STORY TAPESTRIES

NEEDS ASSESSMENT ON ARTS-INTEGRATION APPROACH TO ADDRESS STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH

CHART - a Path to Positive Mental Health

Montgomery, Prince George's, Frederick, and Anne Arundel Counties

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1. Introduction

This study emphasizes the increased challenges faced by students and teachers due to the pandemic, social media, and other societal influences by highlighting the prevalence and impact of mental health and wellness struggles. Understanding these issues is crucial for creating effective arts integration programs that address needs and improve overall well-being in educational environments. The data gathered on current student and teacher mental health issues and wellness needs in Montgomery County, Arundel County, and Prince George's County will serve as evidence to support the development of an arts integration program aimed at enhancing student mental health and wellness.

In light of the ongoing mental health crisis, characterized by escalating rates of anxiety, depression, risky behaviors, and suicidal thoughts and actions, there is a critical need for a comprehensive needs assessment that addresses both the mental health crisis as a whole and the mental and social benefits of arts integration in educational environments. Arts integration can provide therapeutic benefits, encourage emotional expression, offer a stress-relief outlet, encourage creative collaboration and risk-taking, and establish supportive learning environments that address these pressing mental health concerns. Studies suggest that engaging in the arts can help students develop coping skills, increase self-esteem, and provide a healthy outlet for managing emotions. Furthermore, arts integration can enhance social skills by promoting student collaboration, communication, and empathy.

By incorporating the arts into curriculum studies, students have shown increased engagement, which has led to improved academic outcomes. The creative process involved in arts activities can stimulate cognitive development, critical thinking, and

problem-solving skills necessary for school and future careers. Arts integration also provides an inclusive and engaging approach to education that complements and supports diverse learning styles and needs, making educational content more accessible and enjoyable.

Furthermore, arts integration offers social benefits for young learners. Collaborative group art projects can strengthen peer relationships, enhance collaborative skills and thinking, and cultivate a sense of community within the classroom. Collaborative experiences can reduce feelings of isolation and promote positive social interactions, which are vital for students' mental well-being.

Arts integration programs that address the mental and social aspects of student well-being can create a more holistic educational experience. Studies show that integrating the arts into the curriculum can mitigate the adverse effects of social influences like social media and cyberbullying by providing students with constructive and meaningful ways to navigate their emotions and interpersonal relationships. Educational programs incorporating arts integration provide students with strategic opportunities to counteract the adverse impact of the mental health crisis and enhance students' overall well-being by establishing a more supportive and nurturing educational community.

1.1.1. Definitions

- Mental Health - Mental health encompasses emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how individuals think, feel, and act (Wut et al., 2023). Mental health also determines how individuals handle stress, relate to others, and make healthy choices. It is important to note that mental

health conditions can range from disorders like depression and anxiety to impairment if the disorder impacts an individual's daily life. The degree of impairment varies depending on the severity of the condition and its impact on an individual's daily functioning.

Mental health encompasses various aspects of overall well-being, including physical, emotional, social, intellectual, spiritual, environmental, and occupational wellness. Emotional well-being involves the ability to understand, manage, and express emotions in a healthy way. Social wellness is indicated by the capacity to foster healthy relationships and communicate proficiently. Intellectual wellness entails constant learning, embracing mental challenges, and being receptive to novel ideas. Spiritual wellness is achieved when individuals find purpose in life and align their values with their beliefs. Physical wellness is maintained through healthy lifestyle practices. Environmental wellness involves living in and contributing to a safe and supportive environment. Occupational wellness is attained by balancing work and personal life, managing work-related stress, and deriving fulfillment from work or volunteer endeavors.

- Mental Health Crisis - A mental health crisis can refer to the crisis of an individual; this study utilizes the term to refer to the widespread and increasing prevalence of adverse mental health conditions and the acknowledged need for wellness opportunities, strategies, and actions that are increasing across the United States and the world, leading to negative impacts on individuals and communities. The mental health crisis can

strain healthcare systems, reduce economic productivity, and affect overall societal well-being.

