



Engaging our community

Youth Mental Health

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A special report

Featuring efforts of the Colorado Department of Law to support youth mental health.



Colorado Department of Law

May 19, 2022

Supporting youth mental health has never been more important than it is today. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, teen mental health and suicide prevention were major challenges for Colorado and priorities of the Department of Law. During the pandemic, increased isolation, stress, loss, and anxiety led to increased substance abuse, more overdose deaths, and a greater number of pediatric emergency room visits related to mental health issues.

In Colorado, suicide is the leading cause of death of those between 15-24 years old. And in the department's administration of Safe2Tell, suicide-related tips are the largest tip category year after year. Many challenges facing teens are worsening. That's why, in what should be a wake-up call for all, the [U.S. Surgeon General](#) called the state of youth mental health a crisis.

This report outlines the Colorado Department of Law's multi-faceted response to this crisis and calls for even more investment and work in this field. Such work includes our ongoing commitment to suicide prevention through Safe2Tell, our robust response to the opioid epidemic, our intervention into social media's impact on teens, and our commitment to grant programs that support excellent community organizations addressing youth mental health.

The department has made specific investments in youth mental health through a \$5 million public-private partnership, the [Healthy Youth / Strong Colorado Fund](#), which focuses on improving mental health for young Coloradans and decreasing the use of the criminal justice system to address behavioral health challenges – now and in the future. We also look forward to building on [\\$500,000 in additional grants](#) made to organizations around the state that promote youth empowerment and school justice. Consistent with our [report on school justice](#), we also recognize the need for more trauma-informed responses that can support our youth and advance public safety.

A pressing public policy challenge is that youth mental health remains under-resourced. That is why bills like Colorado's HB 22-1243 are important. The bill appropriates \$2 million for grants to schools to, among other things, increase the presence of on-campus substance abuse and behavioral health professionals at schools and to provide more training and resources for school staff on the implementation of evidence-based behavioral health education programming for all students. The bill also extends the temporary youth mental health services program "I Matter," which provides Colorado youth three free therapy sessions either online or in person. This bill offers the type of critical resources and infrastructure necessary to support our youth.

Much work remains to be done. Together, as discussed in this report, we can work on supporting young people and creating a roadmap for collaboration between parents, caregivers, and communities to support Colorado's youth.

Phil Weiser
Colorado Attorney General

The Colorado Attorney General

Youth Mental Health Report

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Statistics

The Department of Law operates the [Safe2Tell Colorado](#) program, a statewide anonymous tip line for students and communities to report safety concerns, any time, any day. While conceived of as a way for students, teachers, and communities to anonymously report threats to prevent school violence, students now use the program to raise a broad range of concerns, including those related to mental health. In recent years, teen suicide is consistently the number one category of tip reported to the program.

All data pictured is preliminary

16,726
reports received during the 2021-22 school year.

19%
of all reports received were related to mental health.

Suicide reports remain the most common, representing nearly 70% of all mental health-related reports.

Suicide Reporting Methods



42% Phone



23% Mobile Web



21% PC Web



14% Mobile App

Safe2Tell has been providing a critical service to our youth for many years. Their expertise has provided a much-needed safety net that has responded to and prevented many individual and community crises. The increased stress, uncertainty and social disruption for our youth has resulted in increased mental health concerns, substance misuse and suicidal ideation.

— **Colorado Crisis Services and Rocky Mountain Crisis Partners**

Mental health challenges are on the rise. For many individuals between the ages of 15-24, mental health is a defining challenge—suicide is [the leading cause of death](#) for people in this age group.¹ We work with partners across Colorado to ensure that individuals who use Safe2Tell know they have mental health resources available to them. For example, we partner with the [CDPHE Office of Suicide Prevention](#) to fund [Sources of Strength](#), a suicide prevention and empowerment program active in high schools throughout Colorado. Sources of Strength's programs are evidence-based and highly successful; Sources of Strength also refers schools back to Safe2Tell for training and partnership.

