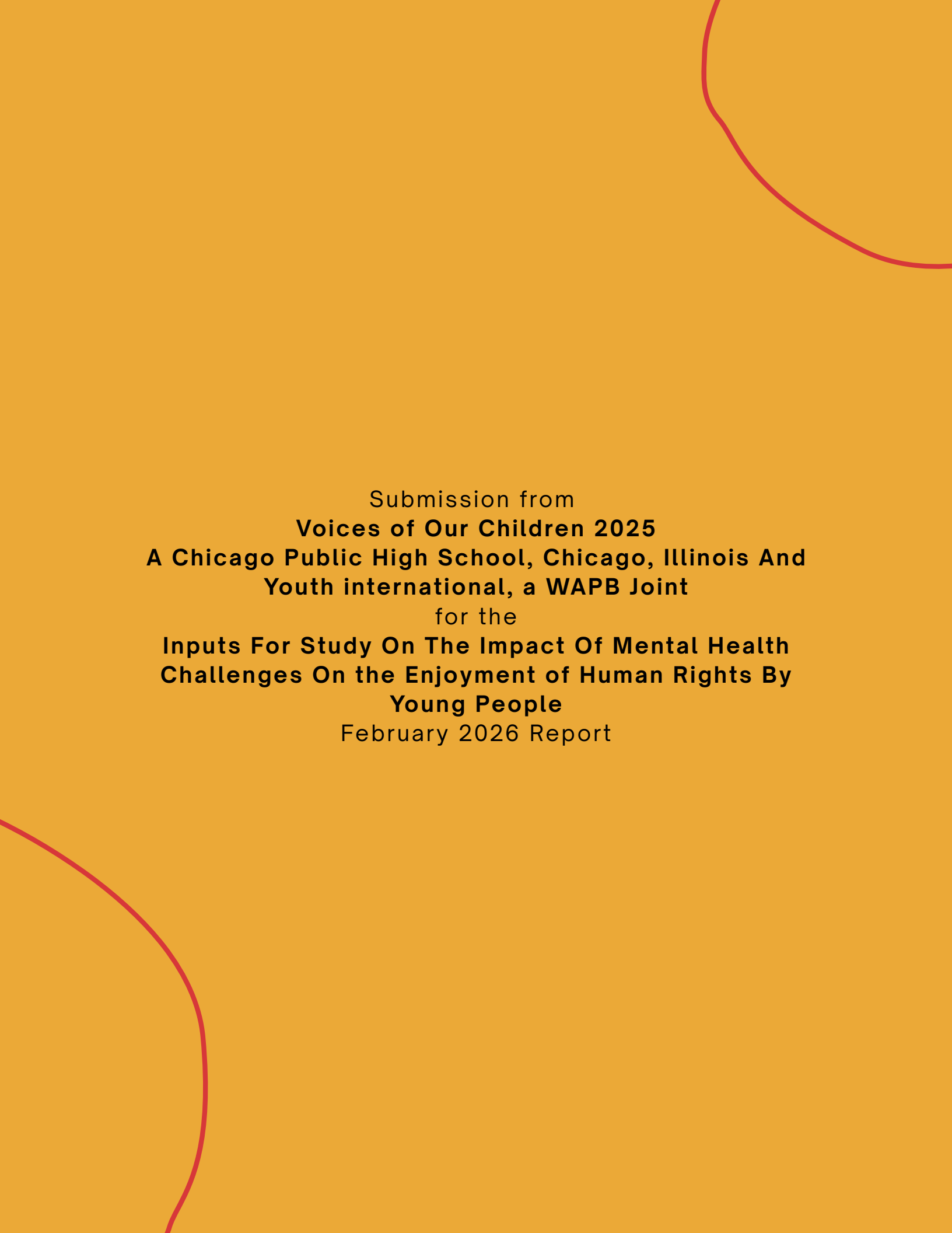




**Voices of Our
Children (VOOC)
Mental Health
Report**

**YOUTH
INTERNATIONAL
A WAPB JOINT**

FEBRUARY 20, 2026

The background is a solid yellow color. There are two decorative pink lines: one in the top right corner curving downwards and to the left, and another in the bottom left corner curving upwards and to the right.

Submission from
Voices of Our Children 2025
A Chicago Public High School, Chicago, Illinois And
Youth international, a WAPB Joint
for the
Inputs For Study On The Impact Of Mental Health
Challenges On the Enjoyment of Human Rights By
Young People
February 2026 Report

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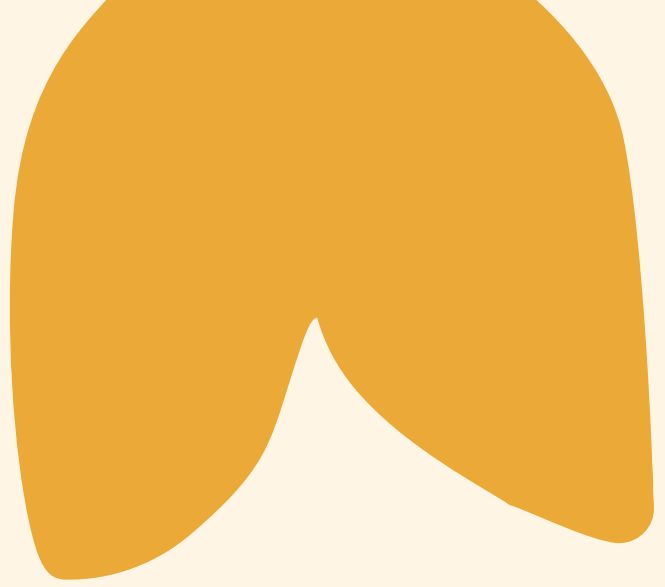


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INTRODUCTION



THE VOICES OF OUR CHILDREN 2025 MENTAL HEALTH SUBMISSION

The Voices of Our Children 2025 Mental Health Submission is a report created by Chicago Public Schools students ages 17–18 at a Chicago Public High School in Illinois, United States. The report highlights the significant mental health challenges facing young people, particularly in Chicago communities.

Our scholars identified widespread experiences of social isolation, anxiety, fear, PTSD, and trauma. In 2023, the CDC found that: 4 in 10 (40%) students had persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, 2 in 10 (20%) students seriously considered attempting suicide and nearly 1 in 10 (9%) attempted suicide. Scholars stressed that children cannot fully learn or thrive when fear stands “in the doorway” of their schools and homes. Our scholars’ issues led us to understand that these challenges are influenced by systemic and community factors, including discrimination, bullying, toxic masculinity, inadequate mental health support, gun and gang violence, immigration enforcement, substance abuse, and the lack of healthcare support for women of color. Some adolescents are at greater risk of mental health conditions due to their living conditions, stigma, discrimination, or exclusion, or lack of access to quality support and services; respecting the rights of children in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and other human rights instruments is key to adolescents’ mental health. Many health behaviors and habits established in adolescence will carry over into adulthood. Every human being has the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. The inability to access the standard of care is a violation of our youth’s human rights, especially for marginalized young populations.

Through artwork and written testimony, many scholars repeatedly expressed “feeling darkness,” signaling a deep sense of emotional distress and lack of support.

LACK OF BODILY AUTONOMY AND SUPPORT FOR WOMEN OF COLOR AND LGBTQ+

Scholars reported fear and concern about limited bodily autonomy due to the restrictions and lack of healthcare support. Whether it comes to legislation impacting reproductive care or health research, women

especially women of color, are excluded from decisions and are not the priority of our healthcare system. Access to sexual and reproductive healthcare lies at the very heart of women's and girls' universal and fundamental rights to equality, privacy and bodily integrity, and are critical to the enjoyment of all other rights, such as their right to health, to education, work and an adequate standard of living, as well as their ability to participate in public and political life and to exercise a leadership role. Scholars made it evident that women are excluded from social decision-making. One scholar who identifies as a Black queer woman expressed feeling unsafe in a society that doesn't adequately represent or protect women. It is crucial that our LGBTQ+ population feels heard. In 2023, female students and LGBTQ+ students experienced more signs of poor mental health and suicidal thoughts and behaviors than their male and cisgender and heterosexual peers. The scholars tied their concerns to Article 28 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which rights and freedoms can be fully realized. Women, women of color, and LGBTQ community members aren't living at peace, face discrimination, and lack opportunities.

INSUFFICIENT MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

Scholars described serious mental health struggles linked to a lack of access to care and representation. One student depicted "seeing darkness" and described coping through self-harm behaviors, dissociation, and depression. Students emphasized that individuals experiencing mental health challenges have the right to receive help without discrimination, aligning with Article 8: Right to Remedy. Individuals facing mental health barriers deserve to "restore their original position", and receive rehabilitation, yet accountability and support from institutions are absent.

