



Youth Mental Health Roadmap for Western Massachusetts

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Acknowledgments

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“...everyone has a role to play in combating this mental health pandemic.... If we each start reorienting our priorities to create accessible space in our homes, schools, workplaces, and communities for seeking and giving assistance, we can all start building a culture that normalizes and promotes mental health care....”

**- U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory,
Protecting Youth Mental Health**



Thank you to the [Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts Foundation](#)
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Strengthening Infrastructure to Support Our Young People's Mental Health

Our Youth Need Our Support

Good mental health is essential for youth to thrive in their lives—from their homes to schools to relationships and beyond.¹ Youth mental was identified as a priority need in our communities even before the COVID-19 pandemic through Community Health Needs Assessments. This need was made worse by the unprecedented challenges our youth faced during the pandemic. They had to physically distance themselves and to attend school remotely. In-person activities that connected youth to others were canceled to prevent the spread of COVID-19. In addition, they faced sustained fear and anxiety as people became sick and died from the disease. Other distressing societal issues also impact the mental well-being of our youth, including the highly visible horrific acts of racism in our country that have occurred with the murder of George Floyd and many others, as well as concerns about climate change and gun violence. Youth health surveys conducted across Western Massachusetts have generally seen an increase in students reporting depressive symptoms with more than 40 percent doing so in 2023.^{2 3 4}

A Roadmap for Support

To support our youth's mental health, we need to target the full spectrum of support: promotion, prevention, treatment, and recovery. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts has allocated millions of dollars to create needed structures and systems to improve the ability for people to obtain **treatment and crisis services**. As these important initiatives have been rolling out, a similar effort is needed that focuses on mental health promotion and prevention. Mental health promotion and prevention focus on **creating the environments and conditions that support well-being and prevent mental health conditions**. Mental health is part of behavioral health, which also includes behavioral conditions such as substance misuse. Aspects of behavioral health are interrelated; thus, promotion and prevention strategies are similar for various behavioral health conditions. Targeting these strategies at young ages can have lasting impacts. As stated by the Commonwealth's Promote and Prevention Commission in their 2018 report *Behavioral Health Promotion and Upstream Prevention*, "behavioral health promotion and prevention initiatives implemented in childhood can and do affect individuals' behavioral health trajectory for decades."⁵



Based on this need and discussions with leaders of Western Massachusetts behavioral health organizations, the Public Health Institute of Western Massachusetts (PHIWM) sought and received funding to create a Youth Mental Health Roadmap for Western Massachusetts that prioritizes **promotion and prevention efforts**. Over the past year, PHIWM has been convening a range of stakeholders to create a roadmap that builds off the important findings from the Commonwealth's Promote and Prevent Commission's 2018 report, as well as the 2023 Massachusetts Behavioral Health Roadmap.⁶

The Youth Mental Health Roadmap for Western Massachusetts focuses on the four counties that make up Western Massachusetts (Berkshire, Franklin, Hampden, and Hampshire), with a particular emphasis on Hampden County and Springfield. The Roadmap research team and the advisory group decided to focus on youth and young adults to build off existing efforts and to address mental health promotion and prevention at young ages. A special emphasis is placed on youth who are Black and Latine because of the Roadmap's focus on Hampden County and the many inequities experienced by these young people in the county. While this report focuses on these youth of color, [other data and reports](#) are available that highlight mental health inequities among various groups in our region.

Promotion - Creating the environments and conditions that support mental, emotional, and behavioral health and the ability of people to withstand challenges.

Prevention - Interventions delivered before the onset of a mental, emotional, or behavioral health disorder that are intended to reduce the risks of developing a mental or behavioral health condition.

