YouthAction Community Leadership Course
Teen Mental Health in NYC

Citizens’ Committee for Children’s (CCC) YouthAction Community Leadership Course (YCLC) is a youth advocacy training program for high school students from New York City’s public and private schools. CCC is a seventy-one year old independent child advocacy organization whose mission is to ensure that every child is healthy, housed, educated, and safe. Since 1999, YouthAction NYC has introduced aspiring young leaders to civic engagement and advocacy opportunities.

During this ten-week advocacy training program, YCLC participants meet once a week after school to research and analyze youth issues, and to develop policy and budgetary recommendations to improve the lives of young people in New York City. This semester, the YCLC focused on mental health issues that impact youth. Students surveyed 168 youth between the ages of 13 and 18 to get their opinions and also visited programs and agencies that provide mental health services, conduct research, and/or work to influence public policy. The following is a summary of the group’s findings and recommendations.

YCLC participants believe that these recommendations, created by teens, are essential to the public conversation about adolescent mental health, because ultimately it will be these students and their fellow teens who will be the beneficiaries of positive policy changes.

Findings and Recommendations

Too Many Teens are Suffering
Of the 168 teens we surveyed, a majority believe that the following mental health issues are very common among teens in New York City: stress (83%), depression (60%), and anxiety (55%). In addition, 79% said they know other teens with a mental health issue. We know that nationally, only 20% of adolescents with a mental illness receive treatment, and we think that New York City should take steps to reach more youth who are suffering.

- We recommend increasing the number of schools with licensed mental health services on site. Currently, out of 1,700 schools citywide only 220 have school-based mental health clinics.
- We recommend that all schools have at least 1 Licensed Social Worker on staff.
- We recommend an increase in funding for community-based organizations and mental health providers that provide affordable, quality mental health services for adolescents.

Many Teens Don’t Know How to Find Help
We had the opportunity to explore New York City’s official NYC Teen web page, and believe it is a very helpful tool for young people looking for resources related to health and mental health. We also learned that several schools received the Teen Talk Tool Kit, which contains all of the information from the NYC Teen page and is meant to be used by educators to raise awareness about teen mental health issues and resources among students. Unfortunately, of the teens we surveyed, 80% had never heard of NYC Teen.

- We support the NYC Teen page and recommend that it be advertised to the public through the radio, subway advertisements, television, and social media.
- We recommend that the Department of Education make it mandatory for every middle and high school health class to include information from the Teen Talk Tool Kit as part of the curriculum.
Untreated Mental Health Issues Can Lead to Suicide

We learned that 1 out of 4 high school students will have a depressive episode as young as 14 years old. If left untreated, depression can lead to suicide, the 3rd leading cause of death among teenagers. According to the national Center for Disease Control and Prevention’s 2013 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 27% of NYC high school students felt sad or hopeless; 13% seriously considered suicide; and 8% attempted suicide. Additionally, the stress of transitioning out of high school has been identified as a factor that increases the risk of suicide among teens.

- We recommend professional development training for all high school social workers, guidance counselors, and teachers that would enable them to identify students who may be at risk for depression and/or suicide.

School Culture Matters

When asked about factors that contribute to mental health issues in teens, 72% strongly agreed that bullying is a contributing factor and 61% strongly agreed that peer pressure is a contributing factor. We learned that creating a positive school culture through community-building initiatives prevents bullying and peer pressure among students at school.

- We support the Mayor’s efforts to expand the community school model, and recommend that these schools replicate successful community-building initiatives that are happening in existing community schools.
- We recommend using advisory periods as a time for students to have face to face discussions about issues such as bullying, peer pressure, and mental health.

Youth Voice

“Mental health is something that is constant throughout our lives. Adolescents require guidance on how to deal with their own individual issues. Attacking the problem from an early stage is essential so that it doesn’t result in more serious problems. Teen mental health is an issue that deserves attention.”

“I knew a lot about mental health beforehand; however, I only knew facts as opposed to how it actually affected my peers. I come from a home where if there is something wrong, I can say something, which I am grateful for. This program showed me that there are teens that do not have that option and I hope to be able to accomplish my goal to make sure all teens have the ability to express their issues comfortably.”

“The information we have gathered from our interviews and field research shows that often teens who have mental health issues don’t know where to go and that sometimes they are scared to ask for help.”

“I think that teen mental health is something that needs to be taken more seriously. There should be more programs, centers, and websites that teens can go in order to seek help.”

“I learned how important it is for there to be awareness of the various mental health issues because it directly impacts the teens of our city.”

“Every school should have programs that address teen mental health. No school should be left behind.”

“I think there should be more mental health services in schools, and that existing services should be promoted better. Perhaps there could be an app where it tells you where in your area you can find help.”

“Teens are sometimes taken for granted when they say they need help, and then people wonder why they don’t speak up about their issues. We need to take our youth more seriously to decrease teen suicides, self-harm, and the percentage of youth not receiving the treatment that they need. Once we listen, we can learn.”