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Urgency needed to thwart youth mental health crisis, Stockton panelists say

Eric Conklin

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Six panelists discuss mental health conditions among children, teens and young adults Tuesday at Stockton University's Campus Center Theater.

Stockton University, provided

Eric Conklin

ALLOWAY TOWNSHIP — Amid growing youth mental health concerns, more must be done to avoid a nationwide crisis, especially as children become older, a panel at Stockton University said Tuesday.

“We’re seeing more issues with more children,” said local school nurse Victoria Druding, adding more students have come to her for mental health treatment.

The six panelists, each with a different expertise in mental health and emotional wellbeing support, shared thoughts Tuesday during a discussion at Stockton’s Campus Center Theater.

Twenty to 40 guests heard opinions about mental health in young people and what can be done to help reduce youth depression, anxiety and self-harming behaviors.

Overall, the panelists discussed the rise in mental health conditions among children, teens and young adults since the COVID-19 pandemic began in March 2020. The emotional toll of social distancing protocols, virtual learning, family financial strains and rising pandemic-related substance abuse have fueled a mental health crisis urgently needing to be tamed, said Druding.

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Other than COVID, many students may be feeling overwhelmed following May 24’s mass shooting at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, which killed 21 people, 19 of whom were students, said moderator Melissa Tomlinson of the New Jersey Education Association’s Executive Committee.



The state of mental health, post-COVID-19

Even before the pandemic forced millions into isolation and changed daily life, the trend in mental health treatment for youth had been climbing toward alarming numbers, the panelists said.

Data, although lagging, suggests anxiety in children, teens and young adults increased by about 29% between 2016 and 2020. Depressive disorders increased by 27% during those years as well, said Dr. Brian Isaacson, chair of AtlantiCare's Department of Psychiatry and founding psychiatry residency training director.

What's worse, Isaacson said, is that the rise in mental health conditions has transpired into alarming suicide rates, making it the second leading cause of death for those ages 10 to 24.

“This is disheartening,” Isaacson said, adding youth suicide rates between 2010 and 2020 rose by more than 37%. “Our current system is currently inadequate to care for these children, and there’s multiple factors in that.”

Part of it is that New Jersey may not be allocating therapists in the most useful way, the panelists said.

New Jersey, being one of the nation’s most diverse states, has high numbers of heavily Latino and Black communities. Not placing counselors of those ethnicities in those communities’ schools may not help Black and Latino students cope well enough, Druding said.



Governor: Texas gunman said he was going to shoot up school

“We cannot expect that some therapists are going to be able to work smoothly with all students,” Druding said.

One factor, the panelists agreed, is not enough funding for in-school and out-of-school mental health treatment. While New Jersey is one of the nation's best in offering mental health services to its school-aged children, each panelist agreed that the amount of funding and available resources is still not enough.

More funding allocated to mental health resources can help make the field offer competitive salaries and attract prospective therapists and doctors. Doing so also could help close the diversity gap, said Amy Kennedy, a former Democratic congressional candidate.

Kennedy's husband, former Rhode Island U.S. Rep. Patrick Kennedy, in 2013 founded the Kennedy Forum, an organization that advocates for evolving the nation's health care system and expanding mental health services.

Other than additional funding for mental health treatment, Kennedy said insurance coverage must be altered to reimburse those with Medicaid and improve school health care billing.

Overall, Kennedy said, more regular funding is needed to create sustainable mental health resources.

“So many school districts have been fortunate to start using ESSER (Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief) funds and pandemic-related funds,” Kennedy said, “but knowing that that's going to end, they've had to spend those funds, and it's challenging to think that they're going to bring staff on only to let them go in a year.”

Contact Eric Conklin:

609-272-7261

econklin@pressofac.com

Twitter @ACPressConklin

By Eric Conklin
