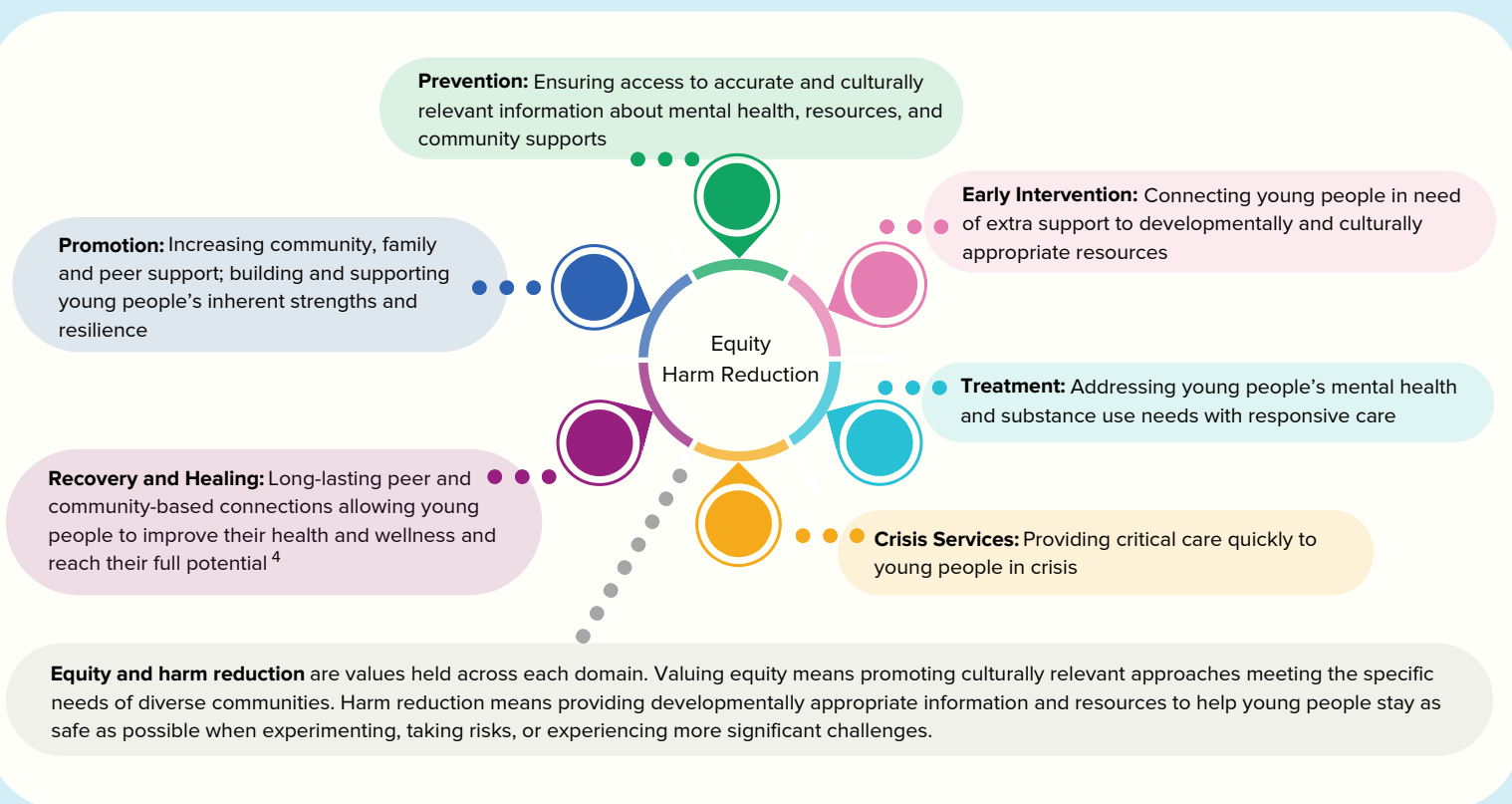


Youth Mental Health and Substance Use in King County: Needs Across a Continuum

As they grow, young people need opportunities to develop their strengths and identities, build healthy relationships with adults and peers, and access a range of developmentally and culturally appropriate supports when they experience challenges. Young people who are Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC) and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, or Two Spirit (LGBTQ2S+) face unique challenges to their mental health and well-being associated with racism, homophobia and other forms of oppression.^{1,2} They also face added barriers to accessing culturally appropriate support and care.