The mental health crisis is characterized by increased diagnosed mental health disorders and rising instances of stress-related conditions and substance abuse disorders. While the mental health crisis affects people of all ages, the impact is increased on vulnerable groups, such as adolescents, and can have disproportionate effects on socioeconomically challenged individuals. The increase in mental health disorders and needs caused by a mental health crisis can lead to insufficient mental health care and support services, creating barriers to treatment and intensifying the need for support services.

- Mental Health and Wellness - Promoting mental health and wellness is a holistic approach that emphasizes overall well-being, including physical, emotional, social, and mental aspects. Wellness involves self-care, stress management, and the ability to develop healthy relationships and coping mechanisms. Wellness can be achieved through self-care practices, establishing healthy relationships, practicing stress management, making healthy lifestyle choices, working towards personal growth, and seeking help when needed.

- Trauma - Understanding trauma is essential for creating supportive environments in various professional settings, such as education, healthcare, and community services. It is crucial that responses to individuals are sensitive to their experiences and promote healing and

recovery. Recent societal events have brought about an increased awareness of mental health and trauma. However, there is a risk of over-identifying what constitutes trauma. Trauma is defined as a deeply distressing or disturbing experience that overwhelms an individual's ability to cope, resulting in feelings of helplessness, diminished sense of self, and impaired ability to experience a full range of emotions. Trauma can stem from various situations, including physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, neglect, witnessing violence, natural disasters, serious accidents, or severe illness or loss.

Whether or not an event leads to trauma depends on the individual's response. Changes in behavior or actions following a distressing event typically indicate trauma. It is important to recognize that what one person perceives as traumatic may not have the same impact on another. Educators should focus on providing a supportive and caring environment for their students rather than determining the validity of an individual's traumatic experience. By offering support and care, educators can help students build resilience to overcome potentially traumatic events.

- Resilience - Resilience is the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties and adapt well to adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress. It involves a combination of behaviors, thoughts, and actions that can be developed and strengthened over time. Resilience doesn't eliminate stress or erase life's difficulties; instead, it gives individuals the strength to

tackle problems, overcome adversity, and move forward with their lives (*Resilience*, 2020).

A child with resilience is more likely to overcome a traumatic event. Educators who understand resilience can help students develop resilience strategies (Resilience, 2020). Resilience is made up of several critical components in the workplace: emotional regulation, which involves managing and responding to emotions constructively; cognitive flexibility, the ability to adapt thoughts and behaviors to changing situations and view challenges from different perspectives; optimism, maintaining a positive outlook despite obstacles; self-efficacy, believing in one's ability to make a difference and achieve positive outcomes; social support, having a network of family, friends, and colleagues who offer emotional and practical assistance; problem-solving skills, the capability to identify solutions and take proactive steps to overcome challenges; and a sense of purpose, setting goals and having direction to stay motivated and persistent ("Building Your Resilience," 2020).

Individuals who exhibit resilience in facing challenges may consistently display a different level of resilience in different situations. However, when beneficial factors are at play, they can enhance resilience and adaptation in various circumstances. These factors involve cultivating nurturing relationships between adults and children, fostering a sense of self-confidence and perceived agency, offering opportunities for

enhancing adaptive skills and self-regulation and drawing upon faith, hope, and cultural practices (Resilience, 2020).

1.1.2. The Focus of the Study

The primary focus of this feasibility study is on mental wellness needs, emphasizing the overall well-being of individuals rather than solely focusing on those diagnosed with mental health disorders or exhibiting symptoms of trauma. The aim of the grant is to:

- Enhance emotional and social skills that support emotional regulation and positive social interactions and relationships.
- Support coping strategies by providing tools and techniques to manage stress and navigate daily challenges.
- Foster positive environments by assisting schools in the creation of supportive educational environments that encourage well-being and the development of resilience.
- Encourage healthy habits by promoting activities and habits that contribute to overall wellness and work to help prevent mental health issues.

