



NATIONAL RECREATION  
AND PARK ASSOCIATION



# **Parks and Recreation: A Public Health Solution**

Mental Health



## Parks and Recreation: A Social Driver of Health and Well-Being

Parks and recreation is essential to community health and well-being. Research confirms that people who live near parks and people who regularly use and engage in park and recreation spaces and programs are physically and mentally healthier than those who do not. Parks and recreation has been found to be effective at increasing physical activity, improving mental and physical health, reducing the risk of chronic disease and lowering healthcare costs.<sup>i</sup> As a vital community condition, parks and recreation has the power to advance health equity and improve other health, social and environmental outcomes where people live, learn, work, play and age.

More and more, park and recreation professionals are leveraging this power to serve as stewards of Community Wellness Hubs — trusted gathering places that connect every member of the community to essential programs, services and spaces that advance health equity, improve health outcomes and enhance quality of life across seven unique but interconnected dimensions of well-being. In this role, parks and recreation is actively addressing many of our most pressing public health and social challenges, including mental health.

## Mental Health in the United States

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), mental health is defined as our emotional, psychological and social well-being that impacts how we think, feel and act. It impacts how we handle stress and challenges, relate to others and make decisions.<sup>ii</sup> Between 2019 and 2020, 21 percent of adults were experiencing a mental illness. This translates to more than 50 million people in the United States. More than half of these adults (28 million) do not receive treatment of any kind, with 28 percent of this population reporting access to affordable treatment as a major barrier.<sup>iii</sup>

Mental health challenges aren't solely experienced by adults. On December 7, 2021, the U.S. Surgeon General issued an advisory on the mental health challenges experienced by young people. The advisory reported that in 2019, 1 in 3 high school students and half of female students reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, an overall increase of 40 percent from 2009. Several reports and publicly available data reinforce the urgency of addressing the youth mental health crisis:

The National Alliance on Mental Illness defines *mental illness* as a condition that affects a person's thinking, feeling, behavior or mood. These conditions deeply impact day-to-day living and may also affect the ability to relate to others.

- Depressive and anxiety symptoms for youth globally doubled during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic<sup>iv</sup> and emergency department visits in the United States for suspected suicide attempts were 51 percent higher for adolescent girls and four percent higher for adolescent boys in 2021 than in 2019.<sup>v</sup>

- As of June 2021, it is estimated that more than 140,000 children in the United States had lost a parent or grandparent caregiver to COVID-19.
- In 2021, more than 4 in 10 (42 percent) of students felt persistently sad or hopeless and nearly one-third reported poor mental health.<sup>vi</sup>
- Significant mental health disparities exist across race, ethnicity, gender identity and sexual orientation:
  - Female youth experience nearly double the rates of sadness and hopelessness when compared to their male counterparts (57 percent to 29 percent).<sup>vii</sup>
  - Multiracial and Hispanic populations experience higher rates of sadness and hopelessness than white, Black and Asian youth.<sup>viii</sup>
  - Forty-five percent of LGBTQ+ youth seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year, and 1 in 5 transgender and nonbinary youth attempted suicide, with LGBTQ+ youth of color reporting considerably higher rates than white peers (21 percent of Native/Indigenous youth, 20 percent of Middle Eastern/North African youth, 20 percent of Black youth, 17 percent of multiracial youth, 16 percent of Latinx youth, compared to 12 percent of white youth).<sup>ix</sup>
  - Seventy-three percent of LGBTQ+ youth report experiencing symptoms of anxiety and 58 percent report experiencing symptoms of depression, with rates substantially higher for cisgender girls/women and transgender and nonbinary populations.<sup>x</sup>

The Surgeon General stated that “coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have an unprecedented opportunity as a country to rebuild in a way that refocuses our identity and common values, puts people first, and strengthens our connections to each other.”

Another rising cause for concern in communities across the country is the impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)<sup>xi</sup> and trauma on youth mental and behavioral health outcomes. According to the CDC, the term ACEs is used to describe all types of abuse, neglect and other traumatic experiences that occur to youth under the age of 18. ACEs include situations —such as exposure to substance use in the home, domestic violence, racism or divorce — that cause toxic stress and can lead to risky health behaviors, chronic health conditions, low life potential and early death. Mental health conditions also are inextricably linked with substance use disorder (SUD). Statistics from the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) show that patients experiencing mood-related mental health disorders or anxiety are twice as likely to also experience a substance use disorder. Mental health and substance use disorders are highly prevalent and, as reported by the Surgeon General, are only anticipated to increase in significance. While these statistics are upsetting, the growing calls

The National Institute of Mental Health defines **substance use disorder (SUD)** as a mental disorder that affects a person’s brain and behavior, leading to a person’s inability to control their use of substances, such as legal or illegal drugs, alcohol or medications. Symptoms can range from moderate to severe, with addiction being the most severe form of SUDs.

for action are promising. Park and recreation professionals play a role in helping to build and advance solutions to support community members and their mental health and well-being.

