



State of Our Kids

Addressing the Youth
Mental Health Crisis

2026



Table of Contents

Introduction

Acknowledgements	1
Youth Editorial Board Opening Statement	3
KABOOM! CEO Opening Statement	4

Realities Shaping Childhood Today

 The Disappearing Playground and Emergence of Screen Time	7
 The Black Child Experience of Adultification vs. Childhood	11
 When Bodies Stop Moving, Minds Suffer	14
 Unseen, Undocumented, and Afraid: The Latino/Hispanic Child Experience	21
 Access to Nature and Outdoor Spaces: A Foundation for Health and Connection	25
 Reclaiming Cultural Identity, Sovereignty, and Childhood: The Native Child Experience	30

Reaching Solutions Through Collective Action

Young People Are Not the Problem. They Are the Solution.	34
Next Steps for Collective Action	37

References	38
-----------------------------	-----------

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report would not be possible without the collective commitment of our *State of Our Kids* Youth Editorial Board and Advisory Council.

Advisory Council

The Advisory Council includes nationally known experts and cross-sector leaders from peer organizations and partners across the youth-serving sector.



Amy Meuers

CEO, National Youth Leadership Council



Ashley Cornforth

Secretary/Treasurer, Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community



Chris Helfrich

CEO, Eat. Learn. Play. Foundation



Jim Boyle

Vice President of Programs and Communication, Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation



Kristine Stratton

CEO, National Recreation and Park Association



Dr. Leah Austin

CEO, National Black Child Development Institute



Lynn Ross

KABOOM! Board Chair, Founder and Principal, Spirit for Change Consulting, LLC



Melissa Rivard

Director of Engagement Strategies, Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University



Natasha Hacker

Vice-Chairwoman, Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community



Sarah Milligan-Toffler

CEO, Children and Nature Network



Tiffany Manuel, PhD

KABOOM! Board Member, President and CEO, TheCaseMade

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We express our deepest gratitude for each person and organization who committed their time and talent to this report.

The Youth Editorial Board includes members of the National Youth Leadership Council's Youth Advisory Council and Youth as Solutions program, and they are young people in 8th through 12th grades nationwide whose lived experiences, insights, and vision for change are at the heart of this report. Their voices don't just inform this work, they lead it, ensuring that the solutions we pursue are truly for them and by them.

Youth Editorial Board



Clarissa Coleman

12th grade,
Tougaloo, MS



Natalie Chen

11th grade,
Mountain View, CA



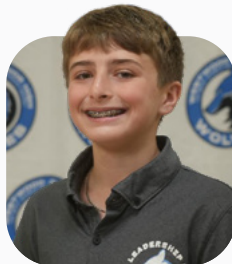
Emiliana Korin

12th grade,
Athens, GA



Noelle Richey

9th grade,
Lanham, MD



Mateo Wolff

8th grade,
Dallas, TX



Syndee Reed

11th grade,
Clinton, MD



OPENING
STATEMENT
FROM

The Youth Editorial Board

We are honored to serve as KABOOM!'s first *State of Our Kids* Youth Editorial Board. KABOOM!'s mission has always centered on framing young people as the architects of their own spaces and through our direct participation in this report, that promise becomes practice. Our voices are not a footnote. They are embedded in every page.

When the topic of youth mental health enters a room, an adult is usually the one speaking. Our voices are often not heard. But we, young people, are not only those most at risk. We are also the ones who know this issue best. We live it.

Between 2016 and 2023, the rate of diagnosed mental or behavioral health conditions among adolescents in the U.S. rose by 35%. Today, four in 10 students report persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness. And approximately one in five teenagers has personal experience with a peer dying by suicide (Sappenfield et al., 2023). These are not abstract statistics to us. These are our classrooms, our group chats, our friends. We also know this: youth mental health is not a youth-only problem. The mental health of young people shapes the communities and systems we all inhabit, including schools, families, neighborhoods, workplaces.

When a young person struggles without support, the effects ripple outward. This is every adult's issue too, and we invite you to see it that way.

Across our communities, too many spaces meant to support young people simply do not exist, are underfunded, overlooked, or built without us in mind or at the table. And it is not that communities lack the will to address youth mental health. Often, they lack the resources. The solutions will not be simple, and they cannot be one-size-fits-all. What helps an elementary schooler navigate anxiety will not look the same for a middle schooler or high schooler processing trauma. What works in one neighborhood may not translate to another. Some young people find stability through writing. Others through athletics, play, art, or music. Our backgrounds and home environments shape how we experience the world, and our mental health along with it.

This report does not offer easy answers. But it does offer something essential: an honest, equity-centered look at where young people stand, and what it might take to build something better, together — across generations, political divides, and sectors.

Dear
Reader,

Thirty years into this work and one truth has only grown clearer: our collective future depends on how we show up for our kids today.

Childhood is not just a moment in time to reflect upon with nostalgia. Today's children are tomorrow's adults who will one day lead our communities, govern our nations, and steward our planet. Childhood is where these future leaders' foundations are established, where values take root, and where their identities first begin to take shape.

The experiences children have in their earliest years directly shape their cognitive abilities, emotional resilience, and long-term health outcomes. **The children alive today will inherit the world that we leave behind, and how well we care for these children now will determine how well they care for us in the future and our planet, long after we are gone.**

This is why the state of our kids demands urgent and collective action.

Across the country, childhood is being reshaped in ways that should concern us all. We are in the midst of a youth mental health crisis, which was declared in 2021 by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP), and the Children's Hospital Association (CHA) (AAP et al., 2021). Children are experiencing rising rates of anxiety, depression, and isolation. They are spending unprecedented hours on screens, often in digital environments designed to capture attention rather than nurture well-being (Office of the Surgeon General, 2023). And too many communities are not designed as places where children can thrive, because they lack safe, accessible places where kids can simply play, connect, and grow.

This report is grounded in that reality. It is both a reflection of where we are and a call to where we must go next.



**OPENING
STATEMENT
FROM
KABOOM!
CEO**

KABOOM! believes deeply in the power of play. Not as a luxury, but as a fundamental ingredient of healthy, joyful childhoods and strong communities. The research is clear: play supports brain development, builds resilience, strengthens relationships, and helps reduce the effects of toxic stress and trauma (Yogman et al., 2018). When kids have safe spaces and supportive relationships, they thrive. When they don't, the consequences ripple for generations.

But here is what three decades of work has also taught us: people care and want to show up for our kids. For 30 years, we have seen neighbors, parents, educators, corporate partners, and local leaders come together and work side-by-side to build vibrant playspaces, and in the process, strengthen the fabric of their communities. This spirit of shared purpose is not incidental. It is essential.

Yet, building playspaces is only one part of the solution. Ensuring that every child has access to what they need to grow up healthy, joyful, and thriving requires systemic change. It requires policies that prioritize our kids. It requires investments in communities that have long been overlooked. And it requires all of us across sectors to recognize our shared responsibility to safeguard children.

That is why this report matters.

This report brings together data, lived experience, and perspectives from across the country to paint a fuller picture of what kids are facing today and what they need from us. We are especially grateful to the members of our Advisory Council, whose expertise and guidance have shaped this solutions-based body of work. We also want to acknowledge the young leaders of the Youth Editorial Board, supported by the National Youth Leadership Council. **Youth voices are not just included, they are essential and must lead the way.**

The youth remind us that this is not an abstract issue. It is their lived reality.

And they are asking us to act. They need us to act.

This moment calls for more than awareness. It calls for commitment. Whether you are a policymaker, educator, business leader, or community member, there is a role for you to improve the state of our kids.

When we invest in our kids, we invest in our future.

The challenges before us are real, but so is our capacity to meet them if we work together.

Now is the time to show up.

For the future we share,

**Lysa
Ratliff**
CEO



Realities Shaping Childhood Today

1.

The Disappearing Playground and Emergence of Screen Time

2.

When Bodies Stop Moving, Minds Suffer

3.

Access to Nature and Outdoor Spaces: A Foundation for Health and Connection

A Racial Equity Lens Through Voices and Lived Experiences

Improving the state of our kids in America starts with understanding the realities faced by youth today, inclusive of all backgrounds. Fear of school shootings, drug use pressures in order to fit in, reckoning with racial or sexual identity, and other recent challenges are felt across populations where no group is untouched. These challenges disproportionately impact communities of color and rural communities alike, compounding systemic barriers that have affected generations of youth. The racial perspectives featured throughout this report were developed to highlight the experiences of Black, Latino/Hispanic, and Native youth that are too often absent from national conversations about child well-being.