This study seeks to improve the quality of life for students and teachers, in and outside the educational setting, by ensuring they have the resources and supports needed to thrive in their educational and personal lives.

2. Significance

In recent years, mental health challenges facing students have become increasingly apparent. This is not necessarily a new challenge but one that educators, medical

professionals, and parents are becoming more attuned to. These challenges profoundly impact students' academic success and overall well-being. With an increase in students being diagnosed with mental health disorders, there has also been an increase in instances of youth suicide and suicide attempts. These issues have been exacerbated by the global COVID-19 pandemic and the proliferation of social media and smartphone usage. Therefore, it is becoming necessary for educational institutions to address these issues. While the focus often centers on student outcomes, it is equally imperative to recognize the impact on educators.

2.1. Mental Health Statistics

Mental health is a critical aspect of children's overall health and well-being. Adolescence is a critical period for the formation of important social and emotional habits that have a substantial impact on mental well-being. These factors involve developing healthy sleep habits, participating in regular physical activity, honing coping and problem-solving skills, and acquiring effective emotional regulation and interpersonal abilities. Throughout this phase, different influences can influence mental health. The impact can be compounded when exposed to multiple risk factors, resulting in adverse outcomes. Certain adolescents may be more susceptible to mental health challenges due to particular circumstances (World Health Organization: WHO, 2021).

The umbrella of mental health encompasses their mental, emotional, and behavioral well-being, all of which influence how they think, feel, and act. Children must develop the ability to handle stress, relate to others, and make healthy decisions (Data and Statistics on Children's Mental Health | CDC, 2022).

Internationally, approximately 15% of individuals between the ages of 10 and 19 are affected by a mental health condition, contributing to 13% of the overall burden of disease within this demographic (Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (US), 2022).

Mental health disorders in children, characterized by significant alterations in learning, behavior, or emotional regulation, can lead to challenges and disruptions in daily functioning and are becoming a pressing concern among children and adolescents in the United States. Prevalent childhood mental health disorders include attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), anxiety, and behavior disorders, affecting nearly 20% of individuals aged 3 - 17, leading to challenges in daily functioning (Data and Statistics on Children's Mental Health | CDC, 2022). From 2016 to 2020, there was a 27% rise in the number of children aged 3 to 17 who were diagnosed with depression in 2021 (Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (US), 2022). These issues have become the leading cause of death and disability, with the prevalence of suicidal behaviors among high school students increasing by more than 40% in the decade leading up to 2019 (National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated these trends, highlighting the critical need for effective mental health interventions.

A significant number of children with mental health conditions experience co-occurring issues. For instance, approximately 75% of children with depression also have anxiety, and nearly half also display behavior problems.

Diagnoses of anxiety and depression in young individuals have seen a steady rise over time, with a notable percentage of adolescents reporting persistent feelings of sadness, substance use, and suicidal tendencies. Approximately one in every six children between the ages of 2 and 8 years old has been diagnosed with a mental, behavioral, or developmental disorder, and treatment rates vary depending on the specific condition. Additionally, children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to be diagnosed with a mental disorder (Data and Statistics on Children's Mental Health | CDC, 2022).

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) uses surveys like the National Survey of Children's Health to assess mental health indicators and the prevalence of diagnosed mental disorders in children. ADHD, anxiety, behavior problems, and depression are the most commonly diagnosed mental disorders in children aged 3 - 17 years, affecting 9.8%, 9.4%, 8.9%, and 4.4% of children, respectively (Data and Statistics on Children's Mental Health | CDC, 2022). These conditions have increased over time, with significant percentages of adolescents reporting persistent sadness, substance use, and suicidal behaviors. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among people aged 10-14 (National Alliance for Mental Illness, 2020).

Despite the high prevalence of mental health disorders, many affected youths do not receive the necessary care. From 2008 - 2019, the percentage of adolescents with a major depressive episode who received treatment increased only modestly, highlighting gaps in mental health service accessibility and delivery. Disparities in mental health outcomes across different demographic groups are significant.

