



The Kids Are Not OK, But Education Innovations Provide Hope

By Carol Graham

We have an increasingly divided country, polity, and society. While this strains our family dinners and creates anxiety on the left and right, one of the most notable results is the stark decline in the well-being and mental health of our youth. They are facing deep uncertainties about the future of jobs and labor markets, being able to afford college and the consequences of not having a degree, worsening climate change, declining communities, and toxic civic discourse.¹ The youth mental health crisis in large part reflects a decline in hope that has resulted from these trends.

The deterioration in youth mental health first became evident in 2011.² Today, our young adults ages 18 to 25 are the least happy demographic group, departing from a long-established U-shaped relationship between life satisfaction and age in

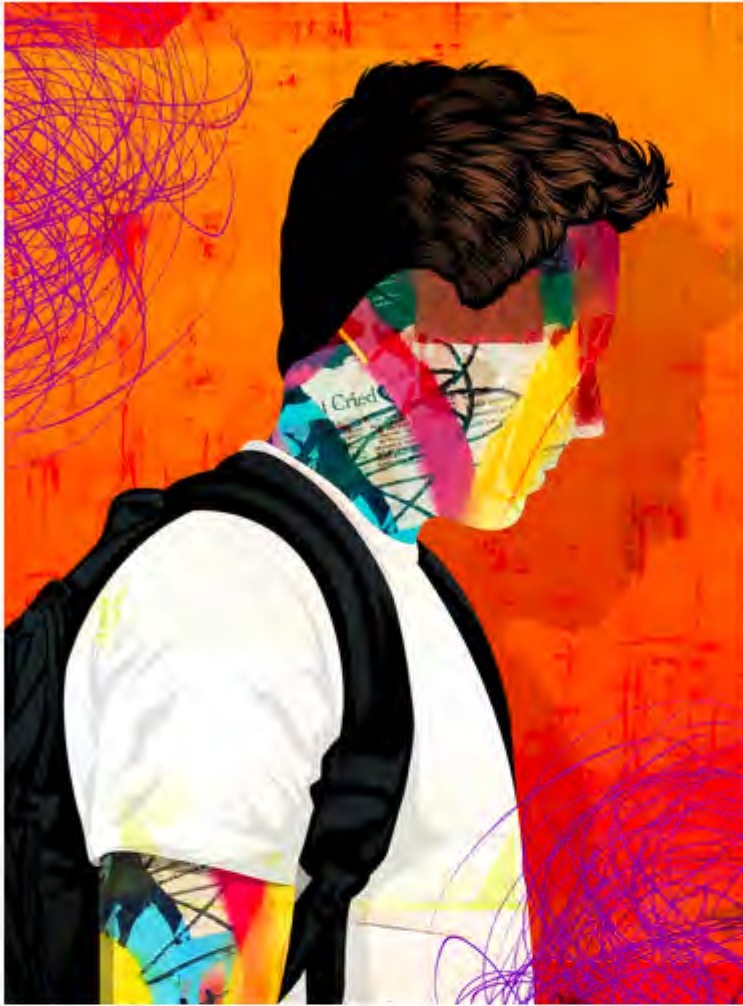
many countries worldwide.³ The longstanding U-curve reflects the unhappiness and stress that most people experience in the midlife years as they juggle financial and family constraints (such as caring for both their children and their aging parents), while both the young and the old exhibit higher life satisfaction and lower stress, anxiety, and depression.⁴ But now, youth in the United States are faring worse than their stressed-out parents.

Our young are also unhappy compared to the young in many other countries, including those that are far less wealthy than the United States. These include Bulgaria, Ecuador, and Honduras.⁵ In 2024, US youth ranked 62nd in the world happiness rankings. Even more concerning, they also are experiencing an increase in anxiety, depression, and suicide.⁶

There is no magic solution for this crisis. Most suggested policies focus on better regulation of social media and increased access to mental health care. While both of these things are important, they will not address the deeper economic, climate, and civil discourse challenges that precipitated the well-being crisis. Social media and misinformation surely exacerbate the trends, but the root causes are deeper and broader.

The costs of not solving this crisis are high, not only for the youth who are suffering during what should be a very happy time in life, but also in terms of future earnings and productivity and

*Carol Graham is a senior fellow in the Economic Studies program at Brookings, a College Park Professor at the University of Maryland, and a senior scientist at Gallup. She received Pioneer Awards from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation in 2017 and 2021 and a Lifetime Distinguished Scholar award from the International Society for Quality-of-Life Studies in 2018. The author of numerous articles and books, her most recent book is *The Power of Hope: How the Science of Well-Being Can Save Us from Despair*.*



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our society's health and life expectancy. In 2021, life expectancy for college-educated adults in the United States (who make up just one-third of our population) was eight and a half years longer than for adults without a bachelor's degree—more than triple the gap in 1992.⁷ And today, many of the jobs available to those without a bachelor's do not offer health insurance.