The Black Child Experience of Adultification vs. Childhood

Unseen, Undocumented, and Afraid: The Latino/Hispanic Child Experience

Reclaiming Cultural Identity, Sovereignty, and Childhood: The Native Child Experience

A young child with dark skin is looking down at a tablet computer. The child's face is in the foreground, and their hand is visible near the bottom of the screen. The background is blurred, showing another person's face. The overall tone is serious and contemplative.

1.

The Disappearing Playground and Emergence of Screen Time

Written in collaboration with Children & Nature Network

Over the past two decades, unstructured play has been steadily displaced — first by overscheduled afternoons, then by screens that followed kids into every room, and finally by platforms engineered to make sure they never looked away.

Today, 40% of children have their own tablet by age two and spend an average of 7.5 hours per day on screens, not counting schooltime. Play was replaced by a system designed to capture attention, manufacture dependency, and monetize both.

The Problem

Oftentimes, I feel we turn to our phones not out of genuine desire to stay connected, but because there's nowhere else to go — no nearby park, no open field, no outdoor space that feels safe and close. The deterioration of those spaces really doesn't offer an obvious alternative, and the screen fills the gap by default.”

— Emiliana, 12th grade

Why This Matters

There is a version of childhood that many of us remember. It looked like neighborhood kids spilling out of houses after school, pickup games that nobody organized, arguments that kids settled themselves, and scraped knees that nobody documented. These everyday moments of unstructured time have turned out to be central to a child's growth and development.

That childhood is largely gone.

Over the past two decades, unstructured play has been steadily displaced — first by overscheduled afternoons, then by screens that followed kids into every room, and finally by platforms engineered to make sure they never looked away. Today, 40% of children have their own tablet by age two and spend an average of 7.5 hours per day on screens, not counting schooltime. Play was replaced by a system designed to capture attention, manufacture dependency, and monetize both.

This shift was not accidental. Former Facebook co-founder Sean Parker acknowledged that social platforms were built by asking, “How do we consume as much of your time and conscious attention as possible?” (Parker, 2017). More recently, Senate testimony from former Meta executive Sarah Wynn-Williams revealed that Facebook identified when teenagers as young as 13 were feeling “worthless or helpless” based on their online behavior — and shared that data with advertisers to capitalize on their moments of insecurity (U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee, 2025).

The consequences show up in the data.

Depression diagnoses among children rose 60% between 2017 and 2021 and anxiety rose by 31% in the same period.

The share of high schoolers reporting persistent sadness or hopelessness grew 40% between 2009 and 2019 (U.S. Surgeon General, 2023). Today, one in six youth ages six to 17 experience a mental health disorder each year (NAMI, 2024). These statistics reflect the measurable cost of a generation's shift away from a play-based childhood to one centered around the digital world.

**Tech companies
are generating**

**\$11
billion**

**a year in ad revenue
from users ages 0-17
years (Raffoul et al., 2023).**



Children who spend
just 60 minutes daily
in nature have a

50%

lower risk of mental
health issues.

Solutions

“
Sometimes I go on my phone just to relax, but I end up staying on it way longer than I planned. It makes it harder to stay active or focus on more important things I need to do.”

— Noelle, 9th grade

The answer is not simply to take away screens. It is to build back what screens displaced — an abundance of physical spaces and the unstructured time that prioritized what’s needed most in childhood.

The research is clear. Children who spend just 60 minutes daily in nature have a 50% lower risk of mental health issues — with the greatest benefits for children from lower-income households (Caryl et al., 2024). Physical activity is two to three times higher when children are outside compared to indoors (Cooper et al., 2010). Green schoolyards and nature-rich environments are linked to better focus, reduced ADHD symptoms, and stronger school attendance (Kuo & Faber Taylor, 2004; Chawla et al., 2014).

When kids play, they are not just having fun. They are developing the cognitive flexibility, emotional regulation, and social skills that no algorithm can teach. They are learning, on their own terms, how to be in the world.

Every child deserves a place to play. And every community needs to define what that looks like on their own terms. This is what sharpens the urgency of KABOOM!’s work alongside national partners like Children & Nature Network and National Recreation and Park Association, as well as other municipal and funding partners across the country. Playspaces are not amenities. They are infrastructure — as essential to a child’s development as any classroom. When KABOOM! co-creates playspaces with communities, we are restoring real life benefits, connections, and experiences that screens cannot replicate and algorithms cannot replace.

The Black Child Experience of Adultification vs. Childhood

Written in collaboration with The National Black Child Development Institute and the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University

The Problem

The National Black Child Development Institute (NBCDI) has named that for Black children, the youth mental health crisis is not only psychological, but the predictable outcome of systems designed to adultify childhood.

The experience of Black joy and childhood in America is one that is treated not as something to be protected, but as something to be managed, surveilled, and muted. Black children are adultified and seen as older, more threatening, and less innocent than other children. This has been well-documented and shapes how Black children are treated in schools, in public spaces, and in the places where they are supposed to live, learn, and play freely. When a Black child is followed in a park, told to move along, or treated as a threat for simply being present, these experiences not only shape their childhood, but they are also carried into how they experience the world as adults. And these roots run deep as a part of decades of racism and disinvestment.



Black children are adultified and seen as older, more threatening, and less innocent than other children.

In the 1930s, the federal government's Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) drew neighborhood maps across more than 230 American cities, grading them from A to D. Areas graded A, outlined in green, were deemed worthy of investment. They were almost exclusively white communities. Areas graded D, outlined in red, were deemed hazardous. They were almost exclusively communities of color. Cities planted trees, built parks, and beautified public spaces in the green zones. They neglected the red ones except to build infrastructure, such as freeways and pollution-rich industrial facilities, that physically dismantled and separated communities from resources. As one researcher put it, the distribution of these disparities is not an accident. "It was a choice, made over generations" (Edberg, as cited in Daly, 2020).

That choice compounds to this day. Research confirms that greenspaces declined alongside HOLC grades and areas historically designated as less desirable were covered in more asphalt and lacked trees and parks. In Black neighborhoods today, parks are half the size of those in white neighborhoods and nearly five times as crowded (Edberg, as cited in Daly, 2020). 68% of Black people live in a nature-deprived area, compared to 23% of white people (Center for American Progress, 2020). Exclusionary zoning compounded what redlining started, concentrating tree canopies, greenspaces, and larger lots in wealthier, whiter neighborhoods while leaving denser, divested communities with more pavement and less protection. Redlined communities are the hottest neighborhoods in 94% of American cities, a direct consequence of that same disinvestment (Hoffman, Shandas & Pendleton, 2020). Historically and today, the built environment where Black children are growing up does not support a thriving community that sets up a healthy childhood.

Why This Matters

The Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University provides useful grounding, stating that the conditions of a place shape child development from the very beginning. Access to safe greenspaces, clean air and water, and environments free of environmental hazards are not extras. They are the foundation of healthy development. When those conditions are absent, the consequences are developmental, not incidental (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2023).

For Black children, the consequences are compounded by adultification. When systems treat Black children as miniature adults who don't deserve innocence or protection, the mental health toll is specific and severe (Goff et al., 2014; Epstein et al., 2017). This is the reality of growing up in communities shaped by structural racism, chronic underinvestment, and the constant low-level stress of navigating spaces that were never designed with them in mind (Holloway & Bhatt, 2023; Bernard et al., 2022).

**Redlined communities
are the hottest
neighborhoods in**

94%

of American cities.



KABOOM! is committed to protecting the spaces where Black children can be exactly who they are.

Solutions

NBCDI points to three levels of change, and KABOOM! is committed to working across all three (National Black Child Development Institute [NBCDI], 2024).

First, we need to shift from thinking of and treating childhood as a period of becoming to honoring it as a time of just being, resisting the urge to adultify Black children. From seeing joy and freedom in childhood as a privilege to recognizing it as a right. NBCDI created the Afrofuturist Systems Design Process, which shows us how to identify the historically harmful mental models that perpetuate racial biases embedded in our institutions and replace them with frameworks that center Black knowledge, ancestral wisdom, and collective vision (NBCDI, 2024).

