

## Article 23: Mental Illness and Mental Health Programs

**Mental health programs** play a crucial role in addressing the complex and diverse challenges associated with **mental illness**. These initiatives range from community-based outreach to specialized clinical treatments, providing essential resources for prevention, early intervention, and long-term recovery (Dzubur et al., 2023; Kirnan et al., 2025; Ward et al., 2023). By offering tailored support systems and reducing stigma, these programs aim to improve the quality of life for individuals experiencing mental health conditions. Their existence is vital for bridging the gap between diagnosis and effective, accessible care, fostering a more supportive environment for all (Bhandari & Gupta, 2024; Goodwin et al., 2022; Kirkbride et al., 2024).

### Causes and Scope of Mental Illness in the United States

Mental illness affects a substantial portion of the U.S. population, as more than 60 million adults—over one in five—have experienced a mental illness in recent years. The causes of these conditions are a complex interplay of genetic, biological, and environmental factors, including chronic stress, trauma, and socioeconomic inequalities. There has been a notable rise in mental health issues, particularly among youth and young adults, which was further magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite this widespread prevalence, a considerable treatment gap persists, since many Americans are not receiving the care they need (Bhandari & Gupta, 2024; Goodwin et al., 2022; Kirkbride et al., 2024).

On that note, a study explored how social and structural conditions influence mental illness over the life course. Drawing primarily from evidence in high-income countries—including the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States—the authors synthesized findings from existing observational studies. The research they reviewed examines how poverty, discrimination, neighborhood disadvantage, childhood adversity, and limited social support contribute to the development of mental disorders. Across these studies, individuals facing persistent or severe social hardship showed a considerably higher likelihood of experiencing mental illness, and early disadvantages often continued to shape mental health risks well into adulthood. The evidence showed that unstable housing, economic strain, and social exclusion elevated population-level vulnerability by creating cumulative stress and reducing access to protective environments. The review highlights that these factors operate at both individual and community levels, revealing that mental illness is not only a clinical issue but also a reflection of broader social and economic inequalities. The authors concluded that addressing these social determinants—especially through early, population-level interventions—is essential for reducing mental health disparities and the overall burden of mental illness (Kirkbride et al., 2024).

Another study examined how the mental health of children and adolescents in the United States shifted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Following that lead, the researchers assessed changes in children’s emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and social functioning using nationally representative data collected through the National Health Interview Survey between 2019 and 2022. The findings showed a clear rise in mental distress beginning in 2020, and adolescents experienced the greatest increases in emotional difficulties, concentration issues, and behavioral challenges. These worsening patterns persisted through 2022, suggesting broad and lasting effects of the pandemic on youth mental well-being. Overall, the study showed that disruptions to schooling, family routines, social environments, and overall stability contributed to elevated distress among U.S. children. Hence, the authors

concluded that the continued deterioration in youth mental health represents a significant public health issue and emphasized the need for expanded, accessible mental health support—especially within school settings and early in development—to address the growing burden of mental illness among young people (Bhandari & Gupta, 2024).

Similarly, a study examined how the prevalence of past-year depression changed across the United States from 2015 to 2020. The researchers analyzed nationally representative data from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health, which collects information annually from people aged 12 and older. Their findings showed a steady rise in depression during this period, and adolescents and young adults experienced some of the largest increases in symptoms and past-year depressive episodes. The upward trend appeared across nearly all demographic groups, suggesting that the scope of depression in the U.S. has expanded beyond any single population. The study pointed to social, economic, and environmental pressures as potential contributors to these growing rates, especially as daily stressors intensified during the years examined. These patterns indicate that depression is becoming a more widespread public health challenge rather than an isolated concern. The authors concluded that the increasing demand for mental health support is outpacing existing prevention and treatment resources and emphasized the importance of improving mental health services to better address the rising burden of depression in the United States (Goodwin et al., 2022).

### **Effectiveness and Impact of Mental Health Programs**

Mental health programs have consistently improved treatment outcomes, helping mitigate the adverse effects of mental illness. Research indicates 70-90% of individuals with serious mental illnesses show significant symptom reduction and improved quality of life with effective treatments. Early intervention in conditions like depression and anxiety leads to better long-term prognoses and helps prevent conditions from worsening. Community- and school-based initiatives, along with individual therapies, are crucial in providing effective and accessible care for millions of Americans (Dzubur et al., 2023; Kirnan et al., 2025; Ward et al., 2023).

Following that lead, a study examined the effectiveness of Spring Health—a digital workplace mental health program offered to employees in the United States. The researchers analyzed data from workers who used the benefit, drawing on clinical assessments and workplace outcome measures collected before and after participation. Their findings show meaningful reductions in depression and anxiety symptoms among individuals who engaged with the program, and these clinical improvements were accompanied by positive workplace changes such as lower absenteeism and enhanced job performance. The results also indicate that increased engagement with the program improved mental health and work-related outcomes. These patterns demonstrate that digital mental health programs can play a valuable role in supporting employees' well-being. Thus, the authors concluded that integrating comprehensive mental health benefits into organizational settings may help reduce the burden of mental illness while offering accessible and effective care for employees (Ward et al., 2023).

Another study examined the impact of the digital program myStrength on adults experiencing anxiety and depression symptoms. The researchers analyzed real-world data from adults who used the program through an employee wellness benefit, drawing on self-reported anxiety and depression scores collected over time. Their findings showed statistically significant reductions in both anxiety and depression symptoms among participants, and individuals with higher baseline severity experienced

greater improvement. Engagement patterns also showed that more frequent program use was associated with stronger symptom relief. These findings indicated that digital mental health programs such as myStrength can contribute to meaningful improvements for adults managing common mental illnesses and related symptoms. The authors concluded that digital tools can play a valuable role in mental health care when participation is sustained and the program content supports users across different levels of clinical severity (Dzibur et al., 2023).

Lastly, a study assessed the impact of the Coming Up for AIR school-based program on youth mental health literacy and help-seeking behaviors. The researchers collected two data sets from schools in the United States. The first data set included pre- and post-survey responses from 8th–10th grade students across four schools between 2020 and 2023 to measure mental health literacy gains. The second data set consisted of archived declaration-card records from 28 schools collected between January 2019 and February 2024 to track self- and friend-initiated help-seeking. Findings showed significant improvement in mental health literacy among participants, regardless of gender, grade level, and prior curriculum exposure. The study also found that help-seeking increased substantially after the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the authors, these results confirm that external educational programming can increase awareness of mental health concerns and promote help-seeking in youths. Hence, they concluded that schools are at the forefront of addressing youth mental health issues and urge implementation of educational interventions that raise literacy and encourage help-seeking behaviors (Kirnan et al., 2025).

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