at risk”, and that the risk of school shootings has changed youth perceptions of school as a safe harbor.
- The Cape Girardeau County Community Health Assessment documented elevated rates of domestic violence, violent crime, assault, and victimization, as well as homelessness among students.
- The Missouri State Epidemiological Profile identified bullying, victimization, violence exposure, and other adverse experiences among youth indicators associated with behavioral health risk.
- Multiple Community Health Needs Assessments, including Independence, Kansas City, Lincoln County, and St. Louis County assessments, identified violence, crime, safety concerns, or trauma-related conditions as factors affecting youth and community well-being.

Technology, Social Media and Social Isolation

Technology, social media, and social isolation emerged as recurring influences on youth mental health across multiple reports.

While these concerns were not discussed as consistently as poverty, housing instability or community violence, several reports identified technology use, online interactions, cyberbullying and increasing social isolation as factors affecting youth well-being.

Reports frequently described concerns with how technology can shape relationships, self-perception, and overall mental health.

In reports that explored youth experiences directly, youth, caregivers, educators and service providers described concerns about excessive screen use, reliance on social media for validation, online harassment, cyberbullying, and reduced opportunities for face-to-face interactions. Several reports highlighted loneliness, isolation and disconnection as growing concerns.

Reports generally emphasized the widespread nature of technology and social media use, suggesting that these influences affect youth across communities, demographic groups and settings. Some community engagement findings raised concerns about cyberbullying, online harassment, social comparison and the increasing role of digital interactions in young people's lives.

Collectively the findings suggest that technology and social media have become important components of the social environments in which young people develop relationships, seek support and navigate daily life, but the long-term implications are not entirely clear.

The influence of technology, social media, and social isolation is reflected across multiple examples:

- The St. Louis County Children's Service Fund Community Engagement Report identified that technology and social media play a central role in the lives of youth, with both positive and negative impacts. Parents and other adults described youth social media use as addictive and mostly harmful, while acknowledging that limiting screen time is a challenge.
- In the statewide Missouri Student Survey report, 13.5% of 6th-12 grade students reported posting something online or sending a text that might embarrass or hurt another student at least once during the previous three months.
- The Jefferson County Community Mental Health Fund School Staff Survey Report identified cyberbullying prevention as an area of need, highlighting concerns about the impact of online interactions on youth well-being.

Family and Household Stress

Family and household conditions emerged as an important influence on youth mental health across multiple reports, which consistently highlighted the family environment as one of the most influential contexts shaping youth well-being. Concerns included family conflict, caregiver stress, parental mental health challenges, family instability, divorce or separation, substance use in the household, and inconsistent support or supervision.

The significance of family influences was highlighted in community engagement and Children's Service fund reports. Participants described parents and caregivers as adults with the greatest influence on young people, while also acknowledging that many families face substantial stressors of their own. Several reports suggested that caregiver stress, mental health challenges, economic strain and competing demands can affect the ability of adults to provide the support and stability that young people need.

While family-related challenges were identified across communities, some reports highlighted greater concerns for youth experiencing additional adversity including housing instability, foster care involvement, family disruption, and other forms of instability within the home environment. These findings suggest that family and household stress may be an especially important contributor to mental health challenges for youth already navigating multiple life challenges.

The importance of family and household factors is reflected across multiple reports. For example:

- The St. Louis County Children's Service Fund Community Engagement Report identified "Parenting Shapes the Well-being of Youth" as one of its major themes. Participants consistently described parents and caregivers as the most influential adults in young people's lives and discussed the challenges many families face in supporting youth mental health.
- The Jefferson County Community Mental Health Fund School Staff Survey Report reported that lack of parent involvement was the most common barrier faced by students when attempting to address mental health needs. The report recommended strengthening parent partnerships and caregiver mental health literacy, recognizing the important role families play in supporting youth mental health.

Theme 3

Barriers to Meeting Youth Mental Health Needs in Missouri

Workforce Shortages

Behavioral health workforce shortages, defined as insufficient numbers of qualified professionals to provide needed services, was consistently identified as a major barrier to meeting youth mental health needs across Missouri.

Reports repeatedly identified shortages of counselors, therapists, psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers and other behavioral health professionals.