Young people may have varying needs for information, care, and support at different points in their development, so rather than focusing on just one area of support, our communities need investment in all domains across the continuum illustrated below.³



The continuum above spans different needs: from creating positive spaces for young people to grow into their strengths, responding to crises, to ensuring that young people have safe and supportive school, home, and community spaces. Local data, including the voices of young people, can help us understand young people's current relationship to this continuum and highlight areas where they need more supports.

This brief was created in partnership with Seattle Children's whose staff provided subject matter expertise and data related to their services.

1 Castro-Ramirez, F., Al-Suwaidi, M., Garcia, P., Rankin, O., Ricard, J. R., & Nock, M. K. (2021). Racism and Poverty are Barriers to the Treatment of Youth Mental Health Concerns. *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology*, 50(4), 534–546. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15374416.2021.1941058>

2 Green, A.E., Price-Feeney, M. & Dorison, S. (2020). Breaking Barriers to Quality Mental Health Care for LGBTQ Youth. New York, New York: The Trevor Project. <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/research-briefs/breaking-barriers-to-quality-mental-health-care-for-lgbtq-youth/>

3 The Institute of Medicine's Continuum of Care. Strategic Prevention Technical Assistance Center, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. <https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/resourcefiles/sptac-continuum-of-care.pdf>

4 SAMHSA's Working Definition of Recovery. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. <https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/hsp12-recdef.pdf>

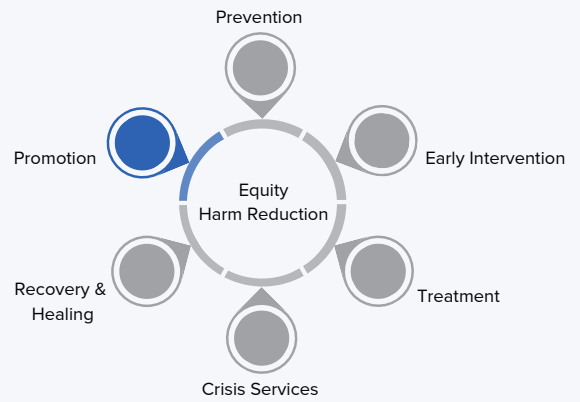


Promotion

Supporting young people’s inherent strengths in positive environments and communities where they can thrive

Mental health promotion supports young people’s inherent strength and resilience by increasing access to protective factors such as healthy family and peer relationships, supportive community environments, and support for positive identity development.¹ We can promote young people’s mental health and well-being by providing opportunities for them to build strong and healthy relationships with peers and adults, explore identity and develop a positive sense of self worth, cultivate community connections, and develop healthy coping strategies when challenges arise.²

When families are surrounded by supportive communities, children can thrive. Currently, only about **one in three children in 5th grade and younger live in families where their caregivers report having support from family, friends, and neighbors.** Families of color experience even less access to social support networks.³ Among teens, having a positive connection with a supportive adult like a coach, teacher, mentor, or extended family member is an important protective factor. 7 in 10 teens in King County have such an adult in their lives, and similarly, youth of color have less access to adult support.⁴

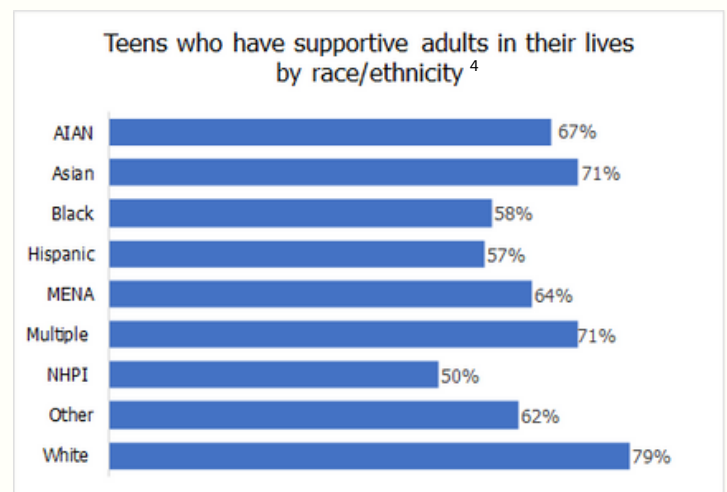


“...**the future is the youth, no matter how they grew up or what they’re doing now.** With the right mentors and people to help them going, they are able to challenge the system, learn leadership and find something they’re passionate about.”
- Youth Healing Project Awardee⁵

