

Knox County Mental Health Report 2023



KNOX COUNTY
TENNESSEE
HEALTH DEPARTMENT

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Knox County Mental Health Report

Background

Mental health affects every aspect of our lives, from childhood and adolescence through adulthood. It influences how we cope, adapt, and solve problems. Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being.¹ Poor mental health and mental illness are frequently used interchangeably but are not the same. A person can experience poor mental health days and not be diagnosed with a mental illness. A person's mental health can change over time depending on certain factors and the demands of their environment.

There are more than 200 types of mental illnesses and disorders, and they are among the most common health conditions in the United States.¹ There is no single cause for mental illness, but factors may include early adverse life experiences, coping with chronic medical conditions, biological factors or chemical imbalances in the brain, the use of drugs or alcohol, or feeling lonely or isolated. More than 50% of Americans will be diagnosed with a mental illness or disorder at some point in their lifetime.¹

Tennessee is ranked 27th out of 51 states (including the District of Columbia) for high prevalence of mental illness and low access to mental health care, indicating the need for services but a shortage of providers to meet the demand.³

The goal of this report is to present and share data about the state of mental health in Knox County and describe the reported issues and barriers in the community.

Methods

The Knox County Health Department and the University of Tennessee, Knoxville Social Work Office of Research and Public Service collaborated to develop and administer a survey to mental health providers, first responders, and other stakeholders in Knox County.

The survey asked 18 questions that included population and demographic questions, which part of the county they work in, which sector (e.g., public or private) they work in, job title, their capacity to provide services, what resources they offer, and what barriers and needs they have in providing mental health care.

Along with the survey, there were 35 focus group interviews and nine key informant interviews. In these interviews, community members and mental health providers were asked five questions about experiences, processes, and improvements to mental health care in Knox County.

Key informants were identified and selected to represent differences in service sector, geographical areas of Knox County served, and ages of clients, among other special populations. Finally, additional data from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), Homelessness in Knox County report, community health data collected by the University of Tennessee, and local hospital discharge data were used to supplement findings.

