



Policy Brief:
**Ensuring Latinx K-12 Students
Receive Culturally Appropriate,
Evidence-Based, and
Supportive Mental Health Care**

Sofia Godoy, Yale University

Yiselie Cabrera, Fordham University

Who We Are

Sofia Godoy (she/her), 2022-2023 Líderes Avanzando Fellow, UnidosUS

- Sofia is a junior studying political science and ethnicity, race, and migration at Yale University. On campus, she is involved with the Latinx Cultural Center, her residential college, the Peace and Dialogue Leadership Initiative, and Programs in Grand Strategy and Human Rights. A child of Mexican immigrants and a South Florida native, Sofia is currently an UnidosUS *Líderes Avanzando* fellow.

Yiselie Cabrera (they/them), 2022-2023 Líderes Avanzando Fellow, UnidosUS

- Yiselie is currently an UnidosUS *Líderes Avanzando* fellow and a sophomore at Fordham University. Yiselie is Puerto Rican and a Cleveland native double majoring in philosophy and American studies with a concentration in power, politics, and institutions.

Summary

The mental health epidemic among America’s young people is harming the Latinx community at disproportionate rates. In order to meet the needs of Latinx students, we call on Congress to reintroduce and pass the Restoring Hope for Mental Health and Well-Being Act and fund Bipartisan Safer Communities Act (BSCA), programs that promote evidence-based mental health services.

The Need

Concerns surrounding mental health have long been on the rise for young people across the United States. From 2009 to 2019, for instance, there was a 40% jump in “persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness” among high school students.¹

This mental health epidemic has particularly impacted Latinx youth, who are routinely exposed to discrimination, poverty, bullying, violence, and other mental health stressors at higher rates than their peers.² The COVID-19 pandemic spurred an unprecedented rise in these already deteriorating mental health conditions. Moreover, it brought the inequalities and inequities that historically marginalized and underserved children face into full view. During the public health emergency, 37% of all high school students said they struggled with poor mental health.³ Latinx youth, however, were 60% more likely than their white counterparts to say they were dealing with poor mental health.⁴

In addition to disparities in prevalence, access to mental health services also shows a variety of disparities. Even as most schools nationwide have reported increases in the number of students seeking mental health support, Latinx children have not sought such help as readily.⁵ Reflecting this, a 2020 survey showed that while 14% of white children use mental health care services, only 8% of Latinx children use these services.⁶ This gap in usage is due to several unique obstacles that Latinx students confront, such as cost, cultural stigma around mental health, distrust of public institutions associated with immigration status, and language barriers.⁷ Exacerbating these access issues is the limited number of Latinx mental health professionals available — only 8% of school psychologists identify as Latinx.⁸

Given these challenges, lawmakers should leverage the opportunity that the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act (BSCA) presents to address the mental health needs of youth. They can work to do so by redirecting funds away from measures that hurt students' mental health. For example, the BSCA authorized an additional \$300 million for STOP School Violence programs to hire and train School Resource Officers.⁹ While well-intentioned, school-based policing exposes students to traumatic interactions that can contribute to mental health issues. Such police encounters are likely among Latinx youth, who disproportionately experience punitive discipline.¹⁰

Background

Ongoing research suggests that because the Latinx community was disproportionately affected by COVID-19, so too was the mental health of Latinx youth. Over 60% of Latinx teenagers grappled with depression and feelings of isolation that were linked to their assumption of childcare responsibilities from their parents. Far from assisting Latinx students as they face these unique challenges, however, many schools have relied on hardening measures that hurt their mental health. Worse yet, legislation intended to help schools manage the deepening student mental health crisis, namely the American Rescue Plan (ARP) and Bipartisan Safer Communities Act (BSCA), has failed to guard against this oversecitized approach. While these legislative packages represent historic investments in school-based mental health services, lawmakers must focus on ensuring that the funds they make available truly serve Latinx and other marginalized students, who have borne the brunt of the pandemic.

Consider the ARP, which appropriated over \$190 billion for education and health grants. Certainly, it launched an Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund to support school districts in mitigating the pandemic's impact on students' social and emotional well-being. It also requires school districts that obtain ESSER funding to reserve 20% of funds for initiatives that address the needs of minority students. Even so, the ARP does not do enough to ensure that ESSER funds go towards evidence-based, preventative mental health practices. The more recent BSCA disappoints in this respect as well.

Like the ARP, the BSCA finances state grant programs that award funds to local educational agencies seeking to implement strategies to improve students' mental health. State officials evaluating agencies' proposals are required to consider their attention to the dignity of underserved students. Additionally, the BSCA awards grant money to school districts and institutions of higher education that are partnering to prepare mental health professionals for employment in schools.

Solutions like these are crucial to connecting Latinx children and adolescents to robust mental health care, as school-linked services are particularly effective at lowering the steep barriers to treatment that they encounter.

Nonetheless, the BSCA is not without its shortcomings. The law allocates \$1.6 billion towards policing, surveillance, and other school-hardening measures undertaken by the Department of Justice. Furthermore, it fails to offer guidance and funding for the implementation of dial code 988, the new national mental health crisis lifeline that schools are already promoting to their students. Without sufficient support, police will be dispatched in response to many callers' mental health emergencies. For Latinx youth who are often brutalized at the hands of law enforcement, these interactions could be lethal.

