



**BORN THIS WAY FOUNDATION**  
EMPOWERING YOUTH ★ INSPIRING BRAVERY

**MHSOAC**  
Mental Health Services  
Oversight & Accountability Commission

## **California Youth Mental Health:**

Understanding Resource Availability and Preferences

# Methodology

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**MHSOAC**  
Mental Health Services  
Oversight & Accountability Commission



**Benenson Strategy Group**

On behalf of Born This Way Foundation and California's Mental Health Services Oversight & Accountability Commission (MHSOAC), Benenson Strategy Group conducted 485 online interviews with 13-24 year olds in California from January 28<sup>th</sup> 2019 to February 2<sup>nd</sup> 2019.

January 2019							February 2019						
S	M	T	W	T	F	S	S	M	T	W	T	F	S
		1	2	3	4	5						1	2
6	7	8	9	10	11	12	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
13	14	15	16	17	18	19	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
20	21	22	23	24	25	26	17	18	19	20	21	22	23
27	28	29	30	31			24	25	26	27	28		



**485**  
Online Interviews

- Participants were identified and targeted through panel networks based on their age. Those ages 13-17 were contacted through their parents/guardians who were first asked to give consent for their child's participation in this study. Those ages 18-24 were directly contacted.
  - To ensure a representative sample of 13-24 year olds in California, final data was weighted using Census information.
  - **Total number of young people contacted in California:** 1,664
  - **Response rate:** 11%
- 
- The margin of error for the entire data set is  $\pm 4.40\%$  at the 95% confidence level.
    - *Note: the margin of error is higher among subgroups*
  - Due to rounding, answer choices may not always add up to 100%.
    - All numbers displayed are a percent out of 100
  - Questions asked only of relevant groups:
    - Military:** Asked of those who have served or have had a family member serve in the U.S. military
    - School student:** Asked of those who are currently in middle or high school
    - University student:** Asked of those who are currently in college
    - Employed:** Asked of those who are currently employed
    - Relationship:** Asked of those who are currently married or in a long-term relationship

# Executive Summary

Access to mental health resources for young people in California is a serious issue that demands our attention.

While mental health is a priority for nearly all (90%) young people we surveyed across California, alarmingly, 1-in-3 say they do not have reliable access to mental health resources. The disconnect is not for lack of will or want: 8-in-10 young people are looking to learn coping skills to help them deal with the stresses of every day life. It is clear that there are significant barriers to mental health resources for many young people in California.

Broad awareness of resources does not exist: almost half (48%) of all young people do not know where to turn to get mental health support. Where awareness exists, the funds to pay for these resources do not: 36% of young people say even if they did know where to look for help with their mental health, the cost of these services puts them out of reach. And while not the primary barriers to resource access, mental health stigmatization and a lack of trust in existing resources stand in the way of many young people getting the mental health help they need. Concerningly, young people do not have reliable access to the mental health resources they need to handle very serious situations, including when feeling suicidal or dealing with sexual assault.

In addition to wanting more access to mental health resources, young people are also looking for the mental health resources already at their disposal to improve. And there is a sense among a quarter of all young people that the resources available to middle and high schoolers are most in need of innovation and improvement. School in particular appears to be a strong source of stress, with 72% of all students citing school as one of their top 3 stress points.

Young people know it takes a concerted, collective, and on-going effort to get positive mental health. A majority of all young people would feel comfortable using a variety of resources to improve their mental health, including seeing a therapist, support groups and online forums, and on campus resources if they had access to these resources.

It is unsurprising that young people are most preoccupied with innovations in mental health care that prioritize expanding access over other factors such as creating greater choice, bringing down the cost, or improving the quality of existing mental health care resources.

Similarly, while there is widespread agreement that mental health is important and that communication is essential to mental health, only 10% of youth say they discuss their mental health “often” while 49% say they “rarely” or “never” discuss it, demonstrating the need to actively model and support conversations about mental health.

These findings reveal the need to do more to educate young people about the existing resources they can turn to in support of their mental health while also expanding access for those who do not currently have it, including by lowering the costs of mental health care.



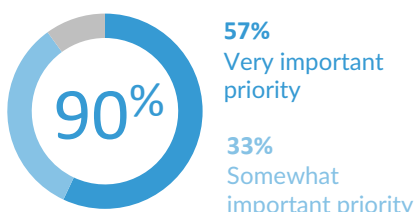
# Snapshot: California Youth Mental Health at a Glance

## Snapshot: Youth mental health at a glance

Overall, young people in the California area believe mental health is an important priority and half say it should be addressed on an ongoing basis. However, half say they “rarely” or “never” talk about it and about a third of young people in California say young people “rarely” or “never” have access to resources to support their mental health. Further raising concern, roughly 6-in-10 young people in California say they do not have access to the resources they need to handle serious mental health challenges such as suicide, bullying, sexual assault, and online harassment. Stress plays a major role in young peoples’ wellbeing in California: a majority say they felt “stressed” “a good bit of the time” or more in the past month and roughly a third say the same thing about feeling “helpless or sad” and “fearful.”

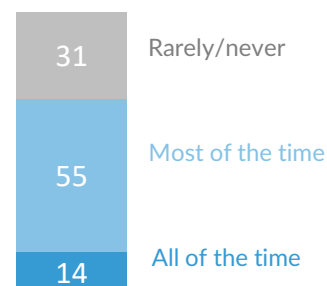
### ALL YOUNG PEOPLE

#### Prioritization of Mental Health



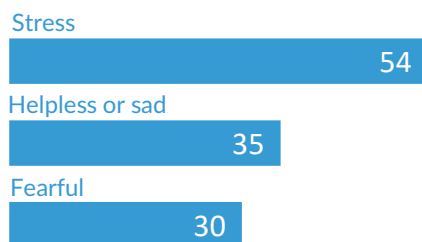
#### Resource Accessibility

“Do young people in your city have access to mental health resources...?”

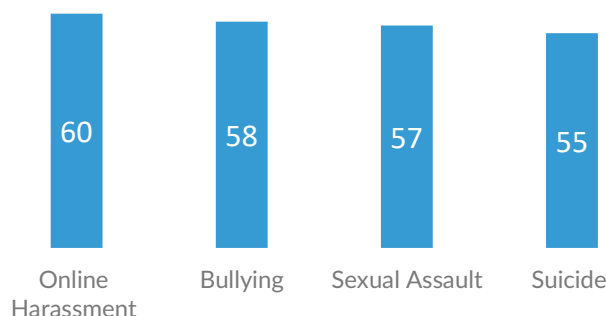


#### Felt Frequently in the Past Month

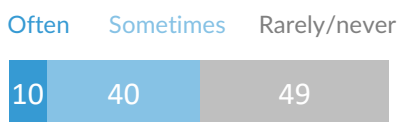
% who felt this way a good bit of the time or more during the past month...