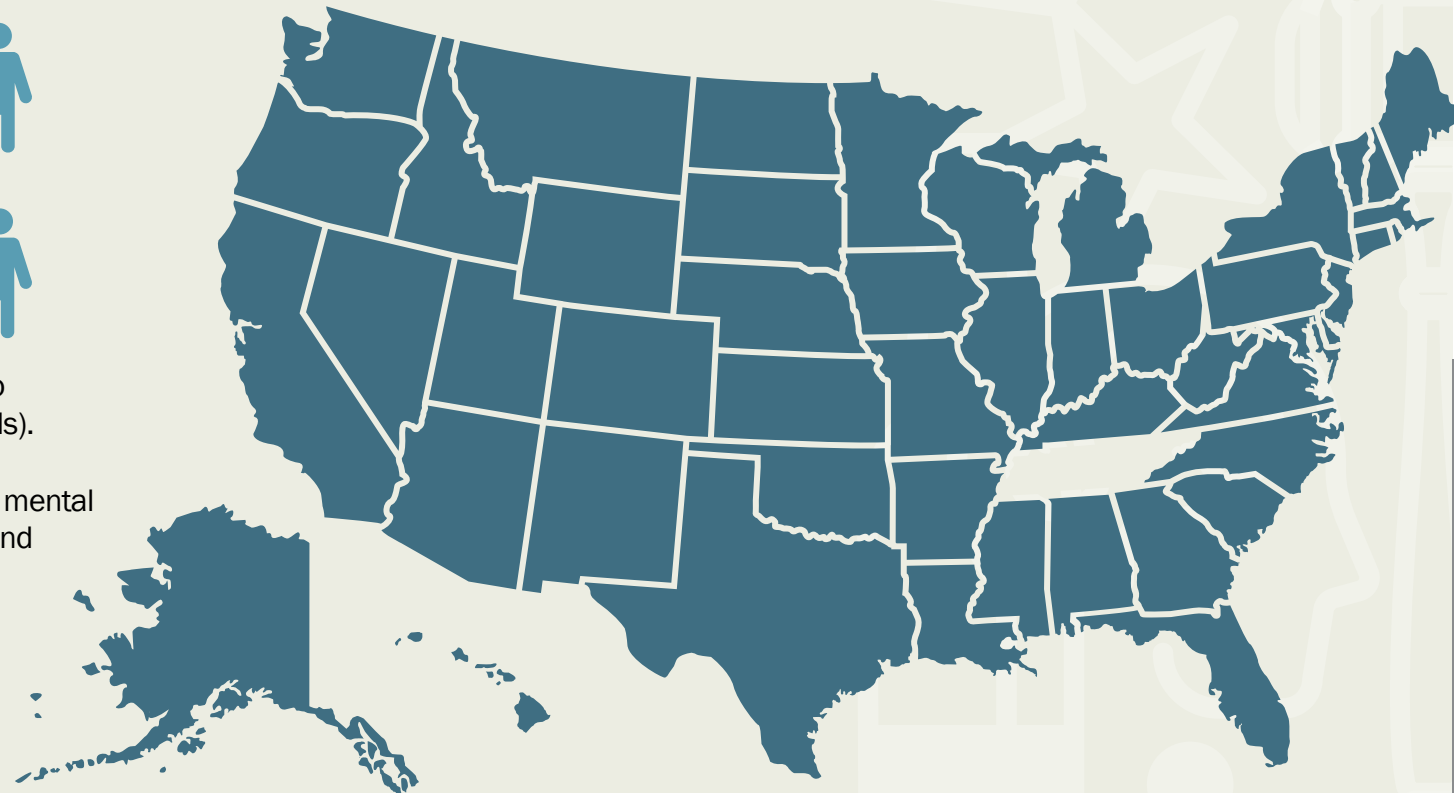


More than 50% of Americans will be diagnosed with a mental illness at some point in their life.

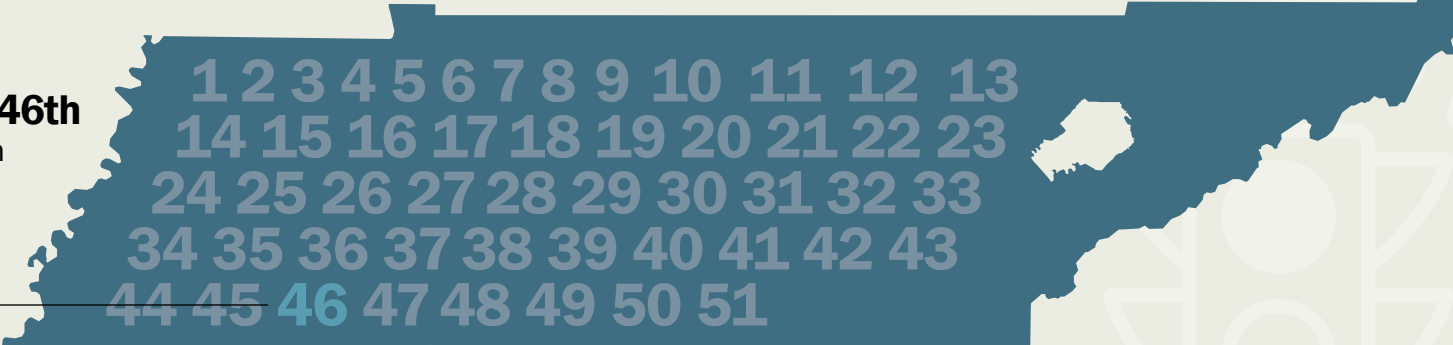
- More than 1 in 5 adult Americans live with a mental illness.



- **55%** of people with a mental illness receive no treatment (that's more than 28 million individuals).
- 14.2 million people 18+ are living with a serious mental illness such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and major depression (6% of all U.S. adults).
- In the U.S., the ratio of individuals to mental health providers is **350:1**
- In Tennessee, the ratio of individuals to mental health providers is **590:1**