Second, policy and practice must change. Environmental racism needs to be addressed, so that Black children have access to clean air, water, and greenspace, directing investment toward the communities that redlining and exclusionary zoning deliberately bypassed as a point of repair. Communities must be safe havens for Black children, places where they can be present and feel free without surveillance or criminalization. As the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University reminds us, places designed to harm children can be redesigned. Environments that deprive children of play, greenspace, and safety can be transformed when the will, the resources, and the right relationships are in place (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2023).

Third, how organizations partner with each other must transform. NBCDI's Village Network, a group of community leaders, advocates, parents, educators, and affiliates committed to improving the lives of Black children, are grounding in the fact that communities closest to the problem hold the expertise. Solutions built without that expertise will not hold. This approach serves as a "think-and-do" tool that prioritizes intentional worldbuilding and tangible policy change over adapting to broken or oppressive structures (NBCDI, 2024).

This is the work KABOOM! is built to support. KABOOM! uses data, including Playspace Inequity Prioritization Index (PIPI), to identify where inequities are deepest and direct investment accordingly (Castillo & Paul, 2024; KABOOM!, 2024). Then KABOOM! builds with communities, not for them. Parents, kids, educators, and neighbors co-design the spaces that will serve them, then show up to build them together. This process is effective and transformative, because when a community helps create something, it becomes truly theirs.

NBCDI envisions a future where every Black child grows up in a world that innately protects and fortifies their access to environments to learn and play. Where, as they write, "Black children will be afforded the future they have always been worthy of but have been so severely cut off from experiencing" (NBCDI, 2024, p. 24).

KABOOM! is committed to that future. Not abstractly, but in the specific, measurable, community-led work of building and protecting the spaces where Black children can be exactly who they are and experience the joy and benefits of having a full childhood.

When Bodies Stop Moving, Minds Suffer

Written in collaboration with Eat. Learn. Play. Foundation, National Recreation and Park Association, and Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation

For children, physical activity is as essential to healthy development as food and sleep. Yet across the country, our kids are moving less than any generation before them, and the toll on their mental health is profound.

According to the CDC, children and adolescents ages six to 17 need at least 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity every day. Yet fewer than one in four youth meets this basic threshold.

The Problem

Not being active enough can make me feel tired and sometimes stressed. If I had more opportunities to move during the day, I think it would help improve my mood and give me a break from everything.”

— Noelle, 9th grade

For children, physical activity is as essential to healthy development as food and sleep.

Yet across the country, our kids are moving less than any generation before them, and the toll on their mental health is profound.

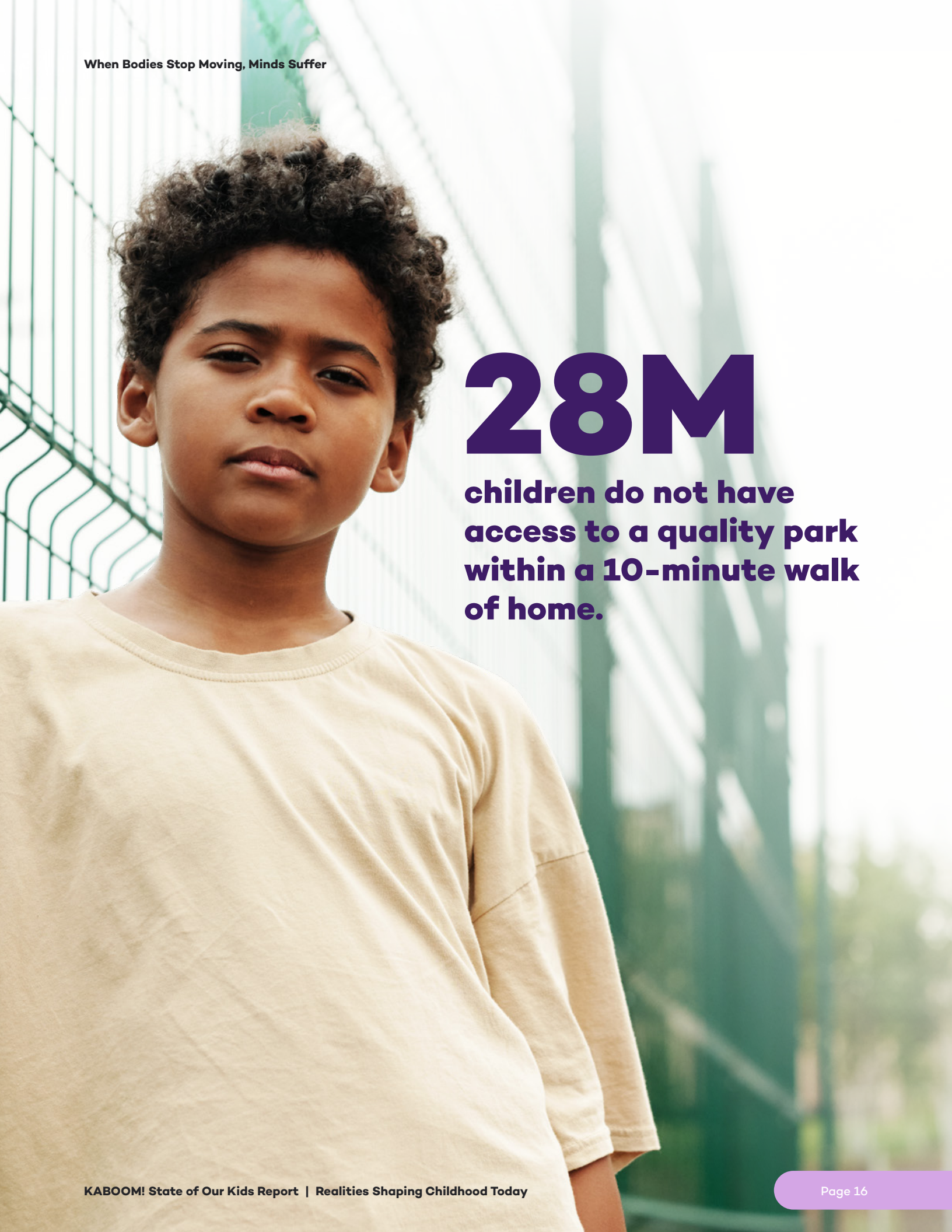
According to the CDC, children and adolescents ages six to 17 need at least 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity every day. Yet fewer than one in four youth meets this basic threshold. Physical activity levels drop sharply as children age, with the steepest declines occurring during adolescence, precisely when the mental health crisis hits hardest.

The result of decreased movement shows up in both physical and mental health. According to the CDC, nearly 20% of young people in the U.S. are obese — that's 14.7 million kids (ages two to 19). A recent study published in JAMA projects that nearly half of Americans — 46.9%, or about 126 million people nationwide — will be living with obesity by 2035 (DeCleene et al., 2026). This is alarming because obesity is also associated with a significantly increased risk for a variety of mental health issues, including bipolar disorder, depressive episodes, recurrent depression, anxiety disorders, eating disorders, and personality disorders (Leutner et al., 2023).

How did we get here? The answer lies not in individual choices but in systemic failures. Recess has been cut or eliminated in schools across the country to make room for academic instruction despite research showing that physical activity improves academic performance. Over the past two decades, recess has been cut almost in half, starting with an average of 37 minutes of daily recess time nationwide in 2001 to just 19.5 minutes in 2024 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). Kids are now remaining sedentary at their school desks for six to eight hours per day, with minimal or no movement breaks, which decreases their focus and academic performance.

Neighborhoods that once had ample open space, safe streets, and accessible parks have seen those spaces disappear or fall into disrepair.

One hundred million Americans, including 28 million children, do not have access to a quality park within a 10-minute walk of home (Trust for Public Land, 2023). In low-income communities and communities of color, this access gap is even more severe. The parks and playspaces that do exist are often outdated, unsafe, or unwelcoming.



28M

**children do not have
access to a quality park
within a 10-minute walk
of home.**



Recess has
been cut
**almost
in half**
over the past
two decades.

Why This Matters

This is not a coincidence. The relationship between physical activity and mental health is well-documented and powerful.

Regular movement reduces symptoms of anxiety and depression, improves mood regulation, strengthens cognitive function, and builds the resilience children need to navigate an increasingly complex world (Biddle et al., 2019; Recchia et al., 2025). When children stop moving, they lose access to one of the most effective, accessible, and natural mental health interventions we have.

Jim Boyle, Vice President of Programs and Communication, Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation puts it plainly, "Kids who are physically active are more likely to be healthy adults and more likely to thrive academically. You can make an economic case, but ultimately, it's a moral imperative. Something as simple as kids being able to play should not be as hard as it is — the freedom, without worry, for parents and kids to just go play and be."

