

Children's Mental Health

DEFINITION

Children's mental health is the number of acute care hospitalizations of children under age 18 with a primary diagnosis of a mental disorder. Hospitalization is the most intensive type of treatment for mental disorders and represents only one type of treatment category on a broad continuum available to children with mental health concerns in Rhode Island.

SIGNIFICANCE

Mental health in childhood and adolescence is defined as the achievement of expected developmental, cognitive, social, and emotional milestones and the ability to use effective coping skills. Mental health influences children's health and behavior at home, in school, and in the community. Mental health conditions can impair daily functioning, prevent or affect academic achievement, increase involvement with the juvenile justice and child welfare systems, result in high treatment costs, diminish family incomes, and increase the risk for suicide. Children with mental health issues are also likely to have other chronic health conditions.^{1,2,3,4}

Mental health problems affect children of all backgrounds. In Rhode Island, one in five (19.0%) children ages six to 17 has a diagnosable mental health problem; one in 10 (9.8%) has significant functional impairment.⁵

Risk factors for childhood mental disorders include environmental factors like prenatal exposure to toxins (including alcohol), physical or sexual abuse, adverse childhood experiences, toxic stress, genetic or a family history of mental health issues, involvement with juvenile justice and child welfare systems, and living in poverty.^{6,7,8}

Mental health treatment systems tend to be fragmented and crisis-driven with disproportionate spending on high-end care and often lack adequate investments in prevention and community-based services.^{9,10,11} In Rhode Island in 2020, an estimated 33% of children ages three to 17 who needed mental health treatment or counseling had a problem obtaining needed care.¹² In Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) 2021, there were 837 children and youth awaiting psychiatric inpatient admission (psychiatric boarding), compared to FFY 2019 when there were 437 boarders. The average wait time for psychiatric admission in FFY 2021 was 3.7 days, compared to 3.2 days in FFY 2020. In FFY 2021, an average of two children per day were ready to leave the psychiatric hospital but were unable due to a lack of step-down availability or there being no other safe placement (including at home).^{13,14}



Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health

- ◆ **Children under age six experience a significant mental health issue at similar rates as older children (16-18%).¹⁵ Infant mental health is the growing capacity of infants and toddlers to experience, regulate, and express emotions, form close and secure relationships with caregivers, and explore their environment to learn and thrive. Infant mental health is synonymous with healthy social and emotional development.¹⁶**
- ◆ **Infants need to form secure attachment with at least one caregiver. Infants who do not develop secure attachment are at risk for learning delays, relationship dysfunction, difficulty expressing emotions, and future mental health disorders.^{17,18}**



Children with Medicaid and RItE Care with a Mental Health Diagnosis

- ◆ **In State Fiscal Year (SFY) 2021, 29% (31,394) of children under age 19 enrolled in Medicaid/RItE Care had a mental health diagnosis. Of those children with a mental health diagnosis, 18% were ages five and under, 43% were ages six to 12, and 39% were ages 13 to 18. In addition, 42% were females and 58% were males.¹⁹**
- ◆ **In SFY 2021, 1,096 children under age 19 enrolled in Medicaid/RItE Care were hospitalized due a mental health related condition (up from 1,030 in SFY 2020), and 2,246 children had a mental health related emergency department visit (down from 2,288 in SFY 2020). Ninety percent of those mental health-related emergency department visits did not result in a hospitalization.²⁰**
- ◆ **In 2020, 53% percent of all emergency department visits for children ages 17 and under with a mental health primary diagnosis were of children enrolled in RItE Care/Medicaid and 30% had commercial insurance.²¹**

Rhode Island's Community Mental Health Organizations

◆ The six Community Mental Health Organizations (CMHOs) in Rhode Island are the primary source of public mental health treatment services available in the state for children and adults.²² During 2021, 6,460 children under age 18 were treated at CMHOs.²³

Psychiatric Hospitals

Children Under Age 18 Treated at Rhode Island Psychiatric Hospitals, October 1, 2020 – September 30, 2021 (FFY 2021)

	BRADLEY HOSPITAL GENERAL PSYCHIATRIC SERVICES		BRADLEY HOSPITAL DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES PROGRAM		BUTLER HOSPITAL ADOLESCENT PSYCHIATRIC SERVICES	
	# TREATED	AVERAGE LENGTH OF STAY	# TREATED	AVERAGE LENGTH OF STAY	# TREATED	AVERAGE LENGTH OF STAY
Inpatient	607	27 days	100	55 days	606	9 days
Residential	225	49 days**	36	4.7 years	--	--
Partial Hospitalization	600	36 visits	140	36 visits	758	6 visits
Home-Based	0	NA	21	15 visits	--	--
Outpatient	1,156	**	29	**	251	NA

Source: Lifespan, 2020-2021 and Butler Hospital, 2020-2021. Programs can have overlapping enrollment. Number treated is based on the hospital census (i.e., the number of patients seen in any program during FFY 2021). The average length of stay is based on discharges. ** Only total number treated with outpatient services by the Lifespan Physician Group is available.

-- = Service not offered. NA = Data not available for this service.

◆ The two hospitals in Rhode Island that specialize in providing psychiatric care to children and youth are Bradley Hospital and Butler Hospital. Inpatient treatment at a psychiatric hospital is the most intensive type of mental health care. The most common diagnoses for youth treated at Butler or Bradley Hospitals in FFY 2021 in an inpatient setting were depressive disorders, anxiety disorders, adjustment disorders, schizophrenia, and bipolar disorders.^{24,25}

◆ Bradley Hospital has a Developmental Disabilities Program that offers highly specialized inpatient and residential services to children and adolescents who show signs of serious emotional and behavioral problems in addition to developmental disabilities. Lifespan School Solutions owns and operates six Bradley schools and six community-based classrooms/public school partnerships for children with behavioral health problems and developmental disabilities. Together, the programs had an average daily enrollment of 399 students in FFY 2021.²⁶

Emergency Care for Primary Diagnosis of Mental Disorder, Children Under Age 18, Rhode Island, 2011-2020*



Source: Rhode Island Department of Health, Hospital Discharge Database, 2011-2020. *Data are for emergency department visits and hospitalizations, not children. Children may visit emergency department or be hospitalized more than once. *Emergency department counts include all visits regardless of outcome and are not comparable to previous Factbooks. Note: Effective October 1, 2015, the International Classification of Disease (ICD) codes changed from the 9th classification to the 10th classification, which may impact comparability across the years.

◆ In 2020, there were 2,608 emergency department visits and 1,825 hospitalizations of Rhode Island children with a primary diagnosis of mental disorder.²⁷

Suicide Among Rhode Island Children and Youth

◆ Children and youth with mental health conditions are at increased risk for suicide.²⁸ In 2019, 15% of Rhode Island high school students reported attempting suicide one or more times during the past year.²⁹ In Rhode Island between 2016 and 2020, there were 2,356 emergency department visits and 1,236 hospitalizations of youth ages 13-19 due to suicide and 13 children ages 15 to 19 died due to suicide.^{30,31}

Covid Impact on Youth Mental Health

◆ While mental health challenges for youth existed before the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been an increase in anxiety and depression among youth, especially among young Children of Color and LGBTQ+ youth since 2020.³² Kids' Link RI, a critical program during the COVID-19 pandemic, is a behavioral health triage service and referral network and is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week to help triage children and youth in need of mental health services and refer them to treatment providers. In FY 2021, there were 9,702 calls to Kids' Link RI, doubling the calls received in FY 2019 (4,849).³³

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