“[A gay-straight alliance club is] important because it gives people like a break from... like having to perform... it takes down a couple walls at least...it’s a lot easier to talk to like people that are similar to me, or like queer people, so it’s like nice to have that kind of place, too.”
- Middle School Youth Listening Session Participant⁶

“**Fight racism in school.** Don’t encourage it and teachers should stand up against racism.”
- Middle School Youth Listening Session Participant⁶

7 in 10 King County teens have supportive adults in their lives⁴



1 Risk and Protective Factors for Youth. Youth.gov. <https://youth.gov/youth-topics/youth-mental-health/risk-and-protective-factors-youth>

2 Office of the Surgeon General. Protecting Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory. 2021. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-youth-mental-health-advisory.pdf>

3 Best Starts for Kids Health Survey, 2021 & 2023. Public Health – Seattle & King County. <https://kingcounty.gov/en/dept/dchs/human-social-services/community-funded-initiatives/best-starts-for-kids/dashboard-data-reports/combined?shortname=Protective%20factors%5c%3a%20social%20supports>

4 Healthy Youth Survey, 2023. Public Health – Seattle & King County. <https://kingcounty.gov/en/dept/dph/about-king-county/about-public-health/data-reports/population-health-data/community-health-indicators/healthy-youth-survey?shortname=Adult%20connection>

5 Best Starts for Kids. Announcing the 21 Youth Healing Project Awardees! <https://beststartsblog.com/2024/03/19/announcing-the-21-youth-healing-project-awardees/>

6 King County Middle School Youth Share Their Experiences and Perspectives on Emotional Safety and Well-being at School. Public Health – Seattle & King County. <https://cdn.kingcounty.gov/-/media/king-county/depts/dph/documents/about-public-health/data-reports/middle-school-emotional-safety-well-being.pdf>



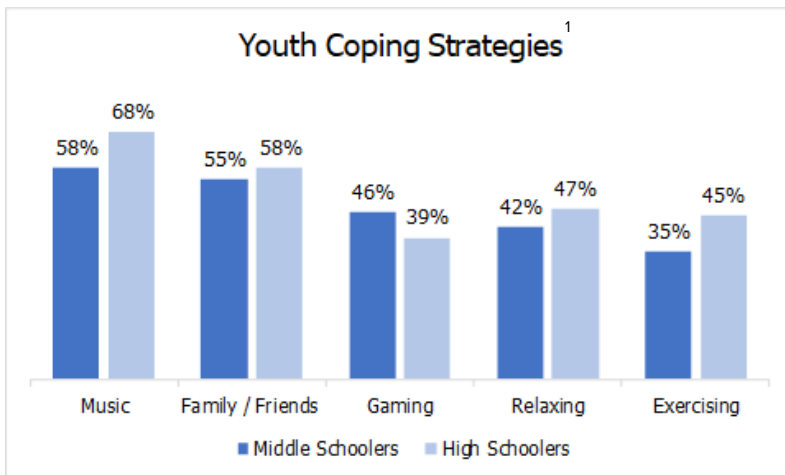
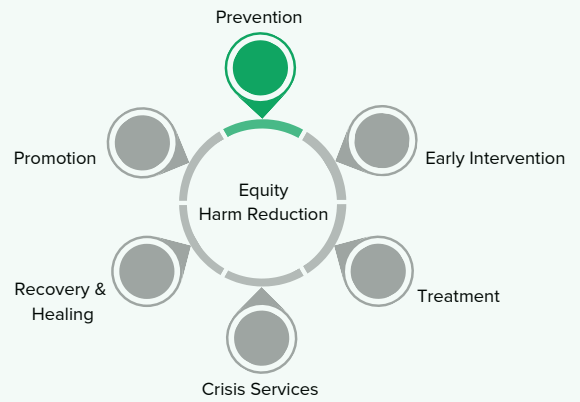
King County

Prevention

Ensuring access to information about mental health, resources, and community supports

Young people need access to information about mental health, substance use, and harm reduction including where to turn when they or their peers need help. Reducing stigma and opening conversations about mental health and substance use with young people helps to ensure they have access to the information they need to make informed decisions about their health and well-being.

