



Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pension Committee Hearing to Examine the American Youth Mental Health Crisis

June 8, 2023

Testimony Submitted for the Record by KABOOM!

KABOOM! is the national non-profit focused on ending playspace inequity by working with communities across the country to install community-designed playgrounds in neighborhoods where historical disinvestment has occurred. We do this work because we understand the important role of active play in a child's life. Not only are there a myriad of physical health benefits, ranging from improved cardiovascular health and better eye-hand coordination, but there are also significant mental health benefits associated with play.

Even before the pandemic a growing number of young people were already facing mental health challenges. According to the CDC, there was a 40% increase in the number of adolescents who reported feeling sad or hopeless between 2009-2019. Suicide attempts also rose amongst teens during this period of time, with significant increases amongst LGBTQ+, Black, and female children. Unfortunately, the pandemic exacerbated these trends. Because of the social isolation many children faced as a result of the lockdowns and school closures a growing number began to experience feelings of anxiety or depression. These feelings were often accompanied by factors related to the societal and economic shocks the pandemic caused. According to the CDC, of the 37% of children who reported worsening mental health during the pandemic, 29% lived in homes where at least one parent or caregiver lost a job and 11% experienced some form of physical abuse by a parent or caregiver.

Easing those feelings of social isolation that children feel is therefore critical to fostering better mental health in children. The ability to engage in active play can have a profound beneficial impact on children because it allows them to form peer-to-peer networks that can help improve their mental health and make them more resilient against feelings of sadness or hopelessness. The U.S. Surgeon General issued a public health advisory on protecting youth mental health in 2021 specifically citing playgrounds as a tool communities should invest in to improve the mental health outlook of children. The CDC has also found that the social interactions children engage in during school helps improve mental health outlooks and fosters strong peer bonds that makes children less likely to engage in riskier behaviors associated with poor mental health.



Many communities made the choice to make the re-opening of playgrounds a top priority after the pandemic induced lock downs began. These open-air spaces where children and their caregivers could safely distance themselves but still play together provided many families with an important outlet and much needed interactions with other children that had gone missing from their daily routines.

Unfortunately, there are many neighborhoods across this country where even outdoor play on a safe, high-quality playground was not an option. Due to the persistent effects of racially based housing discrimination and historic disinvestment in Black communities, many of the children who were most susceptible to a mental health crisis were unable to avail themselves of this critically needed option. This is why playspace inequity is an issue which must be addressed. When BIPOC children do not have the same opportunities as their white peers to engage in active play they are increasingly likely to experience a sense of hopelessness that drives unsafe behaviors like suicide attempts.

Children can and do experience feelings of being treated in a racially biased manner. According to the CDC, student feelings of being racially targeted increased by a third during the pandemic, with Asian students reporting the highest rate of increased feelings, 64%, followed by Black students, who reported a 55% increase. These perceptions of racist attitudes towards them are reinforced when they see firsthand the disparity in investment in their neighborhoods. A lack of playgrounds, parks, community recreational centers, libraries, and other forms of civic infrastructure reinforce feelings that erode a young person of color's mental health.

KABOOM! urges the committee to consider the important role of active play in a child's mental health and the need to ensure that every child has an equal opportunity to engage in it. Providing incentives to municipal governments and school districts to invest in the creation of additional or improved playgrounds in historically disinvested communities would be an important first step. We would also ask the committee to explore ways to break down the barriers between agencies and local and federal government entities when considering the best ways to invest in play and civic infrastructure. Neighborhoods are interconnected places where the issues of housing, mobility, learning, health, safety, and recreation are all interwoven with each other. Trying to address these issues separately without regard to the other needs only results in a disjointed approach that fails to serve the mental health needs of the children who live there.

Thank you for this opportunity to share our thoughts with the committee and be a partner in finding solutions that protect our young people's mental health.