

# Children's Mental Health

## DEFINITION

*Children's mental health* is the number of acute care hospitalizations of children under age 18 with a primary diagnosis of a mental disorder. Hospitalization is the most intensive type of treatment for mental disorders and represents only one type of treatment category on a broad continuum available to children with mental health concerns in Rhode Island.

## SIGNIFICANCE

Mental health in childhood and adolescence is defined as the achievement of expected developmental, cognitive, social, and emotional milestones and the ability to use effective coping skills.<sup>1</sup> Mental health influences children's health and behavior at home, in school, and in the community.<sup>2</sup> Mental health conditions can impair daily functioning, prevent or affect academic achievement, increase involvement with the justice and child welfare systems, result in high treatment costs, and increase the risk for suicide.<sup>3</sup> Children with mental health issues are also likely to have other chronic health conditions.<sup>4</sup>

Mental health problems affect children of all backgrounds and ages. In 2023-2024, nearly one in three (29%) children aged three to 17 had a mental, emotional, or behavioral health problem in Rhode Island.<sup>5</sup> However, many children and youth have trouble getting mental health treatment. In Rhode

Island in 2023-2024, half (50%) of children aged three to 17 who needed mental health treatment or counseling had a problem obtaining needed care.<sup>6</sup>

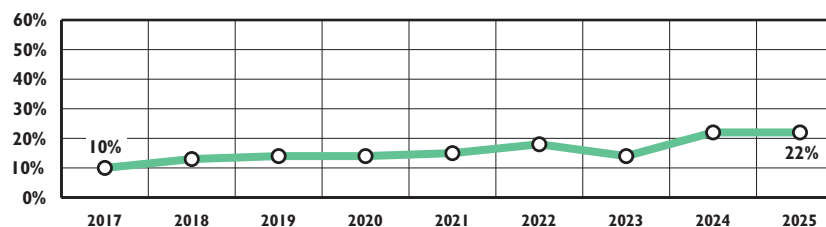
Mental health systems tend to be fragmented and crisis-driven with inadequate investments in prevention and community-based services.<sup>7-9</sup> Collaboration across systems including health care, schools, community organizations and child welfare help intervene in child and youth mental health before a crisis occurs.<sup>10,11</sup>

Risk factors for childhood mental health disorders include biological factors and environmental factors like prenatal exposure to toxins (including alcohol), physical or sexual abuse, adverse childhood experiences, toxic stress, a family history of mental health issues, involvement with the youth justice and child welfare systems, and living in poverty.<sup>10,12,13</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic radically shifted social experiences, employment opportunities, and education, with effects still felt today.<sup>14</sup> Rhode Island pediatric and behavioral health organizations declared a Child and Adolescent Mental Health State of Emergency in 2022.<sup>15</sup> Calls to Kids' Link RI, a behavioral health triage service and referral network, remain higher than before the pandemic. In FY 2025, there were 7,563 calls to Kids' Link RI, up from 5,386 in FY 2024.<sup>16,17</sup>



## Young Children (Ages 0-5) Enrolled in RIte Care with Serious Emotional Disturbance, Rhode Island, 2017-2025



Source: Rhode Island Executive Office of Health and Human Services. (n.d.). MMIS Database, 2017-2025.

◆ **Mental health conditions can be diagnosed even in young children, and 22% of children under age five who are enrolled in RIte Care have a diagnosis of Serious Emotional Disturbance. Without secure attachment, infants are at risk for learning delays, relationship dysfunction, difficulty expressing emotions, and mental health disorders, which can be diagnosed and treated in infancy and toddlerhood.<sup>18,19</sup> Children with mental health needs require support to transition into the adult behavioral health system.<sup>20</sup>**



## Disparities in Mental Health Needs and Care for Children and Adolescents

◆ **Children living in poverty are two to three times more likely to develop mental health conditions than their peers.<sup>10</sup> In State Fiscal Year (SFY) 2025, 32% (38,604) of children under age 19 enrolled in Medicaid/RIte Care had a mental health diagnosis, 1,343 were hospitalized due to a mental health related condition (up from 1,294 in SFY 2024), and 3,668 children had a mental health related emergency department visit (up from 3,308 in SFY 2024).<sup>21</sup>**

◆ **In 2023, 36% of Rhode Island high school students reported feeling sad or hopeless for more than two weeks during the past year. Girls were twice as likely as boys to report these feelings.<sup>22</sup>**

◆ **In 2023, LGBTQ+ Rhode Island high school students reported higher rates of sadness and hopelessness than their peers.<sup>22</sup> LGBTQ+ students, as well as Youth of Color, are more likely to have had their mental health impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and have additional barriers to accessing and receiving adequate mental health treatment.<sup>10</sup>**