That framing captures something essential. When a family cannot let their child play freely outdoors, when the radius of safe movement shrinks because of disinvestment, neglect, or decisions made without them, that is not a parenting problem. It is a policy failure. It is an infrastructure failure. Boyle, who raised his children on Detroit's east side, often witnessed parents draw tight boundaries around where their kids could go. Those boundaries weren't over-protection. They were a rational response to systemic abandonment.

"Kids are thinking about heavy things before they should have to," Boyle said.

That cost — the early theft of a carefree childhood — shows up in mental health data, in doctors' offices, and in schools.

Solutions

Making Recess in Schools a Priority

KABOOM! is committed to ensuring play and places to enjoy the outdoors are prioritized across the country, including in schools. **While only 12 states and Washington, D.C. have recess policies in place that require students to have unstructured play during the school day, KABOOM! is working to change that across the country through “right to recess” policies.** KABOOM! supported a recess policy in Maryland when CEO Lysa Ratliff served on Maryland Governor Wes Moore’s transition team. Similarly, in California, KABOOM! worked with their partner, Eat. Learn. Play. Foundation, to advocate for SB 291, a bill to require at least 30 minutes of recess during the school day for all of California’s children.

Prioritizing the Whole Child

"Too often, we treat physical activity, academic success, and mental health as separate issues, but for kids, they are deeply connected," said Chris Helfrich, CEO of Eat. Learn. Play. Foundation.

For many children, the schoolyard is their only consistent access to safe outdoor play, nature, and connection with peers. When spaces are dominated by asphalt instead of designed for movement and joy, it impacts not only their physical health, but their ability to manage stress, focus in school, and feel a sense of belonging.



Solutions in Action

Eat. Learn. Play. Foundation, Oakland Unified School District, and KABOOM! have been working together since 2021 to create new playgrounds, nature exploration areas, multi-sport courts, teaching gardens, outdoor classrooms, and murals to transform entire schoolyards into spaces that support the whole child. This partnership will complete a total of 28 schoolyard transformations by the end of 2026, giving 8,600 students each year improved opportunities to play, learn, and grow outside of the traditional school setting.

To learn more about the positive outcomes for physical and mental health in Oakland schools, watch [Eat. Learn. Play.'s Building Joy: A Movement to Reimagine Oakland's Schoolyards](#) documentary released in January 2026.

Outdoor Parks and Recreation as a Scalable Platform for Youth Well-Being

Parks and recreation must occupy a prominent place in the national conversation about youth. Across the country, local park and recreation agencies engage 50 million youth annually. **Outdoor settings like parks, fields, courts, and community centers serve the broadest cross-section of children of any out-of-school time sector, including youth in low-income areas, with more than 30 million kids participating in organized youth sports or outdoor recreation in these settings (NRPA, 2025).** This is not peripheral infrastructure. It is one of the most trusted, proximate, and scalable platforms we have for advancing youth well-being.

In former [U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy's 2021 "Protecting Youth Mental Health"](#) advisory, Murthy specifically listed "safe neighborhoods with amenities such as parks and playgrounds" as key priorities for investment for federal, state, local, and tribal governments in order to address youth mental health.

National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA)'s CEO Kristine Stratton offers solutions that center parks and recreation as a platform to address the systemic challenges. She calls out ways to increase access to safe outdoor recreation, engage youth in a meaningful way through intentional programming, and the need for collective alignment and action to support youth.

"We can help prevent crises by weaving protective factors into daily life: trusted adults, a sense of belonging, physical activity, safe places, positive peer relationships, enriching opportunities, and pathways to building confidence and purpose," says Stratton.

The science is pretty clear here. Humans, like any animal, need to have movement in our lives, and growing up in a world where it's become normalized to sit at a desk for hours without breaks, defies our natural inclinations. I think that the question of incorporating movement in our day to day is less a question of *should* and a more urgent question of *how*."

— Emiliana, 12th grade

We already have evidence of what works. Engaging youth in a meaningful way such as NRPA's youth mentoring initiatives have produced documented increases in social competency, community involvement, and stronger peer relationships, with 44% of mentees reporting improved mental health outcomes. Agencies using NRPA's youth sports framework strategies have seen a 24% increase in youth sports participation. Grantees advancing gender equity strategies report increases in girls' participation, girls' confidence, and the number of women in coaching roles (NRPA, 2025).

Unifying Solution: The Opportunity Is Alignment

But no single sector can solve this alone. The real opportunity lies in alignment. When parks and recreation lead in coalition with schools, libraries, youth-serving nonprofits, housing authorities, health partners, and other municipal systems, young people experience consistent, reliable, safe, and welcoming support. **Working together, we can increase access to physical activity through coordinated schedules, transit, shared data, common goals, and stronger shared pathways.**

The youth-centered future we should be building toward requires specific commitments from each of us. Funders should invest not only in individual programs, but in the connective tissue that allows systems to work together: shared outcomes, partnership infrastructure, workforce development, youth voice, and community-rooted public spaces. Peer organizations should commit to a unified and holistic vision of youth well-being. Municipal leaders should recognize parks and recreation and other out-of-school-time systems as essential contributors to public health, mental health, and community resilience. And all of us must center the voices of young people and caregivers in designing what support looks like.

Our youth need environments that reduce stress rather than amplify it, that are inclusive of trusted adults, opportunities for real connection, physical activity, play, joy, belonging, and hope.

The youth mental health crisis is urgent. Collective action, built on aligned systems and equitable access, is the only answer equal to this moment. We cannot afford to wait.

Unseen, Undocumented, and Afraid: The Latino/Hispanic Child Experience

Informed by insights and data from The Marshall Project

The Problem

Latino/Hispanic children are among the most numerous, yet overlooked in national conversations about child well-being, and are navigating extreme trauma and fears around family separation and displacement under the current administration.

The inequities Latino/Hispanic children face today are the accumulated result of more than 150 years of deliberate exclusion and disinvestment.



A Legacy of Exclusion and Displacement

Since the mid-19th century, Latino/Hispanic people in the United States have faced discrimination which continues today. In the late 1920s and 1930s, as economic fear gripped the country, the United States forcibly removed up to two million people of Mexican descent, up to 60% of whom were American citizens (Blakemore, 2025). These were not deportations of immigrants, but the displacement of families whose roots in this country predate its current borders.

Latino/Hispanic children were also systematically excluded from equal education. By the 1940s, as many as 80% of Latino/Hispanic children in parts of California attended separate, under-resourced schools, assigned based on their complexion, their last name, or the language spoken in their home. It took a courageous lawsuit, *Mendez v. Westminster*, filed by Mexican American families in 1945, to begin dismantling school segregation in California (National Park Service, 2023). That legal victory came nearly a decade before *Brown v. Board of Education*, and it remains largely unknown to most Americans. This historical context ties into the decades of race-driven unfair practices targeting the Latino/Hispanic community that continues today.

A Mental Health and Community Investment Gap

Systems level inequities have played a role in the Latino/Hispanic community's lack of access to and trust in the environments that would support mental health.

Among the 1.2 million Latino/Hispanic adolescents who experienced a major depressive episode in 2023, only half received treatment in the past year, compared to nearly 68% of their non-Hispanic white peers (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2025).

Latina/Hispanic high school girls face compounded risk, with 17% more likely than their

Latina/Hispanic high school girls are

17%

more likely than their peers to report a suicide attempt in the past year.

peers to report a suicide attempt in the past year (CDC, 2024). Among Latino/Hispanic youth who identify as LGBTQ+, 40% reported seriously considering suicide in the past year (The Trevor Project, 2026).

As a continuation of racial exclusion and disinvestment, far too many Latino/Hispanic neighborhoods lack places for families to gather or play outdoors. In cities like Los Angeles, predominantly Latino/Hispanic neighborhoods have access to just 0.6 park acres per 1,000 residents, compared to 31.8 acres in predominantly white areas in the same city (Wilson et al., 2009).

But the idea of scarcity in public spaces to gather can't be raised without highlighting the fear of gathering outdoors in general for the Latino/Hispanic community.

When Fear Becomes a Dominating Condition of Childhood

The current immigration climate has introduced a form of toxic stress into the lives of Latino/Hispanic children that does not pause for recess, sleep, or school. Approximately 4.5 million U.S. citizen children live in households where one or both parents are undocumented and the fear of family separation is felt regardless of citizenship.



