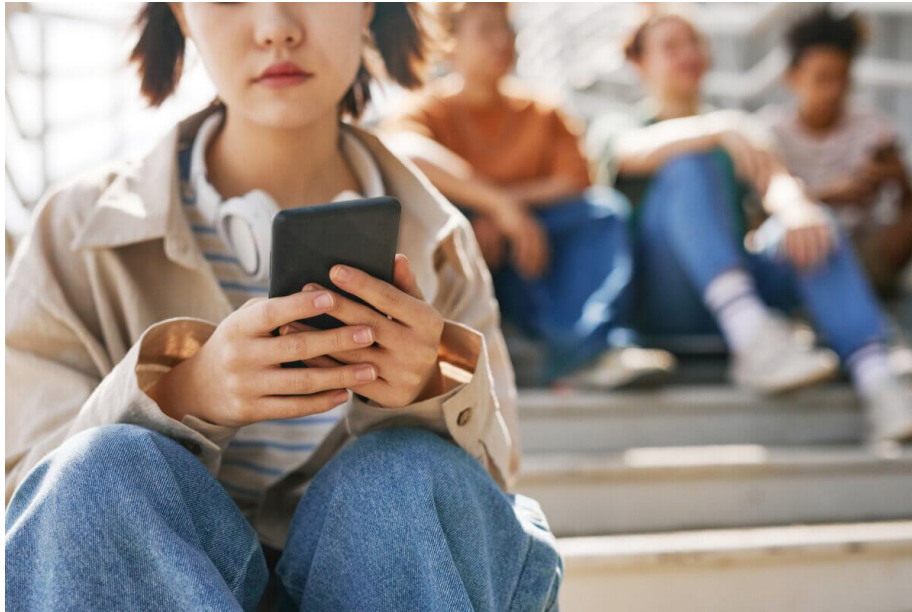


BRONX*Times*

Is the Bronx OK? It had the highest rate of psychiatric hospitalizations across NYC even before COVID-19



By Robbie Sequeira, May 31, 2023

Long before the pandemic, the Bronx had its share of mental health challenges and lacked sufficient resources to address those hurdles. Prior to COVID-19— which health experts told the Bronx Times ushered in long overdue conversations about mental health — the Bronx had the [highest rate of psychiatric hospitalizations](#) in the five boroughs and highest proportion of people in serious psychological distress.

[Nearly one in five](#) U.S. adults lives with a mental illness. However, [fewer than half](#) of those experiencing mental health challenges can access treatment, and those disparities often hinder communities of color.

The Northeast Bronx and Kingsbridge are among the city’s neighborhoods with the lowest connection to mental health access, with only 20% of those with mental health needs receiving treatment.

Since the pandemic, nonprofit [VNS Health](#) (formerly Visiting Nurse Service of New York) which has three offices in the Bronx, has made efforts to individualize mental health care to each corner and community of the borough.

“Ultimately, I feel like since the pandemic, things have been exacerbated, and its not like these things didn’t exist before. It’s just that we kind of had like a Band-Aid on things I feel like in the city and when the pandemic happened it opened up the floodgates,” said Patricia Kissi, director of treatment programs

at VNS Health. “It just opened up all these other issues that we didn’t address before that are now at the forefront.”

A major focus for these mental health experts has been tackling social anxiety and other mental health struggles afflicting children, after a pandemic that interrupted much of their socialization.

Through programs like Home Based Crisis Intervention (HBCI), which offers intensive, short-term in-home crisis care to children between 5 and 18 years old, mobile health crisis teams are making in-roads with communities and families, where mental health is still a taboo subject.

The [efforts of two Gambian behavioral health clinicians](#) with VNS Health, Mary Nketiah and Zamanky Twum, have been instrumental in helping home-based care to an emotionally fragile girl whose family believes that her self-destructive behaviors are “just a phase,” instead of life-threatening mental distress.

VNS Health said there’s an intentionality in their diverse group of mental health care workers, who are able to integrate themselves and mental health into the borough’s multitude of cultures.