#### Feel They Don't Have Access to the Mental Health Resources to Deal with...

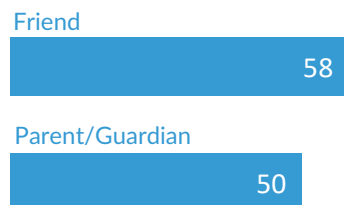


#### Frequency of Discussing Mental Health with Anyone

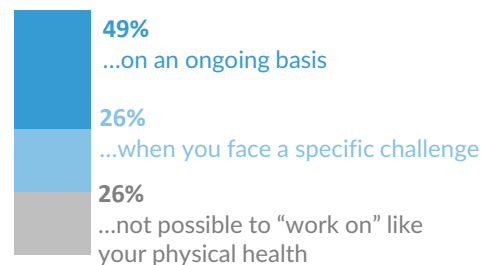


#### Talk About Mental Health With...

Of those who discuss mental health



#### Best Way to Work on Mental Health



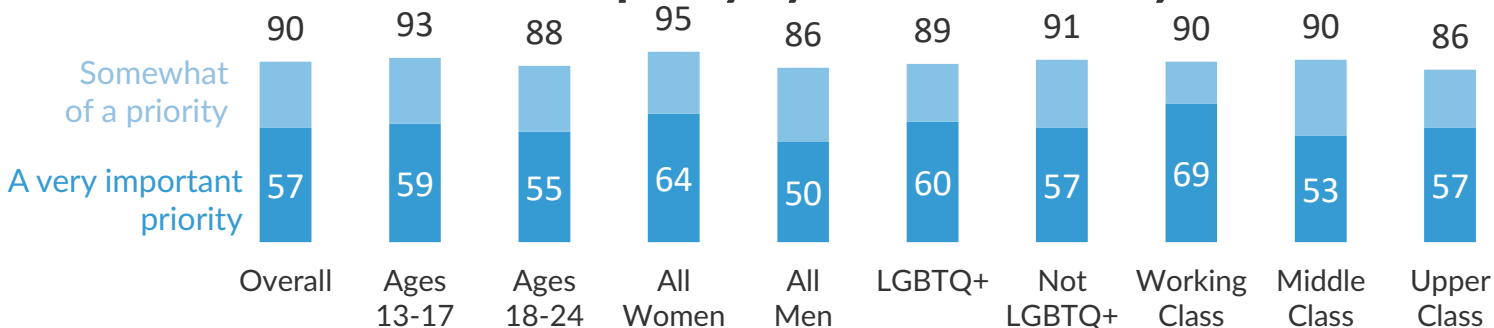


# Mental Health Behavior of California Youth

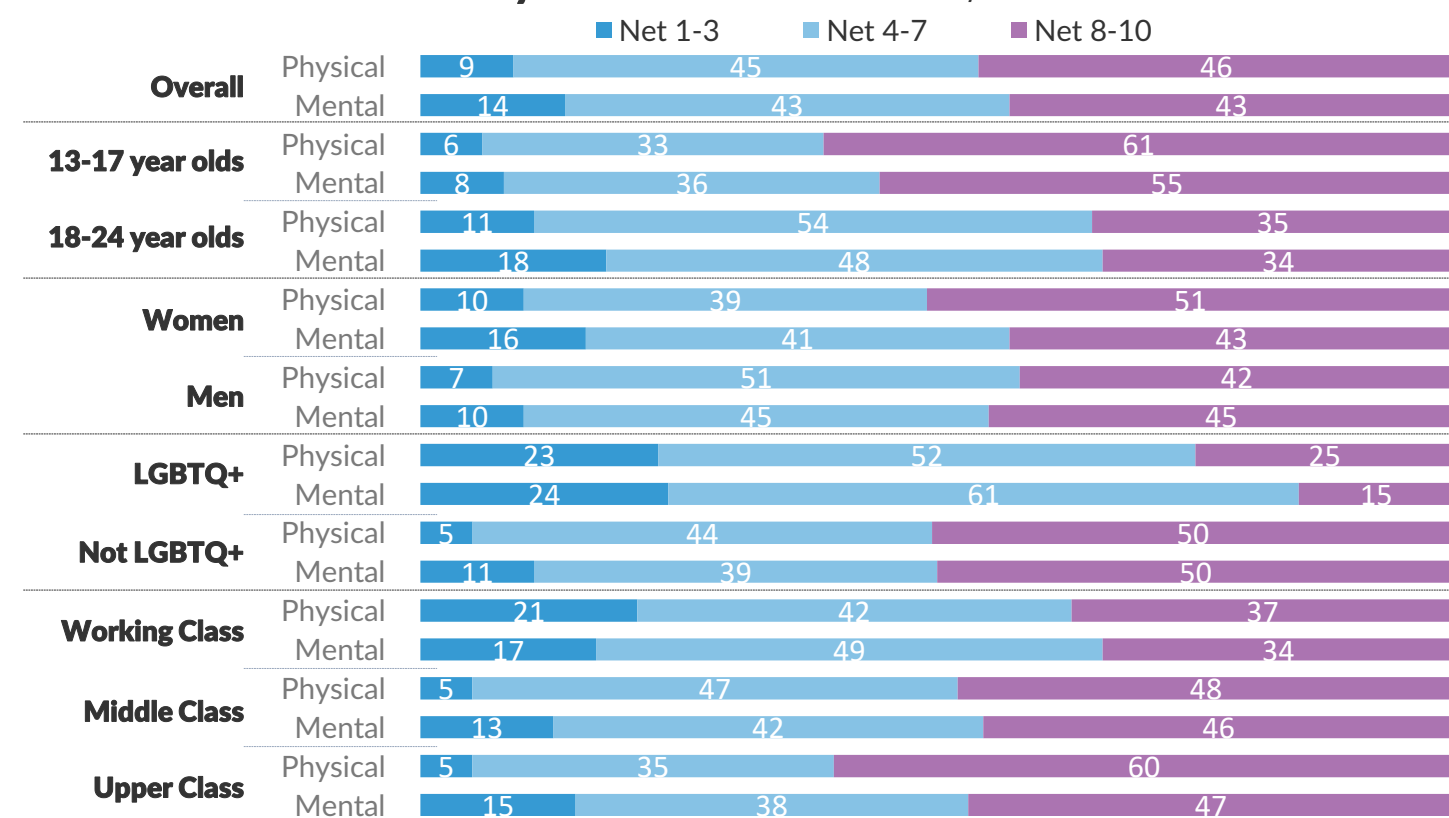
## Most youth in California don't feel great about their physical or mental wellness

While young people find mental health to be a priority, assessments in their physical and mental wellbeing show that these priorities vary for segments of the state's young population. For example, 13-17 year olds feel much better on both fronts than 18-24 year olds, and while young men assess their physical and mental health on equal footing, young women are more likely to feel good physically than mentally. The widest gap is between LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ young people: half of non-LGBTQ+ young people rate their physical and mental health highly. Meanwhile, income appears to influence how young people feel about their health, though the disparity is most stark in terms of physical health.

**How much of a priority is your mental health to you?**



**% Rate Mental + Physical Health.** Where 1 means "poor" and 10 means "excellent"



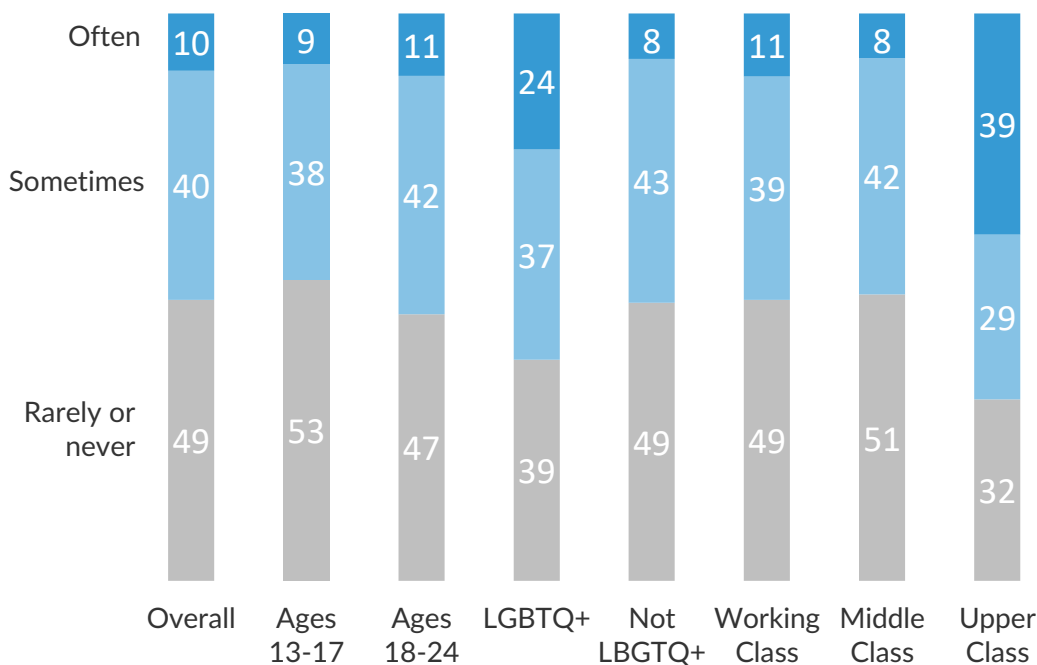
## Just half of California young people believe they can work on their mental health on an ongoing basis

For a plurality of young Californians, mental health is something to be worked on continuously, but this plurality represents just half of the state's youth. Even fewer are actually talking about their mental health frequently. Given this, it is unsurprising that half of young people in the state say they "rarely" or "never" discuss their mental health, with the exception of those in higher income households, where mental health is a common topic of conversation.