ICE arrests increased by

120%

in 2025, making Latino/Hispanic families more fearful of gathering in public places.

An analysis by The Marshall Project of ICE data obtained by the Deportation Data Project found the revival of family detention resulted in at least 6,200 youth under the age of 18 being booked by ICE (The Marshall Project, 2026). According to CBS News reporting, ICE arrests increased by 120% in the first five months of 2025 compared with the same period in 2024. For families, this means being more fearful of more workplace checks, school drop-offs and pickups, and gathering in public places of any kind. **Having to navigate the world looking over your shoulder with constant fear of potential deportation and family separation just because of your ethnic background is a tremendous trauma for parents and children.** This is far beyond what is imaginable for anyone, but especially children.

Research clearly shows that chronic exposure to deportation fear disrupts sleep, impairs cognitive development, increases school absenteeism, and produces anxiety, depression, and PTSD symptoms at clinically significant levels, even among children who have never directly experienced an immigration enforcement action (The Marshall Project, 2026).

Latino/Hispanic children represent nearly

1 in 4

children in the United States.

Why This Matters

The experiences of Latino/Hispanic children are not a niche issue affecting only one community. Latino/Hispanic children represent nearly one in four children in the United States and are among the fastest-growing segments of the nation's youth population. Their well-being is directly tied to the future strength of our schools, workforce, economy, and democracy.

When children grow up carrying chronic fear, untreated mental health needs, and unequal access to education, healthcare, and safe community spaces, the consequences extend far beyond individual families. Communities experience lower educational attainment, increased health disparities, reduced economic mobility, and greater long-term public costs. **Childhood trauma does not remain confined to childhood; it shapes outcomes across a lifetime.**

Latino/Hispanic children make vital cultural, economic, and social contributions to the country. They are students, future workers, leaders, innovators, and caregivers. Underinvesting in their well-being is not only unjust to them, but also a loss for the nation as a whole.

Solutions

Addressing these challenges requires intentional investment and policy action.

First, communities need greater investment in safe public spaces, parks, youth programs, and community centers where children and families can gather nearest to where they live and learn.

The farther children and families must travel, the scarier and riskier it is going to feel. Investments in smaller pocket parks and playgrounds within their neighborhoods are the best solutions, so families and children can build supportive social connections while remaining close to the safety of their homes.

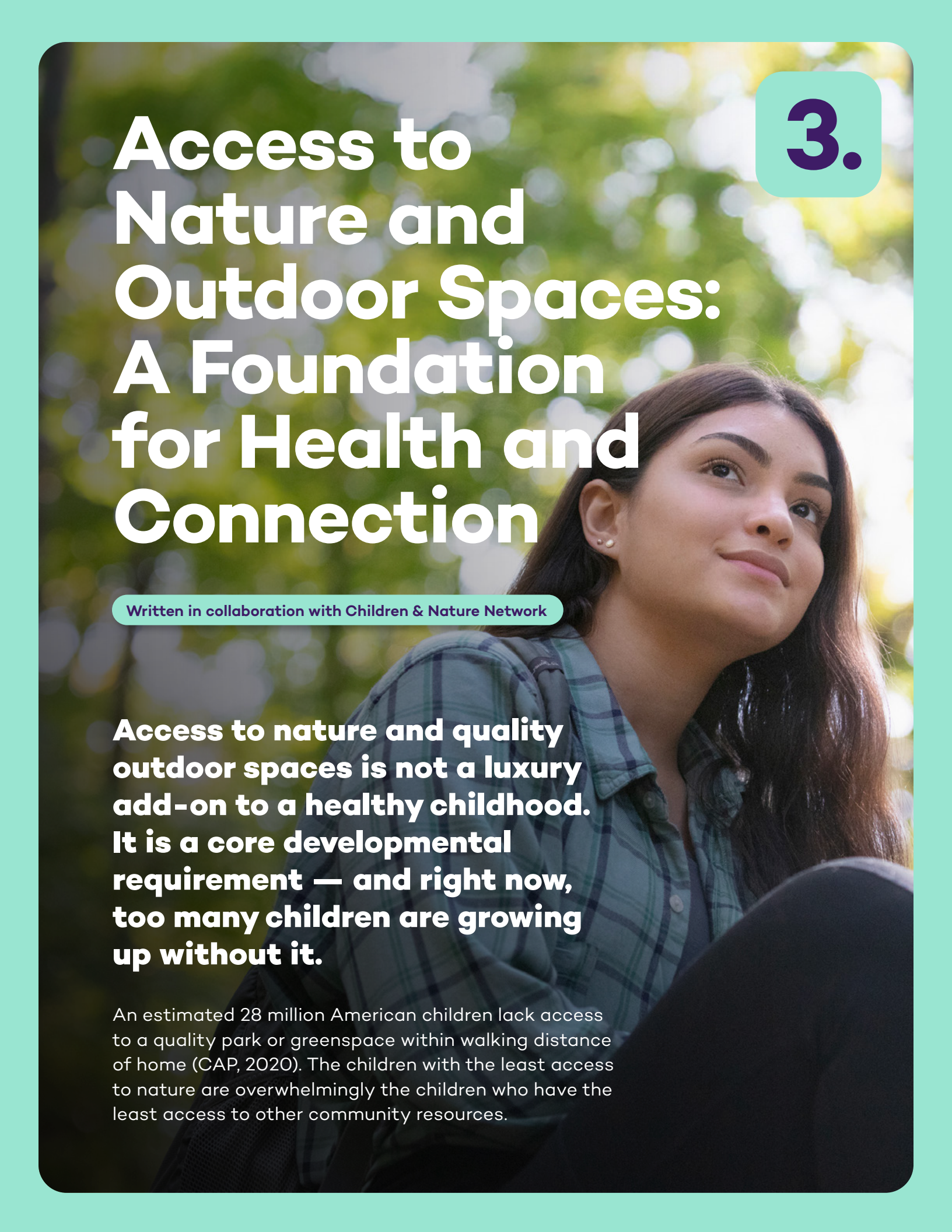
Second, access to culturally responsive mental health care must be expanded. This includes increasing the number of bilingual mental health professionals, integrating mental health services into schools, and reducing barriers to care for immigrant and mixed-status families.

Third, schools should strengthen support systems for students experiencing immigration-related stress through counseling services, family engagement programs, and trauma-informed practices that recognize the realities many children face.

Finally, policymakers should prioritize family stability and child well-being when considering immigration enforcement policies. Children should not bear the psychological burden of living in constant fear that a parent may disappear from their lives without warning.

Until intentional shifts are made to address the understandable fear felt by the Latino/Hispanic community in America today, trust cannot be built, which is the foundation for the solutions to improve their mental health.

The state of our children cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the historical and present-day barriers that shape their lives. Latino/Hispanic youth are resilient, but resilience comes at a cost to their mental health. KABOOM! is committed to the work to ensure every child grows up without fear and with a sense of joy and belonging in public spaces.



3.

Access to Nature and Outdoor Spaces: A Foundation for Health and Connection

Written in collaboration with Children & Nature Network

Access to nature and quality outdoor spaces is not a luxury add-on to a healthy childhood. It is a core developmental requirement — and right now, too many children are growing up without it.

An estimated 28 million American children lack access to a quality park or greenspace within walking distance of home (CAP, 2020). The children with the least access to nature are overwhelmingly the children who have the least access to other community resources.

The Problem

There is something children need that cannot be downloaded, streamed, or delivered to a screen. They need to run. To dig in dirt, climb a structure, feel sun and wind, and move through space with other kids in ways that are unstructured and free.

Access to nature and quality outdoor spaces is not a luxury add-on to a healthy childhood. It is a core developmental requirement — and right now, too many children are growing up without it.

An estimated 28 million American children lack access to a quality park or greenspace within walking distance of home (CAP, 2020). This gap is most prominent in communities of color that have been systematically denied resources and where redlining, disinvestment, and exclusionary land use decisions have shaped access to outdoor spaces. The children with the least access to nature are overwhelmingly the children who have the least access to other community resources.

An estimated

28 million

American children lack access to a quality park or greenspace within walking distance of home.



Why This Matters

The stakes are high enough that in 2023, the U.S. Surgeon General specifically cited disconnection from nature as a major driver of the youth mental health crisis.