Community stakeholders, school personnel, healthcare providers, and service organizations consistently reported difficulty recruiting and retaining qualified professionals. Impacts of shortages include limited access to care, increasing wait times, reducing service availability, and contributing to unmet needs among youth in the state.

Population differences emerged, with reports suggesting that challenges were often more pronounced in rural and underserved areas where youth and families have fewer provider options and longer distances to travel to receive care.

Several reports also highlighted shortages of providers with specialized expertise in serving children and adolescents, creating additional barriers for youth seeking developmentally appropriate mental health support.

Overall, findings suggest that workforce shortages represent a foundational barrier within Missouri's youth behavioral health system.

Examples of workforce shortage challenges cited in reports include:

- Federal Health Professional Shortage Area (HPSA) data published by Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), indicate that mental health workforce shortages are widespread across Missouri. Of 265 designated mental health shortage areas identified by HRSA, 253 were classified in the higher need category (HPSA scores 14-25), indicating substantial unmet need. Rural areas appear particularly affected with 199 Rural Health Clinics designated as high-need mental health shortage areas.
- In the Jefferson County Community Mental Health Fund School Staff Survey Report, nearly all school staff (98%) cited the need for psychiatrists and psychologists or therapists in or near the community to support youth.
- Children's Service Fund assessments from Boone County, Jackson County, Franklin County, St. Louis County, and St. Louis City all identified mental health workforce shortages as major barriers affecting youth behavioral health services.
- Community Health Needs Assessments from Independence, Kansas City, Lincoln County, Mercy Southeast, Mercy Southwest, St. Charles, and other communities identified shortages of behavioral health professionals as major barriers to children, youth, families and the broader community accessing mental health services.
- The Missouri Workforce Development Survey documented workforce sustainability challenges within Missouri's substance use prevention workforce specifically, where respondents reported concerns related to compensation, retention, training needs and career advancement opportunities.

Another consistently identified barrier across Missouri was limited service availability referring to insufficient availability of services, programs, and supports needed to meet youth mental health needs. Reports described issues such as long waitlists, limited availability of desired prevention and treatment services, insufficient school-based supports, and shortages of specialized behavioral health resources for youth.

School staff, providers and caregivers and community stakeholders described situations in which youth waited weeks or months for evaluations, therapy, psychiatric care, or other mental health services. Several reports identified insufficient access to specialized services related to trauma, crisis response, intensive treatment and other critical needs.

While service availability issues were identified across communities, some reports described this as particularly challenging in rural areas and for youth with more complex mental health needs. Some reports also highlighted limited service availability challenges for specific populations of youth including those experiencing trauma, housing instability, foster or juvenile justice involvement, or other significant life stressors.

Collectively, the reports suggest the need for greater availability of mental health services and supports to ensure youth can access support when needed.

The following examples illustrate how service availability issues were highlighted in reports reviewed:

- The Jefferson County Community Mental Health Fund School Staff Survey Report noted that accessibility of both prevention and clinical services remains a persistent challenge, particularly in areas of school-based counseling, psychiatric support and trauma-informed services.
- The Boone County Children's Service Fund Assessment identified increasing demand for behavioral health services, while providers reported limited capacity, long waitlists, and insufficient availability of specialized services to meet community needs.
- The St. Louis County Children's Service Fund Community Engagement Report identified long delays and service discontinuity as a major theme, with participants describing long waitlists for diagnostic evaluations, therapy, and diagnostic services that require seeing new specialists (e.g., child psychiatrists).
- Community Health Needs Assessments from Independence, Kansas City, Mercy Southeast, Mercy Southwest, St. Charles, and other communities documented gaps in behavioral health services, insufficient availability of care, and limited access to critical supports for youth, families and the broader community.

Geographical, Transportation, and Affordability Barriers

Across many reports, geographical, transportation and affordability-related challenges were highlighted as barriers that can prevent youth and families from accessing needed mental health services in Missouri. This area of concern suggests that, even when services exist, youth and families may be unable to benefit because of where they live, how far services are from their residence, or the cost of receiving care.

This challenge was particularly pronounced in rural and underserved areas. Several reports described challenges to long travel distances, limited transportation options and concentration of specialized services in larger population centers. Families reported difficulty getting to appointments particularly when services required travel outside their immediate community. Affordability concerns emerged alongside geographical barriers. Multiple reports described the financial burden of obtaining care including costs associated with treatment, insurance limitations, transportation, childcare and time away from work.