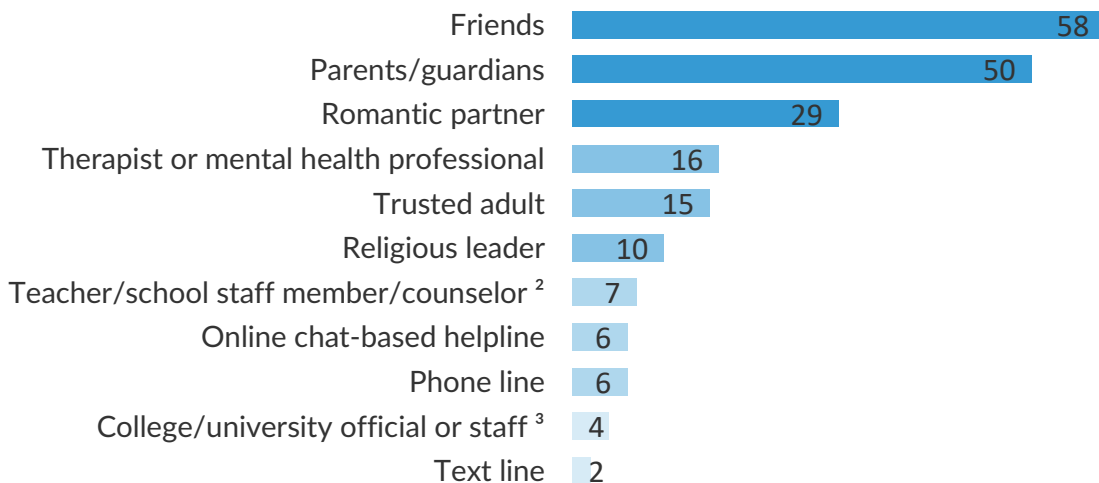
### Which statement comes closest to your view about mental health?



### How often do you discuss mental health?



Among those that do discuss it, they are most likely to have those conversations with their friends.



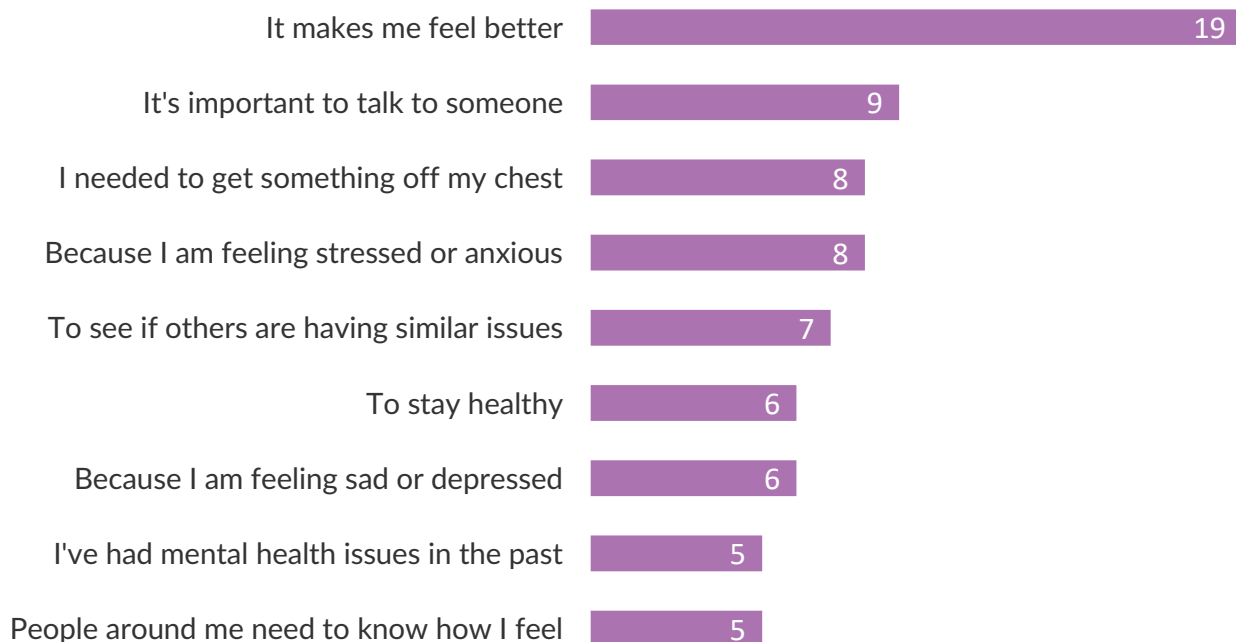


## Young people who discuss their mental health know ongoing discussions are important to feeling good

Communication is key to mental health. When asked to describe in their own words why they discuss their mental health, young people most commonly say these conversations are a way to make them feel better – especially when they feel stressed or anxious – or when they want to get something off their chest.

### What is the main reason you discuss your mental health?

*Asked among those who discuss mental health  
(Open-end question)*



“To help me feel better. **If other people understand, it really helps.**”

- Cis Woman, 21-24

“To get whatever is bothering me out in the open, **so I don't carry it alone.**”

- Cis Man, 13-17

“I need the **support and connection** to other people.”

- Non-Binary 18-20

“I struggle a lot with high anxiety and so **keeping the conversation open and the dialogue going is very important**”

- Cis Woman, 21-24

“I want to be very healthy and **learn the habits that will take me into adulthood.**”