Having coping skills can help young people manage the challenges they experience, and fortunately, most youth in King County report having at least one coping strategy, with listening to or making music being the most popular followed by spending time with family or friends. Most youth in King County also abstain from substance use; **86% of teens report not using alcohol, cannabis, or other drugs in the past month.**² Building on these strengths is an important way to prevent young people from experiencing more serious challenges with their mental health.



“The process of getting mental health resources can be intimidating. **When I was going through a rough time in my life I wasn't comfortable to go from being alone and struggling to sharing all my issues... Having resources that are more casual - here are some healthy coping mechanisms. Something that people can work on by themselves because coping isn't going to be the same for everybody.**”
- Youth Mental Health Cafe Participant³

Over 14,000 students participated in the School-Based Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment/Services (SB-SBIRT) program in the 2023-2024 school year.

98% of high schoolers and **96%** of middle schoolers who participated have **at least one coping strategy** they use to get through tough times like exercising or spending time with family or friends.

¹ School-based Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment (SB-SBIRT) Year 6 (2023-2024) Data Summary. Seattle Children's Research Institute. 2024.

² Healthy Youth Survey, 2023. Public Health – Seattle & King County. <https://kingcounty.gov/en/dept/dph/about-king-county/about-public-health/data-reports/population-health-data/community-health-indicators/healthy-youth-survey?shortname=illicit%20drugs>

³ Community Café Collaborative and Public Health – Seattle & King County.



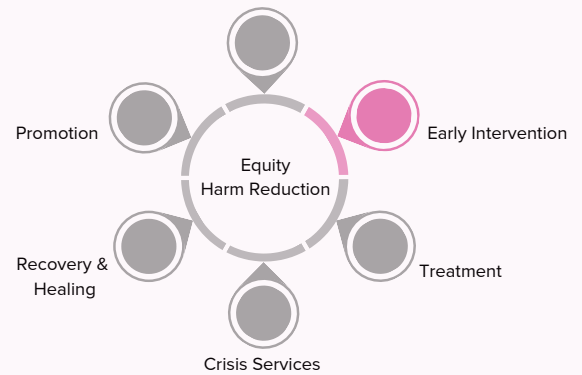
Early Intervention

Identifying young people who need support and connecting them to resources

Early interventions can provide young people with the support they need to prevent more serious challenges, symptoms or crises. Sometimes early intervention is all that's needed - brief touch points with a caring adult or connection to other types of timely support for positive identity development and relationship building can help young people move towards healthy coping strategies and well-being.

School-based health centers are one resource that provides these services to students in schools, where they spend a majority of their time. In King County, **1,985 students received mental health services at 37 school-based health centers** in the 2023-2024 school year.¹

Many schools also participate in the School-Based Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Services/Treatment program (SB-SBIRT). Of the 2,931 high school students who participated during the 2023-2024 school year, 56% met with school staff and participated in a brief intervention to talk about additional supports they might need to continue to thrive. Of those students, 60% were referred to further resources, like mental health counseling, academic tutoring, or other social supports in the community, receiving care earlier instead of waiting until a crisis.²



“We want more accessible and less intensive resources available to us, to make it seem less scary or less intense.”

- Youth Mental Health Cafe Participant³

“We have started student groups including study skills and grief therapy. The program has also allowed our counseling center staff to have a more intentional approach to working with students.”

- School-Based SBIRT Awardee



SB-SBIRT

2,931

high schoolers participated in screening

56%

of students who were screened had a brief intervention

60%

of those who had a brief intervention received a referral to additional resources

¹ Public Health – Seattle & King County, King County School Health.