TOXIC MASCULINITY AND PRESSURE ON YOUNG BLACK MALES

One scholar connected toxic masculinity and embedded gender roles to the mental health struggles of young African American males. The scholar noted: a lack of positive male role models, pressure to suppress emotions, and cultural expectations that prioritize survival over emotional expression. These conditions conflict with Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights , which guarantees the right to

to adequate health, well-being, and social services. The scholar described young Black men experiencing quiet suffering behind a tough façade, generational trauma, and community stigma around mental health. Despite the right to adequate health and social services, suicide is the third leading cause of death for Black or African American men ages 15-24.

SOCIAL JUDGMENT, STIGMA, DISCRIMINATION, AND BULLYING

Artwork highlighted the heavy burden of societal judgment, gossip, and scrutiny. Students described a constant balancing act between personal actions and public perception. This theme connects to Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, affirming that all people are born free and equal in dignity and rights. A scholar reported experiences of discrimination, including anti-Muslim bullying and microaggressions. Scholars described jokes and comments that “hit like a punch,” contributing to anxiety, fear, and isolation. It is evident that our young people are affected by societal judgments and embedded stereotypes of marginalized individuals.

GUN VIOLENCE AND COMMUNITY TRAUMA

Gun violence emerged as a major driver of youth trauma. One scholar reflected on cousins, neighbors, and friends who “never made it past childhood dreams.” A scholar emphasized: Fear of neighborhood violence, trauma from practicing school shooting drills, families grieving lost loved ones, and schools struggling to provide safe learning environments. Another scholar described neighborhoods such as Garfield Park as feeling like war zones, where gang violence and drug activity contributes to chronic fear. For young people living in high-crime neighborhoods, the rate of exposure to violence is comparable to that of soldiers in war zones.

IMMIGRATION ENFORCEMENT AND FAMILY FEAR

Immigration enforcement was identified as a major source of anxiety and instability. One student shared the story of a former classmate whose father was detained by ICE outside a Home Depot in Niles and taken to the Broadview ICE Facility. Students described: Fear of family separation, constant dread in undocumented households, children

struggling to focus on school, and communities feeling unsafe during raids. Family unity was repeatedly identified as central to youth well-being. Immigration policy had led families to avoid essential health and schools due to fear of deportation. Students emphasized that when families live in fear despite committing no crimes, basic principles of dignity and fairness are undermined. Many scholars described immigration experiences as shaping their fear, aspirations, and commitment to fighting discrimination.

UNITED NATIONS FINDS

According to the United Nations, “The consequences of failing to address adolescent mental health conditions extend to adulthood, impairing both physical and mental health and limiting opportunities to lead fulfilling lives as adults”. It is evident that Chicago is living through harsh mental health challenges. Through our young people’s responses, we can see that mental health issues begin at a young age due to their environment. The United Nations also states, “Protective and supportive environments in the family, at school and in the wider community are important”. The United Nations finds a supportive and protective environment essential for youth development, yet Chicago’s youth lack the environments needed to live healthy lives.

LAWS, POLICIES, AND PROGRAMS

Chicago provides various mental health, suicide, and crisis lifelines and resources under the Chicago Department of Public Health. Although the city provides these resources, residents on the South and West sides of Chicago often face barriers, including long wait times. Service deserts; closing of mental health clinics. Beyond service access, residents often face other social and lived experiences. The Trump administration's policies and rhetoric have had significant impacts on the mental health of various youth populations, particularly those from marginalized groups. These experiences help us understand the root causes. If we don’t dismantle the root causes of these issues and years of trauma, it is hard to see results.

- Medicaid/EPSDT: The Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnostic and Treatment (EPSDT) benefit provides comprehensive and preventive health care services for children under age 21 who are enrolled in Medicaid. EPSDT is key to ensuring that children and adolescents receive appropriate preventive, dental, mental health, and specialty services.
- The Bipartisan Safer Communities Act: Increased funding for mental health services in schools and communities. Creates a new \$750 million funding pot that will be available to states for the creation and administration of laws that help ensure deadly weapons are kept out of the hands of individuals a court has determined to be a significant danger to themselves or others, and other purposes such as mental health courts, drug courts, veteran's courts, and extreme risk protection orders that have sufficient due process.

FUNDING AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Gaps remain in long-term, sustainable, and accessible care. There have been direct policy and funding changes. The administration has recently moved to cancel \$1 billion school-based mental health grants. "These grants are intended to improve American students' mental health by funding additional mental health professionals in schools and on campuses," Deputy Assistant Secretary for Communications Madison Biedermann wrote in a statement to ABC News." Three sources said they believe total cuts to nonprofit groups, many providing street-level care. There have also been cuts to Medicaid, the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), and the Affordable Care Act (ACA).

CONCLUSION

The Voices of Our Children 2025 submission demonstrates that youth mental health in Chicago is deeply connected to systemic inequities and community conditions. Students are calling for:

- Expanded Mental Health Support: Increase access to sustainable and accessible mental health resources, especially for marginalized youth.
- Protection of Bodily Autonomy: Ensure access to sexual and reproductive healthcare and protect the rights of women, women of color, and LGBTQ+ individuals.

- Safer Communities: Reduce gun violence and create safe environments for youth to thrive.
- Reduced Stigma: Normalize seeking mental health support and address societal stigma around mental health issues.
- Humane Immigration Policies: Advocate for policies that protect families and reduce fear and instability in immigrant communities.
- Inclusion in Decision-Making: Promote greater representation of marginalized groups in social and political decision-making processes.
- Equitable Education: Invest in education to dismantle harmful ideologies like toxic masculinity and stereotypes, and support affirmative action.
- The overarching goal is to ensure safety, dignity, and a supportive environment for Chicago's youth, particularly vulnerable low-income youth of color, to address systemic inequities and years of trauma.

Young people emphasize that they deserve safety, dignity, and the ability to experience childhood without constant fear. Our government is clearly not doing enough for our Chicago youth. Many of their mental health issues have ties to years of trauma and government oppression. Government oppression has influenced societal oppression and priorities. Our young people needed to be invested in, especially vulnerable low-income youth of color. At Youth International, a WAPB Joint, we believe that our youth need to be invested in early on. They deserve mental health resources, community support, and a government that doesn't target their community members. This also includes investing in equitable education to help dismantle embedded ideologies such as toxic masculinity and stereotypes, support affirmative action, and dismantle the use of policing and force, reduce access to guns, and, of course, expand mental health support for everyone at a young age. It should be normalized to seek mental health support to avoid self-harm, drug abuse, PTSD, and trauma.



ARTWORK



Shame
Fear
It's you're fault
murder
Stigma
You're being selfish
Restriction
Surveillance
Control
Judgment
Guilt
Morality
Blame
Sin
Future mother
Punishment
Force
Pressure
Good woman don't do this
You'll regret this forever
Think of the consequences
Heartless
You're making a mistake
Killing a life of God
Responsibility
Why didn't you think before
Choosing the easy way out
Never forgive yourself
My Body is My choice



Someone who is depressed has trouble connecting to the world and often finds difficulty in trying to find something or someone that truly understands how they feel, mentally making their hands a slightly fading away pencil shade. This drawing best sits under Article 8: Right to Remedy as people who suffer are insured to get the help that they need without facing discrimination or abuse doing so. Mental health patients have the right to get the help they need, which is respectful to their liberty.

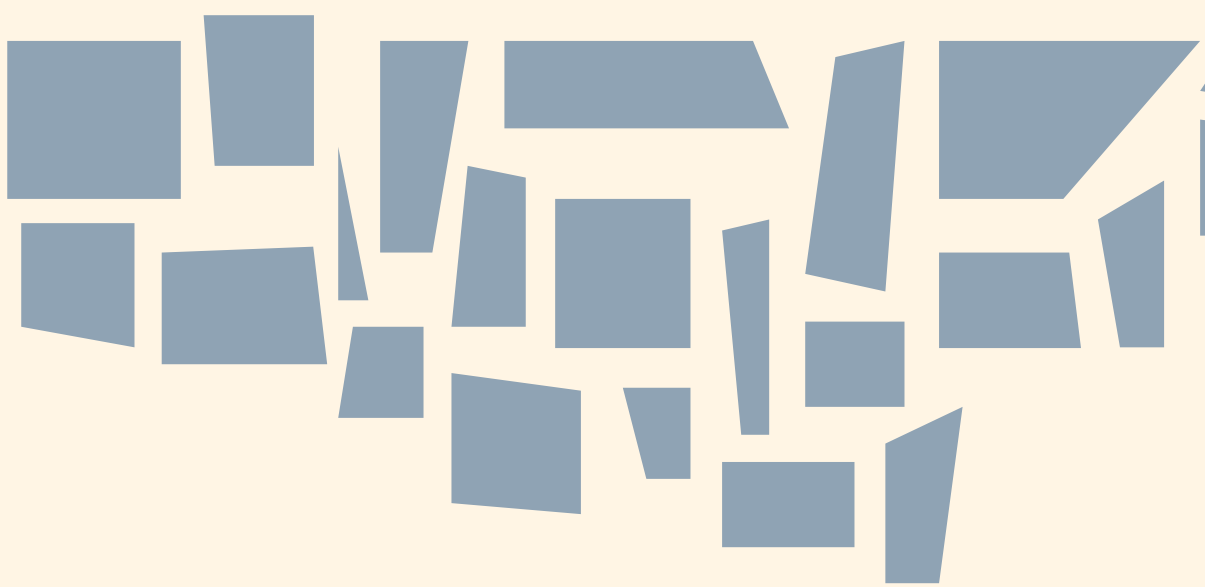


Around my neighborhood, which is located in the Austin area of Chicago, there are lots of recurring issues regarding gun violence with little police effort to enforce any justice due to the relentless scale of activity. When a trigger is pulled, someone's liberty is at grave risk of being stripped away from them. They can be permanently seized from their family, forever.