- Cis Woman, 13-17

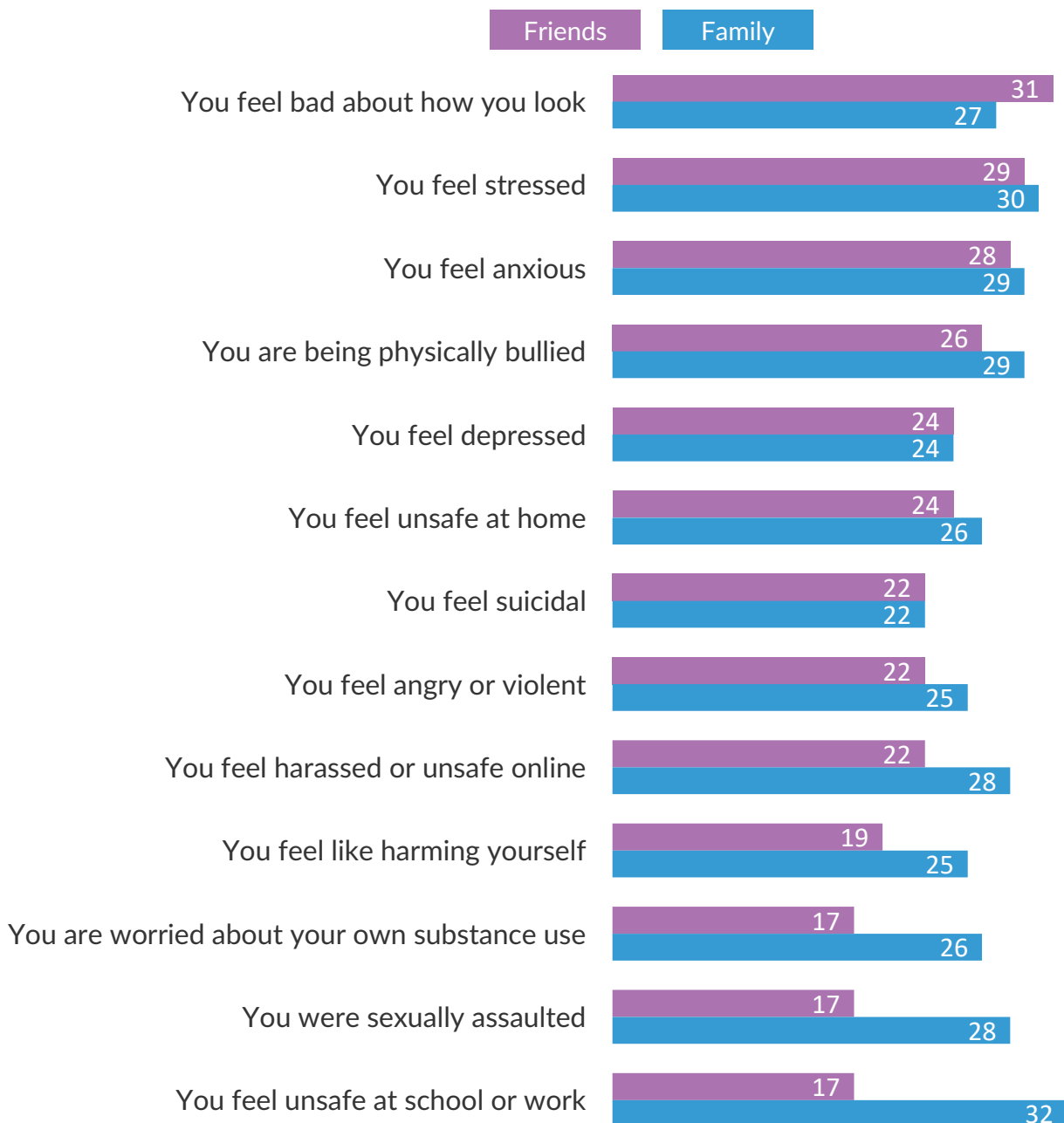
“Talking about [mental health] **makes me feel happier and relaxed.**”

- Cis Man, 13-17

## Family and friends remain a central source of support when confronting many common mental health challenges

Young people in California rely on their friends and family to help them when facing hard times or mental health challenges. For some of the most common challenges like stress, anxiety, and depression, young people are just as likely to turn to their peers for help as they are to seek the support of their family. But when their safety is threatened by others, young people in California are more likely to turn to their family for help.

### % Turn to Each to Talk about Specific Situations

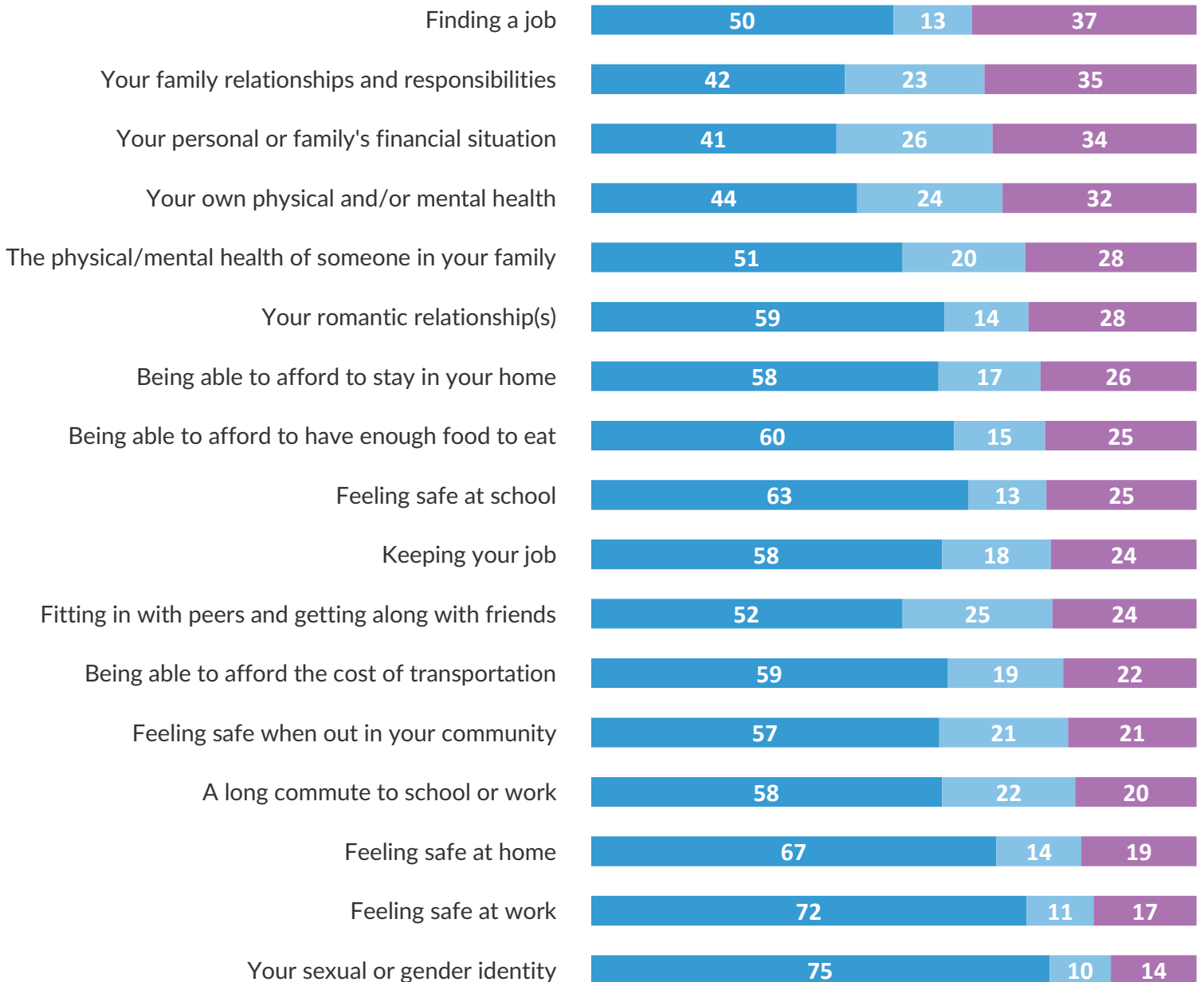


## California youth are facing stress on a number of fronts...

Characterizing young people as quick to “stress out” trivializes the very real pressures youth today grapple with. Many face serious challenges that are innately stressful. For example, a third have felt stress from concerns over the physical and/or mental health of themselves or someone in their family in the past month. Further, a quarter of young people say they felt stressed about being able to afford food or a home to live in.