- Adapted from Behavioral Health Promotion and Upstream Prevention, 2018

Focus



Four counties of Western Massachusetts, with particular focus on Hampden County and Springfield



Youth and young adults: middle school, high school, young adult/transition age youth



Focuses on **Black and Latine youth** while acknowledging inequities among those who are LGBTQIA+, youth of color, living with disabilities, living in poverty, and more

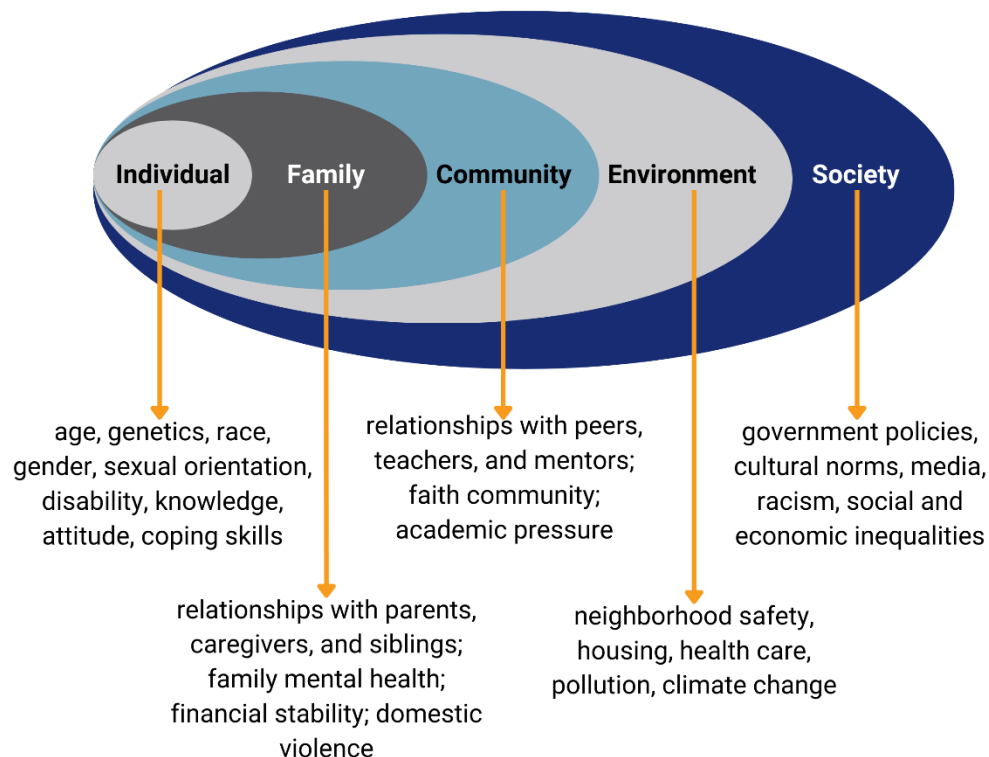
Focusing on **mental health promotion and prevention** will support **behavioral health** overall

What do we mean by mental health?

Mental health is more than just the absence of mental disorders. It is “a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community.”⁷

What affects our mental health?

The mental health of youth is shaped by many things at the individual, family, community, environment, and societal levels. We must understand these factors to effectively promote mental wellness and to prevent mental health challenges. They include our genetics and the relationships we have with our family and friends. Community factors such as school climate and the environment around us—such as access to safe housing—also play a role. Finally, there are societal factors such as government policy, cultural norms, racism, and other systems of oppression in our society that affect one’s mental health.



Source: Image adapted from “Factors that can shape the mental health of young people” in *Protecting Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory*. 2021