Safe2Tell offers every person making a report the option to connect with Colorado Crisis Services (CCS). Mental health related Safe2Tell reports may result in referrals to counseling services, parental notification, a welfare check, or referrals to other mental health services. To learn more about the Safe2Tell Program please see the [Safe2Tell Annual Report, 2020-2021 \(School Year\)](#).



Notes

¹ Although more young people have been reaching out for help related to mental health concerns, it is important to note that [there has been no statistically significant increase or decrease](#) in suicide fatality rates among youth and young adults in Colorado from 2015 through 2021.

Teens2Teens

Suicide Prevention Public Awareness Campaign

In 2019, Safe2Tell – in collaboration with the Office of Behavioral Health, CCS, and the Colorado Office of Film, Television and Media – launched a [video and social media campaign](#) to raise awareness about teen mental health and to highlight available resources. The partners collaborated with more than 40 students from across the state, each impacted by mental health struggles and suicide, to create a video series. The students shared messages aimed at their peers and parents. The messages in the videos aim to help break the silence around teen mental health struggles and highlight resources available for those who are experiencing an immediate safety threat or need professional support for any mental health, substance use, or emotional crisis.

"My Story: breaking our silence" video:

Our stories...

<https://bit.ly/3LmkaPs>

"Do You Know Me?" video:

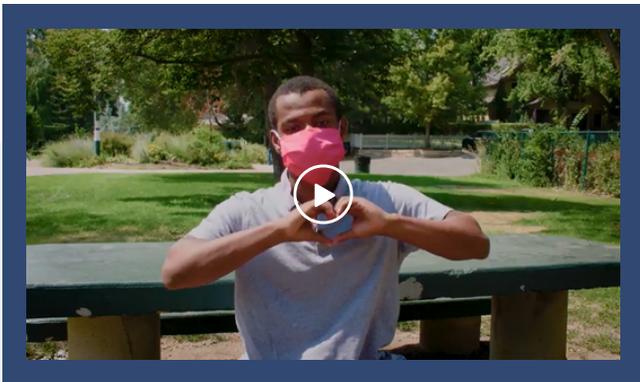


<https://bit.ly/3sFjnTo>

During the Pandemic

In 2020, Safe2Tell received federal funding through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act that allowed the program to conduct COVID-19 specific outreach across the state through the end of the 2020 calendar year. Safe2Tell launched a [public awareness campaign](#) to remind students that Safe2Tell is available 24/7, even during a pandemic. The campaign addressed pandemic-related mental health and safety concerns and emphasized the continued availability of the program's resources while students learn from home or school. The four-month campaign reached stakeholders statewide via television and radio ads and social media platforms, such as Instagram and Snapchat.

"Pandemic Resources" video:



<https://bit.ly/3PrMoLJ>



Sources of Strength



SOURCES OF STRENGTH

Community Spotlight

Another way our office supports students' mental health, wellbeing, and safety is through a grant partnership with Colorado's Office of Suicide Prevention (OSP) at the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE) and Sources of Strength.

[Sources of Strength](#) is an upstream, strength-based, peer leadership program that builds resiliency in students and supports the development of critical well-being skills. Sources of Strength aims to increase the protective, positive influences in young people's lives in order to reduce the incidence of suicide and to establish the support system necessary to assist individuals as they may face crises and adverse situations.

Safe2Tell provides training to schools that receive Sources of Strength programming in an effort to support and supplement elementary, middle, and high schools' overall suicide prevention and intervention efforts.

Combating the Opioid & Fentanyl Crisis

Opioid overdoses and addiction have devastated families and communities throughout Colorado, and this crisis poses a serious threat to our communities' public health, safety, and economy. The recent spike in overdose deaths related to fentanyl continues to harm Colorado communities and families at alarming rates. The risk of opioids, and fentanyl specifically, is particularly acute for young people.

The mental health aspect of substance use disorder cannot be ignored. A [study](#) of 10,000 adolescents found that **two-thirds of those who developed alcohol or substance use disorders had experienced at least one mental health disorder**.² Substance misuse and abuse also [interferes](#) with mental health treatment and worsens the long-term prognosis for a teenager struggling with mental health.