## **Role of Parks and Recreation in Addressing Mental Health**

In addition to serving as providers of — and connection points to — parks, trails and green space, park and recreation agencies also provide access to a multitude of public health services and resources. Park and recreation professionals also play a vital role in preventing and supporting people with mental health and substance use disorders and people impacted by ACEs by creating supportive and positive experiences and healthy community environments that improve mental health. Park and recreation agencies provide opportunities to engage in programming and activities that build resilience, counter ACEs and serve as protective factors against these diseases. Parks and recreation fosters an environment where people of all ages can create strong social and familial connections, focus on mindfulness, foster cultural enrichment, and engage in physical activity and other recreational programming that promote mental health. At the same time, access to quality parks and green spaces supports a healthy and vibrant community and provides an opportunity to spend time in the outdoors, which acts as a protective factor against these diseases and is found to be effective at decreasing stress, improving cognitive performance, and alleviating symptoms of anxiety, depression, attention deficit disorders and dementia.<sup>xii</sup>

Park and recreation agencies are advancing a variety of mental health strategies to support community members, such as:

- **Training staff** on trauma-informed principles, adverse childhood experiences and through programs like Mental Health First Aid
- **Strengthening partnerships** between schools, mental health service providers, social services and other community-based organizations to connect youth and families to needed mental health resources
- **Assessing facilities, environments, communications and operations** to foster a safe and welcoming environment supportive of people experiencing mental health conditions
- **Offering expanded programming**, including inclusive nature-based and outdoor recreation opportunities that promote mindfulness, support healing and build relationships
- **Challenging the stigma** of mental health and substance use disorders by participating in public awareness opportunities, sharing vital information with community members and changing practices and policies so they are grounded in empathy
- **Providing out-of-school time services and programming** that integrates social-emotional learning competencies and youth mentoring principles with sports, mindfulness, arts and cultural activities to promote positive youth development outcomes



## **Case Study: West Allis-West Milwaukee Recreation and Community Services Department**

The West Allis-West Milwaukee Recreation and Community Services (WAWM RCS) Department operates before- and after-school care in 11 elementary schools and three intermediate schools. In total, they serve more than 1,100 children daily. In a world that is often hectic and overwhelming, West Allis-West Milwaukee students are learning how to use mindfulness strategies to better regulate their emotions. Staff members also are implementing these strategies, as they recognize the importance of self-care and mental health for both youth and adults. Mindfulness can help students and staff center their attention and control impulsive behaviors. The department collaborates with the local school district's lead psychologist to provide the training.

WAWM RCS also partnered with school psychologists and social workers to provide Trauma-Informed Care (TIC) training to staff. TIC is an approach that assumes an individual is more likely than not to have a history of trauma — and recognizes the presence of trauma symptoms and acknowledges the role trauma may play in an individual's life. This approach ensures their out-of-school time (OST) staff have the tools necessary to best serve the students in their care and that program policies and practices are grounded in a TIC lens to ensure a safe and supportive environment for youth.

## Additional Resources

- [Mental Health First Aid](#): Encourage staff or offer staff the opportunity to obtain a certification in Mental Health First Aid, a skills-based training course that teaches participants about mental health and substance-use issues.
- [Mental Health and Substance Use Disorder Language Guide](#): Use NRPA's Mental Health and Substance Use Disorder Language Guide to assess written and verbal communications across your agency, helping staff and community members to use non-stigmatizing language.
- [Parks and Recreation: Addressing Stigma Associated With Substance Use and Mental Health Disorders](#): This report provides an overview of various stigmas associated with substance use and mental health disorders, as well as how park and recreation professionals can play an instrumental role in addressing and reducing the impacts of stigma in their own communities.
- [Parks and Recreation: Prevention Guide Addressing Substance Use and Mental Health Disorders](#): This guide is designed to help park and recreation professionals to better understand their role in youth development, substance use prevention and promoting mental health. The guide provides an overview of the substance use and mental health crisis in relation to parks and recreation, as well as how professionals can address these challenges and support positive youth development using outlined strategies.
- [Trauma-Informed Care](#): This approach in the human service field assumes that an individual is more likely than not to have a history of trauma. Explore these resources to ensure program policies and operations are trauma-informed, and staff understand the importance of applying a TIC lens in their work.
- [Commit to Supporting Staff Well-Being](#): Organizational leaders have an opportunity to normalize and promote a positive culture shift that embraces mental health in the workplace. Learn more about actions employers can take to promote employee mental health and affirm a commitment to staff well-being.

## References

---

- <sup>i</sup> National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA). (n.d.). Parks and Recreation is Essential. Retrieved from <https://www.nrpa.org/our-work/building-a-movement/parks-and-recreation-is-essential/>
- <sup>ii</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2023). Mental Health. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/mentalhealth/learn/index.htm>
- <sup>iii</sup> Mental Health America. (2023). The State of Mental Health in America. Retrieved from [https://mhanational.org/issues/state-mental-health-america#:~:text=11.5%25%20of%20youth%20\(over%202.7,illness%20did%20not%20receive%20care](https://mhanational.org/issues/state-mental-health-america#:~:text=11.5%25%20of%20youth%20(over%202.7,illness%20did%20not%20receive%20care)
- <sup>iv</sup> Office of the Surgeon General (OSG). (2021). *Protecting Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory*. US Department of Health and Human Services.
- <sup>v</sup> Office of the Surgeon General (OSG). (2021). *Protecting Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory*. US Department of Health and Human Services.
- <sup>vi</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2021). *Youth Risk Behavior Survey, Data Summary and Trends Report*. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/mental-health/index.htm>
- <sup>vii</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2021). *Youth Risk Behavior Survey, Data Summary and Trends Report*. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/mental-health/index.htm>
- <sup>viii</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2021). *Youth Risk Behavior Survey, Data Summary and Trends Report*. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/mental-health/index.htm>
- <sup>ix</sup> The Trevor Project. (2022). *2022 National Survey on LGBTQ Mental Health*. Retrieved from <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2022/>
- <sup>x</sup> The Trevor Project. (2022). *2022 National Survey on LGBTQ Mental Health*. Retrieved from <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2022/>
- <sup>xi</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2020). "About the CDC-Kaiser ACE Study." Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/39aeokF>
- <sup>xii</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service. (2018). *Urban Nature for Human Health and Well-Being*. FS-1096. Washington, D.C.