Physical activity is two to three times higher when children are outside compared to indoors, making greenspace one of the most accessible and cost-effective public health tools available (Cooper et al., 2010). And the investment compounds across generations: children who spend more time outdoors at age six report significantly more pro-environmental behaviors at age 18 (Chawla, 2020).



Physical activity is 
2 to 3
times higher
when children are outside
compared to indoors.

Solutions

Without having nature nearby, it's easy to stay inside and rely on screens for personal entertainment. If there were more greenspaces available, I believe more people would naturally spend more time outdoors and possibly be more active."

— Noelle, 9th grade

To solve a problem, you have to understand where it is deepest. KABOOM! uses data including the Playspace Inequity Prioritization Index (PIPI) to identify where inequities are greatest and direct investment where it will matter most. Then, we do something that sets us apart: we build with communities, not for them.

Parents, kids, educators, and neighbors co-design the spaces that will serve them, then show up to build them together. It is a process that intentionally engages those closest to the problem — creating a sense of belonging and ownership that lasts for years. Using PIPI data and cell phone mobility data, KABOOM! confirmed that new KABOOM! playspaces in Prince George's County, Maryland led to a 223% increase in playground use, because the community helped create something that was truly theirs (Kumar, 2025).

Sarah Milligan-Toffler, President and CEO of Children & Nature Network, has spent nearly two decades building the evidence base and the movement infrastructure for what happens when children reconnect with the outdoors. Her organization's work across more than 50 cities — in partnership with the National League of Cities — has shown that equitable access to nature strengthens entire communities: improving health outcomes, deepening social cohesion, and building climate resilience. According to Children & Nature Network, communities they work with see a 15:1 return on investment through improvements in children's health, well-being, and learning.

"Spend a few minutes watching child-led play in a natural setting and you'll witness something that no data point can fully capture: wonder, joy, and the quiet confidence of a child who knows they belong in the world around them," said Milligan-Toffler.

It is not enough to have a playspace in every community. It needs to be safe, joyful, rich in play value, and built to last. **Green schoolyards and nature-rich environments are linked to better focus, reduced ADHD symptoms, improved test scores, and stronger school attendance. Every child deserves that no matter where they live.**

Reclaiming Cultural Identity, Sovereignty, and Childhood: The Native Child Experience

Written in collaboration with Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community

The Problem

Access to safe greenspaces, clean air and water, and environments free of harm are developmental necessities. For Native American and Alaska Native children, those conditions have been systematically stripped away through the explicit, documented policies of the federal government.

The federal government forcibly removed Native peoples from their ancestral lands, concentrated them onto a fraction of their original territories,



and then systematically dismantled the cultural, spiritual, and communal foundations that had sustained those communities for generations. Children were taken from their families, forbidden from speaking their languages or practicing their traditions, and subjected to abuse under a policy whose stated goal was cultural erasure: “Kill the Indian, save the man.” That policy did not succeed but its consequences, passed across generations as intergenerational trauma, still shape the conditions in which Native children grow up today.

One in three Native American and Alaska Native children live in poverty, a rate even higher in some reservation communities. **The alarming rates of physical, mental, and social health inequities experienced by these children are symptoms of genocide, a legacy of inhumane federal policies against Native Americans, and ongoing structural violence (Garcia et al., 2021).**

Native American and Alaska Native people have the highest rates of poverty, unemployment, mental distress, disability, and residence in adverse neighborhood conditions of any racial or ethnic group in the United States (Singh et al., 2024). Native people in America report experiencing serious psychological distress 2.5 times more than the general population, and the suicide death rate for Native young people between the ages of 15 and 19 is more than double that of non-Hispanic white youth (Mental Health America, n.d.). Access to safe outdoor spaces, greenspace, and quality playspaces in many Native communities is among the worst of any demographic group in the country, compounded by geographic isolation, chronic underfunding, and infrastructure that has never been adequately built.

“

When we talk about systemic inequities surrounding race and income, the conversation often settles on adults as the ones affected, through things like job selection, housing, and secondary education, but what often is missing in the conversation is the structural effects of these systems on how a child grows. Can we truly reach equity, when only some children’s development is prioritized over others?”

- Emiliana, 12th grade

Why It Matters

The challenges facing Native children today land on top of that history, not separately from it. As Natasha Hacker, Vice-Chairwoman of the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community (SMSC), and Ashley Cornforth, SMSC Secretary/Treasurer and co-chairs of the IndigeFit Kids Campaign, describe it: what children today confront — easy access to unhealthy food, relentless technology, nonstop digital distraction, rising anxiety, isolation, cyberbullying, unhealthy coping habits, and a growing loss of respect for self, elders, and one another — is difficult for all children. But for Native children, these contemporary pressures compound centuries of displacement and erasure. The evidence is clear in the general statistics on youth: physical activity is declining, mental and emotional problems are increasing, and overall wellness is worsening. For Native children, those trends begin from an already more precarious baseline.

The suicide death rate for Native young people between the ages of

15 – 19

is more than double that of non-Hispanic white youth.

And yet resilience has led the way. Hacker and Cornforth write that the refusal to give in to despair is itself a form of sovereignty. Government attempted the erasure of Native people through assimilation, boarding schools, tribal termination, and urban relocation. It did not work. Through all the horrors of shifting and misguided federal policy, Native people held onto their ancestral values, stories, languages, cultural practices, and identities.

Their values remain alive: respect for elders and their knowledge, closeness with the natural world, humility, and generosity, one's word as one's honor.

They are the foundation on which Native communities have been building their own revitalization for decades.

Solutions

First, support for positive influences is critical, beginning in pregnancy and continuing throughout childhood, to include access to nutritious food, clean air and drinking water, safe greenspaces in which to play, reliable transportation, and a home environment free of lead and other heavy metals.

Hacker and Cornforth describe what this looks like in practice through IndigeFit Kids re-Indigenizing life in spirit, diet, language, dance, physical fitness, education, play, music, conservation, and so much more. It is a process of restoring something essential. The hope that Native children in the future will be what their ancestors were among the healthiest people in mind, body, and soul.

Second, overcoming adverse health outcomes must include reclaiming cultural practices respecting tribal sovereignty, and addressing inequitable policies (Garcia et al., 2021). It is widely acknowledged that Native people have an interdependent relationship with their homelands, and these lands are the very places of creation, medicines, traditional foods, health, and individual and collective power.

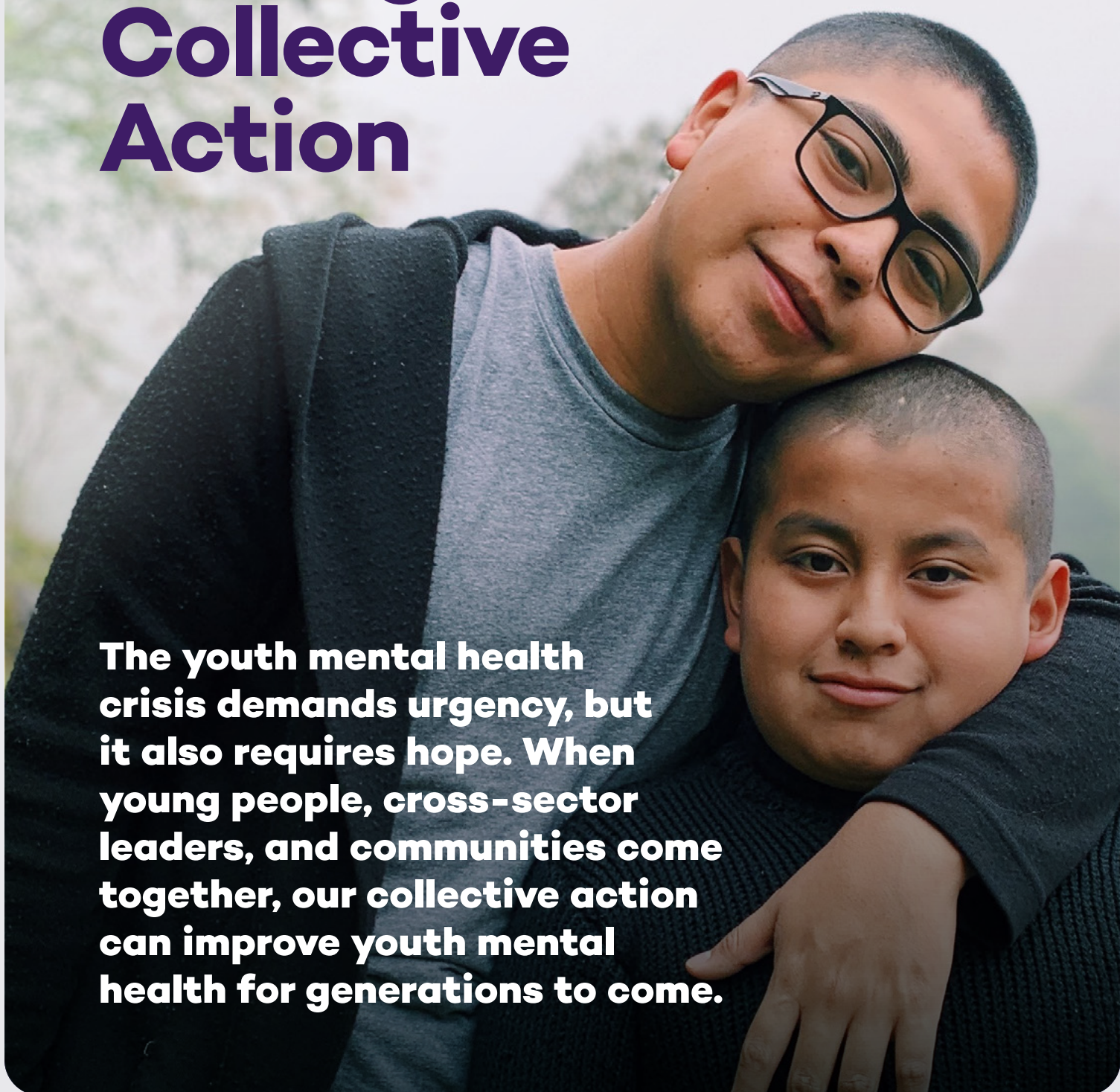
KABOOM! approaches this work with intentionality and humility. We use data, including PIPI, to understand where disparities are deepest and direct resources accordingly. But data alone does not build trust. Trust is built through relationships, through showing up consistently, through listening before designing, and through following the lead of the communities whose children we are committed to serving. When we build with Native communities, we are honoring a principle that the people who have survived the most determined efforts at erasure are exactly the people whose knowledge, vision, and leadership must shape what comes next.