THE OPIOID CRISIS IN COLORADO

5,500

Deaths due to opioid overdose in the past 10 years

2,000

Estimated to have lost their lives to fentanyl and heroin

70%

of people who use heroin report they used prescription opioid medications first

33%

of people with opioid use disorder have been involved with the criminal justice system in the past year

Our state only has about

1/3

of the total drug treatment capacity needed

How we are combating the crisis:

- ▶ Suing unscrupulous pharmaceutical manufacturers and distributors that contributed to the epidemic through deceptive marketing and other practices, and seeking monetary damages that can be used to support urgently needed drug treatment and recovery programs;
- ▶ Cracking down on drug cartels to stop the trafficking of counterfeit oxycodone pills containing deadly fentanyl; and
- ▶ Leading a historic joint framework to share the \$400 million opioid settlements with regions around the state. These funds will improve access to treatment, especially in rural parts of our state that lack sufficient treatment infrastructure. To learn more about this work please visit our [Opioid Response Plan](#) page.

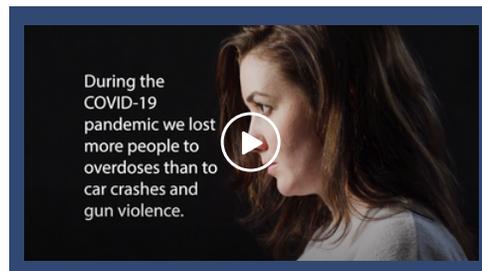
Notes

² See also *National Institute on Drug Abuse, Comorbidity: Substance Use Disorders and Other Mental Illnesses DrugFacts (2018)*. Available at: <https://nida.nih.gov/publications/drugfacts/comorbidity-substance-use-disorders-other-mental-illnesses>.

Combating the Opioid & Fentanyl Crisis

In these efforts, our department is particularly attentive to the vulnerabilities of youth in this crisis. We have, for example, held meetings with parents and community advocates to discuss ways to raise awareness about the risks of fentanyl specifically with teens. Fentanyl is deadly, even in small amounts, and has now been found in many illicit drugs in Colorado – including counterfeit pills. In partnership with community leaders and non-profits, we plan to launch a fentanyl awareness campaign targeted at teens, and particularly those struggling with mental health. This messaging will help protect at-risk Coloradans from making a deadly mistake.

"Pandemic Resources" video:



<https://bit.ly/3PCwDC2>

Everyone, particularly young people, needs to hear about the **high risk of taking pills that do not come from a pharmacy or a doctor**. The facts are clear: if an individual does not obtain a pharmaceutical through a prescription from a doctor but from an illicit source, there is a dangerous likelihood it contains fentanyl.

The department is also committed to fighting the stigma that prevents people from accessing resources and treatment services. With the increasing prevalence of fentanyl and its extreme risk of overdose, any illicit drug use can be a person's last; treatment and recovery are as vital as they have ever been.



Community Spotlight



In February 2022, Attorney General Weiser joined the Adams 12 Five Star School District community and state Representative Shannon Bird to raise awareness about the dangers of fentanyl and substance use disorder. Some parents bravely shared their stories of loss of their children to opioid or fentanyl poisoning and representatives from Adams 12 gave details about the social and emotional support services they provide for children in the district to help combat opioid abuse. The visit provided participants with resources and strategies to strengthen relationships with the youth in their life and to effectively talk about substance abuse. The discussion also covered how we can work together to remove damaging labels and stigma that prevent those with questions or struggling with addiction from accessing resources and treatment services.

[Read](#) more about the event and [learn](#) more about the great services at Adams 12.

Healthy Youth / Strong Colorado Fund

Announced in April 2021, the [Healthy Youth/Strong Colorado Fund](#) is a partnership between the Colorado Department of Law and Rocky Mountain Health Plans, a UnitedHealth Group company. Through the fund, Rocky Mountain Health Plans pledged \$5 million to support youth empowerment and mental health throughout the state.