The incidence and management of mental disorders underscore the significance of early detection, comprehensive healthcare, and supportive community and educational environments in addressing the mental health needs of children.

2.2. Impact of the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic had far-reaching effects on society, including a global recession and strained healthcare systems. However, perhaps most notably, it significantly impacted education and the mental health of both adults and children. Children, whose brains are still developing, were particularly affected. The shift to online learning exacerbated educational disparities, disrupted social relationships, and diminished community engagement. While some students thrived in virtual environments, others, especially those without pre-existing conditions, suffered from increased depressive symptoms. These symptoms persisted even after the initial lockdowns due to the abrupt and disruptive lifestyle changes and heightened uncertainty (Hawke et al., 2020; Shih et al., 2021).

Public health measures such as physical distancing contributed to negative impacts on child and adolescent mental health. Individuals reported increased negative emotions and mental health deterioration due to these control measures. Reduced social interactions led to deteriorated relationships and increased feelings of loneliness. Virtual learning added stress and exhaustion for some students, while others experienced reduced academic pressures. Increased technology use, including social media and gaming, was connected to higher levels of anxiety and depression, particularly among younger individuals. Disrupted routines resulted in heightened emotional distress and anxiety in

children with neurodevelopmental disorders, while those with chronic physical conditions experienced mental health challenges stemming from fears about COVID-19 and disruptions to healthcare access (Hawke et al., 2020; Samji et al., 2022).

Overall, children and adolescents exhibited higher levels of depressive and anxiety symptoms compared to pre-pandemic data. Older adolescents, females, neurodiverse youths, and those with chronic physical conditions experienced more severe mental health outcomes. Social isolation, school closures, and disruptions to daily routines contributed to these heightened mental health concerns. Difficulties in accessing mental health services and support further exacerbated these issues. The adverse mental health impacts caused by the pandemic have shown a propensity to persist beyond the pandemic, necessitating the need for efforts in intervention and prevention (Hawke et al., 2020; Samji et al., 2022).

It is also important to note that youth with pre-existing mental health conditions did not experience a worsening of their symptoms. In some cases, their symptoms improved due to reduced social stressors and an increased focus on mental health and wellness (Shih et al., 2021). Additionally, individuals who utilized coping strategies, like hobbies, physical activity, and maintaining routines, experienced better mental health outcomes (Samji et al., 2022).

2.3. Impact of Social Media and Smartphones

The impact of social media and smartphone usage is an increasingly important topic of discussion regarding the mental well-being of children and adolescents. While the connectivity and access to information they provide are valuable, there are also negative behaviors, habits, dependencies, and potential addictions that can have a significant effect on young minds. It is essential to recognize that while some individuals may develop problematic relationships with these digital platforms, such as compulsive use or addiction-like behaviors, not everyone experiences these challenges the same way. Understanding the complex interactions between young people and digital technology is essential for promoting healthy relationships with social media and smartphones, promoting mental well-being, and ensuring that these tools benefit rather than harm the development of children and adolescents. This issue is not black and white, and a nuanced approach is necessary to address it effectively.

Social media and smart devices have had a varied impact on society. While these innovations facilitate communication and access to information, they also contribute to spreading misinformation and cyberbullying. Cyberbullying, which involves the use of digital communication to harass, threaten, or intimidate others, is made more accessible by the anonymity and distance afforded by screens, resulting in a continuous cycle that can follow individuals beyond school hours. Examples of cyberbullying include sending threatening messages, spreading rumors online, or creating fake profiles to harass others. Social media has been determined to affect the development of the sense of self in interpersonal

relationships, increase exposure to negative interactions, and normalize risky behaviors like suicide and self-harm (Abi-Jaoude, 2020).

Social media and smartphone usage have become pervasive among today's youth, impacting adolescents aged 13-17 and 40% of children aged 8-12. This demographic is particularly vulnerable due to ongoing brain development, making them susceptible to mental health challenges exacerbated by extended social media exposure. Another concern that arises from social media use among adolescents is the lack of research analyzing the impact of social media on youth mental health and its safety (U.S. Surgeon General, 2023).