Tennessee ranks 46th
(of 51) for Mental Health Workforce Availability



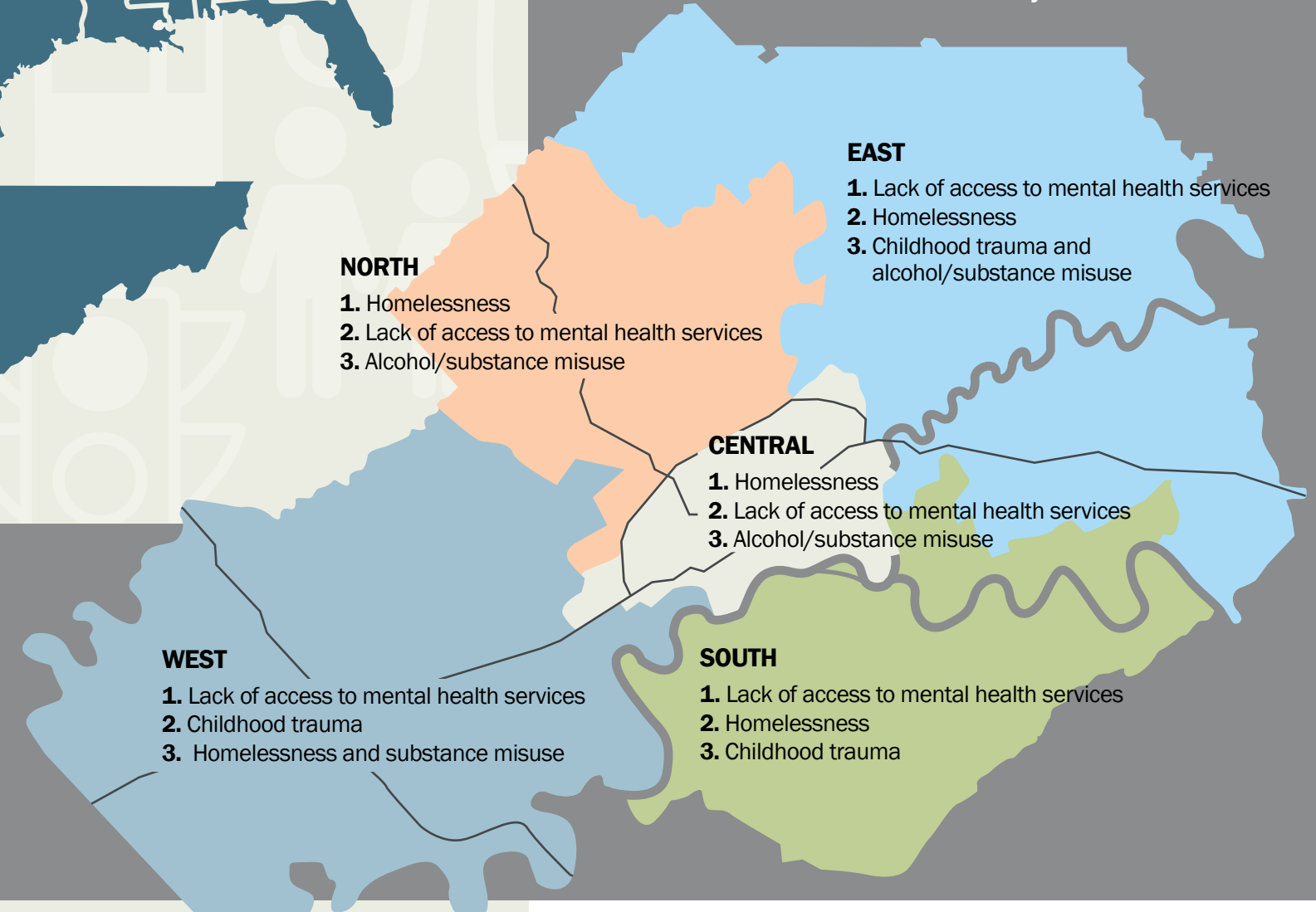
Social Determinants of Mental Health

There is no single cause for mental illness but there are several risk factors that can contribute to the development and severity of a mental health condition, including:

- Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), such as experiencing abuse or witnessing violence as a child
- Social and environmental factors such as income inequality and housing instability
- Biological factors such as individual brain chemistry or family history
- Poor access to mental health care

Top 3 Provider- and Partner-Reported Mental Health Concerns

Providers and community partners were asked about the top three issues impacting community mental health in each of the five Knox County sectors.



Knox County is designated as a Health Professional Shortage Area for Mental Health providers for low-income individuals.⁴

Based on community health data collected by the University of Tennessee:

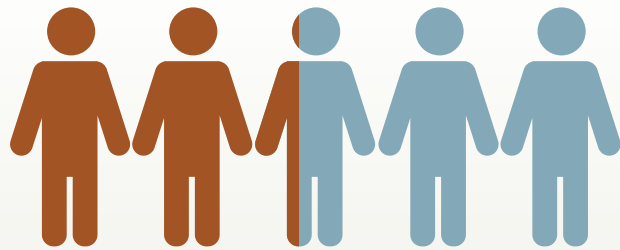
- The average number of days that Knox County residents reported that their mental health was not good in the past 30 days was approximately five days.
- 28% of respondents have been told they have a depressive disorder (including depression, major depression, dysthymia, or minor depression).

Top Three Most Urgent Issues Impacting Mental Health in Knox County

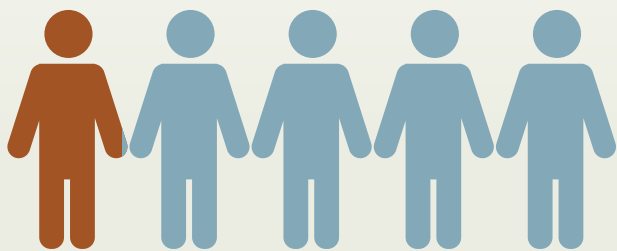
Mental health providers were asked to name the top three most urgent issues impacting mental health within the communities they serve. The most commonly reported issues were childhood trauma, anxiety, and homelessness. Providers identified young adults ages 18-24 as the group in greatest need of mental health services, alongside those with substance use disorder and persons experiencing homelessness.