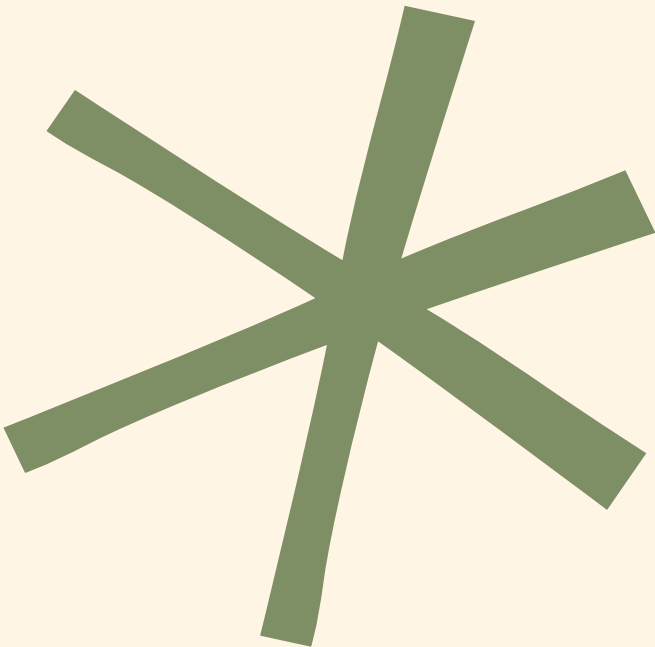


Each step feels like an insurmountable effort; each conversation feels as though you're being persecuted; everything and everyone is out to get you. You feel completely and utterly alone, even in the most full and lively of environments. Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control." Yet this right is often snuffed out, silenced by preconceived notions, stigmas, and ultimately neglect in the household of the young "Black" male?





POEMS



West Garfield Park, the place of love and community
But slowly, I see all the “cracks” start to show.
All of the users and drug abusers.
All the epidemic of drugs start to grow
The neighborhood is far from nice
If you go to Madison its far from great, junkies in front of the
places of business,
Every loud sound in the neighbourhood can be traced back
there.
Someone’s mother, cousin, brother, the lights are on but
nobody is there.
Walking down that street felt like a warzone all the lost
souls around me
It was like the real life walking dead, the tarnished walking
with their hands out
going into a “drug comma” and a “fent lean”
The mere sight of their drooling faces were obscene
Block club chicago talks about drugs in my neighborhood
How the neighborhood is scaring off customers off for
good
I feel compelled to write this because its gotten to crazy
To the point where i think the mayor is getting lazy
My neighborhood is going down in shambles
It's affecting the community
Kids scared to go to school because of where they live
It's the last place people want to be.
CBS news also said the same thing about drugs in the
community
“Drug deals are done right at the car window, and money

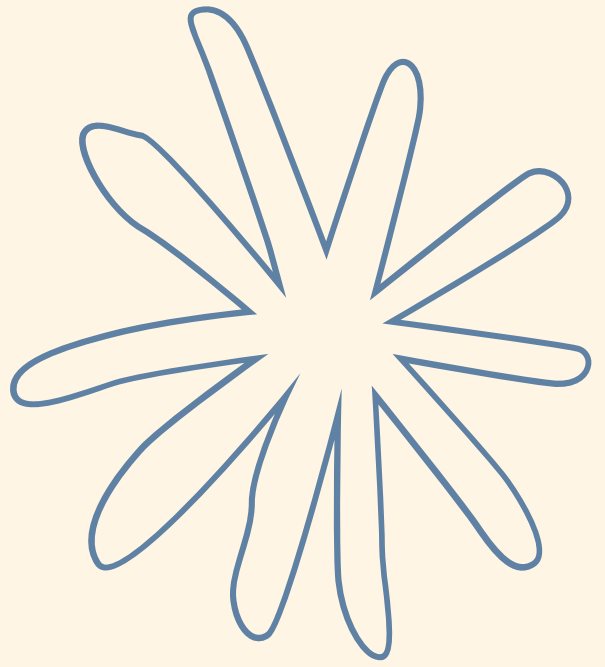
exchanges hands over and over”

Same story that nobody is helping to rewrite

I really hope that the government starts getting sober

Many in the community have voiced their displeasure with
the recent drug activity

The Trace interviewed a woman and she said "We're like the
forgotten child," said Drea Slaughter, a West Side native
who's been working with residents to rebuild the community.
There are more people than just me that think it's time for a
change.



LETTERS



To whom it may concern,

I am writing this letter to talk about immigration. As a daughter of immigrant parents. I am proud and not ashamed of it. It is a blessing to be part of something so beautiful. Times like this can be terrifying. Waiting for your parents to get home safely from work. There's so much harm happening to many innocent people, and no justice is being served to anyone whatsoever. I remember being afraid once I found out who had been selected as president, knowing his intentions and trying to make people think he would make America "great". I've always wondered how someone can be so cruel to others and have no heart. How can a pedophile and a felon be elected for president? Ever since he has taken charge, 47 thousand innocent immigrants have been arrested and treated unfairly. Maybe one day, this will all be over. All the fear, the hiding, and the injustice will no longer exist. We as a community will finally be able to breathe in peace with no fear of being ripped apart from our beautiful families. We will be able to walk down the street to get snacks from the elotero without seeing someone getting pinned down or getting tear gassed. We will all be happy together with our loved ones. Again, I am proud to be part of my Hispanic community, I am ready to stand up and speak for those who are afraid or can't. We, as a community, will stick together. Thank you for your time. I hope for a response back on your opinion about what has been going on.

Sincerely,
A CPS student

GANG VIOLENCE IN CHICAGO

Gang violence in my neighborhood threatens basic human rights as it endangers kids, as well as sets kids or teens up for failure. Kids are often exposed to dangers they should never have to face, such as fights, gunshots, or pressure from older gang members to do things they might not want to and shouldn't do. Growing up in an unsafe environment affects their mental health, their education, and their ability to comprehend violent situations. When a community cannot protect its youngest members, their human rights are being violated. As a community, we need to come together and protect the younger generations from this negative form of life.

According to the National Institute of Justice, gang violence remains “a continuing threat to public safety,” showing how much this issue affects families and neighborhoods. We also see that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has stated that “youth violence is a serious public health problem.” This is due to the massive drug deals that take place, which puts a risk on the kids and families as well. We can also look at the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and how they say that “Children have the right to be protected from all forms of violence.” Showing how many companies or conventions are standing up and against violence, specifically gang violence, to protect children from the streets and the dangerous gang life. Even in my neighborhood, I have seen many kids who have a lot of potential get taken into the gang life due to the negative influence around them. This has caused many of my once-called friends to go to jail and even get sent back to their home countries by their parents.

HOW IMMIGRATION HAS AFFECTED MY PERSPECTIVE

Immigration is something that has affected many in the world including myself and here is how. Throughout my life I've always heard of immigration whether it's from a news channel on the television or a relative of mine, while growing up my perspective of the world has always been affected by acts of immigration. Immigration in my life has changed my perspective in many ways most noticeably in fear, aspirations, and values while also guiding me to contribute to freedom from discrimination. These three perspectives have changed greatly and gave me something to work towards in life.

First off my perspective of fear greatly changed in my life due to immigration. When I was younger I wasn't as aware of immigration and I.C.E. but as I grew up and heard more stories that's when my perspective of what I fear grew. When I was in 7th grade I heard a story about how my father was almost deported but before he could be deported his lawyer had found out that he was eligible for his U-VISA which kept him in the states and most importantly in my life. That story honestly changed my perspective because it showed me that I could've lost my father for who knows how long. That story also developed a new found fear in the form of losing my family. This new found fear would soon drive my contribution to freedom from discrimination

Additionally Immigration has affected my life in what I aspire to do and accomplish. This effect is also supported by my perspective of fear as that new developed fear helped me realize what I wanna do with my life. I've always wanted to become a lawyer since I was young. I just didn't know what type of lawyer I wanted to be. Now after my fear developed it also made me realize as an immigration lawyer. As an immigration lawyer I could make a difference in people lives, personally I feel as if im going towards the right path as I've helped my parents obtain documentation by submitting essays for them and for my mother she obtained them while my fathers are still processing. Personally to me these essays including this one I am currently writing help some people obtain freedom from discrimination.