While social media can provide positive community, connections, opportunities for self-expression, and foster friendships and support networks, there is a correlation between mental health and social media use. Research, though limited, suggests a link between prolonged social media use and adverse mental health outcomes, prompting findings that reducing such usage can alleviate these issues, especially among those spending more than three hours a day on social media (U.S. Surgeon General, 2023). Furthermore, while these technologies facilitate communication and information access, they also propagate issues like misinformation and cyberbullying. The anonymity of screens exacerbates cyberbullying, perpetuating negative impacts that extend beyond school hours and affecting self-esteem and social development (Abi-Jaoude, 2020). Due to ongoing brain development, adolescents are particularly vulnerable to the effects of social media. Regular social media use by adolescents can influence negative

behaviors that may exacerbate mental health challenges during this critical developmental stage (U.S. Surgeon General, 2023).

The revolutionization of social media has significantly impacted adolescent social engagements by offering consistent and dynamic social interactions during a crucial development period. The utilization of social media during this developmental stage reshapes adolescent neurodevelopment through ongoing social feedback expectations. A study conducted in North Carolina examined the relationship between the frequency of social media use and changes in adolescent brain development over three years. Neural responses to the Social Incentive Delay task were measured annually to assess the impact. The study posited that regular social media use would heighten neural sensitivity to anticipating social feedback, while infrequent use would diminish it. Results from the baseline data revealed that regular users exhibited lower neural sensitivity to social anticipation at age 12. However, these individuals experienced increased sensitivity over time, whereas irregular users showed decreased sensitivity in key brain regions (amygdala, insula, ventral striatum, dorsolateral prefrontal cortex). While this study does not definitively determine the adverse effects of social media, it does establish a clear connection between habitual social media use and developmental changes in the brain related to social rewards and punishments in adolescence. Further research is necessary to fully understand the long-term implications on adolescent neural development and psychological well-being (Maza et al., 2023).

Additionally, the widespread use of smartphones has been associated with decreased social interaction among young individuals, leading to a reliance on

these devices. This decrease in interpersonal skills can result in a regression in social development and emotional instability. Adolescence is a crucial period for cognitive and social growth in children. Therefore, they are particularly vulnerable to the adverse effects of smartphone use and are more at risk of developing addictions to smartphones and social media (Cleary, 2020). In educational environments, smartphones have become a source of distraction, causing disruptions and hindering students' concentration on their studies. Teachers spend more time redirecting students' focus from their devices instead of effectively delivering their lessons.

A study by SÖZBİLİR on the Impact of Social Media and Smartphone Addiction on Young Adolescents' Career Futures suggests that while high school students benefit from social media for networking and career development, parents and educators should limit their smartphone usage to prevent addiction. The study even recommends restricting internet access for students with smartphones (2018). Cross-sectional studies have shown a correlation between the increased use of smartphones and social media among adolescents and a rise in mental health issues, self-harming behaviors, body image issues, eating disorders, and suicide rates (Abi-Jaoude, 2020).

Smartphone dependency and usage have also demonstrably affected adolescents' sleep patterns, which are crucial for their growth and development. The rise in sleep deprivation has resulted in detrimental consequences such as cognitive deficits, diminished academic achievement, and impaired social interactions (Abi-Jaoude, 2020; U.S. Surgeon General, 2023). The study conducted by Lee et

al. determined that students who brought smartphones to bed or used social media without limitations were more likely to experience depression, anxiety, and poor sleep quality (2023).

There is a significant lack of research pertaining to this topic. While some studies identify the adverse effects of social media and adolescent smartphone use, many highlight the positive effects. This topic must be studied further to ensure that children and adolescents are safe and that their well-being is ensured during the advancement of the digital age. The U.S. Surgeon General's report emphasizes the need for further research and the establishment of proactive measures to safeguard young users (2023). The urgency of this research cannot be overstated, as it will guide the development of policies and interventions to mitigate the negative effects of social media and smartphone usage on adolescent mental well-being.