“When it comes to the African community, they don’t believe that mental health is a real thing,” said Twum, a first-generation Ghanian-American from the South Bronx.

HBCI Program Coordinator Helena Tenkorang said that when families are not receptive to their care at first, assurances are made that care specialists, from the same culture and backgrounds, are there to help.



*The efforts of two Gambian behavioral health clinicians Mary Nketiah and Zamanky Twum have been instrumental in helping an emotionally fragile girl whose family believes that her self-destructive behaviors are “just a phase.”
Photo courtesy VNS Health*

[The most recent results](#) of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Youth Risk Behavior Survey showed an alarming increase of self-reported mental health challenges, most notably among girls and also children who identify as LGBTQ+.

In 2021, 42% of high school students said they experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness during the past year, according to the report — a 13.5% increase from 2019 and a 50% increase from 2011.

The survey was conducted in 2021, when many schools were still in remote or hybrid learning due to the pandemic.

WHEDco’s Youth Program Director Jamie Yellen told the Bronx Times in January that the city’s middle school population — grades fifth through eighth — have been most impacted mentally by the pandemic.

One in five New York City children ages 3 to 13 had one or more mental, emotional, developmental or behavioral problems in 2021, according to city health data and [an ongoing collaborative project by publications Chalkbeat, ProPublica and THE CITY.](#)

“These are the kids who we are seeing had the most impact ... being isolated for those times, not just academically but socially,” said Yellen. “Yes, we’re talking about mental health, but like, these kids don’t know how to interact with each other because they have been doing it through screens.”

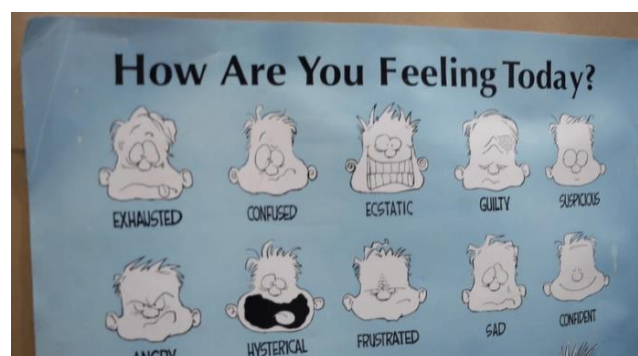
This year, a host of NYC nonprofits that run Bronx after-school programs ramped up mental health offerings to help students cope with the challenges of the pandemic such as social isolation, learning loss, illness and death of family members, as well as trauma and anxiety from gun violence.

[WHEDco](#), which runs after-school programs at PS/MS 218 in the South Bronx, launched a new social-emotional, mental health and mindfulness program this year with guided meditation and other age-appropriate activities for third through seventh grades.

The [New York Junior Tennis & Learning \(NYJTL\)](#) piloted mental health support services at select sites in its ACES Afterschool Program last school year, and has expanded to more sites this year.

And [the Girl Scouts of Greater New York](#), which launched a new program last month called “GS Learn” as a pathway for child/adolescent mental health support, and is funded by a grant for more mental health training for troop leaders to facilitate open discussions at their troop meetings.

There will also be girl-led, mental health-focused projects that come out of this training. For Yellen, programming and, more importantly, conversations about mental health can allow kids in a cycle of distress and violence to be able to put words to their feelings, and find solace in a confusing world.



A mood chart that adorns the wall of VNS Health Clinic in the Bronx. Photo courtesy VNS Health

“If you can even get one student to take that one deep breath and walk away from a potentially bad situation that could affect two people’s lives, you know, this type of work is making a positive effect,” she said. “We hope that through all our work, these kids can have healthy conversations again and most importantly, feel healthy at a time when everything around them is changing.”

The Bronx Times is a weekly newspaper serving Parkchester, Hunts Point, Fordham South, Grand Concourse, Fordham North, Bronx North and Co-Op City. Articles reach an estimated audience of 63,942.