Several reports noted that families who are already experiencing financial hardship may face additional obstacles when trying to obtain mental health services for their children. Overall findings across reports suggest that obtaining appropriate, timely mental health support for youth is shaped not only by service availability, but also by families' ability to reach and pay for care. To illustrate the geographical, transportation and affordability barriers cited in several reports:

- The Boone County Children's Service Fund Assessment identified geographic inequities as a persistent concern. Families in rural Boone county and surrounding areas in particular face challenges accessing mental health care, housing support, respite care, shelters and school-based services. The report noted that transportation issues further restrict access, especially for low-income families and youth with special needs.
- Multiple Community Health Needs Assessments, including those from Mercy Southeast, Mercy Southwest, Andrew County, and Jefferson County, identified transportation limitations as barriers to accessing healthcare and behavioral health services, particularly in rural communities.
- The St. Louis County Children's Service Fund Community Engagement Report found that many families perceived significant income-related disparities in access to care, reporting that more affluent families have access to more providers, better insurance coverage, and greater ability to pay out-of-pocket for services.
- In the Jefferson County Community Mental Health Fund School Staff Survey Report, 63% of staff cited limited access to mental health professionals and 43% indicated transportation was among the most common barriers faced by students when attempting to access mental health services.

Service Navigation, Awareness and Stigma Barriers

Barriers related to service navigation, awareness or stigma refer to whether youth and families can successfully identify, understand, trust and access mental health services in Missouri. Key findings that emerged from reports suggest that families often do not know what services exist or how to access them. Reports described confusion about available resources, eligibility requirements, referral pathways, and where to begin when a young person needs support.

Several community engagement and needs assessment reports described families' struggle to navigate complex behavioral health systems, including complicated intake processes, eligibility requirements, referral systems and transitions between providers, leading to feelings of overwhelm when trying to access services for their children.

Several reports identified stigma related to mental health service utilization as an important barrier. Stigma may cause reluctance to seek support because of concerns about judgment, cultural attitudes about mental health, privacy concerns or about being labeled. Finally, awareness alone is insufficient. Some reports suggested that providing information is not always enough. Families often need guidance, navigation support, care coordination and assistance with understanding how systems work.

Several reports highlighted the need for more coordinated referral systems, centralized resource directories, and "one-stop-shop" approaches that would make it easier for youth and families to identify and access appropriate services and supports. Examples of service navigation, awareness and stigma barriers from reports include the following:

- In the St. Louis County Children's Service Fund Community Engagement Report, parents reported low awareness of the service options available to them or believed that services were primarily available to more affluent families. The report also highlighted generational differences in attitudes toward mental health with some parents expressing reluctance to discuss mental health, while youth reported very low or no reservations about discussing mental health.
- The St. Louis Mental Health Board Community Engagement Report found that residents described the process of accessing services as confusing and discouraging. Participants reported they not knowing where to start, being "bounced around" between providers, and lacking clear pathways to care.

Theme 4

Schools and Community-based Settings Are Critical Access Points

Positive School Climate and Sense of Belonging

Schools emerged across several reports as one of the most important and consistent settings influencing youth mental health and well-being. Reports highlighted the importance of school connectedness, school safety, supportive relationships with adults, positive peer interactions, and a sense of belonging. Findings suggest that schools are critical environments where youth develop relationships, access support, and build resilience.

The significance of school climate in particular was also evident throughout the reports. Positive school environments were mentioned as associated with stronger social-emotional skills, greater connectedness, improving engagement, and healthier relationships. Conversely, concerns related to bullying, exclusion, lack of belonging, or feeling disconnected from school appeared repeatedly in discussions of youth mental health challenges. Several reports described school belonging as a protective factor that can promote well-being.

Collectively, findings suggest that fostering positive school climates and helping youth feel safe, connected, and valued within their school communities represents an important opportunity for promoting youth mental health across Missouri. The importance of positive school climate and belonging is reflected across multiple reports:

- The Jefferson County Community Mental Health Fund School Staff Survey Report identified social-emotional skills, peer relationships, self-esteem, emotional regulation, and conflict resolution as priority areas for students, reinforcing the importance of supportive school environments in promoting well-being. The report also recommended expanding access to school-based mental health services and supports.