The final significant factor that needs to be addressed pertains to the impact of social media and its intersection with livelihoods and broader societal issues. Social media platforms have become essential to the livelihoods of many individuals, including influencers, content creators, and businesses reliant on digital marketing. Policy changes to protect adolescents and children can significantly affect these livelihoods, prompting congressional concerns about stability and equity. Another consideration for Congress is the ongoing debate over the balance between regulation and personal freedoms. It is essential to balance the adverse effects of social media, such as misinformation and cyberbullying, with regulatory measures that uphold freedom of expression as outlined in the Constitution—education on digital literacy and responsibility is

crucial to ensuring safe online behavior, particularly among young people. However, regulations must also be implemented to safeguard children and adolescents from potential harm, even at the cost of livelihoods.

2.4. Disproportionate Impact on Vulnerable Students

The disproportionate impact on vulnerable students refers to the unequal and often severe effects experienced by certain groups of students, particularly those that are already disadvantaged due to various socio-economic, racial, and cultural factors. Data shows that students from urban school districts and lower-income families attend schools with fewer resources, leading to more strict disciplinary policies. In addition to external stressors, these students also have higher suspension rates and more severe punishments. As seen in the district data included, students from minority racial and ethnic backgrounds, primarily black and brown students, special education students, and English Language Learners, face higher rates of suspension, expulsions, and other punitive disciplinary actions at higher rates than white students exhibiting similar behaviors. Finally, LGBTQ+ students often experience a lack of support from peers, teachers, and parents and are often the victim of bullying incidents, impacting them academically, socially, and emotionally.

Millions of students experience suspensions and expulsions each year. Specifically, during the 2015-2016 school year, around 2.7 million K-12 students faced out-of-school suspensions, and approximately 120,000 were expelled. Additionally, about 1.7 million school-related arrests occurred, significantly impacting adolescents' involvement in the juvenile justice system. These numbers

underscore the widespread impact of strict disciplinary measures in schools, contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline (Mallett, 2017). Nearly one in three multiracial individuals experience mental health challenges (National Alliance for Mental Illness, 2020). Higher rates of mental health challenges are documented among students of color, Indigenous students, English language learners, students with disabilities, and LGBTQIA+ students (Goldberg, 2021). Vulnerable children, especially those from low-income families or who have experienced maltreatment, are at higher risk for poor academic outcomes and justice system involvement. Poverty and maltreatment exacerbate academic difficulties, leading to cognitive and language delays, higher absenteeism, and lower performance, with maltreated children often being diagnosed with special education disabilities. Disorganized communities with high crime rates, drug selling, and exposure to violence are linked to negative behaviors and mental health issues. The disproportionate impact on vulnerable students, particularly those who are impoverished, students of color, and those with special education needs, is evident in their higher rates of school discipline and juvenile justice involvement. Systemic biases result in harsher punishments for these groups, perpetuating the school-to-prison pipeline (Mallett, 2017).

The disproportionate impact on vulnerable students is a pressing issue that the education system must address. These students are constantly battling their socio-economic inequalities, facing disproportionate punishments, dealing with increased health and mental health concerns, and navigating numerous societal barriers. This systemic inequity underscores the education system's responsibility

to implement more inclusive and supportive educational practices to mitigate the school-to-prison pipeline and address mental health challenges among vulnerable students.

2.5. Suicide Rates

Over the decade spanning from 2009 to 2019, there was a rise in the age-adjusted suicide rate from 11.8 to 13.9 deaths per 100,000 population. In 2019, there were a total of 47,511 suicides in the United States, positioning suicide as the 10th leading cause of death in the country (Suicide, 2023).

Suicide is a significant public health concern, ranking as the second leading cause of death within several age groups. Trends show that suicide rates among males have risen across all age demographics from 2009 to 2019. However, rates were lower in 2019 compared to 2018 for certain age groups. Similarly, suicide rates among females have generally increased across all age groups during the same period but have shown a decrease since 2015 for women aged 45–64 (Suicide, 2023).

