The Impact of Child Welfare on Youth Mental Health

Access to Mental Health Services · https://bridges4mentalhealth.org/hub/access-to-mental-health-services/impactofchildwelfare/

In response to the 2025 State of Mental Health Report, the National Center has compared data regarding youth mental health needs in the general population and the mental health needs of children who have experienced child welfare. We know that the youth in child welfare have higher mental health needs and need services that are responsive to their unique experiences. This is why the National Center is working to increase access to permanency competent mental health services across the country.

THE IMPACT OF CHILD WELFARE ON MENTAL YOUTH HEALTH

According to the 2025 State of Mental Health Report, fewer teens are reporting major depressive episodes, substance use is down, and suicidal ideation has declined for the first time in years. However, behind these hopeful trends, children and youth in the child welfare system continue to experience significant mental health challenges.

Children in foster care are diagnosed with mental health illnesses at higher rates, **30 to 80 percent**, compared to approximately **22 percent**, and are **three to four times more likely** to be diagnosed with a mental health disorder.



Depression is far more **common**, more **severe**, and more **persistent** among children in the child welfare system.

13-52%

of children and youth in foster care use **psychotropic medications** compared to just **4%** of the general population.

Children in child welfare are far more likely to experience **complex, co-occurring, layered** mental health needs, not isolated concerns.



Mental and Behavioral Health

is the **largest unmet need** for children and youth in the child welfare system.

Prior research revealed that foster youth experience **PTSD** nearly

FIVE TIMES

the rate of the general population and twice the rate of U.S. combat veterans.

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