In addition, we have a more general crisis of “deaths of despair,”⁸ primarily driven by premature deaths due to suicide, drug overdoses, and alcohol and other poisonings. Initially, these deaths were concentrated among middle-aged, blue-collar white people in communities suffering from declines in manufacturing, mining, and related industries; these industries typically anchored their communities, often serving as the main source of employment and supporting related civic organizations and local resources such as grocery stores, restaurants, and newspapers. Now, these deaths are spreading to a wider range of races and age groups, including Black people—who have long

displayed resilience in the face of injustice and hardship—and teenagers. This crisis is of such magnitude that it has steadily driven down our national average life expectancy since 2015, with overdose deaths alone surpassing 100,000 per year in 2021 and 2022.⁹ The increasing participation of the young in these patterns suggests that our crisis of despair is becoming an intergenerational one.

The prospect of intergenerational transmission is disturbing, and there are signs of it throughout research my colleagues and I have conducted in low-income communities. For example, a survey of white youth in Missouri found that they have finished or want to finish high school and, at most, perhaps an additional year of technical education—but their parents do not support them in achieving higher levels of education. This reflects, among other things, a decline in the American narrative of individual effort being the key to success for the white working class.¹⁰ There is no longer a stable work-life narrative for those who do not acquire higher education or technical skills. This is especially concerning because the factors that underpin despair can make people more susceptible to extremist ideologies and create entire geographies that are prone to radicalization and violence. Poverty, unemployment, income inequality, and low education levels are all relevant factors in radicalization, extremism, and mass shootings.¹¹

Restoring Hope

An important and underreported solution to the crisis lies in restoring hope. While hope resembles optimism—as individuals believe things will get better—an equally important part of hope (and not optimism) is that individuals can do things that improve their lives and thereby demonstrate agency over their futures. Helping the young form a vision of what their futures can look like will help them have hope and aspirations. This is crucial because, as my research has found, there are strong linkages between hope and long-term outcomes in education, health, and mental well-being, with hope more important to the outcomes of youth with limited access to education and mentorship.¹²

Psychiatrists often cite restoring hope as the first step to recovering from mental illness but offer very few prescriptions for doing so.¹³ A classic definition of hope—which entails aspirations, agency, and pathways to achieve goals—provides a good frame for thinking about how to restore hope, but lacks examples relevant to today's youth.¹⁴ Yet today an increasing number of new programs aim to provide students with the agency and pathways to acquire the education they need to lead healthy and productive futures. One potential policy innovation that most people can agree on and that will help restore hope among the young is the development of new models of education that focus on the mix of technological and social-emotional skills students need to succeed in tomorrow's labor force.

Education Innovations

Educational innovations are taking root across the country that focus on middle and high school students and on helping

students who want a college education to achieve it. Community colleges and career and technical education (CTE) programs stand out, as they often bridge the gaps between the skills kids learn in high school and those that are needed to succeed in college and the workplace. CTE in particular provides a productive longer-term track for those who do not want or cannot afford to pursue a college education.

Starting as early as middle school, some programs focus on the social-emotional skills that students will need to succeed in rapidly changing labor markets, such as creativity, adaptability, and self-esteem, in addition to traditional technical skills. The #BeeWell program in Greater Manchester, a large county in the deindustrialized northeast of England, introduces these skills as an integral part of its student engagement process in over 160 schools.¹⁵ It includes strategies to combat loneliness, which is increasing among the young in both the United States and the United Kingdom and is often a precursor to depression.¹⁶ The program relies on the cooperation of families and communities and uses inputs from large-scale surveys of students. Surveys over three years showed modest improvements in student well-being, and demand for the program is increasing in and beyond Greater Manchester.¹⁷

Youthful Savings is a high school program founded in the United States that targets low-income students. The curriculum addresses basic economic principles, financial literacy, ethical entrepreneurship practices, and protecting mental well-being. Students who participate in the program tend to go on to a vocational school or four-year college. A key feature of the program, according to the four program leaders and participants I interviewed in June of 2024, is the active mentorship that the program leadership provides—that mentorship was a critical factor in the students' decisions to go on to some form of post-high school education.¹⁸

Across the country, CTE programs are playing an increasingly important role in helping youth develop pathways to good jobs—and therefore restoring hope. In Massachusetts, for example, supporting CTE is a statewide initiative based on creating pathways to successful careers by fostering STEM skills for students of all income levels and backgrounds. Some of the programs are based in high schools and require that students spend part of their training time in local organizations, such as local engineering and building firms, among others. The state has also implemented higher reimbursement rates for high school building projects incorporating CTE programs. These efforts are aimed at modernizing and enhancing vocational and technical education opportunities for students throughout the state.¹⁹ And an innovative CTE program in Cleveland has high school students taking classes and engaged in workplace learning in a hospital as they explore healthcare careers—they can even graduate high school with state-tested nurse aide credentials.²⁰ Similar high school-hospital partnerships are now expanding thanks to Bloomberg Philanthropies.²¹