### Frequent Sources of Stress

*% Felt stressed about...in the past month, where 1 means “not at all stressed” and 10 means “extremely stressed”* ■ NET 1-4 ■ NET 5-6 ■ NET 7-10

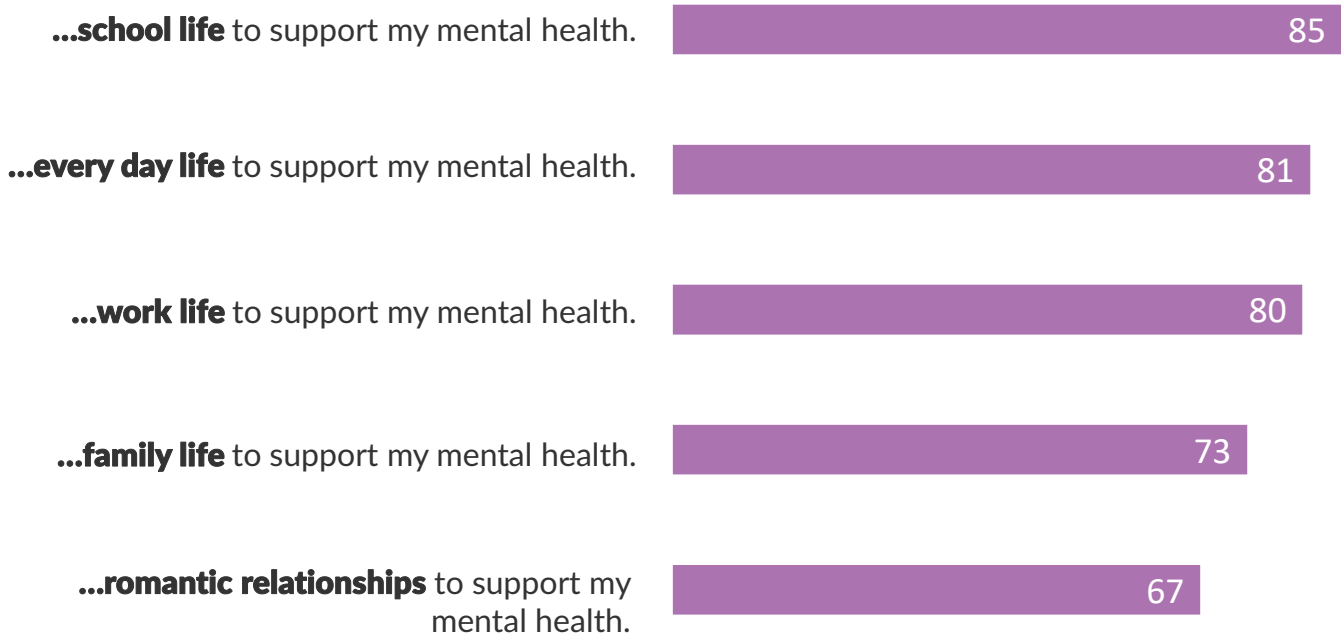


## ...Driving the demand for tools to help them cope

There is high demand for mental health resources that teach coping mechanisms to help navigate the ins-and-outs of every day life. A strong majority (65%) are also enthusiastic about taking a class or workshop that teaches them how to support themselves or someone else in their life who is experiencing a mental health challenge or crisis.

### % Agree with Following Statements

I want to learn coping skills and tools to help me deal with the stresses of...



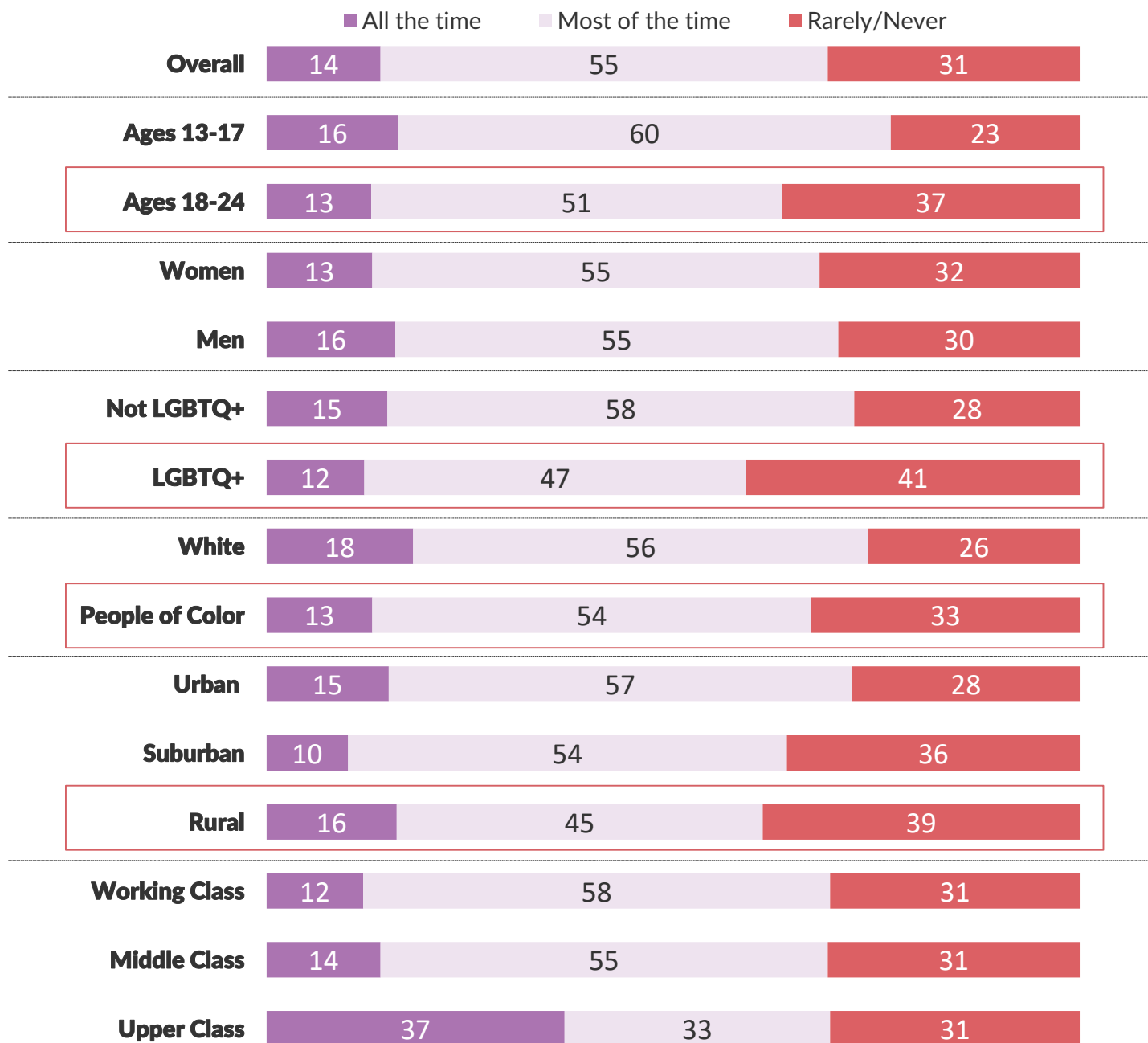


# California Mental Health Resource Access

## 1-in-3 young people in California don't have reliable access to mental health resources

LGBTQ+ young people, those living in rural areas, those ages 18-24, and those of color are most inclined to say that they rarely or never have access to the mental health resources they need. Meanwhile, those in higher income households believe access to mental health care resources are easier to come by.

### Do young people in your city have access to the resources they need to support their mental wellness or to address a mental health issue?



## Key barriers to mental health resources: knowing where to look and affordability

Almost half of all young people in California say they don't know where to turn to get mental health resources and more than a third say even if they did know where to look, the cost of these services puts them out of reach for most people in their city. And while not the primary barrier to resource access, there is a perception among young people in California that stigmatization surrounding mental health and lack of quality or trustworthiness of mental health resources, prevent young people from getting the help they need.