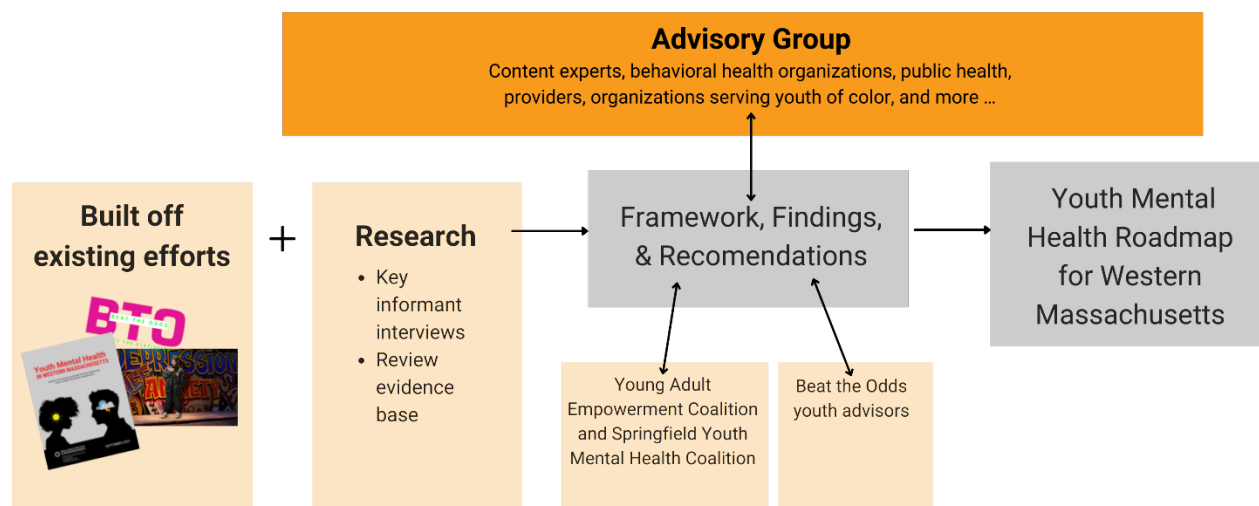
Experiences of trauma and chronic stress increase our risk for mental health conditions, which is why exposure to structural and interpersonal discrimination in our society impacts mental health. For example, we see much higher rates of poor mental health conditions among transgender and nonbinary youth. We also know that experiences of chronic stress can be

cumulative for youth who experience multiple forms of discrimination, such as youth of color who are also transgender. On the other hand, social support, coping skills, and other protective factors can help lessen these risk factors. For example, research has shown that having a stable, committed relationship with a supportive adult is the most crucial factor for our youth to be resilient in the face of adversity, trauma, and major stress.⁸

Our Process

We developed the Youth Mental Health Roadmap for Western Massachusetts through an iterative, collaborative process. We **built off what we learned from existing efforts**, including the Community Health Needs Assessments for the Coalition of Western Massachusetts Hospitals and Insurer, the work of Beat the Odds youth group/Springfield Youth Mental Health Coalition, and the Commonwealth's Promote and Prevention Commission in their 2018 report *Behavioral Health Promotion and Upstream Prevention*. An **Advisory Group of 24 individuals** with a wide variety of expertise partnered with us to guide and provide input on the process, focus areas, findings, and recommendations. The research process included **reviewing the evidence base** and **hearing from people in our region** about work that is successfully supporting youth mental health promotion and prevention and the additional supports and programs needed. We **conducted 29 interviews and a focus group** with content experts, youth-serving organizations, community entities, behavioral health providers, school representatives, organizations serving youth of color, parents, caregivers, and others.

The insights and expertise of our Advisory Group and all the people we have spoken with have



been invaluable in crafting a Roadmap that is inclusive, responsive, and reflective of the diverse needs within our community. In addition to vetting findings with our Advisory Group, we also vetted them with the Springfield Youth Mental Health Coalition (YMHC), the regional Young

Adult Empowerment Coalition (YAEC), and youth from Beat the Odds (BTO, an advisory group to YMHC) to further validate and refine what we learned and are recommending.

Youth Mental Health Roadmap for Western Massachusetts

The Roadmap provides recommendations for these promotion and prevention areas, as well as the important need to align community and clinical prevention, support, and treatment work:



Our research found a lot of great work going on in these areas in our region. We can build off this to better support all young people in our region.

Core Values

- Involve **youth and parent/caregiver voices** in designing and implementing youth mental health promotion and prevention strategies. Consider how youth and parents/caregivers can lead or co-lead efforts.
- Use a **data-driven** approach:
 - Use data to understand local needs and to drive action.
 - Evaluate to understand what is working and to modify based on findings.
- Incorporate principles of **health equity**:
 - Consider who is experiencing mental health inequities because of oppression and discrimination in our society and what extra support or tailored supports are needed to support mental health promotion and prevention.
 - Share power with youth and parents/caregivers when designing and implementing promotion and prevention strategies.
 - Be cautious when designing programming, interventions, and messages to avoid perpetuating stereotypes about mental health or causes of inequities.
 - Use asset-based framing.
 - Acknowledge how oppression contributes to stigma.
 - Acknowledge cultural differences related to dealing with mental health.