Hence with this new developed fear and aspiration in my life it drives me to new values. Some of these values include helping others from discrimination, family, and fighting racial mistreatment. Discrimination against people that immigration shows for me is unacceptable as they fill families with fear racial profiling people just because of the tone of their skin, arresting people just because of the fear in their eyes. That's what drives my value of helping people fight racial mistreatment and discrimination. Family is something everyone is born with and should value at any moment they can be taken. For a lot of people, family is motivation, family is a force, family is the center of everything and without it people wouldn't have support and care but immigration neglects all of that. For those reasons that is what gives me a drive to help my family and others as people shouldn't be afraid of discrimination.

Ultimately my perspective has greatly shifted due to immigration. Although Immigration caused me to be afraid it didn't halt me as my perspectives in my aspirations and my values are and what will be my motivation to contribute to freedom from discrimination. Now as a community we shouldn't let fears of immigration and discrimination halt us from what we believe is right. Even though this writing isn't gonna help anyone, always remember that just speaking your mind will always have a chance big or small to make a difference in the world and in this case freedom from discrimination.

NO ONE'S ILLEGAL ON STOLEN LAND

Immigration in America has and is affecting the Latino population entirely. It's making us feel afraid and trapped from living our everyday lives. Our kids aren't focusing on school because they're so afraid that their parents, siblings, or themselves are being kidnapped by ICE enforcement. Kids as young as myself are being taken off the streets on the way to school. History has shown us that these actions aren't new and have been going on for years. Starting from the Mexican Repatriation to the present, with "Operation Midway Bliss" and "Operation Charlotte's Web". Even though Operation Midway Bliss ended in mid-November, it still left a heavy toll and trauma on the Latino community. Even to me, I am a 16-year-old Mexican-American living in Chicago, and I have been greatly affected by Operation Midway Bliss.

We cannot forget that ICE has not just targeted Latino Families, but also African-American Families here in Chicago. On September 30, 2025, U.S Border Control and the FBI conducted a huge raid in the South Shore of Chicago. They zip-tied children and parents all "for their own safety and to ensure these children were not being trafficked, abused, or otherwise exploited," says Time Magazine. It also affected Ofelia Torres, a former classmate of mine. Before attending Devry, I went to Lake View, so I would always see her every day in my classes. I recently got the news that she is battling stage 4 cancer, but to add more salt to the wound, her father is an undocumented immigrant. On October 18th, ICE Agents outside of a Home Depot in Niles detained and arrested her father, Ruben Torres, who was initially taken to the Broadview ICE Facility before being transferred to a detention center in Clay County, Indiana. "Her treatments had been on hold since her father was detained by federal agents, who initially took him to the Broadview ICE facility before transferring him to a detention center in Clay County, Indiana.", says HSPRD. The government treats us like animals, and Ofelia's cancer treatment was put on hold because of this.

The actions put forth by the government have greatly affected all of us. They treat us like animals and don't see eye to eye with our true reason for being in this country. Homeland Security is using the excuse that undocumented immigrants are criminals to justify kidnapping thousands of individuals, whether they're undocumented or not. We want to work to support our families. Illegal or not, we all have an understanding that working hard is the way to success. They won't let us. In LA, where it all started, ICE agents arrested over 5,000 individuals. According to Kristi Noem, "DHS law enforcement has made over 5,000 arrests in Los Angeles. That's more than 5,000 criminal illegal aliens, gang members, child predators, and murderers taken off our streets. Precious lives saved,". The words, the actions, the thoughts that they use against us are absolutely killing all of us from the inside. We are hardworking individuals seeking a better life. But it's not just these individuals being taken off our streets; they take citizens, blue-collar workers, and kids as young as 6 years old. Yuanxin Zheng, a 6-year-old boy, was separated from his father by ICE in late 2025.

What I want my audience to take away from this letter is that we are human. And like any other human, we try our hardest to succeed. Rounding us up like farm animals will never truly fix this country. Immigration has affected everyone, everyone who is a person of color/minority. We are all scared, not because we've done something wrong in the past or done something illegal, that's not the point. We are afraid that they'll take us and that we'll never see our family again. We don't want to go back to gang violence, we don't want to go to corruption, we don't want to go back to the place that had us stuck for so long. We're just kids, we're just adults trying to put food on our table, we are adolescents who are trying hard in school, we are new adults trying to find our way in the world.

No one is illegal on stolen land.
Nadie es ilegal en tierra robada.



ESSAYS

IMMIGRATION ENFORCEMENT AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN CHICAGO

Immigration Enforcement and Human Rights in Chicago

Chicago is known for being one of the most diverse cities in the country, with neighborhoods built by immigrants from all over the world. Because of that, immigration isn't just a political topic here; it's something that affects real families, workers, students, and entire communities. In recent years, however, the way ICE has increased its actions in Chicago has created growing fear and uncertainty for many people. Instead of focusing only on dangerous cases, immigration enforcement now often targets ordinary residents who have lived in the city for years, work steady jobs or support mixed-status families. This shift has raised serious concerns about fairness, safety, and dignity. ICE's increased actions in Chicago violate human rights principles by detaining people without criminal records, creating fear in immigrant neighborhoods, and disrupting families and daily life.

ICE's increased enforcement in Chicago creates serious human rights issues because people are being targeted and detained even when they have no criminal history. Between January and July 2025, ICE arrests in Illinois increased by 59%, and 61% of those arrested in June had "no criminal charges at all" (Axios 2025). Many of the individuals were longtime residents with families, jobs, and strong ties to the community. In one Chicago case, a daughter described the moment her father was detained, saying, "I really started crying... my heart is torn in pieces right now." (WBEZ 2025) This evidence shows that enforcement is no longer focused on public safety. Instead, it targets ordinary community members who have not committed any crimes. Detaining people without a criminal history violates basic principles of fairness and human dignity. When families are separated unexpectedly, it becomes more than a legal issue; it becomes a direct violation of human rights values that protect family unity and personal security.

Aggressive immigration enforcement harms Chicago communities by creating fear, disrupting daily life, and damaging families. Chicago is home to 1.7 million immigrants, making up 18% of the city's population (Vera Institute 2023). That means immigration enforcement affects entire neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces. A factory worker

described how an ICE action “freaked out the whole factory,” calling it “sad the way the United States crucifies its immigrant workers” (WBEZ 2025). Parents fear being separated from their children. Students worry their family members won't be home when they return from school. Some avoid hospitals, government buildings, or even public transit in fear of being stopped. When almost one-fifth of the city feels unsafe going to work, school, or medical appointments, the impact becomes widespread. Fear spreads beyond individuals to children, neighborhoods, and local businesses. The daily stress created by enforcement affects mental health, stability, and community trust. This goes directly against human rights principles that protect safety, equal treatment, and the right to live without constant fear, especially in a city where immigrants play such a large and essential role.

Community organizations and local activists have stepped up to support families and fight back against what they see as unfair treatment. One organizer said, “We know who keeps us safe, and that is us.” (WTTW 2025) A larger coalition of groups stated, “An attack on one community is an attack on all.” (Chicago Sun Times 2025) These responses highlight that immigration enforcement isn't just an immigrant issue; it's a community issue. When entire neighborhoods unite, it shows that people believe everyone deserves protection and dignity. Their actions reflect a belief that safety comes from supporting one another, not from separating families or targeting innocent residents. This reinforces the idea that defending immigrant rights is an essential part of defending human rights for everyone in Chicago.

In the end, immigration enforcement in Chicago has grown into a serious human rights issue that affects far more than just legal paperwork. When people who have committed no crimes are detained, when families live in fear, and when whole communities feel unsafe, the basic values of dignity and fairness are put at risk. Chicago is a city built by immigrants, and its strength comes from the people who live and work here every day. Ignoring the harm caused by aggressive ICE actions only makes communities more divided and weaker. By choosing to protect immigrant rights, Chicago can move towards a future where safety is created through justice, not fear. Speaking up about this issue matters because every person in this city deserves to feel secure, respected, and human.



SPEECH



Ladies and gentlemen, honored guests—

Today I stand before you with a simple question that carries a profound weight: Who are women?

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a woman is defined as “an adult female human.” But I invite you to pause and look closely at the word human. Let it sit with you. Reflect on it. Because every day, as a young Black woman, I look around and ask myself: If we are all human, why does society treat women—especially Black women—as somehow less? Why do men so often stand as the default, the standard, the assumed center of humanity, while women are treated as an afterthought?

