

# Washtenaw County Youth Mental Health Campaign OUTREACH REPORT

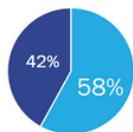
#wishyouknew

## Background

This spring, the Washtenaw County Health Department and Washtenaw County Community Mental Health teamed up to design a campaign to address community concerns around youth mental health and reducing stigma. This report reflects community feedback gathered from May-August 2019 on what mental health means to communities across the county and what they hope to see in a campaign. This work is supported by the Washtenaw County Public Safety & Mental Health Preservation Millage. Thank you to everyone who helped shape the campaign so far!

## Methods & Participants

**Survey:** 250 responses from Ann Arbor, Ypsilanti, Dexter, Chelsea, Saline, Milan, & Twps.



### Survey Participant Ages

- Adults (ages 25+)
- Youth (ages 11-24)\*  
\*most youth 15-18



Nearly half of youth survey respondents identify with LGBTQ+ communities



## Focus Groups & Community Conversations:

Community members and mental health providers from Ypsilanti, Ann Arbor, Superior Township, Ypsilanti Township, Chelsea and Dexter. Organizations include: The Corner Health Center, Ozone House, SURE Moms and Chelsea's Youth Mental Health Community Collaborative.

- 4 group conversations with youth ages 11-24
- 40 residents: canvassing in Ypsi & Superior Township
- 3 group conversations with adults and parents
- 10+ meetings with community leaders & stakeholders



Although males and people of color are underrepresented in online survey data, they are more represented in community conversations and focus groups. Plans exist to continue additional outreach efforts with underrepresented groups and communities (i.e. immigrant families, rural areas).

## Themes

### Diversity & Inclusion

Community members care deeply about diversity in representation while also showing that mental health is an issue that affects everyone, it's not just a "problem" in certain communities.

Messaging about seeking support should be inclusive and realistic, taking into account young people's family and community environments. It should show a variety of what getting support looks like, not just professional services.

"How can that doctor understand my black life growing up in the hood? Telling me 'take a breath and count to 10' while shots are taken across the street"

## Different Views of Mental Health

Not all families and communities buy in to the idea of mental health care. Youth wish parents acknowledged mental health as a real health concern, similar to physical health issues.

"I wish parents knew that mental health is real."

There's a wide range of how families address mental health, whether it's through religion, social support, groups, medication or therapy. Psychiatrists talk a lot about brain chemistry. Counselors often talk about motivating life changes. Schools and law enforcement are seen as disciplining behavior. Contradicting messages about mental health can be confusing for families.

## Open Communication

Many communities don't talk openly about mental health and most youth don't feel comfortable talking with adults about it. Youth often feel like they can't express what's going on. They're afraid of how adults will respond.

"Kids don't feel safe to talk to parents when met with anger or hearing what they did wrong."

When youth do admit they're struggling, they say parents take it personally or dismiss their experiences with stigmatizing responses. Youth desire more empathy.

Adults feel like they don't know what to do or how to respond. Adults want to know it's not their fault. Both youth and adults want their experiences validated.

"Teens want a conversation. Don't talk at me or down to me, talk with me."

Youth and adults have a lot of ideas for how to respond compassionately. Don't react before listening. Help them feel less alone. Respect their timeline for opening up. Start with trying to understand their experience instead of forcing change. Parent and adult openness is key; youth start opening up when they feel safe and heard.

## Patience & Persistence

Adults hope for quick fixes, which makes it difficult to be patient with youth's experience and the healing process. Learning coping strategies is important and takes time. Navigating systems for different levels of care can be confusing and frustrating.

"Youth don't want to just stay where they are but they also don't want someone to plow them with change."

Getting support often isn't linear and takes reaching out more than once, which can leave youth and adults discouraged. Daily stressors for parents, especially in low-income households, can make the process even harder.