The SMSC and the IndigeFit Kids Campaign are proof of what is possible when Native communities are resourced and trusted to lead. Their work is a reminder that the solutions already exist within the communities that need them most. Our role is to support, resource, follow, and ensure that every Native child has a safe, joyful, community-designed place to play.

Because a healthy childhood, for Native children as for all children, is not incidental to a healthy life. It is where culture is transmitted, where identity is formed, where resilience is built, and where the future takes its first steps.

Reaching Solutions Through Collective Action

The youth mental health crisis demands urgency, but it also requires hope. When young people, cross-sector leaders, and communities come together, our collective action can improve youth mental health for generations to come.



Young People Are Not the Problem.

They Are the Solution.

By Amy Meuers, CEO, National Youth Leadership Council

On the youth mental health crisis and why creating spaces for young people to share their voices and lead change matters.

Every educator, parent, and pediatrician in America knows something is wrong. Rates of anxiety, depression, and loneliness among young people have climbed steadily for more than a decade. Results from a 2022 study by Daly on the prevalence of depression among adolescents in the United States found that between 2010 and 2019, the percentage of adolescents ages 12 to 17 who experienced a major depressive episode nearly doubled, increasing from about eight percent to nearly 16%. The U.S. Surgeon General declared youth mental health an urgent public health crisis, noting that one in three high school students reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness.

Yet amid the concern and conversation, we often overlook something equally important. **A powerful contributor to young people's well-being is for them to have the opportunity to feel heard, valued, and capable of making a difference. When young people have spaces to share their perspectives and take meaningful action on issues they care about, they experience a stronger sense of purpose, belonging, and connection, which are all protective factors essential to mental health.**

At the National Youth Leadership Council (NYLC), we believe one of the most powerful responses to the youth mental health crisis is to invite young people into meaningful roles as leaders and problem solvers. Research backs this up. A 2024 scoping review in the journal *Children* found that civic engagement programs improve youth mental health outcomes, including reduced anxiety and increased resilience, while fostering empowerment and stronger social connections.



“

I want to help my community, but I don't always know where to start or who will actually support me.”

— Youth quote from the NYLC student survey

Service-learning creates these opportunities. It connects classroom learning with real community challenges and invites students to participate in shaping solutions. When students investigate issues, present ideas to community leaders, and collaborate with local organizations, they learn that their voices have value and influence. This matters enormously in an era of rising screen time and digital isolation. The U.S. Surgeon General found that young people who spend more than three hours a day on social media face double the risk of depression and anxiety symptoms. Service-learning offers a direct counterweight, pulling young people into active, face-to-face community engagement.

We also cannot talk honestly about youth mental health without talking about inequity. Research from the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement at Tufts University found that rural youth, youth with lower incomes, and youth with less education have disproportionately less access to civic connections, the very resources that support both mental health and civic agency. For many young people, anxiety and hopelessness are rational responses to structural barriers. Service-learning invites young people to name those barriers and work collectively to change them.

The young people featured on NYLC's [***The Power of Young People***](#) podcast illustrate what becomes possible when these spaces exist. Mila Henry, an eighth grader, created MH Boxes to provide mental health care packages to young Black girls in her community who lacked access to support and affirmation. Nora Sun, then a Harvard sophomore, built [*mercuri.world*](#) to break down language barriers in mental health care, because she understood

“I’d be more likely to join if I knew I wouldn’t be judged and my voice would matter.”

— Youth quote from the NYLC student survey

firsthand how those barriers exclude people. Both saw a gap and decided to build a bridge rather than wait for someone else. Across the country, through programs like [NYLC’s Youth as Solutions](#) initiative, similar stories are unfolding every day. One team of students used the program to take on safe and distracted driving in their community, partnering with local stakeholders and using peer-led campaigns to raise awareness among other teens because they understood that messages from peers land differently than messages from adults.

A 2023 survey by the Institute for Citizens and Scholars found that civically engaged young adults are more likely to feel satisfied and purposeful, and that satisfaction grows as their engagement deepens. That is the work we are committed to at NYLC. Across the country, young people are already demonstrating what becomes possible when their voices are heard and their leadership is supported. When we create spaces for young people to lead, they do not simply imagine a better future. They begin building it.



Next Steps for Collective Action

The data is clear, and the stakes could not be higher. America's children are in crisis, and the window to act is now. The solutions explored in this report point to a shared roadmap for change by:

1.

Engaging young people in designing solutions at all levels.

There is no other group more affected by the youth mental health crisis than young people themselves, and their lived experiences and voices must be at the center of all solutions created. This includes engaging them in how to shape their own spaces, so they will want to spend more time being social outside of the digital world.

2.

Integrating youth mental health solutions into policy.

Advocate for local, state, and federal policies that treat outdoor recreation, recess, and greenspaces as essential infrastructure for child well-being that also protect and increase unstructured play time and recess.

3.

Redirecting investments to spaces for young people to be physically active, explore nature, and enjoy childhood.

Invest in safe, inclusive spaces where children can move, explore, and connect freely, and especially those that increase access to greenspaces and nature. Invest in and participate in community care. And ensure connection and early support are built into the places where young people already gather.

4.

Fostering cross-sector collaboration.

Align the efforts of public health, education, urban planning, and community organizations around children's holistic needs.

5.

Closing the equity gap.

Direct funding and resources toward communities that have been historically underserved and disinvested, and where mental health challenges are most severe.