Our Constitution, the very framework of this nation, repeatedly uses the word “men” when describing rights and freedoms. Why not men and women? Why not all people? Why, in a country built on the ideals of equality, do women still find themselves pushed to the margins of conversations that directly impact our bodies, our futures, and our lives?

It often feels like the system is built to make us lose before we even begin. Consider this: nearly 80% of single-parent households in America are led by women. Half of Black women are the primary breadwinners in single-income homes. Many Black Americans—myself included—know the reality of growing up with a single Black mother who carried an entire family alone. So I must ask: if men claim they are the natural leaders of society, then why do so many abandon leadership within the most fundamental institution of all—the home?

Why can they claim authority over nations, yet refuse to share responsibility within their own households?

Women in the United States were not granted the right to vote until 1920—not even a century and a half ago. And even now, our voices are often dismissed, minimized, or silenced.

Article 28 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in the Declaration can be fully realized.” Nelson Mandela—one of the greatest champions of justice—reminds us that “to deny people their human rights is to challenge their humanity.”

So I ask again: Why are we still challenging the humanity of women?

Why are we forcing women to carry pregnancies even when their lives are in danger? Why are people who have never carried a child, who will never understand the physical and emotional weight of pregnancy, allowed to make decisions for those who do? Men will never fully comprehend the risks, the pain, the sacrifice. And yet they hold the power to legislate our bodies.

Medical research reveals even deeper inequities. Studies from the University of Chicago and UC Berkeley show that women are often overdosed—or underdosed—because clinical trials are overwhelmingly conducted on male bodies. As Professor Brian Prendergast explains, “These drugs are optimized from the beginning to work on male bodies.” And what does that mean? It means that women are more vulnerable to illness, more likely to suffer severe side effects, and less likely to receive treatments that truly work for them.

Our health matters just as much as men’s. Our voices matter just as much as men’s. Our lives matter just as much as men’s.

Yet time and time again, society treats us as if they do not.

And let us be honest: the person most at risk in America—the one who faces the hardest battles, the deepest discrimination, and the most unspoken struggles—is often a Black woman who identifies as part of the LGBTQ community. When we talk about justice, when we talk about equality, we cannot ignore the people standing at the intersection of every form of oppression.

So what must we do?

We must fight.

We must pray.

We must uplift one another.

Women, we must advocate for our rights—not the version of our rights shaped by male convenience or male opinion. If we are excluded from their conversations, then we will create our own. If we are shut out of their rooms, we will build our own tables.

If our voices are ignored, we will raise them louder.

Because women are not an afterthought. We are not an accessory to humanity.

We are human.

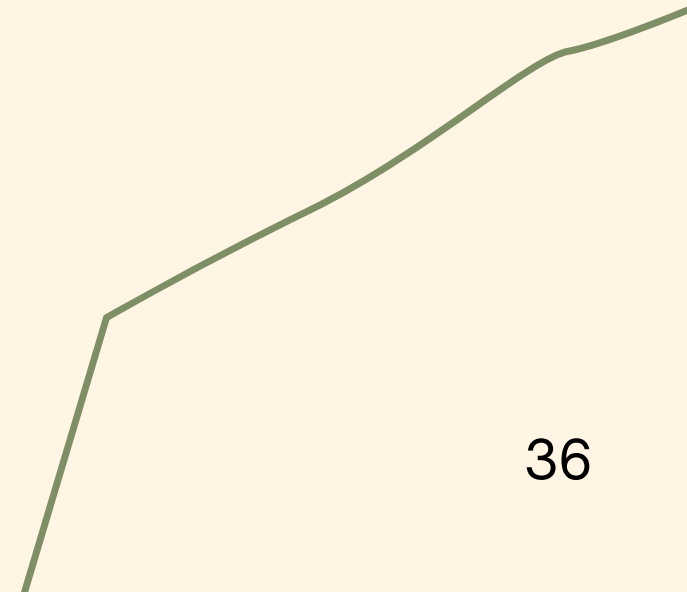
We are powerful.

And we deserve every right, every protection, and every opportunity that men claim for themselves.

Thank you.



PRESENTATIONS



MENTAL HEALTH IN THE CHICAGO COMMUNITY



What's the Problem?

- Youth mental health struggles are increasing in Chicago
- Many young people lack access or motivation to receive counseling or support services.
- This is a human rights issue under Article 8 of the UDHR: “Everyone has the right to an effective remedy by competent national tribunals for acts violating fundamental rights granted by the constitution or by law.”

Who is Affected?

Teens and young adults experience anxiety, depression, or stress. They often face academic difficulties, social isolation, and higher risk of self-harm.

Chicago statistics:

- 43% of high school students reported feeling sad/hopeless for two weeks or more.
- 16% of those students considered suicide.

Why This Happens

- Poverty, community violence, and housing instability.
- Trauma and exposure to violence.
- Barriers: stigma, lack of services, and inequity in access
- Poverty, violence, and housing instability increase stress and trauma for youth while limiting access to mental health support..

My Perspective

I believe mental health needs to be taken much more seriously and should never be taken lightly, especially for young people. Mental health seems to be a bigger problem than ever in my generation, and I have personally witnessed both my own struggles and those of others around me. Carrying that kind of weight on your shoulders is deteriorating and exhausting. Too many kids struggle in silence because they are not taught early enough how to understand or talk about their mental health. We need more mental health facilities,

especially in minority communities, where youth are often discouraged from seeking help or lack access to care. No one should feel alone or ignored when they reach out for help.

How can we work on this?

Early Mental Health Education: Teaching kids about mental health early helps them understand their feelings and ask for help sooner.

Support in Minority Communities: Adding mental health resources in minority areas makes it easier for all kids to get help.

More Mental Health Facilities: Building more clinics and counseling centers gives more kids a place to get support when they need it.

Getting rid of Stigma: Talking openly about mental health helps kids feel safe and supported when asking for help, without fear of being judged or misunderstood.



ICE

The Issue: What is the human rights violation, and what is the underlying cause?

ICE actions, like detention and family separations, can violate immigrants' fundamental rights to freedom, family unity, and humane treatment. These issues often arise from a strong focus on border enforcement, which can overshadow humanitarian concerns.

When I say 'overshadowing humanitarian concerns,' it means people are really focused on enforcing rules or dealing with stuff; they (ICE Agents) end up not paying enough attention to how people are actually being treated or what's best for them.

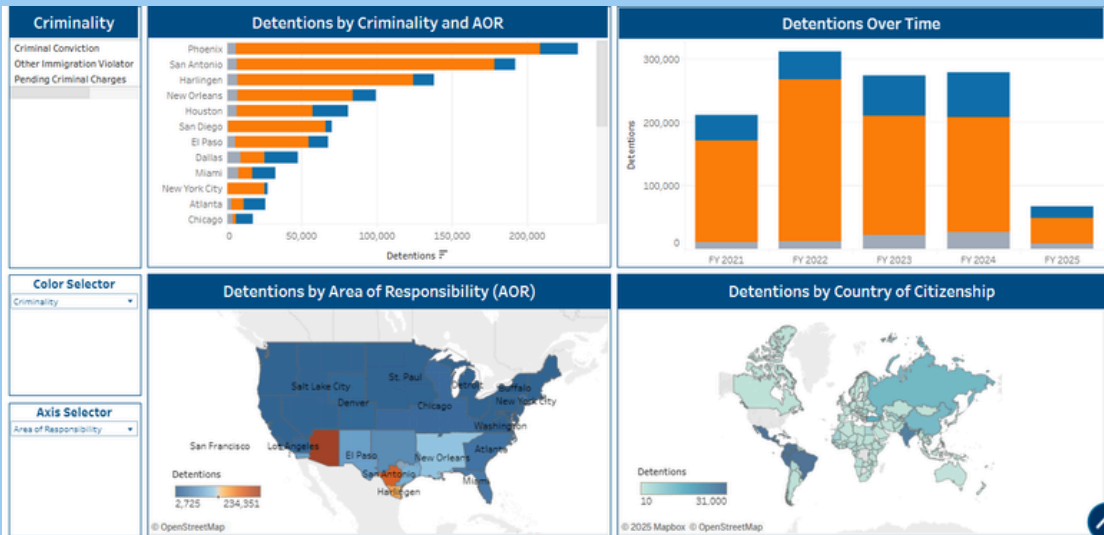
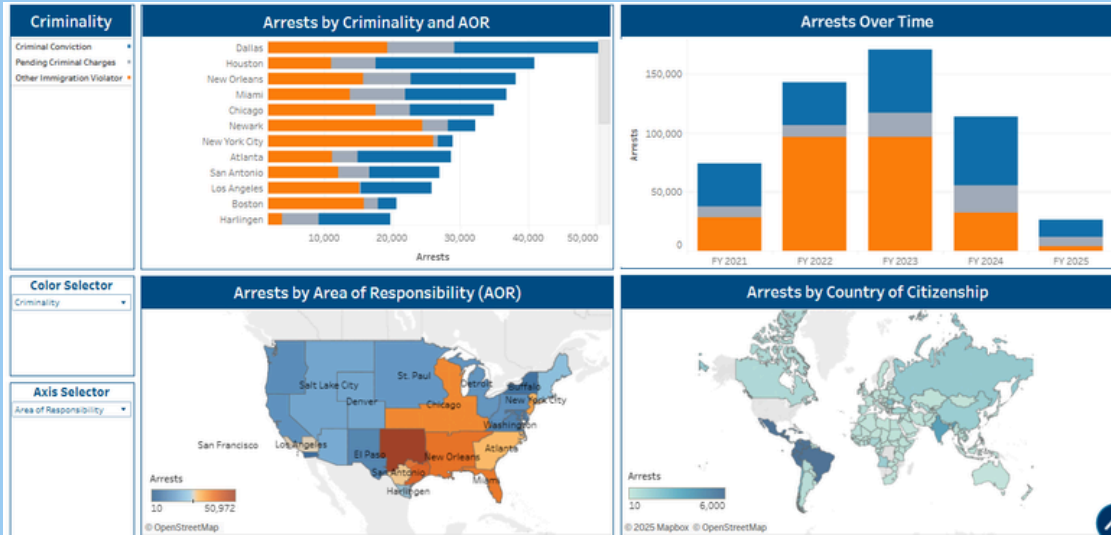
The Impact: Who is affected, and what are the consequences for their lives?

