

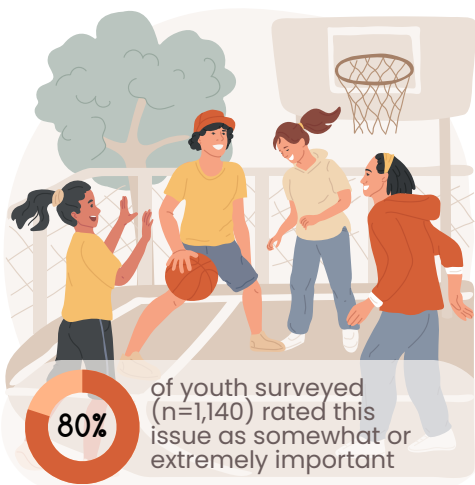


## Youth Perspectives on:

# Mental, Physical, & Behavioral Health

### Overview

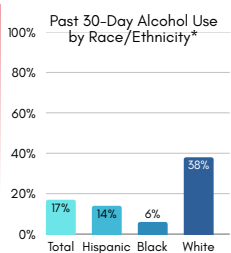
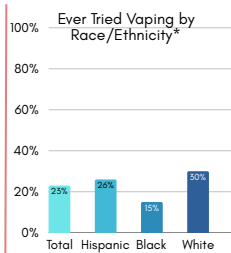
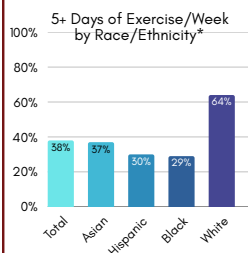
This theme explores how youth experience and envision their physical, emotional, and behavioral health. Students shared their perspectives on access to mental health care, opportunities for physical activity, prevention and intervention around substance use, and support for healthy relationships during 94 listening sessions. Their 325+ responses reflect a desire for holistic care that prioritize emotional well-being alongside academic success. While youth appreciate existing supports, they emphasize the need for more equitable access, reduced stigma, and expanded community investment in their overall health.



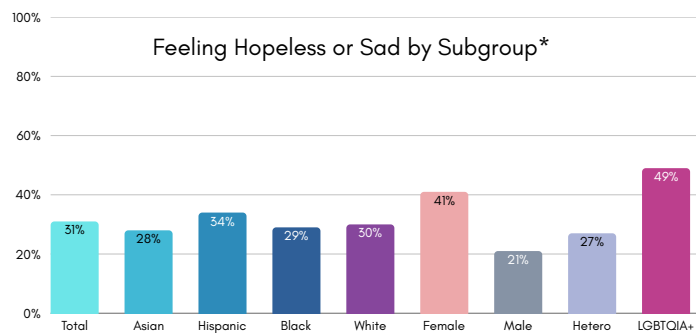
## WHY IT MATTERS

Mental health, physical activity, and healthy decision-making are interconnected components of adolescent development. When young people have access to safe environments, trusted adults, supportive services, and opportunities for recreation, they are more likely to thrive in school and in life. Conversely, unaddressed trauma, lack of movement, peer pressure, and limited access to services can contribute to disengagement and increased risk-taking behavior.

## WHAT THE DATA SAY



\*Source: Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2023



## WHAT YOUTH WANT

30+ mentions

### Mental Health Access & Supports

"Normalize mental health help/therapy"

Free and confidential access to mental health professionals, both in and out of school

20+ mentions

### Physical Activity & Recreation

"Free and inclusive youth sports"

Recreational spaces and sports programs that are inclusive, clean, and well-funded

20+ mentions

### Substance Use Prevention

"100K for free rehab centers"

A drug- and alcohol-free environment supported by prevention, education, and treatment services

"No drugs and vape pens"

130+ mentions

### Relationships, Sexual Health, and Risk Behaviors

"A support group for troubled teens"

Comprehensive, mandatory sex education and greater support in navigating healthy relationships

## WHAT YOUTH EXPERIENCE

40+ mentions

### Mental Health Access & Supports

"Not enough therapy."

Limited availability of mental health services, with ongoing stigma around seeking help

50+ mentions

### Physical Activity & Recreation

"Expensive sports."

Recreational facilities that are outdated, inaccessible, or cost-prohibitive

45+ mentions

### Substance Use

"Kids vaping in the bathrooms."

High rates of vaping and marijuana use in schools

95+ mentions

### Relationships, Sexual Health, & Risk Behaviors

"Mandatory sex ed."

Inconsistent or insufficient sexual health education



## Barriers to Improvement

*Students shared several reasons why youth may struggle with their physical, mental, and behavioral health.*

### **Internal Factors:**

- Lack of motivation, high stress levels, and insufficient personal support were noted as factors that exacerbate mental health issues.

### **Access and Resource Barriers:**

- Many mentioned that poor access to mental health services, limited community facilities, and a general lack of funding hinder improvements.

### **Peer and Cultural Influences**

- Peer pressure, easy access to drugs, and even economic factors (e.g., more disposable income among certain groups leading to higher substance use) were noted.

### **Systemic Issues**

- Poor communication between school administrators and students, regulatory hurdles (such as those affecting menu changes in schools), and a tendency for students to underreport problems (due to fear or stigma) further complicate matters.





## Recommended Strategies from ACHS Students to Promote Mental, Physical, & Behavioral Health

*When asked to brainstorm potential solutions to address behavioral health issues, students proposed the following actions.*

### Enhanced Mental Health Support

- Increase funding for school-based mental health services to ensure timely access.
  - Hire more counselors, social workers, and psychologists.
- Provide easier access to counselors, and institute regular check-ins (e.g., bi-weekly) by social workers or counselors.
- Create a school environment where students can seek help without stigma.
- Normalize mental health support through posters, campaigns, and school-based ambassadors.
- Allow mental health days without academic penalties.
- Ensure connection and support are prioritized over punishment for struggling students.

### Build Culturally Responsive Mental Health Supports for Latino Youth

- Launch a Youth Mental Health Resource Hub at local recreation centers, designed as non-clinical “creative hangout” spaces.
- Host bilingual peer group sessions that blend conversation with art, journaling, and soccer.
- Lead community campaigns to normalize conversations about mental health in Hispanic families.
- Hold bilingual workshops for parents and students to reduce stigma and increase trust.
- Remove barriers like ID, insurance, or proof of residency.

### School Climate, Trust, and Relationships

- Build stronger relationships between students and teachers to reduce fear of confidentiality being broken.
- Encourage honesty and comfort when students disclose struggles.
- Foster inclusive, supportive school cultures where students help one another.

### Improved Physical Health Opportunities

- Offer free public gyms and better access to recreational facilities (fields, pools) that are especially accessible to minority groups.

### Youth Substance Use – Prevention and Harm Reduction

- Strengthen prevention and education programs about vaping, smoking, and substance use.
- Expand counseling for students struggling with substance or alcohol use.
- Train all staff in Narcan administration to prevent overdose deaths.
- Install vape detectors in bathrooms and ensure that security knows how to respond effectively.
- Explore alternative harm reduction approaches (*some disagreement among students - some suggested designated smoking lounges, others pushed for strict bans*).

### Community Engagement and Advocacy

- Engage parents and families through workshops and open dialogue about mental and behavioral health.
- Ensure that mental health, substance use, and behavioral health policies are shaped with youth input.