

Research on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic affirms that youth and young adults are especially vulnerable to anxiety, depression, traumatic stress, substance use, suicidal ideation, and related issues¹. One quarter of youth ages 18-24 reported starting or increasing substance use as a means of coping with pandemic-related stress. Another 25% reported suicidal ideation in the past 30 days. These rates of increased distress were highest among this age group². Youth mental health needs are also rising, specifically related to depression and suicidal ideation, and especially among youth from systematically marginalized groups, including non-White and LGBTQ+ youth³. As anxiety and depression increase among young people so does the risk for substance use and addiction, which could further exacerbate mental illness and suicide risk.

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted usual access to mental health services, reduced positive social connections, and eliminated many protective factors that help to buffer against the consequences of anxiety, depression, and trauma. Even before the pandemic, youth experienced persistent barriers to accessing consistent, developmentally appropriate services and supports.

Youth and young adults need access to substance use and mental health supports that are developmentally tailored and culturally responsive, and provide opportunities for prevention and early intervention along with assessment, treatment, and recovery when needed. Having access to a range of supports over time can help youth to engage positively

with academics, relationships with friends and family, recreation, and other self-defined interests and goals.

Recommendations

State agency and provider system leaders know that there is no time to lose. Young people need support more than ever before, and that support must be comprehensive, equitable, effective, and sustainable. This is no easy task for agencies and systems already stretched to the breaking point, grappling with workforce shortages, and reeling from accelerated change and decision-making processes. C4 can support you to assess your continuum of services and supports for youth, and define and implement strategies for addressing unmet needs, closing gaps, and improving outcomes for youth. Potential focus areas include:

- Assessing and expanding the continuum of youth behavioral health supports and youth leadership opportunities. In partnership with local youth leaders, C4 can support you to ensure that the continuum is as accessible, equitable, and comprehensive as possible to meet the different needs of youth as they develop into young adults.
- Supporting current treatment and recovery support agencies to develop or strengthen programming for youth and young adults, including engagement with young people to inform program design, delivery, and evaluation.
- Developing robust, sustainable youth development, advocacy, and leadership pathways for youth and young adults with lived experience of mental health conditions,

substance use disorder, homelessness, and/or involvement with child welfare, juvenile justice, and other youth-serving systems.

- Bringing together youth, families, service providers, and state agencies to address policy and practice challenges related to care transitions, information sharing, engagement, and decision-making.
- Supporting schools to identify non-academic support needs and solutions, especially for students and families that have been systematically marginalized by housing instability, trauma, behavioral health challenges, racial inequities, or other factors.
- Implementing [Project Amp](#) in school-based settings. Developed by C4, Project Amp is a flexible, person-centered, extended brief intervention delivered by trained young adult peers with lived experience of recovery, to adolescents who are at low-to-moderate risk of problem substance use.
- Selecting and implementing other youth-specific prevention and recovery support models that address youth mental health and substance use.



Endnotes

- 1 Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). (2021). Disaster Technical Assistance Center Supplemental Research Bulletin. A Preliminary Look at the Mental Health and Substance Use-Related Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic. May 2021. Rockville, MD: SAMHSA. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/47bfyas5>
- 2 SAMHSA, 2021
- 3 Reinert, M., Nguyen, T., & Fritze, D. (2021). The State of Mental Health in America. 2021. Alexandria, VA: Mental Health America. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/nwzsf6dj>

To learn more about C4's work with youth-serving organizations, please contact us at training@c4innovates.com.

About C4 Innovations

C4 Innovations (C4) promotes equitable access to recovery, wellness, and housing stability for people who are systematically marginalized. We are committed to reducing disparities and achieving equitable outcomes by promoting best practices for individuals, families, and communities affected by substance use, mental illness, trauma, and housing instability. Central to C4's core values is the involvement of people with lived experience in all of our work. Over one-third of C4 staff identify as having lived experience of substance use, mental illness, trauma, or homelessness.

Using state-of-the-art research, training, facilitation, and implementation strategies, C4 helps individuals, agencies, communities, and systems deepen the impact of their work. C4 helps to strengthen organizations at multiple levels through training, technical assistance, coaching, workforce development initiatives, implementation of evidence-based and best practices, capacity building, systems change, and strategic planning to develop leadership and long-term sustainability. C4 supports multidisciplinary teams and communities to facilitate approaches that are inclusive, integrated, and collaborative. We are known by our collaborators as an organization that is mission-focused, grounded in both research and real-world experience, committed to high quality, and being trustworthy and reliable partners.