No. 1: Childhood Trauma

Mental health providers in Knox County ranked childhood trauma as the most urgent mental health issue and the top issue impacting mental health in various demographic and population groups in Knox County. The 2022 YRBS found that nearly half (44%) of Knox County Schools (KCS) high school students reported at least one adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and that approximately 1 out of 5 (19%) KCS high school students reported having experienced two or more ACEs, which can lead to increases in depression and other negative mental and physical health outcomes.⁵ Students with two or more ACEs were more likely to report a variety of mental health problems, tobacco/electronic vapor product use, illicit drug use, and violence-related behaviors, compared to students who reported no ACEs.



Almost half of KCS high school students reported at least one ACEs.



Almost 1 out of 5 of KCS high school students reported having experienced two or more ACEs.

Source: 2022 Youth Risk Behavior Survey



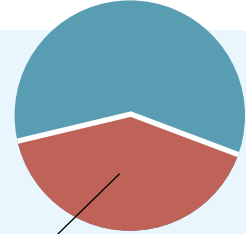


No. 2: Anxiety

Anxiety disorders are the most common mental health concern in the U.S.⁶ Mental health providers reported that anxiety was the second most urgent issue impacting mental health in Knox County. Anxiety also ranked in the top three issues for children and adolescents ages 0-17 and within several different demographic and population groups including LGBTQ+, Hispanic/Latinx, and individuals with chronic health conditions. Respondents also ranked anxiety as the most urgent issue in the inner city.

No. 3: Homelessness

It is estimated that 25% of people experiencing homelessness in the U.S. have a serious mental illness. In 2020, approximately 7,700 individuals were receiving homeless services in Knox County,⁷ approximately 2% of the Knox County population. Mental health is one of the top five causes of homelessness in Knox County, along with a lack of affordable housing, eviction, job loss/unemployment, and substance misuse.⁷ If a person is experiencing untreated or undiagnosed mental illness, their ability to obtain stable long-term housing can be affected.⁷ Homelessness can also contribute to mental illnesses such as anxiety, depression, and PTSD due to the environmental stressors of housing insecurity and difficulty accessing health care.⁷ Results from the Knox County Mental Health Survey ranked those experiencing homelessness in the top two groups in greatest need of mental health services.

	MAJOR RESOURCE	MAJOR STATISTIC	RESPONSES
TRAUMA	Helen Ross McNabb Victim Services; Staff at Helen Ross McNabb are available to assist victims of sexual assault and domestic violence as well as work with runaway youth and youth in need of emergency shelter. These services aid victims in identifying counseling services, safe housing, and connect them with critical resources.	 In 2021, there were a total of 79 hospital visits in Knox County for PTSD and other stress-related reactions. ²³	<i>“We are seeing more people experiencing more stress and trauma and it’s more difficult to access services.”</i> – Key informant
ANXIETY	The Mental Health Association of East Tennessee (MHAET) offers free mental health screenings on their website for anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, ADHD, psychosis, PTSD, alcohol and substance use, and more. ¹⁷	 In 2021, Knox County area emergency rooms saw an average of 15 visits per week for anxiety-related concerns. ⁸	<i>“Anxiety has really increased in kids. Our threshold for discomfort has shifted.”</i> – Key informant
HOMELESSNESS	The Community Action Committee (CAC) is a joint local public agency that supports and advocates for low-income people, including much of the county’s homeless population.	 40% of newly homeless households reported that their homelessness is the result of a lack of affordable housing in the first three quarters of 2022.	<i>“When you have folks who also have the challenge of mental health needs, the outcome is going to be terrible if they can’t stay stably housed.”</i> – Focus group participant



Top Three Barriers to Mental Health Services in Knox County

Mental health providers were asked to identify the top three barriers to accessing mental health care within the communities they serve. The most commonly reported barriers were transportation, knowledge of available services, and access.

No. 1: Transportation

The Knox County Mental Health Survey found that transportation was the most commonly reported barrier to engaging mental health services and ranked as the top barrier in all five regions of Knox County (North, South, Central/Inner City, East, and West). Providers acknowledged that telehealth has helped address the transportation barrier, and suggested increasing in-home services and similar options that could take services directly to clients.



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No. 2: Knowledge of Available Services

Client knowledge of available services rated as the second most commonly reported barrier to engaging mental health services. This issue was of particular concern to providers in the South and East sectors compared to the other regions of the county. Consumers of mental health services shared that the process of finding a provider is an added stressor when experiencing mental health issues, as the information consumers find or receive is often confusing or unclear.

"Figuring out the best way to let people know what's in place already. That would probably go a long way in easing some of the perceptions of difficulty [in finding a provider], too."

- Focus group participant

BARRIERS TO SERVICES RANKED

- 78% Transportation
- 68% Knowledge of Services
- 64% Access

No. 3: Access

Access is the third highest reported barrier to receiving mental health care and was a common theme in our quantitative and qualitative analyses and encompasses agency capacity, insurance coverage, and continuity of care. It ranked in the top three issues impacting mental health for all age groups. Access may be ranked third for barriers but overall it's the most common theme among respondents. Nearly 90% of Mental Health Survey respondents indicated there is a lack of available appointments and more than 50% stated that people were not able to get needed mental health services in their geographic area.

