Addressing Youth Mental Health in Low-Income Areas (and how we can fix it)

Youth mental health is being overlooked and is worsening by the year, especially those in low-income areas. Just to clarify, this statement does not mean that teens in a higher wealth category do not have mental health problems, but living in low-income areas can often influence illness. Adolescents have had a rough few years, since Covid-19 social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok. A recent study showed that roughly 1 in 6 American teens experience a serious mental illness each year, and 50% of all mental illnesses start at the age of 14. If we target at-risk youth, we can stop mental problems from progressing into adulthood.

Another article by the *National Library of Medicine* says, "Children <18 years of age are disproportionately affected by poverty, making up 23% of the total population, but 33% of all people in poverty." This raises crucial questions about the underlying causes of mental-health issues. There must be a connection between poverty, and mental health. But what causes these problems, especially recently? In this essay, we will discuss why mental illness in youth is occurring, how this affects low-income areas, school services, social-stigma, and what we can do to fix this problem.

Causes

It's no doubt that low-income areas have more crime and fewer opportunities. But it is also prevalent they have more illness. This could be from various things such as food insecurity, lack of employment, and crime. People living in poverty are also more likely to suffer through trauma, which leads disorders like anxiety & bipolar disorder. The article titled *Poverty, depression, and anxiety: Causal evidence and mechanisms* by students at MIT dives deep into the comparison. The article states, "Rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide correlate negatively with income and employment. Those with the lowest incomes in a community suffer 1.5 to 3 times more frequently from depression, anxiety, and other common mental illnesses than those with the highest incomes." This shows that mental illness is a major side effect caused by the problems of poverty.

The worries/uncertainty that come with living in poverty can drive mental illness; as well as the effects on childhood development. Parents in low-income areas already have enough stress as it is. "What bills do I have to pay, how much is my paycheck this week, will I have enough money to put food on the table?" These are the questions that around 40 million American adults ask themselves every day. This anxiety can transfer to kids at times, causing low self-esteem and confidence.

School Services

Many school districts aren't receiving enough funding/budget to provide nutritious lunches and technology, never mind mental health services. Students need services like guidance

counselors and social workers more than students in wealthier districts. Most of the time, they cannot access these services because school districts can't afford them. Students in low-income areas go to public schools which are funded by state/local governments. So if the state doesn't have money, neither does the school. Kids in these inner-city schools are exposed to violence and trauma on an everyday basis. "When you look at trauma exposure … over half of our students said that a loved one has died in the last eight months, and almost a third of our students had an overnight hospital stay for themselves or a family member." Says Alysia Meriweather, Deputy Superintendent of the Detroit Public Schools Community District. Seeing violence and death at an early age can often be dangerous to your mental health, and can cause illnesses such as PTSD, among others.

 This is a cycle called a "poverty trap" which keeps the disadvantaged from achieving more. Children of low-income areas develop mental disorders without intervention or medication and grow up to live in poverty without advancing.

Stigma

 A lot of the time, there is a stigma that surrounds the entire topic of getting help. Stigma is a set of negative, unfair beliefs that society/groups of people have about something. There is a stigma on how society perceives people with mental illness, especially those who are under the poverty line. Another excerpt from the National Library of Medicine article states, "Children and families experiencing poverty encounter additional social and psychological barriers. The stigma of mental health treatment and the stigma of living in poverty can engender self-blame and self-loathing, which can inhibit families from seeking care."

 Children with mental illness are wrongfully stereotyped. People think because one isn't getting the highest grades, they are just lazy, or "aren't trying hard enough". This couldn't be further from the truth. From first-hand experience, I've seen specific students get singled out, forced out of group activities, and isolated because they aren't completely caught up, or are acting out. Kids could be acting this way because of burnout, or their situation at home.

How we can fix this

 There is a lot to be done to change the mental health space. And I want to be a part of the change. I chose to pursue a Clinical Psychologist for my Future Business Leaders of America Career Presentation. Why? Over the past decade, there's been an increase of 10% of adults & children going to therapy. That means there has to be more health professionals such as Psychologists. I want to help those that need it. What most people need, is just someone to talk to. And if I can make even one person's day a bit better, I know that it will be worth it.

 There is a way to fix the problem of the mental health crisis in low-income areas. Not just in your community, but all over. We can increase the outreach and awareness of mental health problems to parents and schools, fill in gaps in the mental health workforce, and help fund causes

and organizations addressing the problem. By prioritizing these initiatives, we can create an environment that makes sure that everyone can survive, no matter race, gender, or income.

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