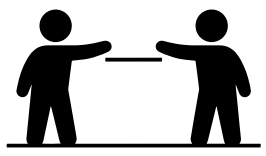
YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH AND CHILD WELFARE

PROGRESS, PROMISE, AND THE PATH FORWARD FOR OUR MOST VULNERABLE YOUTH

Rates of youth **mental health challenges declined from 2023 to 2024,** including a significant decrease in major depressive episodes (MDE), MDE with severe impairment, substance use disorder (SUD), and suicidal ideation. However, these gains do not reach all children equally.

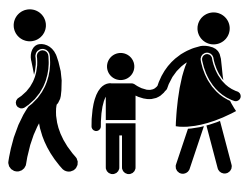
CHILDREN INVOLVED IN CHILD WELFARE EXPERIENCE SIGNIFICANTLY HIGHER RATES OF MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES DUE TO:

Complex Trauma



Separation and Loss

Placement Instability



Disrupted Attachments

BARRIERS TO CARE

In child welfare systems, typical barriers to care (such as fear of stigma or being forced into treatment) are compounded by:

- **Provider shortages**
- **Lack of adoption competent training**
- **Fragmented systems across mental health, child welfare, and education**

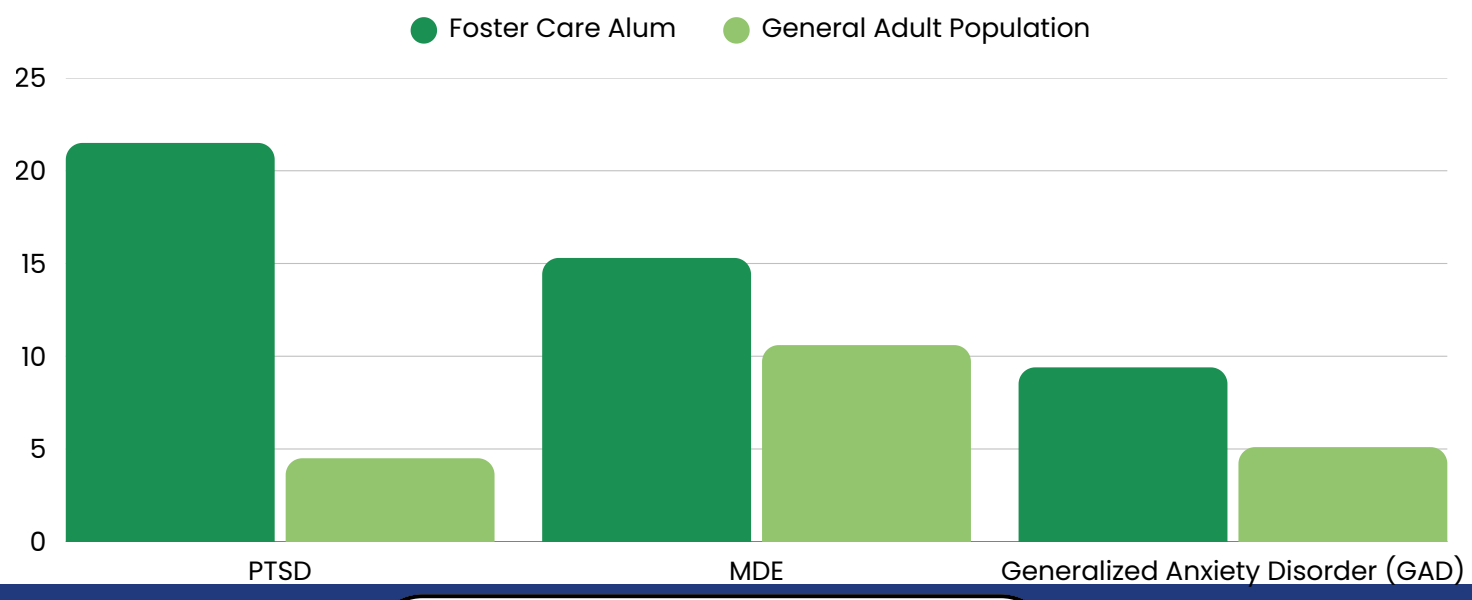
UNMET NEEDS

The **American Academy of Pediatrics** identifies mental and behavioral health as the number one unmet health issue for children in foster care. Lack of treatment can lead to **long-term consequences**, including:

- Academic struggles
- Homelessness
- Substance use
- Justice system involvement
- Unemployment in adulthood

BY THE NUMBERS

The chart below demonstrates the mental health disparities between foster care alumni and the general adult population



FILLING IN THE GAPS

The **National Center** recognizes that, despite improvements in the overall mental health of youth, children involved in child welfare face far greater mental health challenges. **Trauma, loss, and instability** heighten their risk. **Adoption competent mental health** ensures that youth and families are receiving specialized care that meets their unique needs.

Addressing the needs of our most vulnerable youth strengthens the entire mental health system and improves outcomes for *all* young people.

National Center for Adoption Competent Mental Health Services