"It [cost] can add up even when people have insurance."

It's not always necessarily a \$10 or \$15 co-payment."

- Focus group participant

In addition to availability of appointments, cost was mentioned as a major barrier in key informant and focus group interviews of community members as well as in community health data collected by the University of Tennessee, which found that nearly half of respondents indicating they needed mental health care did not receive it because they could not afford to pay for it.

88% of Mental Health Survey respondents said there is a lack of availability of appointments.



MAJOR RESOURCE

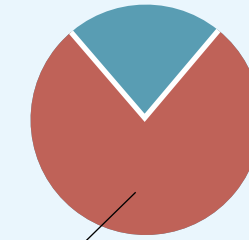
MAJOR STATISTIC

RESPONSES

TRANSPORTATION

Knoxville Area Transit (KAT) provides public transportation in the city through numerous bus routes and downtown trolleys.

East Tennessee Human Resource Agency (ETHRA) offers door-to-door public transportation services that can be scheduled in advance for appointments, shopping, work, and school.



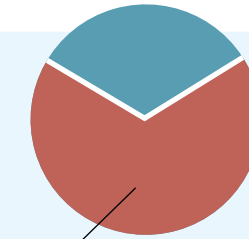
78% of mental health providers ranked transportation as a top three barrier to accessing mental health services.

"... a lot of my clients wouldn't be able to see me if their case manager didn't pick them up or we have funding to do Uber health so we can pay for people's Ubers."

- Mental health provider

KNOWLEDGE OF AVAILABLE SERVICES

The Mental Health Association of East Tennessee Call Center is available Monday-Saturday to help individuals find treatment and identify resources for many different needs.



68% of mental health providers reported that knowledge of available services was a barrier for their clients when accessing mental health services.

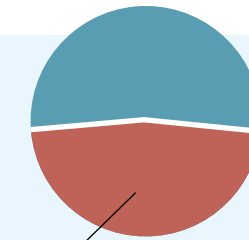
"While I was searching for a provider, I several times had the thought of 'What if I was in crisis right now?' I wasn't at the time, but I would have no idea what to do and how to do it."

- Focus group participant

ACCESS

Cherokee Health Systems offers comprehensive health services to children, adults, and seniors who have coverage through private insurance plans, state programs, and those who have no insurance.

The Behavioral Health Urgent Care Center provides a variety of residential behavioral health treatment services.



47% of respondents said they didn't seek mental health care because they couldn't afford it according to community health data collected by the University of Tennessee.

"...being able to offer telehealth has really helped if they can find access to a computer. We have a lot of veterans who prefer not to do in person sessions so that's really helpful for them. It has broadened our availability and helped with access to services."

- Mental health provider

Special Issues and Populations

Because the topic of mental health is complex, it is important to look at both the individual components of mental health and the interactions with other social issues and special populations such as:

- Substance misuse
- Veterans
- Children
- Justice system

Mental Health & Substance Misuse

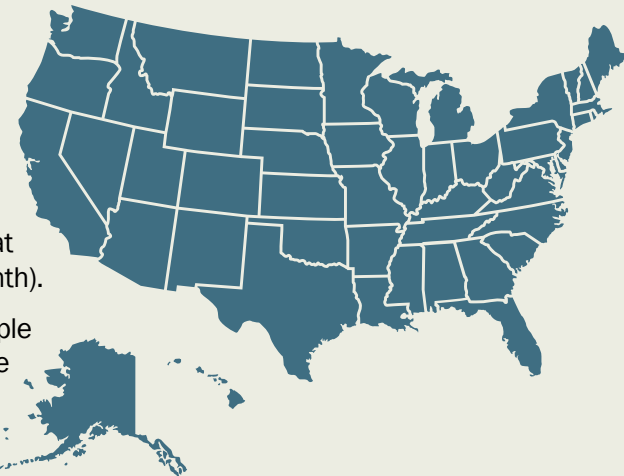


Substance use disorder (SUD) and alcohol use disorder (AUD) are common co-occurring conditions with many mental health disorders, including anxiety and depressive disorders, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and others. While these conditions commonly occur together and have common risk factors including trauma, they do not cause each other. Additionally, substance use may be utilized as an informal self-medication by individuals who cannot access mental health services.¹⁰