Immigrants, asylum seekers, and especially their children suffer from detention, mental health, and physical toll, and the trauma of family separation. These experiences can have long-lasting negative effects (families experience stress, and children can suffer from PTSD and have worse health and educational outcomes) on their well-being futures.

Human Rights “Freedom from Discrimination”

Human rights laws, like the ICCPR and U.S. civil rights statutes, guarantee freedom from discrimination for everyone, including non-citizens, meaning ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) must not discriminate based on race, origin, gender, etc., in employment, housing, or detention, though advocacy groups report issues like racial profiling, harsh conditions, etc.

Evidence





YOUTH INTERNATIONAL IMMIGRATION

The Issue

More than two months ago, The Trump Administration launched Operation Midway Blitz, started in early Septemeber and was supposed to last 30 days. This was not the case as Immigration and Customs Enforcement continued to go rampant throughout the streets of Chicago terrorizing neighborhoods.

I chose to talk bout this matter because this is my community and Ignoring the racial discrimination agression towards my community would be impossible. To see innocent immigrants taken and ripped apart from their families in such an inhumane way is something I wouldn't be able to turn a blind eye to knowing that I could be in the same situation.

Operation Midway Blitz

Since the operation began, ICE racially profiled hundreds of hispanic U.S citizens. Michelle Garcia, Deputy legal director of the ACLU Of Illinois even states, "You look at this list and it is very clear they just did a broad sweep of anybody and not a targeted sweep of people who were here unlawfully and that they knew were likely to flee or were criminals as they lead you to believe" (Martinez-Beltran 4). This is regarding the people that were taken by ICE, supposedly dangerous criminals. "The government's own documents contradict the Trump administration's narrative that its ongoing raids are targeting and arresting violent criminals who are in the country illegally or are what the agency routinely calls "the worst of the worst" (Martinez-Beltran 3).

The Main Goal

During Obama's presidency, many people argue that Trump is doing no different than Obama, but there is a significant distinction between the operations. Obama stated before that:

"And that's why we're going to keep focusing enforcement resources on actual threats to our security. Felons, not families. Criminals, not children. Gang members, not a mom who's working hard to provide for her kids. We'll prioritize, just like law enforcement does every day."(Obama, 2014).

Obama focused on arresting undocumented immigrants whereas

Trumps administration will catch any hispanic related person assumin they are undocumented, known as racial profiling.



Aggression against Innocents

Not only are ICE agents being aggressive toward Hispanic individuals, but also toward US citizens as well. They've gone so far as to tear-gassing and arresting peaceful protesters.

“They’ve launched tear gas in residential neighborhoods in Chicago and Portland, rappelled from a Black Hawk helicopter into an apartment building to arrest families at night, violently attacked U.S. citizens, and used predator drones to surveil protests, predator drones to surveil protests”(Mehta, 2025).

Significance

Immigrants have come into this country each looking for a better life here in America. They work the best they can do to provide for their families and would do anything for them. Like anyone in America, they are also human and deserve no other treatment other than respect and to be equal as others.

As though this is true, they face racial discrimination and are treated as if all are dangerous.



EFFECTS ON IMMIGRANTS

What is happening?

Many immigrants are being separated from their families. Some cannot work legally due to their status, but they desire to live the “American Dream” and support their families.

Knowing that my own family and friends are going through similar struggles and are still pushing through reminds me of the importance of having compassion and standing up for what’s right by helping them and showing support.

Why is this important?

With everything that's going on around the world, I believe that it's important to realize that we're all human, no matter our skin color. We all deserve to be treated equally.

Many Latino families are going through discriminations that include racial comments and profiling, and what we need now is for people to show that they care!

Why do they come here in the first place?

In the United States there exist some of the most sought- after and famous well- known colleges in the world, which make it valuable. Many families come here to give their children a better opportunity in life. When it comes to education in the United States, there is no shortage of fields you can study, and they are far more developed. The options are endless. Students can pursue their passions in the US!

Deportation statistic

DHS reported over 527,000 removals as of late October 2025, with the administration expecting to reach around 600,000 by the end of the year.

Personal Experience

I have experienced family and friends being taken by ice while they are working to support their families, and there is nothing I can do to help. I’ve witnessed the fear on my parents’ faces when they hear about

someone we care deeply for being taken away. I feel like it's unfair because they struggle in their own countries and then come here to face struggles with people who discriminate against them.

Family Separation

Mass deportation programs could affect 5.5 million U.S.-born children who live in mixed-status households, many of whom could be separated from their parents if the parents are deported.

Many of these children have yet to be reunited with their families, many of whose parents were deported without them this is trauma and affect kids mental health at such a young age.

Racism

Particularly, Latino individuals are often stereotyped as undocumented, regardless of their actual legal status or citizenship. This leads to racial profiling and discrimination against a wide range of people of color.

Concerns about job competition or the strain on public services can fuel the belief that immigrants are a burden on the system, even though studies show undocumented immigrants contribute billions in taxes and have a positive effect on Social Security finances.

Many innocent families are considered all dangerous aliens and criminals who invaded their country which normalizes and encourages discriminatory attitudes and behavior toward immigrant communities.

