

Guest Column: Addressing the youth mental health crisis

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More than 130 children's organizations recently called on President Biden to declare a national emergency in response to America's youth mental health crisis.

That news came just days after an expert panel recommended that all children ages eight to 18 receive routine screenings for anxiety.

These developments drew new attention to a worsening situation. Yet too often, concrete strategies for improving youth mental health are missing from the discussion.

One strategy

One of those strategies should be expanded access to school counseling.

School counselors are trained to help K-12 students reach their goals by addressing academic, career development, emotional, and social challenges. These professionals have a skillset that goes beyond assisting

students with navigating classroom conflicts and college readiness. They also have the training to recognize mental health warning signs.

School counselors can be a critical line of defense against worsening mental health conditions. And yet they remain all too uncommon, particularly in schools that serve poor and marginalized communities. We need more school counselors.

What triggered the decline

There's no denying that COVID-19 has taken a tragic toll on young people's well-being. Between 2016 and 2021, mental-health-related hospital admissions for people under 20 jumped by 61%, according to a recent analysis by the Clarify Health Institute.

But this decline in mental health began before the pandemic. A JAMA Pediatrics study published in 2019 found that nearly 8 million children between 6 and 18 reported at least one mental health condition.

The many causes of youth depression and anxiety include cyberbullying, traumatic experiences, marginalization, and school shootings. A majority of all American teens now worry that a shooting could occur at their own school, according to the Pew Research Center.

School counselors could help arrest these heartbreaking trends. But roughly a fifth of all students in grades K-12 have no access to counseling in their school.

By the numbers

Whereas the American School Counselor Association recommends one counselor for every 250 students, the average ratio nationwide is about one to 400 -- and in some states, it's one to more than 600. At least 20 states don't even have school counselor mandates on the books. Black and low-income students are more likely than their peers to lack sufficient access.

But even these figures understate the severity of the counselor shortage. That's because the kinds of guidance that school counselors provide can vary dramatically. Within high schools, specifically, the counselor's role is often confined to academics and college planning -- with little focus on students' emotional and social well-being.

Hope

If we're to have any hope of reversing the alarming youth mental-health deterioration, we must improve access to school counselors. The federal government has provided several rounds of emergency relief funds to schools since the start of the pandemic, some of which have gone to mental health. In October, the Biden Administration released an additional \$280 million for this purpose.

These funds are a welcome start, but we need additional action. Nationwide, all schools should be required to provide counseling services to their students and maintain appropriate counselor-to-student ratios. And at the

state level, curriculum designers should incorporate social and emotional learning as standard practice for K-12 students.

The youth mental-health crisis is all around us. Expanding access to school counselors could make these tragedies far less common, while giving students the support, guidance, and care they need to flourish.

Cameka Hazel, Ed.D., is an assistant professor for New York Institute of Technology's Master of Science in School Counseling program. This piece originally appeared in Salon.