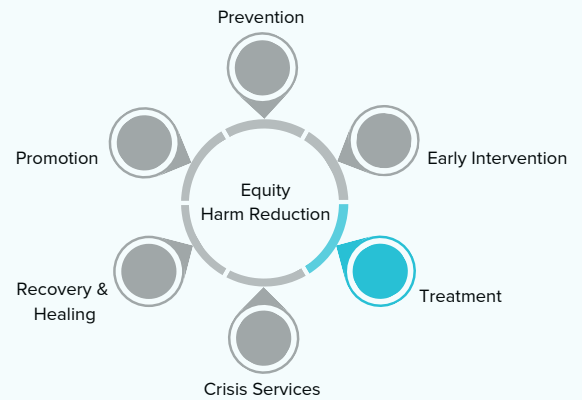
² School-based Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment (SB-SBIRT) Year 6 (2023-2024) High School Data Summary. Seattle Children's Research Institute. 2024.

³ Community Café Collaborative and Public Health – Seattle & King County.



Treatment

Addressing young people’s behavioral health needs with responsive intervention and care



Equitable and timely access to mental health and substance use services ensures youth receive evidence-informed, culturally-relevant, and recovery-oriented treatment in alignment with their goals and values. There are a variety of treatment types for children, youth, and families through school-, community-, and hospital-based services and programs.¹ Many behavioral health conditions develop between the ages of 14-24 and treatment can be effective in helping youth thrive and live healthy lives along with preventing crises or long-term health impacts.²

Many youth may benefit from some form of treatment, with 25% of teens in King County experiencing serious symptoms of depression. This is higher among lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and questioning (LGB+) teens at 47%, and transgender teens at 53%.³ Over 12,000 young people (ages 0-25) in King County are enrolled in Medicaid benefits for behavioral health services annually.⁴ Yet, among all King County youth ages 0-25 who receive Medicaid benefits, **38% with a mental health treatment need did not receive any mental health services**, inclusive of services provided by both primary care and behavioral health providers.⁵

Young people are at higher risk for more adverse outcomes involving harm to themselves and/or others if they don’t receive adequate and effective treatment. In 2023, Emergency Medical Services in King County responded to **868 non-fatal opioid overdoses** among youth aged 11-24, with 15% of overdoses occurring in those under 18.⁶ In 2023, there were 53 fatal overdose deaths among those age 11-24, largely driven by fentanyl. Over a five-year period from 2018-2022, an average of 46 people under age 25 died by suicide each year.⁷ These numbers demonstrate the need for better access to a range of mental health and substance use disorder treatment strategies.

1 in 4 youth in King County experienced depression³



2 in 4 LGBTQ+ youth in King County experienced depression



“Treatment allowed me to not only understand and cope with my mental health struggles, but also empowered me to learn to talk about them and ask for what I need. While it took me a while to finally open up to treatment and the idea that I was worth fighting for, it is the reason I am here today!”

- Young adult who received treatment as a teen



1 Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Screening and Treatment of Substance Use Disorders among Adolescents. 2021. <https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/pep20-06-04-008.pdf>
2 National Institute on Drug Abuse. The Adolescent Brain and Substance Use. <https://nida.nih.gov/research-topics/adolescent-brain-substance-use>
3 Healthy Youth Survey, 2023. Public Health – Seattle & King County. <https://kingcounty.gov/en/dept/dph/about-king-county/about-public-health/data-reports/population-health-data/community-health-indicators/healthy-youth-survey?shortname=Depression>
4 King County Department of Community and Human Services, Behavioral Health and Recovery Division. 2024.
5 Medicaid claims data, Washington State Health Care Authority. Prepared by Public Health – Seattle & King County.
6 Emergency Medical Services, Public Health – Seattle & King County.
7 Overdose Data Dashboards. Public Health – Seattle & King County. <https://kingcounty.gov/en/dept/dph/health-safety/safety-injury-prevention/overdose-prevention-response/data-dashboards>