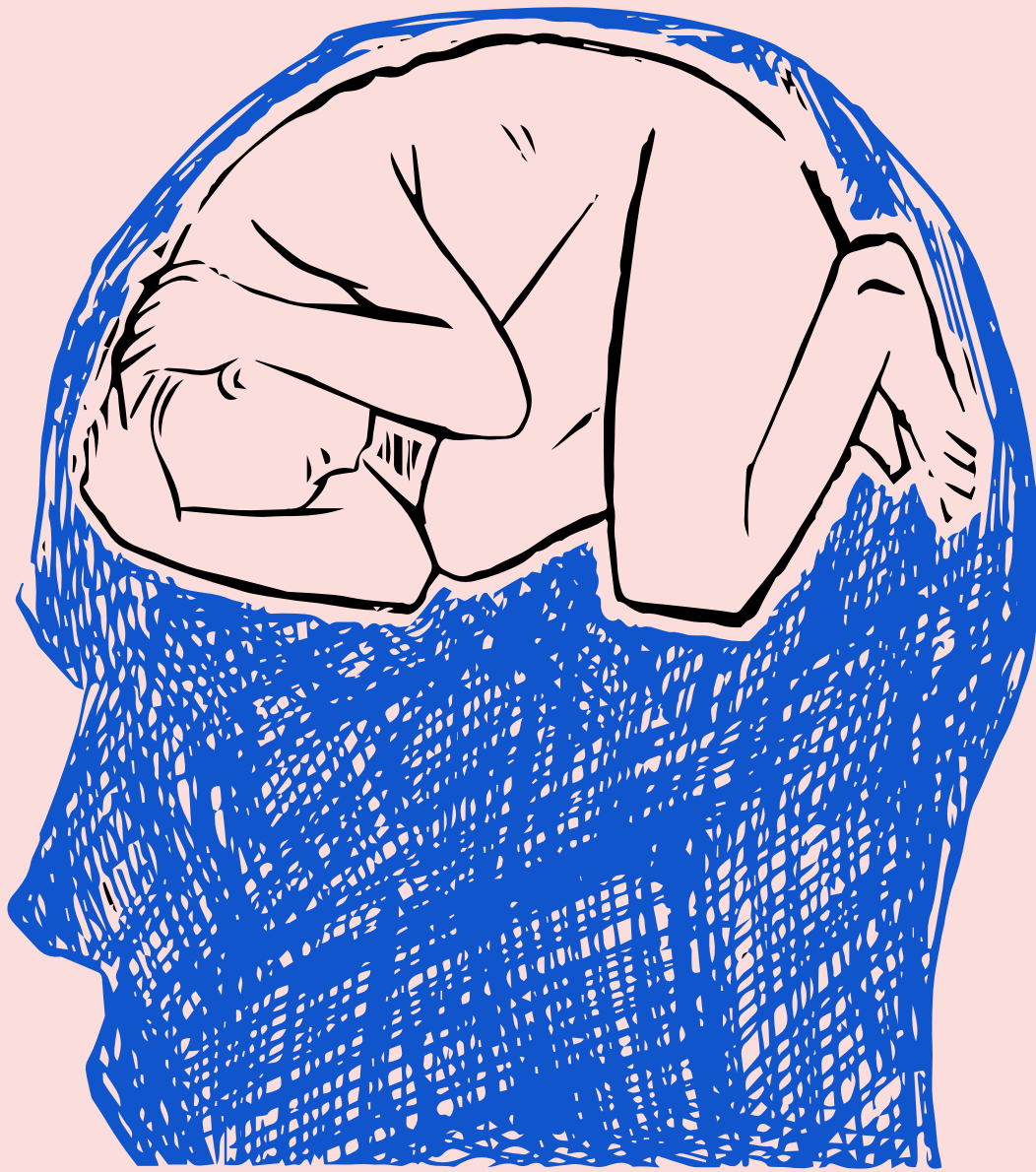
Violence

Immigrant families are now reporting aggression that has been caused by ICE, which includes excessive use of force and physical assault. For example, shoving a woman onto the floor of an immigration court, tackling a person to the ground, and the use of full-body restraints. Verbal abuse and racial profiling have been committed by these officers

Violence has been an issue in immigration enforcement, such as concerns over the use of aggressive tactics against immigrants,

including reports of excessive force and potentially violent arrests. Recent data shows a significant increase in assaults on ICE officers, and critics highlight aggressive enforcement tactics like mass raids, the detention of U.S. citizens, and forceful arrests

WHO WILL BE NEXT?



What is violence?

By definition from the Merriam-Webster dictionary violence is “the use of physical force as so to injure, abuse, damage, or destroy.”

- Physical violence
- Sexual violence
- Psychological/emotional violence
- Financial Violence
- Community Violence
- School Violence

Why does it happen?

Violent behavior is linked to specific psychological and environmental factors. Children from violent homes are more likely to become violent adults. Violence causes depression and fear in both perpetrators and victims.

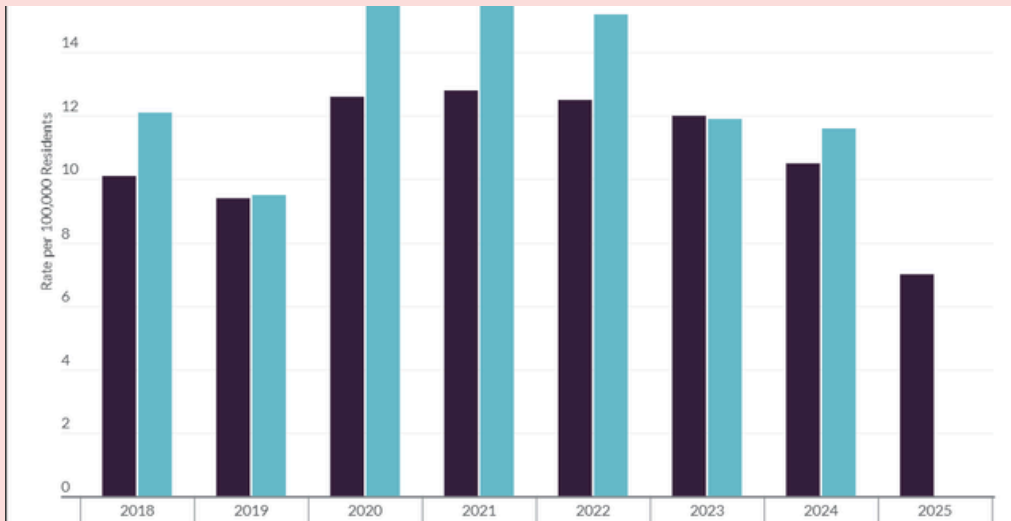
The Impact

Mental Impact

- PTSD: A mental condition caused by experiencing or witnessing trauma
- Depression: A mental health condition marked by ongoing sadness
- Anxiety: A mental health condition involving excessive worry or fear

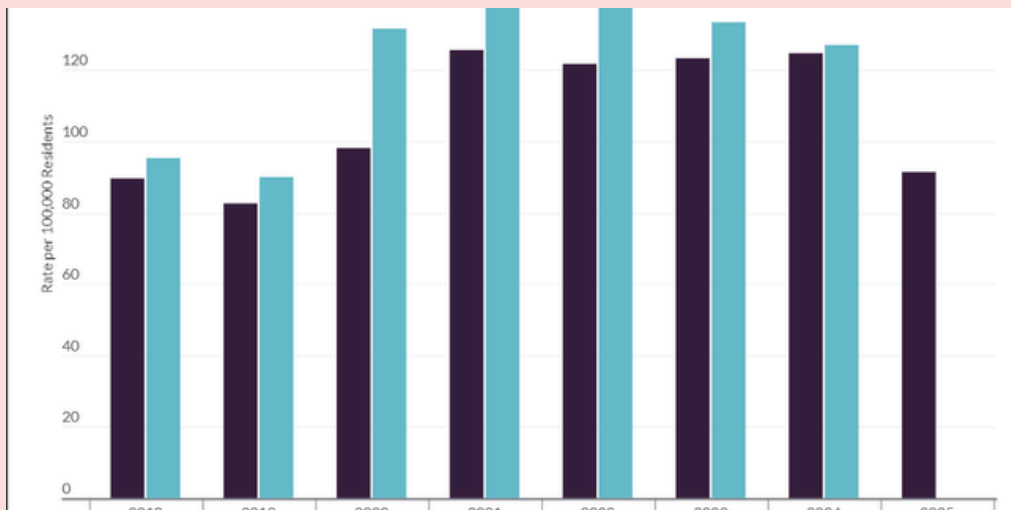
Physical/Long-term Impact

- Injury: Gunshot wounds, stab wounds, injuries from physical assault, and blunt force trauma
- Social isolation: Avoiding friends and family and spending most of the time alone without social interaction.
- Cycles of trauma: Generational abuse, repeated exposure to violence, and ongoing stress from poverty.

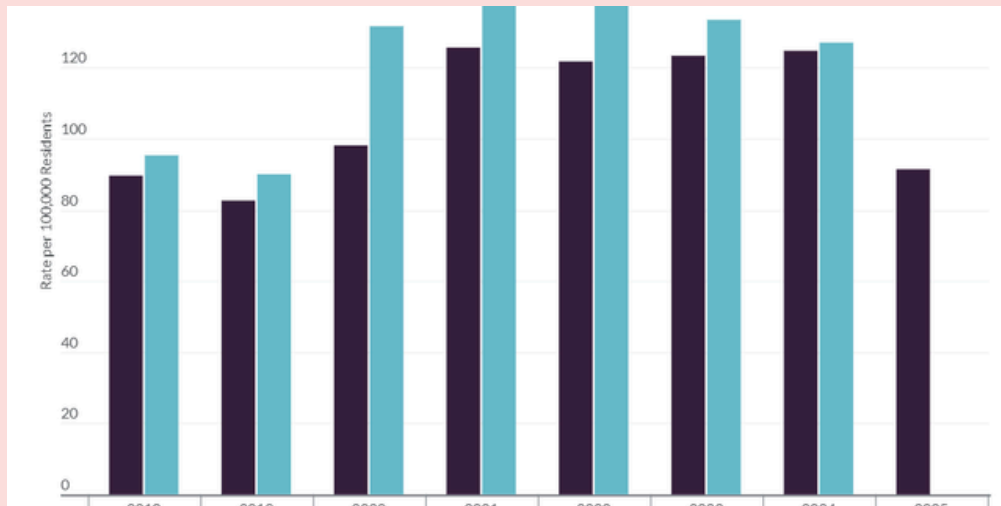


Evidence

Chicago homicides peaked in July 2020 and 2021 but dropped 65% by June 2025, with 36 incidents. The first half of 2025 also had 33% fewer homicides than the same period in 2024 and 25% fewer than in 2019, performing better than most other large cities.



From January 2018 to June 2025, aggravated assaults usually peaked in the summer (June–August). The highest was in June 2024 with 1,803 cases. By June 2025, assaults dropped to 1,554 cases, a 16% decrease from the previous year.



Gun assaults are part of aggravated assaults. From January 2018 to June 2025, Chicago's gun assault rate dropped 27% in the first half of 2025 compared to the same time in 2024, while the average drop in 11 other cities was 21%.