The Healthy Youth/Strong Colorado Fund supports mental health and wellness programs for youth to promote safer and healthier lives and to avoid involvement with the criminal justice system. The \$5 million represents a significant investment in improved mental health for young Coloradans and a decreased use of the criminal justice system to address behavioral health challenges.

The specific grants from the fund will pave the way for a proactive response to the mental health crisis we see taking shape during the pandemic. These investments enable trusted community organizations to expand their work empowering and supporting youth.



Healthy Youth / Strong Colorado Fund

Grant Partnerships

Grant partnerships through the Healthy Youth/Strong Colorado Fund include:



\$1.8 Million to three corps of the [Colorado Youth Corps Association](#) – Mile High Youth Corps, Rocky Mountain Youth Corps, and the Western Colorado Conservation Corps—to provide a new criminal justice diversion program promoting employment, education, mental health support, and service opportunities to youth.



\$1.5 Million to [Boys & Girls Clubs in Colorado](#) to expand programming and serve more than 100,000 kids across the state. Boys & Girls Clubs equip young people with the skills they need to manage emotions and build resiliency.



\$500,000 to [Sources of Strength](#) to expand access to youth suicide prevention programs in schools. The mission of Sources of Strength is to prevent suicide by increasing help-seeking behaviors and promoting connections between peers and caring adults.

"There couldn't be a better time to increase support for youth mental health. This generous support from Rocky Mountain Health Plans will help us serve more young people as we're seeing the needs skyrocket."

——— Jami Hayes, Executive Director of YouthZone.



\$400,000 to [The Center on Colfax](#) to support career counseling and empowerment for LGBTQ young adults as well as mental health services. The Center's mission is to engage, empower, enrich, and advance the LGBTQ community of Colorado.



\$400,000 to [The Place](#) to increase stability and support for youth experiencing homelessness in El Paso County. The Place helps young people experiencing homelessness and those at risk of becoming homeless overcome real-life challenges by providing essential services and a supportive community, empowering them to become self-sufficient adults.



\$300,000 to [YouthZone](#) to foster positive youth development for teens across Colorado's Western Slope. The three-year contribution will help YouthZone expand its services to school-based settings and deliver mental health and substance abuse support to at least 470 youth and their families annually. YouthZone offers assessment and counseling services for both youth and parents and has close relationships with school systems and law enforcement who refer at-risk youth to YouthZone for help.

Social Media's Impact on Children & Teens

It is clear—from hearings, academic research, and recent investigative reporting—that use of social media platforms uniquely threatens and harms the mental health of youth. The department is pursuing a series of projects to address these harms.

Our department continues to [encourage](#) Congress to evaluate the following priorities in working to establish responsible oversight of social media platforms:

- ▶ Developing a comprehensive and unbiased understanding of the problems and hazards caused by social media platforms, including further research and discussion on how algorithms operate and impact youth;
- ▶ Enacting a regulatory framework that addresses risks posed by social media to children, including the oversight of advertising decisions, requirements for appropriate transparency, and effective age verification and parental consent; and
- ▶ Providing a regulatory agency with the necessary authority to take appropriate action to protect consumer privacy, safeguard competition in the online world, and address the risks to kids and our democratic institutions, including strengthening tools to limit disinformation and combat online hate speech.

The department has taken direct action to address the harms of platforms on children and teens. As these investigations proceed, our department remains committed to supporting legislative efforts that prioritize the safety of children online.

Then in November 2021, Attorney General Weiser with another bipartisan group of attorneys general from across the country [announced](#) an investigation into Meta Platforms, Inc., formerly known as Facebook, for providing and promoting one of its social media platform Instagram to kids.