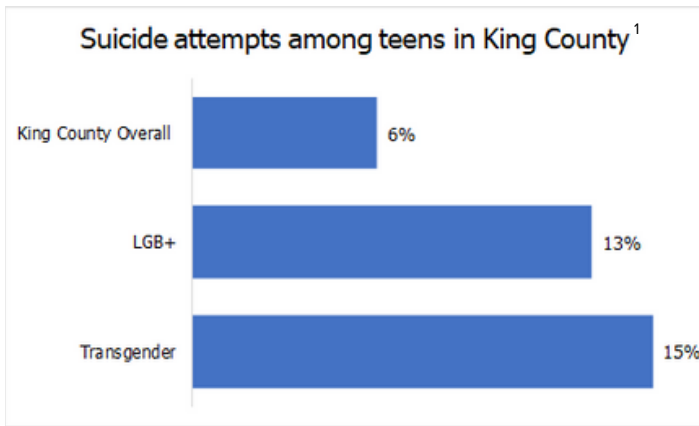
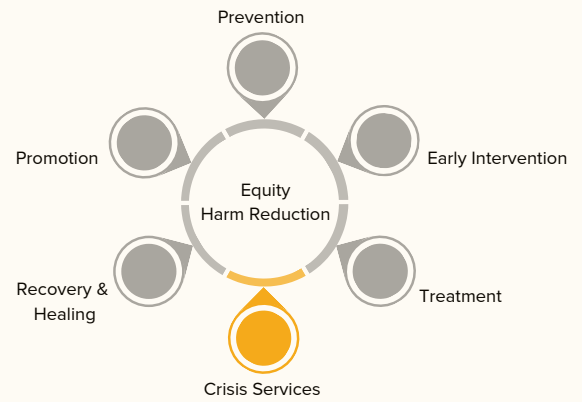


King County

Crisis Services

Providing critical care quickly to young people in crisis

Young people and caretakers need access to resources that can help a young person in crisis get immediate care to prevent and mitigate harm, while also creating opportunities for the young person in crisis to access treatment and recovery supports. Access to crisis services can prevent worse outcomes, including suicide, overdose and other serious health issues.



Crisis services are expanding in 2025 to continue to respond to the growing needs of all young people in our region, regardless of insurance. 6% of teens report having attempted suicide in the past year. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) teens are over twice as likely as King County teens overall to have experienced a suicide attempt. 13% of LGB+ teens and 15% of transgender teens have attempted suicide in the past year.

In 2023, the Children’s Crisis Outreach Response System (mobile crisis response) received nearly 1,000 referrals and **engaged over 840 youth in crisis.**² 84% of families served felt better able to face future challenges as a result. That year, Seattle Children’s Emergency Department had over 2,700 visits related to youth (ages 18 and under) experiencing a mental health crisis. Over 1,770 of those visits were residents of King County.³



*“While I wish we could get to everyone before they were in a serious crisis, the reality is we can’t. But this is why it is so important to have adequately trained and supported crisis services and resources especially with youth who might not really understand why they are feeling the way they feel. **If the crisis services can help them see that treatment can help, that there is hope, and help them come down from crisis, I personally think we could save a lot of lives.**”*

- Young adult who received treatment as a teen



¹ Healthy Youth Survey, 2023. Public Health – Seattle & King County. <https://kingcounty.gov/en/dept/dph/about-king-county/about-public-health/data-reports/population-health-data/community-health-indicators/healthy-youth-survey?shortname=Suicide%20attempts>

² King County Department of Community and Human Services, Behavioral Health and Recovery Division. 2024.

³ Seattle Children’s Hospital. 2024.