## Crisis

Across the county, this is the most common reason for seeking support. Youth believe they can only get their needs met or tell people how they feel if there's a crisis. With limited access to resources and long wait lists, youth sense their issues aren't "bad enough" to get help. There's a strong call for earlier intervention and crisis prevention. Youth and adults also want more education about how to respond in crisis situations.

## Normalizing Check-ins

Youth and adults want to normalize conversations about mental health within families. Whether things are going well or someone is really struggling, it's something everyone experiences on some level and we need to pay attention to it. Make it one of "the talks", part of the coming-of-age conversations about health. Promote mental health care as part of taking care of your entire body.

"Just like your stomach can ache, so can your mind."

Parents suggest normalizing check-ins early and often. Start when they're young and when things are okay, so they feel more comfortable going to adults before issues become serious. Create safe space throughout childhood to talk about the ups and downs of daily life.

## Denial

Youth often don't admit they're struggling. Many factors play a role, depending on community, culture and family support. Pride and the pressure to not be seen as weak is one barrier, especially for boys and young men. Pressure to be perfect and measure up to societal expectations of success is another. Self-medication and unhealthy coping also affect openness to support.

"People say 'oh I'm just stressed out' when they're really struggling with something deeper."

Awareness of when stress becomes a more serious concern is key.

## Trauma

Trauma relates to nearly every topic that came up in community conversations. Experiences with trauma can make feeling safe to open up much more difficult. Youth say traumatic experiences are common, but talking about them isn't.

Trauma can take many forms. Youth especially emphasize how lack of physical safety, witnessing violence, not getting to be a kid at home, and the chronic stress of struggling to survive, deeply impact mental health on a daily basis.

## Trust & Confidentiality

Lack of trust is a major barrier to reaching out for support, especially if youth don't feel safe confiding in their family. Youth want to trust. They want to feel seen, heard, and affirmed. They want to know if they tell someone, they will be listened to and it won't get worse. Consistency and reliability help build trust.

"Validate the fear. 'Of course it's scary to tell someone, it's hard to take that risk.'"

Many families do not want private matters shared with outside agencies. Youth fear disrespecting their parents by confiding in someone outside the family about their mental health or about stress at home.

Youth don't trust that adults will keep confidence and not tell others. There's a lack of understanding about mandated reporting, who is a confidential resource and who isn't. Youth and parents want to know their rights related to confidentiality when accessing services.

## Discrimination & Oppression

Washtenaw residents want to see real and honest conversation about inequitable resources in our county. Experiencing discrimination or being ignored by systems and institutions impacts collective trauma, daily stress and how safe individuals and communities feel to seek support. Discomfort with professional services also relates to fear of Child Protective Services (CPS) and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). It's important to reflect on current and historical inequities, racism and systemic injustice facing communities, especially communities of color.

## Criminalized Behavior

Mental health shows up in behaviors more than words. Youth act out their struggles because they feel they can't talk about it. Behaviors get addressed and disciplined – in class, home and court – rather than adults trying to understand what's going on underneath. Mental health issues can start early, so does labeling kids as “bad”.

"Being called a 'bad kid', that label follows them like a police record."

## Peers

Youth often prefer hearing advice from friends, but also wish peers knew more about how to help their friends seek support or respond to a crisis. It helps when friends are open about their own mental health and offer to go with them to seek support.

They wish peers didn't throw around mental health words around like jokes. Youth also don't like when peers use mental health as a way to seek attention online, to seem cool or special by posting intense statements related to mental health.

"People throw words around, saying 'go kill yourself' as if it's a joke."

## Social Media

Youth say parents don't know what goes on in the online lives of their kids. Adults want more education about social media and internet use among teens. They both connect less face-to-face interaction with an increase in social anxiety.

Youth describe two extremes of social media posts, painting perfect pictures or posting about crises and suicidality. Both are seen as harmful. However, social media is also a socially acceptable source of support and inspiration. It promotes positive and personal storytelling which normalizes talk about mental health and helps youth feel less alone.