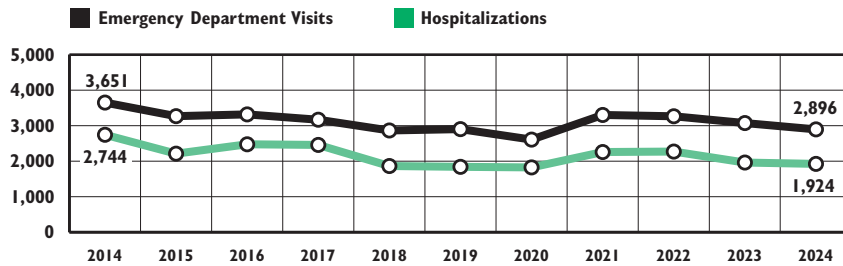


## Community-Based Mental Health Care

◆ In Rhode Island, Community Mental Health Organizations (CMHOs) are the primary source of public mental health treatment services for children and adults.<sup>23</sup> Rhode Island has six Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinics (CCBHCs) that provide comprehensive mental health, substance abuse and crisis supports to all Rhode Islanders.<sup>24</sup> During 2025, CMHOs treated 5,407 children under age 18.<sup>25</sup>



## Emergency Care for Primary Diagnosis of Mental Disorder, Children Under Age 18, Rhode Island, 2014-2024\*



Source: Rhode Island Department of Health, Hospital Discharge Database, 2014-2024. \*Data are for emergency department visits and hospitalizations, not children. Children may visit the emergency department or be hospitalized more than once. Emergency department counts include all visits regardless of outcome and are not comparable to previous Factbooks. Note: Effective October 1, 2015, the International Classification of Disease (ICD) codes changed from the 9th classification to the 10th classification, which may impact comparability across the years.

◆ In 2024, there were 2,896 emergency department visits and 1,924 hospitalizations of Rhode Island children with a primary diagnosis of mental disorder. Of these emergency department visits, 66% were of children enrolled in RIte Care/Medicaid and 31% had commercial insurance.<sup>26</sup>

◆ In 2023, 9% of Rhode Island high school students reported attempting suicide one or more times during the past year.<sup>22</sup>

◆ In Rhode Island between 2020 and 2024, there were 2,333 emergency department visits and 1,299 hospitalizations of youth ages 13 to 19 due to suicide attempts or intentional self-harm.<sup>26</sup>



## Psychiatric Hospitals

### Children Under Age 18 Treated at Rhode Island Psychiatric Hospitals, October 1, 2024 – September 30, 2025 (FFY 2025)

	BRADLEY HOSPITAL GENERAL PSYCHIATRIC SERVICES		BRADLEY HOSPITAL DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES PROGRAM		BUTLER HOSPITAL ADOLESCENT PSYCHIATRIC SERVICES	
	# TREATED	AVERAGE LENGTH OF STAY	# TREATED	AVERAGE LENGTH OF STAY	# TREATED	AVERAGE LENGTH OF STAY
Inpatient	779	21 days	165	38 days	428	8 days
Residential	179	86 days	49	4.2 years	--	--
Partial Hospitalization	888	NA	100	NA	456	6 visits
Home-Based	0	NA	24	17 visits	--	--
Outpatient**	4,264	NA	338	NA	717	NA

Source: Brown University Health, 2024-2025 and Butler Hospital, 2024-2025. Programs can have overlapping enrollment. Number treated is based on the hospital census (i.e., the number of patients seen in any program during FFY 2025). The average length of stay is based on discharges. \*\*Outpatient services include Bradley and Hasbro Outpatient Services. + Children in this residential program can remain enrolled until they age out of the program.

-- = Service not offered. NA = Data not available for this service.

◆ The two hospitals in Rhode Island that specialize in providing intensive inpatient treatment and psychiatric care to children and youth are Bradley Hospital and Butler Hospital.<sup>27</sup> In Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) 2025, the most common diagnoses for youth treated in an inpatient setting at Butler or Bradley Hospitals were depressive disorders, adjustment disorders, anxiety disorders, and childhood/adolescent disorders.<sup>17,28</sup>

◆ In FFY 2025, there were 365 children and youth awaiting psychiatric inpatient admission (psychiatric boarding), down from 538 boarders in FFY 2024. In FFY 2025, an average of six children were ready to leave the psychiatric hospital every five days (1.2 kids per day) but were unable due to a lack of step-down availability or there being no other safe placement (including at home).<sup>17</sup>

◆ Bradley Hospital has a Developmental Disabilities Program that offers highly specialized inpatient and residential services to children and adolescents who show signs of serious emotional and behavioral problems in addition to developmental disabilities. Lifespan School Solutions owns and operates four Bradley schools in RI and two in CT, and five community-based classrooms/public school partnerships.<sup>17,29</sup> The programs had an average daily enrollment of 403 students in FFY 2025.<sup>17</sup>

(References are on page 178)

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