HOMELESSNESS IN CHICAGO

What is homelessness, and its causes?

Homelessness is the condition of lacking a stable, safe and permanent place to live. While homelessness is often compared to being homeless there is a slight difference. Homeless is the description of a person's condition while homelessness is a broader term to describe multiple individuals.

There are many reason why people can be homeless while some people believe that getting out of the state of being homeless just requires you need a job that is far from the truth. For example, one of the leading causes for homelessness is the lack of affordable housing, health problems, addiction to substances, Mental illness, and domestic abuse.

Who is affected by homelessness?

Homelessness can happen to various vulnerable populations that include veterans, families with children, people with disabilities, and people with mental illness.

Statistics

The United States saw an 18.1% increase of homelessness last year Chicago total homeless population tripled.

Chicago estimated that 18,836 people experienced homelessness last year, compared to 2023 where it was 6,139 people according to the city's annual tally released last summer.

Human Right Article 25

The homeless fall under the human right, Article 25, the right to an adequate standard of living. The Human right to an adequate standard of living is the human right to have adequate food, water, sanitation, clothing, housing, and medical care, which is something that homeless people don't receive.

ALCOHOLISM: THE HIDDEN EPIDEMIC

“First you take a drink, then the drink takes a drink, then the drink takes you.” – F. Scott Fitzgerald



The Issue: Violation to Human Rights?

Violates:

- Failure to ensure healthcare and well-being services
- Equal treatment from social shame
- In some countries, a right to humane treatment

Causes:

- History of trauma: genetic or traumatic
- Mental health problems: escape reality
- Social and Cultural factors: influence of peers
- The practice of drinking: steady drinking on a regular basis

Why is it a Human's Right Issue?

Right to Health: individuals partaking in heavy drinking often face obstacles to reach treatment.

Neglect: Governmental establishments fail to recognize and fund alcohol treatment or rehabilitation.

Right to Living: Alcohol addiction can lead to homelessness, isolated situations, or residing in unsafe environments.

Avoidance of Discrimination: Social shame can lead to unemployment, mockery, or education cut-off.

Who is Affected?

Families: Families of alcoholics often experience emotional trauma and dangerous risks of abuse. Descendants of alcoholics can be affected through genetic malfunctions or distortions.

Communities: Healthcare and social services become costly when a high rate of alcoholism is present, as the dangerous act causes severe damage.

Worldwide: Although alcoholism can be more prevalent in certain areas than others, alcohol use affects people of any social status and residents in most countries, indicating it isn't biased to a certain demographic.

Consequences?

Social:

- Domestic Violence
- Homelessness

Economic:

- Financial loss
- Unemployment
- Social Service dependences

Legal:

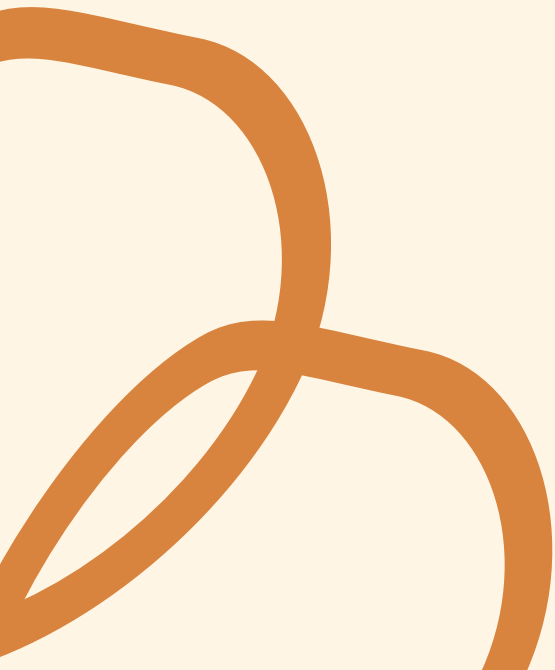
- Likelihood to arrests

Solutions

- Expansion of healthcare treatment
- Address the matter through education
- Improve public policies: affordable health care, programs, and safe facilities
- Family support through community resources



INFOGRAPHIC



MENTAL HEALTH

Teen Mental Health Statistics 2025

40%

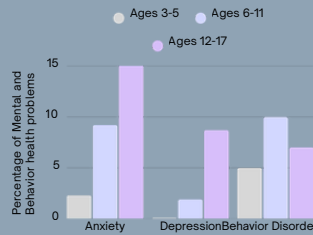
Of teens report feelings of sadness or hopelessness within the past year

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

- Give teens other ways to express how they're feelings, often times the ways we give to teens are ineffective because they end up going ignored.
- Giving teens an outlet that teens know will get them heard is the first step.

MENTAL AND BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS

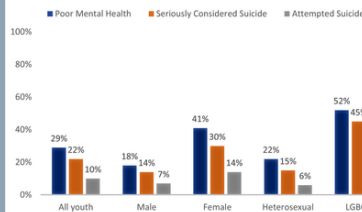
This graph explains the percentages of mental and behavioral problems of children ages 3-17



20%

Highschool students reported seriously considering suicide attempts. Highschool is supposed to be the some of the best years of a child's life so this number is way too high, meaning that they are not receiving proper help.

YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH



WAYS TO HELP

Another way we help teens with their mental health is linking them up with someone that has been through the same things they have, so they feel understood. They are given hope that they can get through what they are going through.

ANNUAL PREVALENCE OF SERIOUS SUICIDE THOUGHTS

- 20% of U.S Highschool students have serious suicide thoughts
- 39% of U.S LGBTQ+ young people ages 13-24 have serious suicide thoughts
- 12.6% U.S young adults ages 18-25 have serious suicide thoughts

HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATION

Not having access to Mental health care is a violation of Human Rights Article 8, The Rights to Remedy. The Rights to Remedy is the legal entitlements individuals have to seek redress or compensation when their rights are violated. In this case the Rights to Remedy are being violated by improper redress and lack of ways to find help for people with mental health issues.

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Acknowledgements

Dear distinguished members of this committee,

On behalf of Youth International, a WAPB Joint, we would like to extend our sincere gratitude to all those who contributed to the Voices of Our Children Mental Health Submission. This acknowledgment not only reflects Youth International's appreciation but also highlights the collaborative efforts and resources that played a pivotal role in the development of this report.

First and foremost, Youth International, a WAPB Joint, would like to acknowledge the student participants in the Voices of Our Children Mental Health Submission. Without the students, there would be no Voices of Our Children Mental Health Submission. To the scholars: we hear you, and we see the issues in your communities. You are valued, and each and every one of you deserves human rights.

Youth International, a WAPB Joint, would also like to acknowledge the guidance and support provided by Crista Noel, CEO and Founder of Women's All Points Bulletin, WAPB. Women's All Points Bulletin who along with Marilen Corres submitted the first Voices of Our Children report to the United Nations CERD in 2022. Crista has provided extensive mentorship, guidance, and research expertise in creating human rights reports for UN bodies.

Our appreciation also extends to a Chicgo Public High School for providing the necessary facilities to conduct this work with their high school scholars.

We would like to formally thank:

The teacher and the principal at this Chicago Public School, who have been supportive from the very beginning when Youth International's Director, Arseny Acosta, approached them with the idea of partnering with the school's community. We truly appreciate their flexibility and enthusiasm in ensuring DeVry students feel heard and represented.

Acknowledgements

We are immensely grateful to our young leaders for their strong commitment and impact on this report:

Edie Danielle: Edie formally began engaging with Youth International as an intern through their institution, DePaul University. Danielle helped draft and formalize the VOOC 2025 curriculum, participated in teach-ins at the Chicago Public School, engaged with staff and students, brought distinguished peace, justice, and conflict-resolution skills when hosting talking circles with students, and helped compile and edit the final report.

Rohail Ansari: Rohail began engaging with Youth International alongside Edie as a student intern from Depaul University. Rohail contributed to the early development of Youth International and helped create VOOC's human rights curriculum..

Marian Dones: Through our efforts to recruit more youth, Marian Dones volunteered with Youth International and quickly became an integral contributor. They applied their social justice and editing skills to help design and edit the Voices of Our Children Mental Health Submission report.

Alx Denise: In our effort to document students' art pieces in detail, Alx Denise volunteered to photograph and edit the students' work. Through their photography expertise, Denise captured every detail of the students' impactful imagery.

Lastly, we would like to thank the Director of Youth International and former participant in the Voices of Our Children 2022 report, Arseny Acosta, for dedicating her time to helping create the VOOC 2025 curriculum, participating in teach-ins at the Chicago Public School, communicating with the schools staff and students, and helping assemble the final report.

In conclusion, the contributions of everyone named, and those unnamed, have been invaluable to the completion of the Voices of Our Children Mental Health Submission. Youth International is truly grateful for your support!

Thank you.

