

# Children's Mental Health in America



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The reports by the U.S. Surgeon General and President Bush's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health offer great hope to the millions of children and adolescents living with mental disorders and their families. Through appropriate identification, evaluation, and treatment, children and adolescents with mental illnesses can embrace the hope of recovery. They can achieve success in school, in work, and in family life. Nonetheless, the overwhelming majority of children with mental illnesses fail to be identified, lack access to treatment, and needlessly struggle throughout their lives. Stigma persists, and as a result, millions of young people in this country are left behind or go without appropriate necessary care.

## **Prevalence of Child and Adolescent Mental Disorders**

- Four million children and adolescents in this country struggle with a serious mental disorder that causes significant functional impairments at home, at school, and with peers. Twenty-one percent of our nation's children ages 9 to 17 have a diagnosable mental or addictive disorder that causes at least minimal impairment.
- Half of all lifetime cases of mental disorders begin by age 14. Despite effective treatments, there are long delays—sometimes decades—between the first onset of symptoms and when people seek and receive treatment. An untreated mental illness can lead to more severe symptoms, the development of co-occurring mental illnesses.
- In any given year, only 20 percent of children with mental illnesses are identified and receive mental health services.

## **Consequences of Untreated Mental Illnesses in Children and Adolescents**

### ***Suicide***

- Suicide is the third leading cause of death in youth aged 15 to 24. More teenagers and young adults die from suicide than from cancer, heart disease, AIDS, birth defects, stroke, pneumonia, influenza, and chronic lung disease combined. Over 90 percent of children and adolescents who commit suicide have a mental disorder.
- In 2002, almost 4,300 young people aged 10 to 24 died in this country by suicide.
- States spend nearly \$1 billion annually on medical costs associated with completed suicides and suicide attempts by youth up to 20 years of age.

### ***Failure in School***

- Approximately 50 percent of students with a mental illness age 14 and older drop out of high school; this is the highest dropout rate of any disability group.

### ***Juvenile and Criminal Justice Involvement***

- Youth with unidentified and untreated mental illnesses also tragically end up in jails and prisons. According to a NIMH funded study—the largest such study on this issue—an alarming 65 percent of boys and 75 percent of girls in juvenile detention have at least one mental illness. We are incarcerating youth with mental illnesses, some as young as eight years old, rather than identifying their illnesses early and intervening with appropriate treatment and supports.

### ***Spiraling Higher Health Care Costs***

- When children with untreated mental illnesses become adults, they generally use more health care services and incur higher health care costs than other adults. Left untreated, childhood illnesses are likely to persist and lead to a downward spiral of school failure, limited or non-existent employment opportunities, and poverty in adulthood. No other illnesses harm so many children so seriously.

### **Early Identification, Evaluation, and Treatment are Essential to Recovery and Resiliency**

- Research shows that early identification and intervention can minimize the long-term disability of mental disorders.
- Mental illnesses in children and adolescents are real and can be effectively treated, especially when identified and treated early.
- Research has yielded important advances in the development of effective treatment for children and adolescents living with mental illness. Early identification and treatment prevents the loss of critical developmental years that cannot be recovered and helps youth avoid years of unnecessary suffering.
- Early and effective mental health treatment can prevent a significant proportion of delinquent and violent youth from future violence and crime. It also enables children and adolescents to succeed in school, to develop socially, and to fully experience the developmental opportunities of childhood.

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