



Addressing Our Nation's Crisis of Youth Mental Illness and Substance Misuse

Community Catalyst and our Youth Advisory Board work together to raise awareness and build solutions that address the crisis of youth mental illness, substance misuse, and addiction in the United States. Combining expert policy analysis with the knowledge of youth lived experiences, we work to build a behavioral health system that is accessible to all of us, easy to navigate, and affirming of our lived experiences and identities.

What needs to be fixed?

- **There are too few prevention and early intervention services** – including in schools and pediatric primary care. Many young people are experiencing crises that could be prevented.
- **There is a shortage of school-based and community-based behavioral health providers** across the continuum of care, and even fewer that offer quality, trauma-informed, youth-centered, and culturally affirming care. Many young people do not receive support when a problem has been identified, are being boarded in emergency rooms awaiting treatment, and get little follow-up after inpatient programs.
- **Many existing providers don't accept insurance (public or private)** because of low reimbursement rates and administrative burdens, making services unaffordable and providers inaccessible.
- **Schools rely on punitive models** that suspend and expel students – especially students of color, with low incomes or disabilities – for substance misuse and other behaviors rooted in mental illness and trauma. This exacerbates behavioral health issues and increases barriers to care.

Our Recommendations:

Invest in the youth mental health and substance use workforce

- Train pediatric primary care providers to offer mental health and substance use services including prevention and early intervention (e.g., [youth SBIRT](#)), and long-term follow-up.
- Explore opportunities to increase behavioral health provider participation in private and public insurance. Encourage insurance plans to cover comprehensive, affordable mental health and substance use services, including harm reduction services and long-term peer supports.
- Enforce existing parity laws, including provisions on coverage and reimbursement.
- Train more youth peer specialists and encourage insurers to include them as billable providers.

- Train pediatric and behavioral health providers in trauma-informed care and how to provide affirming care to Black, Indigenous, and other youth of color, LGBTQ+ youth, and youth with disabilities.

Improve school-based services

- End zero tolerance and other punitive models, and replace them with supportive prevention and early intervention services such as [SBIRT](#), multi-tiered systems of support, and restorative justice programs.
- Expand the number of school-based behavioral health providers to meet the student-to-provider ratios recommended by professional associations.

Community Catalyst is a national non-profit organization working to build the power of people and communities to create a health system rooted in racial equity and health justice. Our Substance Use Disorders and Justice Involved Populations Program has helped expand youth substance use prevention services across the county. The Youth Advisory Board is youth ages 18-23 with lived experiences of mental illness and substance misuse.