### What in your view is preventing young people in your city from using resources to support mental health?

*Among those who say they don't have access to resources all of the time*

#### BARRIER TYPE:



## Resources will not be used if they are seen to be too expensive, too indiscrete, or too impersonal

**What are the qualities a mental health resource could have that would make you *less likely* to use that resource?**  
*(Open-ended question)*

**“Money.”**

- Cis Woman, 13-17

**“Expensive.”**

- Cis Man, 18-20

**“\$\$\$.”**

- Cis Man, 18-20

**“Cost.”**

- Cis Woman, 13-17

**“Scrutinization.”**

- Cis Man, 18-20

**“Not private.”**

- Cis Man, 18-20

**“Lack of anonymity.”**

- Cis Man, 18-20

**“If there are too many people there, no privacy.”**

- Cis Man, 18-20

**“No private sessions.”**

- Cis Man, 18-20

**“If they tell my parents.”**

- Cis Man, 18-20

**“Having to talk about your problems the instant you meet the specialist.”**

- Cis Man, 18-20

**“Having people that don't care about me there.”**

- Cis Man, 18-20

**“If the people there haven't been in the same situations [as me].”**

- Cis Man, 18-20

**“If it looks unfriendly.”**

- Cis Man, 18-20

**“Judgmental.”**

- Cis Man, 18-20

**“Close minded people.”**

- Cis Man, 18-20



## Most young people in California don't feel they have access to the resources they need to deal with life's most challenging situations

Most young people in California don't think they have access to the mental health resources they need when feeling bad or disappointed in themselves or feeling concerned about others. Alarming,ly, most are not confident that they have the resources to deal with being bullied, being assaulted, feeling suicidal or like harming themselves.

### If you faced each situation, would you have the resources to deal with it?

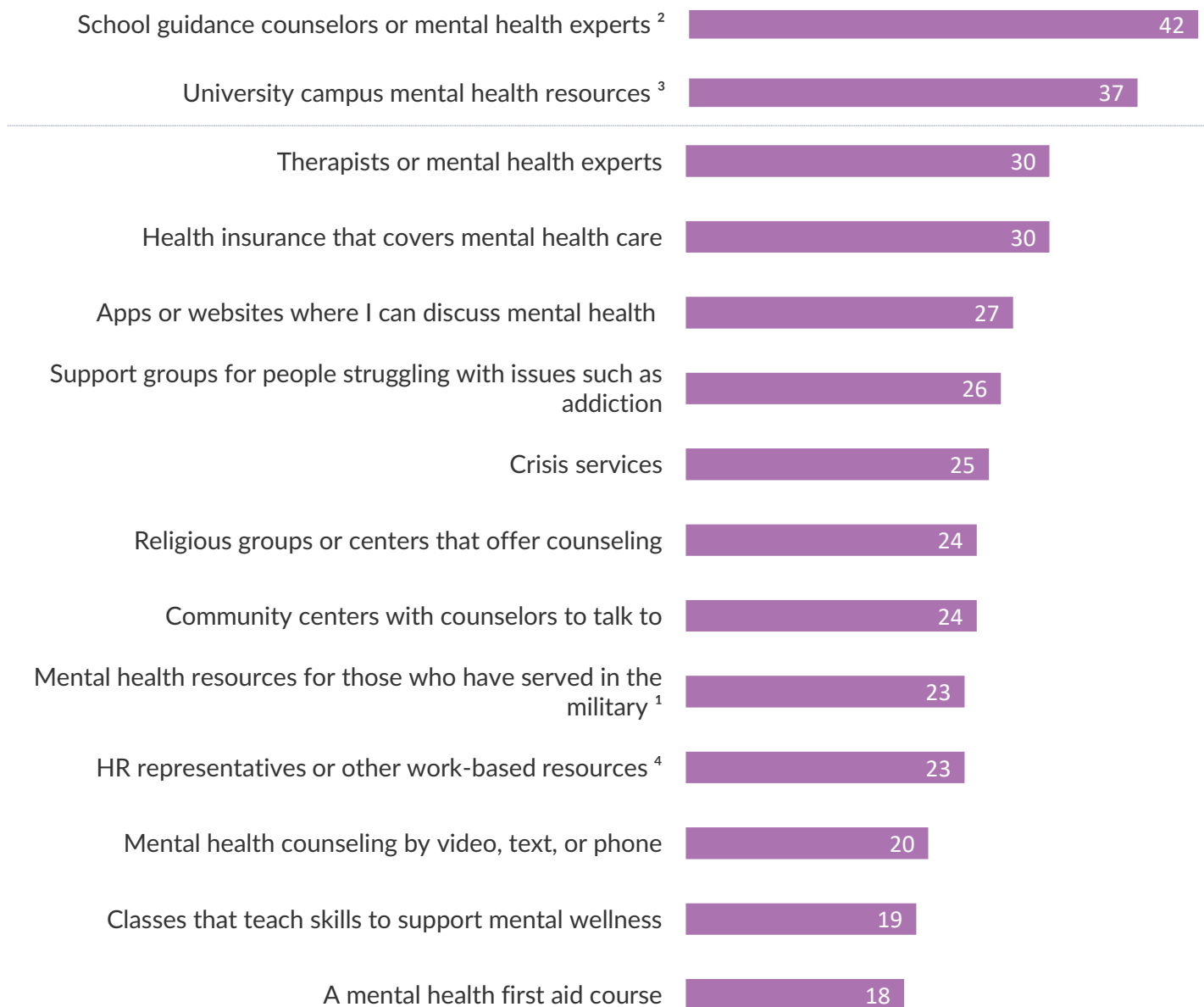
■ Definitely Yes  
 ■ Probably Yes  
 ■ Probably No  
 ■ Definitely No



## Young people in California aren't sure if they have access to key mental health resources

Most young people are unsure if they have access to essential mental health resources when asked about specific services. Among students, there is a fairly good sense that their schools and universities provide them with on-campus access to mental health resources. But the story is less sure off-campus, where less than a third of young people in California believe their communities have access to other important mental health resources.