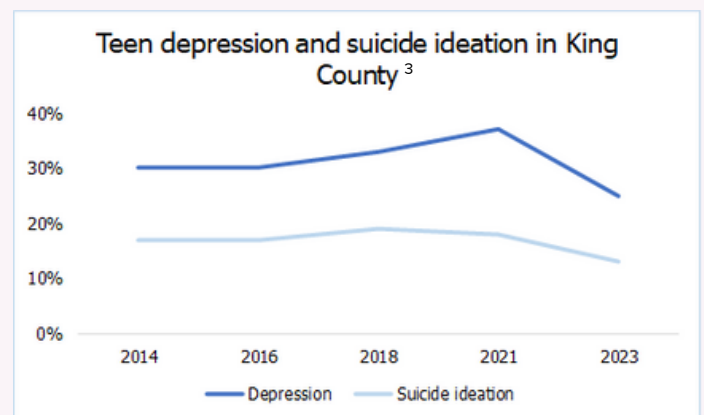
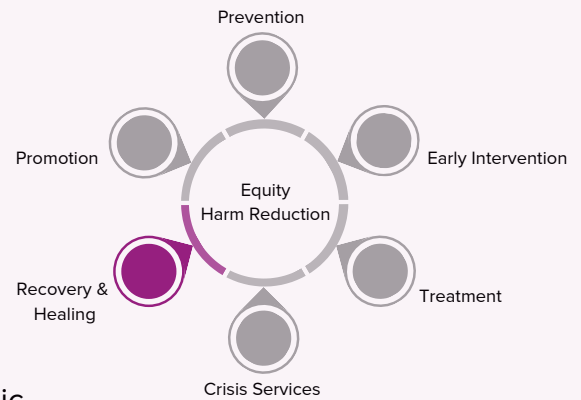
Recovery and Healing

Long-lasting supports that promote sustainable recovery, growth and development

Young people across King County have faced numerous challenges and demonstrated resilience. Through the pandemic, social upheaval and uprisings, and the associated increasing rates of depression and substance use disorder in King County, young people are striving to look out for each other and their own well-being. When it comes to recovery, King County seeks to meet young people where they are with the resources they find most useful.

Whether recovering from substance use disorder or mental health conditions, young people benefit when they have access to peer connections, a safe place to grow, and sustainable committed supports. [Recovery High Schools](#), Alternative Peer Groups, and other community-based mental health and substance use recovery supports are essential components of the healing process for youth and families. These resources are especially important because only 1 in 4 young people in Washington State who participated in publicly-funded substance use treatment graduated high school, and even fewer youth with co-occurring mental health disorders.¹ But among students at the Seattle Public Schools Interagency Recovery Campus, **63% earned or were working towards graduation** and 18% transferred to continue their education elsewhere.²

Among teens, the rates of depression and suicide ideation have started to decline from their peaks, but they remain too high and young people continue to navigate challenging environments.³



*“We believe that healing doesn’t happen in isolation. **Healing happens in community, with connection, joy, art, food, and music...**”*

- Youth Healing Project participant⁴

*“I’m happy that nothing really really bad happened and I’m here today. **I know it sounds so cliché but things really do get better.** What I’m doing, the people whose life I make a contribution to, I have actually helped people and been there for people. After that [suicide attempt] happened, it kind of drives me to helping other people.”*

- Youth mental health cafe participant⁵

*“The Recovery Campus gave me a place to fit in and find comfort in a sober lifestyle that not many people my age were doing. It gave me an environment where **my ideas were valued, and my problems met with solutions rather than dismissal.**”*

- Seattle Public Schools Interagency Recovery Campus student

If you or someone you know is in crisis, you can access help at www.crisisconnections.org and 866-427-4747.



1 Kohlenberg L, Lucenko B, Mancuso D et al. Behavioral Health Needs and School Success: Youth with Mental Health and Substance Abuse Problems are at Risk for Poor High School Performance. Washington State Department of Social and Health Services, Research and Data Analysis Division. 2013. <https://www.dshs.wa.gov/sites/default/files/rda/reports/research/11-194.pdf>

2 King County Department of Community and Human Services. Interagency Recovery Campus in the spotlight following visit from the National Association of Counties. <https://richsblog.com/2024/11/14/interagency-recovery-campus-in-the-spotlight-following-visit-from-the-national-association-of-counties/>

3 Healthy Youth Survey, 2023. Public Health – Seattle & King County. <https://kingcounty.gov/en/dept/dph/about-king-county/about-public-health/data-reports/population-health-data/community-health-indicators/healthy-youth-survey>

4 Best Starts for Kids. Announcing the 21 Youth Healing Project Awardees! <https://beststartsblog.com/2024/03/19/announcing-the-21-youth-healing-project-awardees/>

5 Community Café Collaborative and Public Health – Seattle & King County.



King County