## Bullying

Youth and adults identify teasing, exclusion, fighting and cyberbullying as a major source of student stress and a main reason for seeking support from school counseling offices.

"Adults don't realize everything this generation is going through, especially cyberbullying."

Youth feel adults don't pay attention unless something serious happens. Students experiencing bullying fear retaliation and feel like no one has their back, which may contribute to more serious mental health challenges. Adults also note a lack of compassionate support for students labeled as the “trouble makers”.

## Resilience

While youth note across the county that it's common to pretend to bounce back and to act okay when they're not, other aspects of resilience differ greatly across racial and socioeconomic lines.

In parts of Chelsea and Dexter, youth feel constrained by societal pressures of what success looks like and how to get there, learning to fear failure. They want safe opportunities to strengthen resiliency while feeling supported by parents, schools and community.

"It's in the culture to bounce back from the cracks in the ground where we come from."

"Our generation has seen so much change, we're strong for how adaptable we are."

In Ypsilanti and townships on the east side, youth talk about not having control over their environment, and not having a choice but to keep pushing.

Conversation about resilience accompanies talk of hopelessness. "Hopelessness clouds our ability to see the strengths we do have." Adults want more visibility for positive adults and role models in their communities. They note peer support groups, community organizing, and looking out for neighbors as part of resilience.

## Language & Lingo

Youth and adults want to see culturally relevant language. They don't want mental health to sound sugar-coated but also don't like hearing clinical mental health terms and diagnostic labels.

The words that most widely resonate are "stressed out", "overwhelmed" + "support". Other common words are "frustrated", "hopeless" + "alone". Youth of color also identify with feeling "misunderstood".

## Schools

School is a major stressor for youth, and a major avenue for connecting to services, though the role of schools in navigating mental health care systems is sometimes unclear. School interventions happen for crisis situations or "behavioral issues" and often result in required professional services. Fear of peer judgment and parent reactions prevents youth from going to counseling offices sooner.

Youth hope for more compassionate and trauma-informed responses from school staff, wanting to feel seen and encouraged. Adults hope for more school social workers and a mental health curriculum similar to required health classes.

## Young Adults 18+

Young adults transitioning out of high school face unique challenges with mental health. Access to services changes for this age group, especially for non-college-enrolled youth. Youth in college don't always have family or school support. Youth describe not knowing how or where to call for appointments. If insured, health clinics are often the first line of support for young adults 18-25, but the new challenge of navigating systems on their own is often a barrier.

# Campaign Proposal:



#wishyouknew

Driven by community conversations, the new countywide "Wish You Knew" campaign aims to address the disconnect between youth and adults by promoting regular and open communication about mental health. Washtenaw communities will be able to customize materials and messaging to resonate with their families and use in different settings such as schools, youth organizations and faith communities.

Through artwork and video storytelling the "Wish You Knew" campaign will reflect what youth wish adults knew about their mental health and how parents and caregivers can support open communication. As one community member said about truth-telling: "we need to be honest so people can really heal." This campaign aims to spark honest and supportive conversations between youth and adults. And to spread hope that if we can share our truth with trusted people in our life, we can begin to heal.

## Proposed Campaign Elements



### Artwork

- On social media & in the community
- Youth-driven murals, projects, exhibits



### Pocket Cards + Magnets

- Pocket guides with tips about how to seek support or respond when someone reaches out
- Tailored to different audiences: parents and caregivers, youth, peers

### Video Storytelling



Personal stories about campaign themes:

- Open communication
- Youth wish adults knew
- Seeking support
- Successful coping
- Building trust

### Campaign Promotion

Based on survey & artist feedback, we plan to promote the campaign using the following platforms:



- Social media
- Posters & handouts
- Billboards
- Movie previews
- Murals & art displays

Have a mental health question or need?

Call Washtenaw County CARES 24/7:

**734-544-3050**

Want to get more involved?

Contact Emma Share at [sharee@washtenaw.org](mailto:sharee@washtenaw.org) or Kayla Steinberg at 734-544-6848.

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