- The Missouri Framework for School-Based Mental Health identifies schools as a primary setting for prevention, early intervention, and mental health promotion and emphasizes the importance of positive school climate, belonging, and supportive relationships.
- The St. Louis County Children's Service Fund Community Engagement Report highlighted the importance of safe spaces, supportive adults, and environments where youth feel connected, accepted, and valued.

Trusted Adults and Supportive Relationships

Across reports, supportive relationships with trusted adults emerged as one of the most consistently identified protective factors for youth mental health and well-being. Youth, caregivers, educators, service providers, and community stakeholders repeatedly emphasized the importance of having caring adults who provide guidance, encouragement, emotional support, and connection. These findings suggest that trusted relationships play a critical role in helping youth navigate challenges and promoting resilience.

The significance of supportive relationships was evident across several reports where trusted adults were described as the people most likely to recognize when a young person was struggling, provide emotional support, connect them with resources and help them navigate difficult situations. Several reports identified positive adult relationships as important protective factors associated with greater well-being, greater school engagement, improved coping skills and increased willingness to seek help. For youth experiencing multiple forms of adversity, supportive adults were described as a critical source of stability, encouragement and connection.

Examples that illustrate the importance of trusted adults and supportive relationships across reports include:

- The Missouri Student Survey includes measures of resiliency, including an indicator of supportive adult relationships by asking youth whether they had adults they could turn to when things feel overwhelming. In 2026, the statewide report indicated that 78% of 6th-12th graders agreed or strongly agreed with that item.

- The Missouri Framework for School-Based Mental Health emphasizes that a healthy and well-supported school staff is foundational to advancing wellness in school communities, as well as having caring adults in school communities collaborating in support of school based mental health systems.
- The St. Louis County Children’s Services Fund Community Engagement Report notes that parents view teachers as advocates for children and partners in supporting well-being, while school-based counseling and social work positions strengthen support systems for youth. The report also identifies mentoring programs as providing networking, life skills training, role modeling and relationship building opportunities.
- The Jefferson County Community Mental Health School Staff Survey Report highlights counselors, school-based therapists, social workers and school personnel as important supports and identifies need for stronger parent-school partnerships.

Prevention and Early Intervention

Prevention and early intervention emerged as an opportunity to strengthen youth mental health across Missouri.

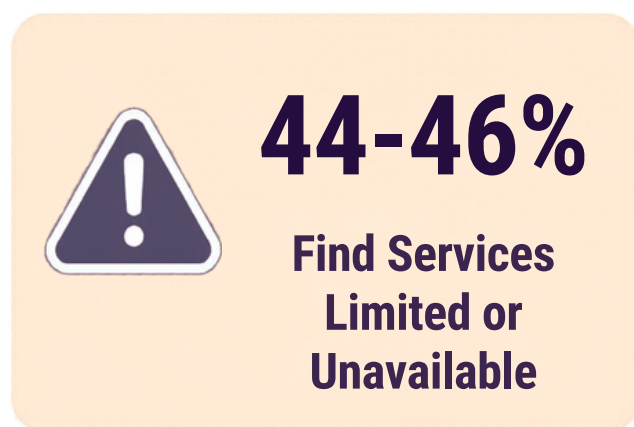
Reports emphasized the importance of supporting young people before concerns escalate into more significant challenges. Stakeholders described prevention-focused approaches as essential components of an effective youth mental health system and identified the need for earlier identification, increased prevention programming, and broader access to supports that promote healthy development and well-being.

The significance of prevention and early intervention was particularly evident in school and community settings. Reports suggested that young people often struggle to access services until concerns become severe enough to warrant intervention.

Stakeholders emphasized the need for resources that support youth with emerging concerns, including anxiety, social-emotional challenges, grief, relationship difficulties, and coping with stress. Several reports also noted that prevention services are less available than higher-level interventions despite agreement about their importance.