### % Believe Following Resources Are Definitely Available in Their Community



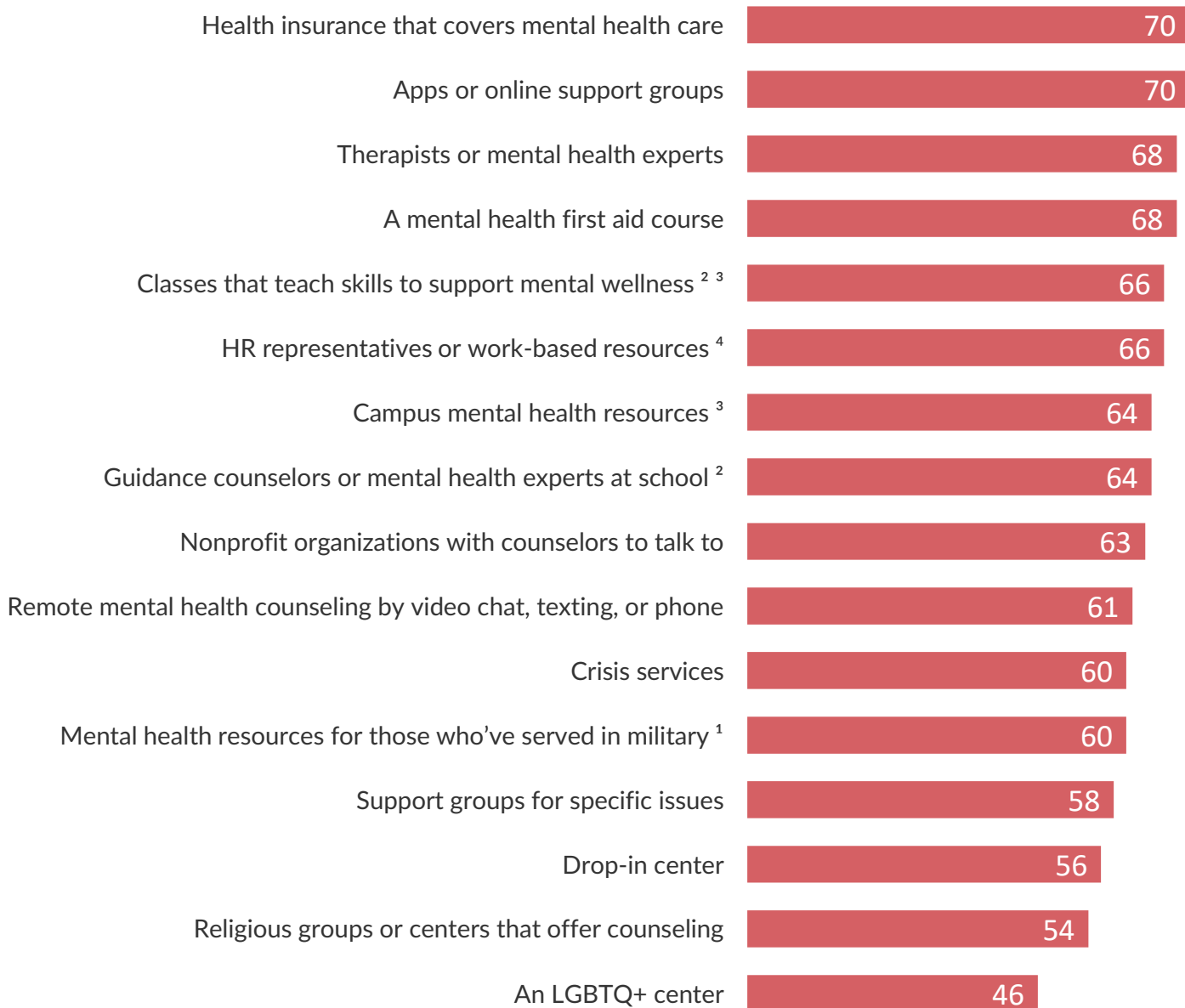


# Youth Mental Health Resource Preferences in California

## Despite uncertainty about access, young people in California would be comfortable using a variety of resources to support their mental health

Young people in California are willing to try a host of resources to support their mental health, both online and in-person. Promisingly, they are also ready to make more concerted efforts, such as taking a mental health first aid course or general mental wellness class, showing a desire to learn the skills they need to help support positive mental health for themselves and within their communities.

### % Comfortable Using the Following Mental Health Resources



## Young people want mental health resources that are trustworthy and judgement-free

California youth define an ideal mental health resource to be one that is judgement-free and has access to understanding and trustworthy people. Following this, there is a desire for these resources to strike a balance between being professional, reputable, and affordable. Openness to digital mental health resources suggests an alternative approach to expand access more widely and affordably.

### Top Mental Health Resource Qualities that Increase Likelihood of Use

*(Open-ended question)*



### What are the qualities a mental health resource could have that would make you more likely to use it?

*(Open-ended question)*

“Somewhere there are **trusted and certified professionals.**”

- Cis Man, 22-24

“A **class that teaches mental health well-being.**”

- Cis Woman, 18-20

“**Specific advice** for me.”

- Cis Man, 18-20

“**Mentored by someone with same issues.**”

- Cis Woman, 13-17

“Somewhere I can talk to people **without being judged.**”

- Cis Man, 18-20

“**Trained professionals** who I can connect with.”

- Cis Man, 18-20

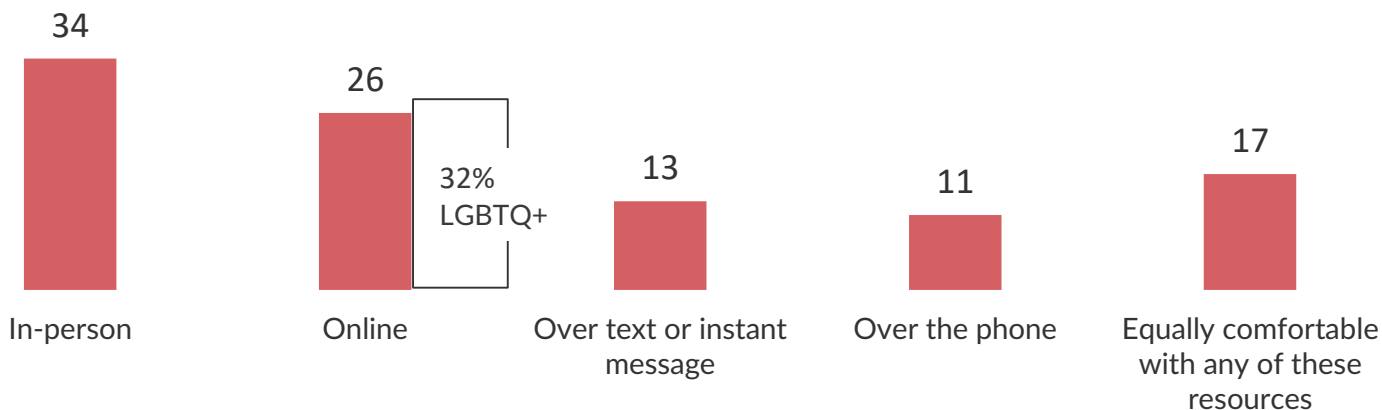
“**Professionals being part** of the resource.”

- Cis Woman, 13-17

## In-person resources are the most desired and while anonymity is important, it's not essential for all

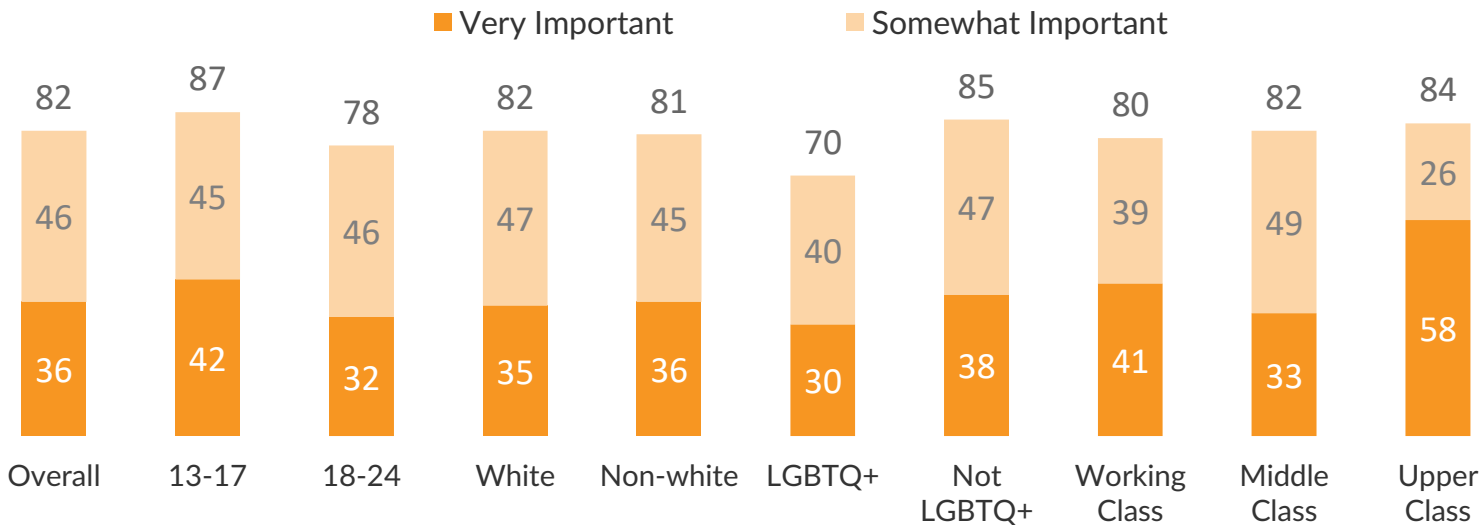
Half of all young people in California would look to face-to-face resources to support their mental health, but digital resources are also valued. Online resources are even more likely to be relied upon by LGBTQ+ young people in California.