United States

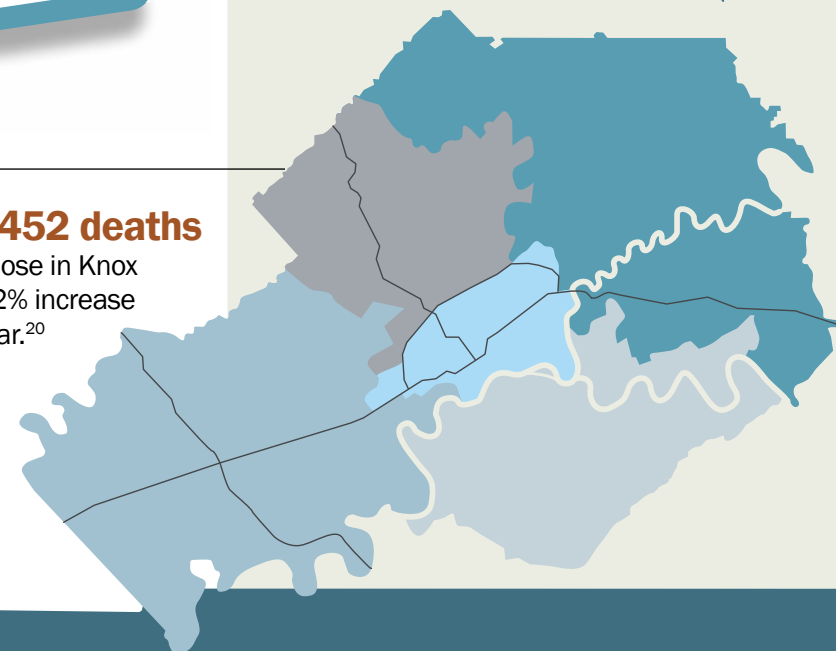
2021, **16.3 million** are heavy drinkers (five or more drinks in a night, at least five times in a month).

2021, **35.3 million** people reported illicit substance use, not including marijuana.



Knox County

In 2021, there were **452 deaths** related to drug overdose in Knox County, which is a 32% increase from the previous year.²⁰



19% of KCS high school students drank alcohol on one or more days during the past 30 days in 2022.⁵

17% of KCS high school students used some form of illicit drug (excluding alcohol or tobacco) during the past 30 days.

Tennessee

In 2021, there were **3,814 deaths** related to drug overdose in Tennessee which is almost a 23% increase from the previous year.²⁰



Veterans & Mental Health

The unique experiences of veterans and service members, such as transitioning to civilian life, are important to acknowledge, and providers with specific training in best practices for these populations are the most equipped to help. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and the U.S. Department of Defense offer

free mental health services to veterans regardless of discharge status, service history, or eligibility for VA health care.^{12, 13} NAMI Homefront is a free program for families and friends of service members and veterans with mental health needs. Finally, the Knoxville Regional Veteran's Mental Health Council is a resource for veterans in Knox County.¹⁴



11%-20% of U.S. veterans experience PTSD compared to **4%** of the general population.



According to the NAMI, suicide rates of service members and veterans is at an all-time high, **increasing by 25% in 2020.**¹¹

The **Veteran's Crisis Line** provides 24/7 confidential crisis support for veterans and their loved ones. You do not have to be enrolled in VA benefits or health care to call.

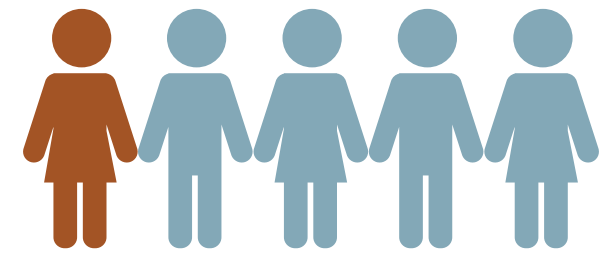
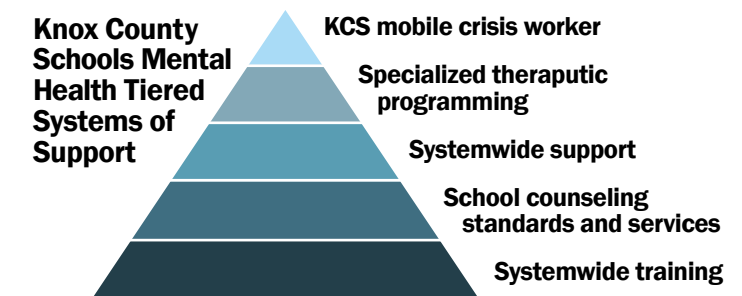
Children & Mental Health



Mental disorders among children are defined as serious changes in the way children typically learn, behave, or handle their emotions.¹⁵ A child's mental health is an essential part of their overall health and can impact their ability to succeed in school and in society.¹⁶ Because

of this, Knox County Schools (KCS), Knox County Health Department, and Metro Drug Coalition collaborate to conduct the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, which asks Knox County students to answer questions about many outcomes including mental health. The Knox County school system offers mental health services to students and staff through a tiered system of support. In addition, KCS conducts systemwide training to staff members and offers counseling to both students and staff in partnership with local agencies including Helen Ross McNabb.