- The St. Louis County Children's Service Fund Community Engagement Report identified “Prevention is the Best Care” as one of its ten major themes. Participants expressed confidence in prevention strategies and emphasized the value of early intervention and prevention-focused education both for youth experiencing mental illness and for youth experiencing challenges related to relationships and emotion regulation. Participants called for early screening/identification, more resources for youth experiencing mild to moderate mental health challenges (i.e., Tier 2 services), and greater focus on coping skills training to teach healthy responses to social and academic stressors particularly for middle and high school students.
- The Jefferson County Community Mental Health Fund School Staff Survey Report indicated that educators identified substantial unmet need for social-emotional skills training, bullying prevention, grief and loss support, chronic absenteeism prevention, and other preventive services intended to address concerns before they become more severe.
- The St. Louis Mental Health Engagement Report cites supporting youth-focused prevention, school-based counseling, and safe after-school outlets as one of eight priority investment recommendations.
- The Missouri Framework for School-Based Mental Health emphasizes a continuum of supports that includes universal prevention, early intervention, and mental health promotion strategies designed to reach students before intensive services are required.

Key Findings: Jefferson County CMHF School Staff Survey



Safe Spaces for Connection and Growth

The subtopic “Safe Spaces for Connection and Growth” brings together several recurring ideas from earlier themes: belonging, social connection, prevention, community and school based supports, positive youth development, and opportunities for youth to engage with peers and adults outside of “crisis-oriented” services.

Across reports reviewed, youth consistently described the need for safe, welcoming environments where they could connect with peers, develop supportive relationships and engage in positive activities. These spaces included schools, community centers, after-school programs, recreation programs, mentoring services, faith-based organizations, libraries, and workplaces.

Reports suggest that access to safe spaces and meaningful opportunities for connection contributes positively to youth well-being and may help protect against isolation, disengagement, and other mental health challenges.

The significance of this subtopic was particularly evident in community-engagement reports. Youth desire places where they could spend time with peers, develop interests, and be part of a community.

Parents, educators, and service providers similarly emphasized the role of community spaces in fostering belonging, encouraging positive youth development, and providing access to supportive relationships and resources.

Several reports noted that opportunities for connection have become increasingly important as youth navigate stress, social pressures, isolation and ongoing effects of community and societal change.

Overall, findings suggest that safe spaces for connection and growth are important settings where youth can develop relationships, access support, experience a sense of belonging and strengthen resilience.

- The St. Louis County Children’s Service Fund Community Engagement Report identified “Safe Places Enable Socialization and Community-Building” as one of its ten major themes. Youth expressed a desire for safe places “in the real world” where they could spend time with peers, explore interests, and build relationships outside of school and social media environments. Parents perceived a lack of low-cost, convenient, safe ways for families to spend time together outside of school-affiliated functions. Participants emphasized that community spaces can offer multiple benefits including a referral access points for health, education, and social services, and access to structured enrichment programs like mentoring.
- The St. Louis Mental Health Engagement Report highlighted the need for prevention, school-based supports, and safe after-school environments.
- In the St. Charles Community Health Needs Assessment community members highlighted that a healthy community is one where there are parks, walking tracks, community centers, and other shared spaces to promote healthy, relationships, and well-being.
- In the St. Louis County MO Baptist Community Health Needs Assessment community members indicated that a healthy community is one that offers accessible, safe spaces for physical activity, social connection and mental well-being.
- The Missouri Framework for School-Based Mental Health emphasizes creating safe and healthy learning environments that promote positive school climate, nurturing relationships, student well-being, resilience and positive youth development.

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Limitations

The findings presented in this report reflect patterns that emerged across multiple sources through a review and thematic synthesis of existing reports, assessments, surveys and secondary data sources. As a result, several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings.

The reports included in this review varied in purpose, methodology, age, geographic scope, depth of information, and level of focus on youth mental health. While some sources were designed to understand the needs of youth and families specifically, others were broader community health assessments that included both youth and adult populations. These variations in methods, populations, and measures limit the ability to make direct comparisons between regions or to quantify the prevalence of concerns statewide.

In addition, no new data collection was conducted as part of this review. The goal was to develop a broad understanding of the youth mental health landscape in Missouri by leveraging existing information and avoiding duplication of previous assessment efforts. Therefore, findings should be viewed as a high-level synthesis of available information rather than a comprehensive statewide study of youth mental health.

Despite these limitations, the consistency of findings across multiple reports, geographic regions, stakeholder groups and youth-focused data sources provides confidence that the themes identified represent meaningful considerations for understanding and addressing youth mental health in Missouri.

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Note: Microsoft Copilot was used as an analytic support tool during the review and synthesis process. All coding decisions, interpretation of findings and final report content were reviewed and validated by the author.

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