Community colleges are also playing a critical role in helping low-income youth find fulfilling education and work opportunities. Macomb Community College (MCC), outside

Detroit, has pioneered a model that allows students to take courses from participating state universities and complete four-year degrees while remaining on the community college campus. This avoids the expenses and time constraints introduced by moving and/or long commutes and is particularly important for older students who often must balance work and family obligations. Each student who comes to MCC is partnered with a mentor who advises them on their academic progress and steers them to mental health resources when needed. Approximately 65 percent of students who attend MCC complete four-year degrees, either on the campus or at state schools.²²

Another aspect of the MCC model is the James Jacobs Legacy Series, which sponsors civic engagement activities and periodic lectures for the students and the community. Macomb County is diverse, with retired auto workers, a longstanding but traditionally discriminated against African American community, and new immigrants. The Legacy Series aims to increase civic engagement across the three populations and to expose students to new connections and networks that enhance their chances of living and working in Macomb post-graduation.

An important part of hope is that individuals demonstrate agency over their futures.



A related initiative inspired in part by the MCC model is underway at Lorain County Community College in Ohio. The college collaborates with employers and other regional partners to provide targeted curricula and paid internships, with the objective of setting up every student for success. Some programs at Lorain, such as one in microelectromechanical systems, have a 100 percent success rate in placing graduates in full-time jobs.

This is because internships in local firms are a mandatory part of its curriculum, and that curriculum is frequently updated with employer input. The internships provide students with both hands-on experience and focused mentorship.²³

On the demand side of the story, efforts to renovate regional economies and communities in the parts of the country that have suffered the most from the decline of manufacturing industries and employment largely hinge on having local colleges and universities. Higher education institutions provide not only relevant training for the labor force, but also the threshold of knowledge and civic engagement that is necessary for communities and small cities to attract and retain new industries and their workforces.²⁴

We can help young people facing decisive junctures in their lives gain agency, skills, and connections.



Mentors and Mental Health

As noted above, a critical part of the success of efforts to restore hope and give youth new opportunities is the provision of mentorship. Mentors not only guide young adults in their goals of skill acquisition but also provide advice on how to deal with mental health and other issues that often arise during the transition from youth to adulthood. While stress and anxiety are not new for high school- and college-age youth, as the rising number of serious incidents shows, they have been severely exacerbated by the above-noted uncertainties about the future of job openings, education, climate change, political divisions, community declines, and even the nature of information itself. While these trends affect many of us, they are particularly challenging for young people trying to make decisions about how to aspire to and invest in better futures.

Insufficient access to mental health care is also a central issue, especially in the roughly 80 percent of rural counties that do not have a single psychiatrist.²⁵ The role of peers and mentors is invaluable to encourage those who need it to seek necessary treatment. Peers can also help available—and new—providers identify vulnerable people and populations, as does the Visible Hands Collaborative in the environs of Pittsburgh and beyond.²⁶ This is particularly important for young men; while they often are more reluctant than young women to seek out mental health care because of the continued stigma attached to it, they are showing increasing signs of distress, such as low college completion rates and high levels of labor force dropout.²⁷

Given that most mental health conditions emerge during school years, efforts to expand detection and early intervention in schools are promising. Efforts in Massachusetts and Texas that focused on urgent access have shown potential for rapid scaling.²⁸ And several organizations are collaborating to establish a new “theory of change” in this area by involving trusted community members—ranging from hairdressers to school teachers—to assess the risk of mental health disorders in communities.²⁹ It is worth a note of caution, though, that projects that seek scale and widespread coverage at low cost are more effective at treating the average case than dealing with complex or more serious mental health issues. That said, given that mental health is increasingly considered a societal challenge on a much larger scale than in the past (and certainly than before the COVID-19 pandemic), it is worth exploring strategies that can reach more people—particularly those who previously have not had access—in new ways. This could help catch the problem in its early stages rather than wait until more extensive and medically intense treatment is necessary.

Providing youth with the skills and support they need to navigate the uncertainties in the economic, social, and other facets of their lives is an important step forward in addressing the crisis of youth mental health. By helping young people facing decisive junctures in their lives gain agency, skills, and connections through education, the initiatives described above show that restoring hope and taking on mental health issues during these very uncertain times is indeed possible.

Even though these programs—and others nationwide—are gaining momentum, we must generate a broad base of public support for them so that they do not operate in silos or only in “supportive” states and counties. This will require broad consensus and the cooperation of both public and private sectors. Without it, we are unlikely to make progress on solving the crisis that threatens the future of our country’s young and their ability to even conceive of pursuing the American dream. Especially now, in the early days of understanding how our political, economic, and social divisions are impacting our youth, we must have hope. Our shared concerns for our children and our country give us common ground—that alone gives me hope that we can resolve our differences enough to reimagine the opportunities we offer our youth. □

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/winter2024-2025/graham.