"We have developed a whole child support team at every school that is for that baseline support."
- KCS representative



1 out of 5 children experience a mental disorder in a given year, and an estimated **\$247 billion** is spent each year on treatment and management of childhood mental disorders.

Source: Child Mental Health, CDC



Justice System & Mental Health

Nearly 44% of people incarcerated in the U.S. in local jails have a history of mental illness.²¹ Many people with a

mental illness who are incarcerated are being held for non-violent, minor offenses related to untreated mental illness (e.g., trespassing).²¹ Fewer than half of those with a history of mental illness in local jails receive mental health treatment while in custody.²¹ Knox County is in the process of establishing a mental health court for adult defendants who have serious and persistent mental illness. The court is designed to be an alternative to incarceration by addressing underlying issues that led to an arrest and linking to individualized treatment.²²



In the U.S., nearly 44% of people incarcerated in local jails have a history of mental illness.

The court system is one of the ways that mental health providers in Knox County receive referrals, and according to the mental health survey, providers stated they have seen an uptick in recovery court referrals which encompasses serious mental health issues. Mental health providers in Knox County also noted that the establishment of the Knoxville Police Department (KPD) co-responder unit has been a great addition

and is essential in reducing incarceration rates for those with mental illnesses. The unit is staffed by a KPD officer trained in intervention alongside a clinician from Helen Ross McNabb.

Additional State-Funded Resources

Behavioral Health Safety Net for Adults and Children provides core, essential, outpatient mental health services to uninsured Tennesseans who meet program eligibility criteria through a network of participating community mental health centers. In the Knox County area this includes Cherokee Health Systems, Helen Ross McNabb Center, and Peninsula. More information can be found at <https://www.tn.gov/behavioral-health/bhsn.html>

988 and the Crisis Continuum includes access to a crisis hotline, mobile crisis, crisis stabilization units, and walk-in centers. These services include a response 24/7 to psychiatric and mental health needs and the connection to the most appropriate level of care. The crisis services provided in Knox County are facilitated by the McNabb Center. More information can be found at <https://www.tn.gov/behavioral-health/need-help.html>

School-Based Behavioral Health Liaisons use the Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS) framework to provide face-to-face consultation with classroom teachers to enhance trauma-informed learning environments for children and youth who have or are at-risk for severe emotional disturbance, behavior problems, or substance use disorders. Liaisons provide training and education for the classroom teachers regarding mental health and substance abuse topics, as well as behavioral interventions. TDMHSAS partners with the McNabb Center on this program. More information can be found at <https://www.tn.gov/behavioral-health/children-youth-young-adults-families/sbbhl.html>

Regional Intervention Program (RIP) is a parent-implemented, professionally supported program for young children and their families who are experiencing challenging behaviors. RIP has been serving families with young children since 1969. This unique, internationally recognized program guides parents in learning the skills to work directly with their own children while they receive training and support from experienced RIP families. Helen Ross McNabb leads this effort in the Knoxville area. More information can be found at <https://www.tn.gov/behavioral-health/children-youth-young-adults-families/rip.html>

System of Care Across Tennessee (SOCAT) aims to ensure Tennessee families have access to community-based services for children, youth, and young adults with mental, emotional, and behavioral health needs. SOCAT is coordinated across systems, individualized to a family's unique needs, strengths, and culture, where the families are the primary decision makers in the care of their children. Families can access SOCAT through the Helen Ross McNabb Center. More information can be found at <https://socacrosstn.org/>

First Episode Psychosis Initiative (FEPI) is designed to provide early intervention services for individuals ages

15-30 who have experienced first-episode psychosis. Families can access this resource in Knox County through the Helen Ross McNabb Center. More information can be found at <https://www.tn.gov/behavioral-health/children-youth-young-adults-families/on-track-tn.html>

Individual Placement and Support Supported Employment in collaboration with Department of Human Services – Vocational Rehabilitation as an evidence-based program that provides individuals with serious mental illness or co-occurring disorders assistance with obtaining competitive and integrated jobs of their choosing. Cherokee Health Systems and the McNabb Center offer this service to Knox County residents. More information can be found at <https://www.tn.gov/behavioral-health/mental-health-services/ips-supported-employment.html>

Criminal Justice Liaisons (CJL) facilitate communication and coordination between the community, criminal justice, and behavioral health systems to achieve common goals of decriminalizing mental illness, co-occurring disorders, and substance use disorders. The CJL for Knox County is based out of the McNabb Center. More information can be found at <https://www.tn.gov/behavioral-health/substance-abuse-services/criminal-justice-services/cjl.html>

Projects for Assistance in Transition for Homelessness (PATH) assists individuals experiencing homelessness who have mental illness or co-occurring disorders. The program funds community-based outreach services to connect individuals to mental health, substance abuse, case management, and other support services as well as limited housing services. The services provider for Knoxville is the McNabb Center. More information can be found at <https://www.tn.gov/behavioral-health/housing/path.html>