May 2021

Nov. 2021

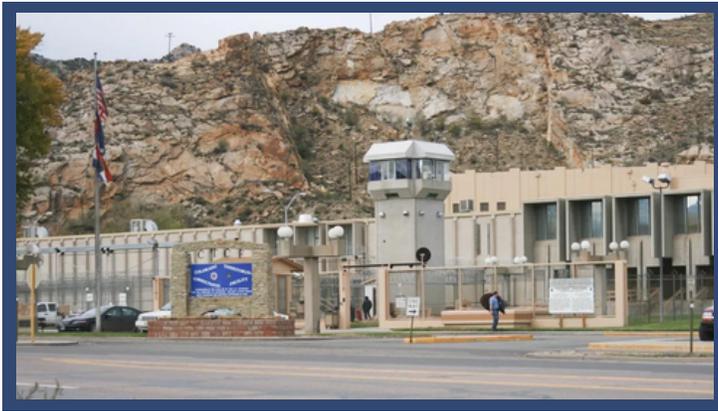
March 2022

In May 2021, Attorney General Weiser [sent](#) a bipartisan letter to Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg asking for more information about Facebook's announced plans to launch a kids version of Instagram and how the company will protect the privacy and safety of children under 13 years old who use the new platform.

In March 2022, Attorney General Weiser also [joined](#) a nationwide investigation into TikTok for providing and promoting its social media platform to children and young adults because its use is associated with physical and mental health harms.

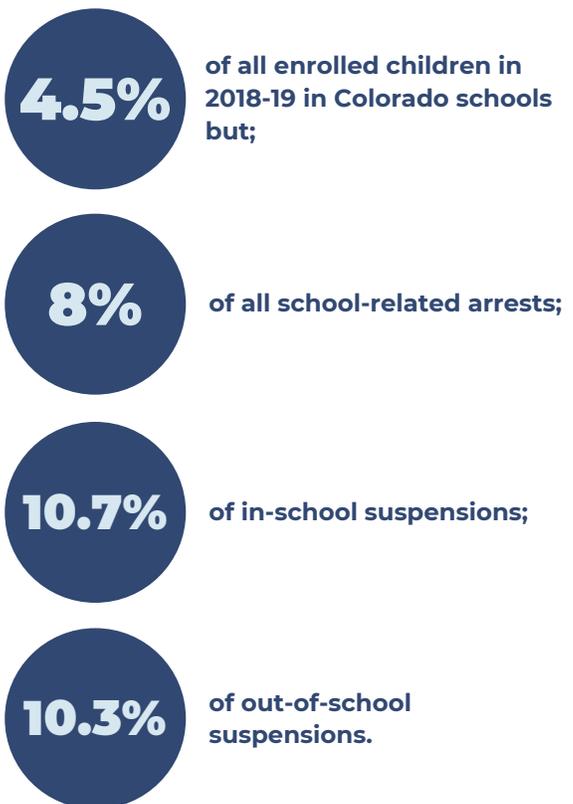
Disrupting the School-to-Prison Pipeline

Young people in our communities, especially youth of color, face a variety of barriers to success, including disparate rates of incarceration. One important contributing factor to our state's level of incarceration is the "school-to-prison pipeline," which disproportionately impacts youth of color. Too often, behavioral challenges posed by students struggling with mental health issues or past traumas that impact their school experience is addressed punitively rather than medically, causing youth with mental health challenges to be disproportionately impacted by the "school-to-prison pipeline."³



To begin this work on this important issue, the department announced a series of grants—the [School Justice Partnership Innovation Grants](#) – that would be used to support and develop community programs that promote positive school justice partnerships and address the "school-to-prison pipeline."

According to the [Colorado Department of Education](#), Black students made up:



Notes

³ The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration states that 50% to 70% of inmates in the juvenile justice system meet the standard for having a mental disorder.

Disrupting the School-to-Prison Pipeline

Grants:

The grants were awarded to entities with programs striving to achieve any or all of the following objectives:

- ▶ Reduce youth incarceration in Colorado;
- ▶ Develop sound and effective alternatives to practices that lead to criminal records and incarceration, which could include restorative practices, restorative justice, and diversion programs;
- ▶ Develop programming that ensures a safe learning environment but also, when possible, supports practices alternative to the severe exclusionary consequences of suspension or expulsion; and
- ▶ Ensure equitable application of school discipline practices across economic, gender, racial, and ethnic groups.