Our Ask

We request that Congress reintroduce and pass the Restoring Hope for Mental Health and Well-Being Act in order to strengthen the Latinx mental health profession pipeline and support cities and states in responding to mental health emergencies that are called in to the 988 lifeline.

We also call for Congress to continue funding Bipartisan Safer Communities Act (BSCA) programs that promote student mental health and boost the effectiveness of such programs by:

- Significantly increasing appropriations for them in FY24 and future fiscal years.
- Adding language in appropriations bills that restricts funding from being allocated towards programs that promote punitive practices and school-hardening measures.

Impact

By promoting proper care and reducing disparities in mental health services for marginalized communities, policymakers make it possible for every child to have an equal opportunity to be successful, safe, and healthy. Enhancing the continuum of mental health services, improving the school climate, and decreasing student social isolation and marginalization helps foster a sense of safety, support, and improved outcomes. Such initiatives have been linked to properly meeting the comprehensive needs of students. Emerging trends suggest the benefits of equipping schools with the expertise to address mental health.

According to the ACLU:

Students are 21 times more likely to visit school-based health centers for treatment than anywhere else. Schools that employ more school-based mental health providers see improved attendance rates, lower rates of suspension and other disciplinary incidents, expulsion, improved academic achievement and career preparation, and improved graduation rates. Moreover, **data shows that school staff who provide health and mental health services to our children** not only improve the health outcomes for those students, but also **improve school safety.**

As the data above illustrates, the availability and accessibility of mental health support and evidence-based services yield the best results. To ensure that resources and funds accurately address mental health concerns, we call for Congress to implement effective and promising federal guidance.

Similarly, the Restoring Hope for Mental Health and Well-Being Act will address the shortage of Latinx mental health professionals by reauthorizing and boosting funding for the Minority Fellowship Program, which awards scholarships to master’s or doctoral degree candidates who are racial or ethnic minorities. This legislation will also facilitate the equitable implementation of the new suicide and mental health crisis lifeline, which schools are promoting to students experiencing mental health crises. By establishing a Behavioral Health Crisis Coordinating Office and requiring the Health and Human Services Secretary to issue best practices on handling mental health emergencies, the bill supports states and localities in connecting 988 callers to effective mental health care.

Endnotes

- 1 “Mental Health Among Adolescents,” CDC.gov, accessed March 11, 2023, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchhstp/newsroom/docs/factsheets/dash-mental-health.pdf>.
- 2 Amelie Ramirez, Gallion Kipling, Rosalie Aguilar, and Erin Surette Dembeck, “Mental Health and Latino Kids: A Research Review,” Salud America! and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, September 12, 2017, <https://salud-america.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/FINAL-mental-health-research-review-9-12-17.pdf>.
- 3 “New CDC Data Illuminate Youth Mental Health Threats during the COVID-19 Pandemic,” CDC.gov, March 31, 2022, <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2022/p0331-youth-mental-health-covid-19.html>.
- 4 Julia Weis, “Data: Latino Youth Struggled with Mental Health in 2020,” Salud America!, July 6, 2021, <https://salud-america.org/data-latino-youth-struggled-with-mental-health-in-2020/>.
- 5 Donna St. George and Valerie Strauss, “The Crisis of Student Mental Health Is Much Vaster than We Realize,” The Washington Post, December 5, 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2022/12/05/crisis-student-mental-health-is-much-vaster-than-we-realize/>.
- 6 Weis, “Data: Latino Youth Struggled with Mental Health in 2020.”
- 7 Ibid.; “Chapter 2 Culture Counts: The Influence of Culture and Society on Mental Health,” Office of the Surgeon General (US); Center for Mental Health Services (US); National Institute of Mental Health (US), August 2001. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK44249/>.
- 8 “Latino Student Success: Advancing U.S. Educational Progress for All,” UnidosUS, accessed March 11, 2023. https://unidosus.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/UnidosUS_Latino-Education_2022.pdf; Nicholas W. Affrunti, Anisa N. Goforth, Ryan L. Farmer, Samuel Y. Kim, and Adam B. Lockwood, “Status of School Psychology in 2020: Part 1, Demographics of the NASP Membership Survey,” ed. by Christy M. Walcott, National Association of School Psychologists, July 2021, https://www.nasponline.org/Documents/Research%20and%20Policy/Research%20Center/NRR_2020-Membership-Survey-P1.pdf.
- 9 “NAPO Statement on the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act,” National Association of Police Organizations, June 23, 2022. https://napo.org/files/6216/5600/6179/NAPO_Statement_Safer_Communities_Act.pdf.
- 10 Deanie Anyangwe and Whitney Bunts, “Safer for Whom? The Bipartisan Safer Communities Act Does Not Actually Keep Communities Safe,” Center for Law and Social Policy, October 26, 2022. <https://www.clasp.org/blog/safer-for-whom-the-bipartisan-safer-communities-act-does-not-actually-keep-communities-safe/>.