References

American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, & Children's Hospital Association. (2021, October 19). *AAP-AACAP-CHA declaration of a national emergency in child and adolescent mental health*. American Academy of Pediatrics. <https://www.aap.org/en/advocacy/child-and-adolescent-healthy-mental-development/aap-aacap-cha-declaration-of-a-national-emergency-in-child-and-adolescent-mental-health/>

Bernard, D. L., Smith, Q., & Lanier, P. (2022). Racial discrimination and other adverse childhood experiences as risk factors for internalizing mental health concerns among Black youth. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 35(2), 473–483. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.22760>

Blakemore, E. (2025, May). The deportation campaigns of the Great Depression. *History.com*. <https://www.history.com/articles/great-depression-repatriation-drives-mexico-deportation>

Castillo, I., & Paul, K. (2024). A new index to estimate playspace inequity. *Cityscape: A Journal of Policy Development and Research*, 26(3), 241–247. <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/periodicals/cityscape/vol26num3/ch13.pdf>

Biddle, S. J. H., Ciaccioni, S., Thomas, G., & Vergeer, I. (2019). Physical activity and mental health in children and adolescents: An updated review of reviews and an analysis of causality. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 42, 146–155. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2018.08.011>

Caryl, F., Bryce, R., Dougall, N., & Hilton, S. (2024). Use of natural environments is associated with reduced inequalities in child mental wellbeing: A cross-sectional analysis using global positioning system (GPS) data. *Environment International*, 188, 108847. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envint.2024.108847>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2024). *2023 Youth Risk Behavior Survey results*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://www.cdc.gov/yrbs/results/2023-yrbs-results.html>

Chawla, L., Keena, K., Pevec, I., & Stanley, E. (2014). Green schoolyards as havens from stress and resources for resilience in childhood and adolescence. *Health & Place*, 28, 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2014.03.001>

Cooper, A. R., Page, A. S., Wheeler, B. W., Hillsdon, M., Griew, P., & Jago, R. (2010). Patterns of GPS measured time outdoors after school and objective physical activity in English children: The PEACH project. *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*, 7, 31. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1479-5868-7-31>

Daly, M. (2022). Prevalence of depression among adolescents in the U.S. from 2009 to 2019: Analysis of trends by sex, race/ethnicity, and income. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 70(3), 496–499. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2021.08.026>

DeCleene, N. K., Maddison, E. R., Woyczynski, L., Nguyen, D., Shirude, S., Stein, C., & Johnson, C. O. (2026). US state-level prevalence of adult obesity by race and ethnicity from 1990 to 2022 and forecasted to 2035. *JAMA*. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2025.26817>

Empey, A., Garcia, A., & Bell, S. (2021). American Indian/Alaska Native child health and poverty. *Academic Pediatrics*, 21(8S), S134–S139. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acap.2021.07.026>

Epstein, R., Blake, J. J., & González, T. (2017). *Girlhood interrupted: The erasure of Black girls' childhood*. Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality. <https://www.law.georgetown.edu/poverty-inequality-center/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2017/08/girlhood-interrupted.pdf>

Evans, G. W., Otto, S., & Kaiser, F. G. (2018). Childhood origins of young adult environmental behavior. *Psychological Science*, 29(5), 679–687. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797617741894>

Goff, P. A., Jackson, M. C., Di Leone, B. A., Culotta, C. M., & DiTomasso, N. A. (2014). The essence of innocence: Consequences of dehumanizing Black children. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 106(4), 526–545. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0035663>

Hoffman, J. S., Shandas, V., & Pendleton, N. (2020). The effects of historical housing policies on resident exposure to intra-urban heat: A study of 108 US urban areas. *Climate*, 8(1), 12. <https://doi.org/10.3390/cli8010012>

Holloway, J., & Bhatt, P. (2023). Racialised identity, racism and the mental health of children and adolescents. *International Review of Psychiatry*, 35(4), 277–288. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540261.2023.2181059>

Kumar, A. (2025, June 2). Pulse of play in Prince George's County, Maryland. CityData.AI Blog. <https://blog.citydata.ai/pulse-of-play-in-prince-georges-county/>

Kuo, F. E., & Faber Taylor, A. (2004). A potential natural treatment for attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder: Evidence from a national study. *American Journal of Public Health*, 94(9), 1580–1586. <https://doi.org/10.2105/ajph.94.9.1580>

Leutner, M., Dervic, E., Bellach, L., Klimek, P., Thurner, S., & Kautzky, A. (2023). Obesity as pleiotropic risk state for metabolic and mental health throughout life. *Translational Psychiatry*, 13, 175. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41398-023-02447-w>

Marshall Project, The. (2026, April 6). *Kids in ICE detention up 10x in Trump's second term*. <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2026/04/06/ice-kids-detention-over-6200-trump>

Mental Health America. (n.d.). *Native and Indigenous communities and mental health*. <https://mhanational.org/position-statements/native-and-indigenous-communities-and-mental-health/>

National Alliance on Mental Illness. (2024). (n.d.). *Mental health by the numbers*. <https://www.nami.org/mental-health-by-the-numbers/>

National Black Child Development Institute. (2024). *Afrofuturism and systems change: Designing new realities for Black children to thrive from birth*. <https://www.nbcdi.org/afrofuturism-and-systems-change-paper/>

National Park Service. (2023, September 13). Setting the precedent: Mendez, et al. v. Westminster School District of Orange County, et al. and the US Courthouse and Post Office. U.S. Department of the Interior. <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/setting-the-precedent-mendez-et-al-v-westminster-school-district-of-orange-county-et-al-and-the-us-courthouse-and-post-office.htm>

National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. (2023). *Place matters: The environment we create shapes the foundations of healthy development* (Working Paper No. 16). Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/working-paper/place-matters-the-environment-we-create-shapes-the-foundations-of-healthy-development/>

National Recreation and Park Association. (2025). *Youth sports in parks and recreation*. NRPA. https://www.nrpa.org/contentassets/e8964d7375e94c0fa3f19123e5745194/2025nrpayouthsportsreport_final.pdf

Office of the Surgeon General. (2021). *Protecting youth mental health: The U.S. Surgeon General's advisory*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-youth-mental-health-advisory.pdf>

Office of the Surgeon General. (2023). *Social media and youth mental health: The U.S. Surgeon General's advisory*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/sg-youth-mental-health-social-media-advisory.pdf>

Parker, S. (2017, November 9). [Remarks at Axios event]. As reported in Allen, M. (2017, November 9). Sean Parker unloads on Facebook: "God only knows what it's doing to our children's brains." Axios. <https://www.axios.com/2017/12/15/sean-parker-unloads-on-facebook-god-only-knows-what-its-doing-to-our-childrens-brains-1513306792>

Raffoul, A., Ward, Z. J., Santoso, M., Kavanaugh, J. R., & Austin, S. B. (2023). Social media platforms generate billions of dollars in revenue from U.S. youth: Findings from a simulated revenue model. *PLOS ONE*, 18(12), e0295337. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0295337>

Recchia, F., Bernal, J. D. K., Fong, D. Y., Wong, S. H. S., Chung, P. K., & Chan, D. K. C. (2023). Physical activity interventions to alleviate depressive symptoms in children and adolescents: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 177(2), 132–140. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapediatrics.2022.5090>

Rowland-Shea, J., Doshi, S., Edberg, S., & Fanger, R. (2020). *The nature gap: Confronting racial and economic disparities in the destruction and protection of nature in America*. Center for American Progress. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/the-nature-gap/>

Sappenfield, O., Alberto, C., Minnaert, J., Donney, J., Lebrun-Harris, L., & Ghandour, R. (2024, October). *Adolescent mental and behavioral health, 2023* [Data brief]. National Survey of Children's Health Data Briefs. Health Resources and Services Administration. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK608531/>

Singh, G. K., Lee, H., Kim, L. H., & Williams, S. D. (2024). Social determinants of health among American Indians and Alaska Natives and tribal communities: Comparison with other major racial and ethnic groups in the United States, 1990–2022. *International Journal of Maternal and Child Health and AIDS*, 13, e010. https://doi.org/10.25259/IJMA_10_2024

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2024). *Key substance use and mental health indicators in the United States: Results from the 2023 National Survey on Drug Use and Health* (HHS Publication No. PEP24-07-021). Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality. <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/reports/rpt47095/National%20Report/National%20Report/2023-nsduh-annual-national.pdf>

Trust for Public Land. (2023). *2023 ParkScore index*. <https://www.tpl.org/parkscore>

U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee, Subcommittee on Crime and Terrorism. (2025, April 9). *Testimony of Sarah Wynn-Williams*. U.S. Senate. <https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/>

Wolch, J., Wilson, J. P., & Fehrenbach, J. (2005). Parks and park funding in Los Angeles: An equity-mapping analysis. *Urban Geography*, 26(1), 4–35. <https://doi.org/10.2747/0272-3638.26.1.4>

Yogman, M., Garner, A., Hutchinson, J., Hirsh-Pasek, K., & Golinkoff, R. M. (2018). The power of play: A pediatric role in enhancing development in young children. *Pediatrics*, 142(3), e20182058. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2018-2058>



LEARN MORE ABOUT KABOOM!

[Click here](#) to read more
about the State of Our Kids.

[Click here](#) to support
KABOOM!.