Visit [this School Justice website](#) learn more about the grant awardees and the grant process. To better understand the scope of the challenges around school justice, on October 15, 2020, the department brought together educators, school district officials, parent- and student-led community organizations, restorative justice practitioners, academic researchers, community-based service providers, state government leaders, and other interested community members committed to addressing school justice issues. The roundtable focused on how school discipline policies and practices—notably, an overreliance on punitive measures such as suspension, expulsion, or criminal arrest and citation rather than an emphasis on healing-centered restorative approaches—reduce the likelihood of graduation and place students on a path towards revolving involvement with the criminal justice system.

The department published a [report](#) that captures the key takeaways from the roundtable discussion and is supplemented with research from relevant academic sources and other stakeholders across Colorado. As detailed in the report, the roundtable identified several public policy concepts that stakeholders seeking to curb punitive measures in school and shift to greater utilization of restorative justice principles could consider:

- ▶ Training opportunities for school administrators and teachers;
- ▶ Enhancing data collection and data analysis to improve practice;
- ▶ Leveraging of community partnerships;
- ▶ Providing greater support to schools for mental health services and support;
- ▶ Improving school resource officers training opportunities; and
- ▶ Clarifying the role of school resource officers.

Continuing to investigate and invest in these issues remains a priority of the department.



Community Spotlight

One of our School Justice Partnership grantees is La Plata Youth Services (LPYS), which is piloting a collaborative and innovative educational model for students in grades 6-12 who present significant emotional, behavioral, or psychological challenges. Founded on a therapeutic approach to learning and development, the Hub Therapeutic Program involves strategic partnerships between Durango School District 9-R, LPYS, the Child Wellness Center, and other community-based agencies to bring together robust, specialized expertise in a central location.

The Hub engages local partners to provide pediatric behavioral health services, art therapy and intensive family support services as well as music, STEM curriculum, cooking instruction, martial arts, and yoga activities. LPYS also brings integrated restorative practices into the school culture, establishing restorative language norms and teaching curriculum regarding social-emotional and problem-solving skills. This intensive, holistic wraparound services model increases protective factors for students and their families to build resiliency, social-emotional capacity, and behavioral health wellness and decreases negative involvement with law enforcement and the likelihood that participating students will face suspension or expulsion.

In its first two years, the Hub has reached 121 students. Students served have demonstrated success when transitioning back into their home-school environments, which are often students who have historically missed up to 80% of contact days. Recently, the Hub celebrated its first two graduates from the program.

Conclusion

While the Department of Law has taken the many actions highlighted in this report to support youth, invest in successful and evidence-based resources, and challenge bad actors, more is required. To adequately support youth mental health and promote increasingly positive outcomes our communities must come together to take deliberate and concrete action. We call on Colorado as a state to collectively invest more in this work and encourage each and every Coloradans to commit or recommit to this work in their own lives and communities.

If you would like to learn more about our work, or ask any questions, please feel free to contact our office:



(720) 508-6000



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Further Resources

If you or anyone you know needs confidential and free support for things like anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts or substance use concerns, or just need to talk, below are some resources:

Call [Colorado Crisis Services](#) at 844-493-TALK (8255) or text TALK to 38255.

Call the toll-free, 24-hour hotline of the [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#) at 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255) to be connected to a trained counselor at a suicide crisis center nearest you.

Contact the [Crisis Text Line](#) by texting TALK to 741741.

Call [Safe2Tell](#) at 1-877-542-7233 to anonymously report anything that concerns or threatens you, your friends, your family, or your community. If you have a genuine concern, make a report. You don't have to know all the warning signs, leave that to the experts.

A detailed list of additional resources can be found [here](#).

For those interested in learning more about how to engage with children and youth on mental health topics, help them become more resilient, and address emerging mental health challenges, the [U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory](#) on youth mental health provides specific resources for caregivers, educators, and other community members.