### When looking for resources to improve your mental health, you would be more comfortable turning to resources that are...?



While young people say anonymity is an important consideration, the importance of anonymity is felt differently across various segments. Across ages, races, and sexual orientations, large majorities say remaining anonymous on some level is important. However, young people are evenly split between just how important anonymity is to them when using mental health resources.

### Importance of Anonymity in Finding and Using Mental Health Resources



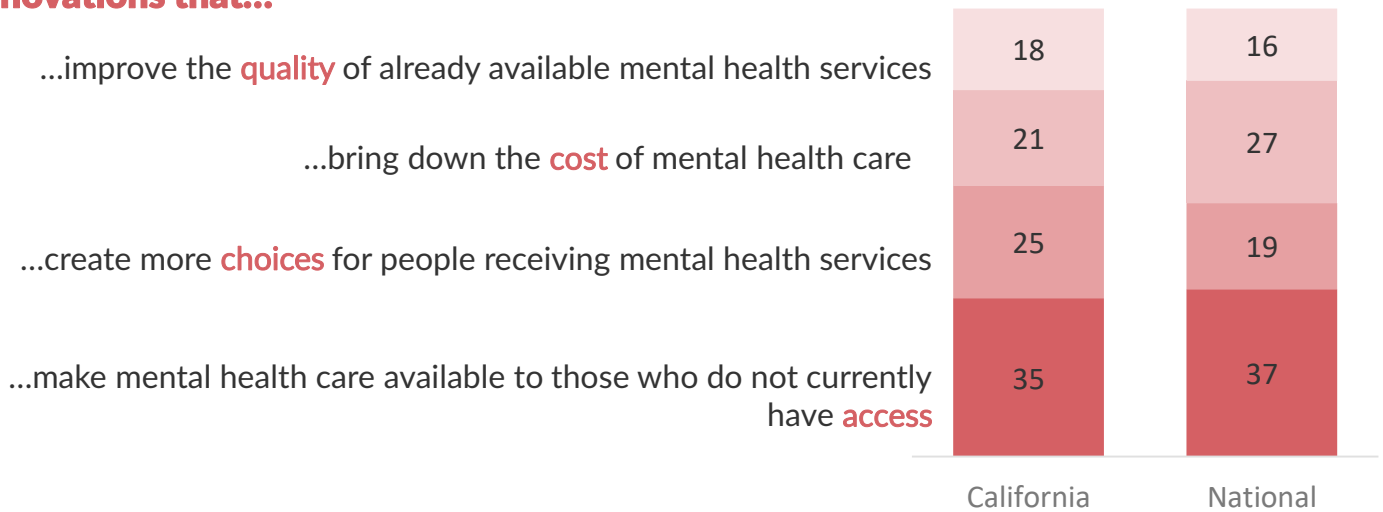
## Innovations in the health care should first strive to expand access to those currently without coverage

While improving the choice, cost, and quality of covered services is important, young people are more interested in how innovation can increase access to mental health coverage overall. Young Californian's preferences are somewhat distinct from the preferences of young people nationally. For both groups, expanding access is of greatest importance, but while young Californians are next most likely to want innovations to expand choice, nationally young people want innovations to reduce cost.

### Which kind of innovations should be the biggest priority for the mental health care system in your state?

*(Open-ended question)*

#### Innovations that...



### Which of the following mental health services in your state is most in need of innovation and improvement?

*(Open-ended question)*

#### Mental Health Services...

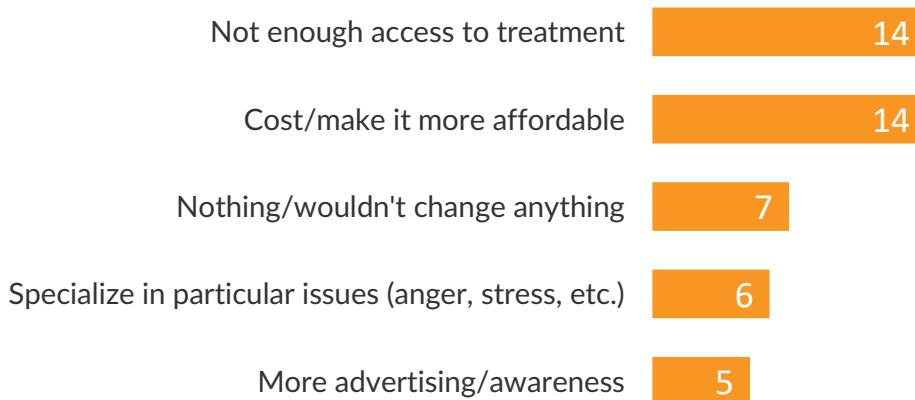


## California young people believe cost and access should be the primary focus of innovation

When asked to describe in their own words, young people in California say innovations that will help lower costs and expand access should be prioritized. Many also voiced an interest in having mental health innovations focus on promoting specialization to meet specific mental health needs.

### Top Mental Health Resource Improvements

(Open-ended question)



While California youth believe that insurance should not be a barrier to adequate mental health care, young people say it is one.

“Being able to access counselors or any other type of support without insurance because many people are homeless or can’t afford it.”

- Cis Woman, 21-24

“I personally receive excellent healthcare, but that's only because insurance pays for it. Others that I know don't get the same care...”

- Trans Man, 13-17

“...insurance is expensive and is something that some people can’t afford like me, who live check to check [and] barely getting by.”

- Cis Man, 21-24

“People shouldn't be denied the best mental health care because they lack insurance.”

- Cis Woman, 21-24

“Making it available on low cost insurance plans so that low/middle class can access it...”

- Cis Woman, 21-24



## Communication, compassion, and cost should be the focus of resource improvements in California

In their own words, the key to improving the mental healthcare system lies in better communicating about existing resources, so young people know where to look when they need support. Many feel that more work needs to be done to de-stigmatize mental health, so that young people are not ashamed or embarrassed to seek-out resources. Finally, improving the mental healthcare system is seen as synonymous with reducing cost, as many young people believe the price-tags that come along with these recourse put them out of reach for most.

### If you had the opportunity to improve one aspect of how the mental healthcare system works in your state, what would it be?

*(Open-ended question)*

**“Advertise where these sources of help are available.”**

- Cis Man, 18-20

**“I would make sure that connection and communication is available and that it was advertised more in schools and mainstream places..”**

-Cis Woman, 18-20

**“Make [resources] more well known and advertise it more to the people.”**

- Cis Man, 13-17

**“I’d innovate so that kids would be more comfortable using mental health resources and not feeling like they will be made fun of.”**

- Cis Man, 18-20

**“To try to eliminate the feeling you get when seeing professionals that you aren’t ‘sick enough’ or you can’t have this or that because you don’t check off all the boxes. I wish there was more openness regarding everyone’s different situations and feelings because they are all unique..”**

- Cis Man, 18-20

**“I’d bring [mental health] opportunities to schools and make them anonymous. Often children go unnoticed when it comes to mental health. More often than not they can’t go to parents and family because they don’t know how to handle it without being ashamed or embarrassed. Rural areas have few mental health opportunities.”**

- Cis Woman, 18-20

**“More available and low cost resources.”**

- Cis Man, 18-20

**“Make it more affordable and accessible to people..”**

- Cis Man, 13-17

**“Make it free for the poor..”**

- Cis Woman, 13-17