Additionally, the Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services (TDMHSAS) has supported infrastructure needs for the new **Children's Crisis Stabilization Unit**, operated by the McNabb Center, co-located at East Tennessee Children's Hospital as well as **The Gateway**, a recovery community center operated by Metro Drug Coalition. More recently, TDMHSAS is funding the **East Tennessee Urgent Care – Behavioral Health Project** from fiscal year 23-directed appropriations. These funds will create a free-standing urgent care behavioral health pilot program in Knoxville that will receive patients 365 days a year as individuals are diverted from the emergency department, to receive appropriate assessment and treatment. This project supports an existing redevelopment initiative on the historic St. Mary's campus and current behavioral care systems in Knoxville and Knox County. This project is supported by \$1,845,000 in funding.

Resources provided by the Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services.

Major Inpatient & Outpatient Resources

MAJOR INPATIENT RESOURCES

East Tennessee Behavioral Health
easttennesseebehavioralhealth.com
888-475-1421

Knoxville Center for Behavioral Medicine
knoxvillebehavioralmedicine.com
865-444-3770

Peninsula Behavioral Health Hospital
peninsulabehavioralhealth.org/inpatient
865-970-9800

CRISIS SERVICES

988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline (call or text)

Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services Mobile Crisis Services: 855-274-7471

McNabb Center Crisis Hotline/Mobile Crisis Unit:
865-539-2409

Children & Family Crisis Walk In: 865-257-9982
Children's Crisis Stabilization Unit: 865-245-0070
Adult Crisis Stabilization Unit: 865-541-6958

*Accepts Medicaid, Medicare, and is a Safety-Net Provider

**Accepts uninsured

MAJOR OUTPATIENT RESOURCES

McNabb Center*
mcnabbcenter.org
800-255-9711

Cherokee Health Systems*
cherokeehealth.com
866-231-4477

Peninsula Behavioral Health*
www.peninsulabehavioralhealth.org/outpatient
865-970-9800

Interfaith Health Clinic**
interfaithhealthclinic.org
865-546-7330

Covenant Counseling
2606 Greenway Dr., Suite 205, Knoxville, TN 37918
865-337-7375

The Middle Path
themiddlepath.life
865-693-7453

Bearden Behavioral Health
beardenbehavioralhealth.com
865-212-6600

Resources provided by the Mental Health Association of East Tennessee.

Conclusion & Recommendations



Several necessary next steps have been identified through the data reviewed in this report. First and foremost, strategies to reduce and eliminate barriers to accessing available services must be developed. Addressing immediate concerns would include: funding the development or expansions of transportation services available to individuals to attend their appointments; addressing the mental healthcare workforce needs to meet the demand of services from residents; and increasing awareness of currently available services in the area to both potential clients and partner agencies. It is also important to take into consideration the needs of special populations and their unique mental health concerns. The next section will outline recommendations for addressing these concerns and barriers in mental health care as identified by mental health providers as well as key informants and focus groups in Knox County.

Recommendations to Meet Needs

- To further understand the impact of trauma on our population’s mental health, continue local monitoring of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) through systematic data collection such as the Youth Risk Behavior Survey.
- Reduce local emergency service utilization by developing a local crisis hotline to address acute mental health needs.
- To determine workforce availability, conduct an environmental scan of Knox County.
- To increase capacity of services, increase availability of group homes and long-term care facilities.

Recommendations to Address Barriers

- Enable individuals to attend their mental health service appointments by providing subsidized or free transportation and increased access to telehealth services.
- Increase awareness of existing resources by providing education to individuals and organizations in sectors that engage high-risk populations.
- Increase awareness of existing resources by implementing targeted publicity and marketing campaigns.
- To meet the cultural needs of our population, develop and facilitate cultural competency trainings regarding special populations for mental health professionals in all career stages.
- Enable access for individuals with limited or no income to mental health services by exploring options to reduce or eliminate cost for clients for initial engagement.

Other Recommendations from Focus Groups

Focus groups of providers in Knox County recommended that an increase in provider wages, lower student debt, and easing barriers that prevent providers from entering the public sector, would increase provider retention and recruitment. This would allow for more manageable caseloads and space for new patients with providers who accept public insurance. These groups also recommended that work is done to identify critical social transitions or intervention spaces and develop appropriate navigation plans (e.g. Mental Health Court, KPD Crisis Response Team).

“There are a lot of emerging populations [so there’s a] need for culturally competent services, people who can speak different languages or who are culturally aware of those things.”

– Mental health provider

“Rearranging the whole [incarceration] discharge planning could be helpful so that we could connect people to services before they close for the day, like a walk-in clinic or the line to get into a shelter, if you’re not in that line by a certain time, you’re on the street ...

Let’s fix the discharging so we’re not re-arresting people. Fix it so they can be served and get help the day they get out.”

– Focus group participant

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