Recent data shows a concerning increase in suicide rates among young people, making it a significant cause of death in the 10-14 and 15-24 age groups. Factors contributing to this rise include mental health issues, the influence of social media, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Addressing this issue involves enhancing mental health support and awareness, especially within educational institutions and communities. Research from reputable sources such as Goldberg (2021), the National Alliance on Mental Illness (2020), and Suicide

(2023) highlight the urgency of this matter. According to the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (2022), suicide ranked as the 12th leading cause of death in the United States in 2020, with youth aged 10-14 and 15-24 being particularly at risk. Depression is a key factor associated with suicidal thoughts, increasing the vulnerability of affected individuals (Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (US), 2022).

Research has shown a noticeable discrepancy in suicide risks among LGBTQ youth, who have reported higher rates of suicidal ideation and behaviors compared to their peers. Figure 1 shows that from 2008 to 2020, the overall suicide death rates per 100,000 individuals increased by 16%, reaching 16.3 per 100,000 people. Particularly concerning is the rate among adolescents aged 12 to 17, which significantly increased from 3.7 per 100,000 in 2008 to 6.3 per 100,000 in 2020, marking a 70% rise, the most significant increase among all age groups (Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (US), 2022).

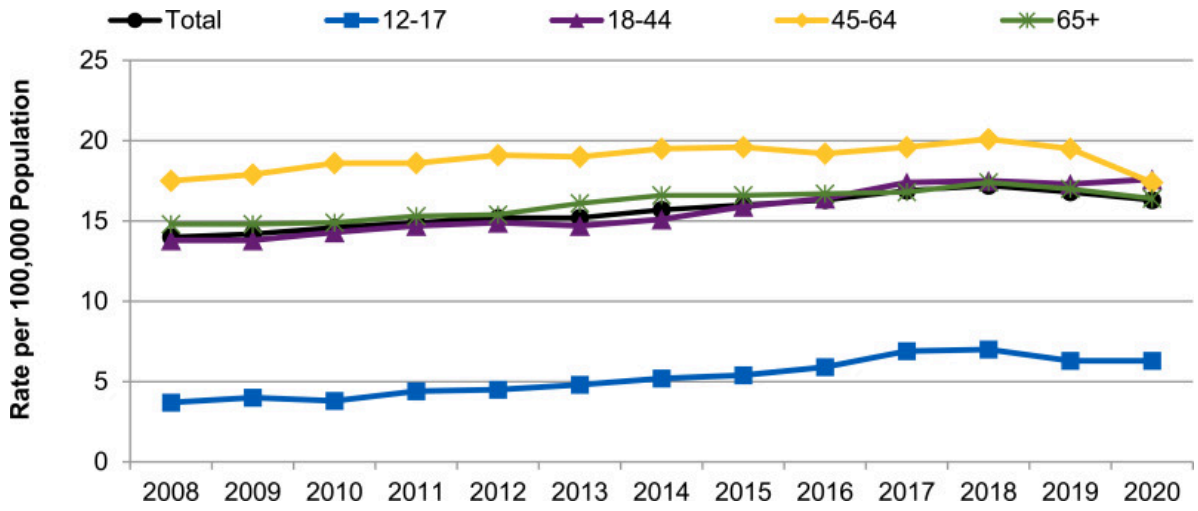

Figure #1: Suicide deaths among people age 12 and over per 100,000 population, by age, 2008-2020. *Source: Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (US), n.d.-b*

Figure 2 presents the variations in suicide rates among different racial and ethnic groups, with recent data showing distinct trends. The overall 10% decrease in suicide rates among adolescents aged 12-17 between 2018 and 2020 is a positive sign. However, the slight increase among Hispanic adolescents and the persistent concern among minority youth, such as Asian and Pacific Islander and American Indian or Alaska Native groups, highlight the need for further research. Our preliminary data suggests that suicide is the leading cause of death in certain age groups within these communities (Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (US), 2022). This underscores the urgency and importance of our work.

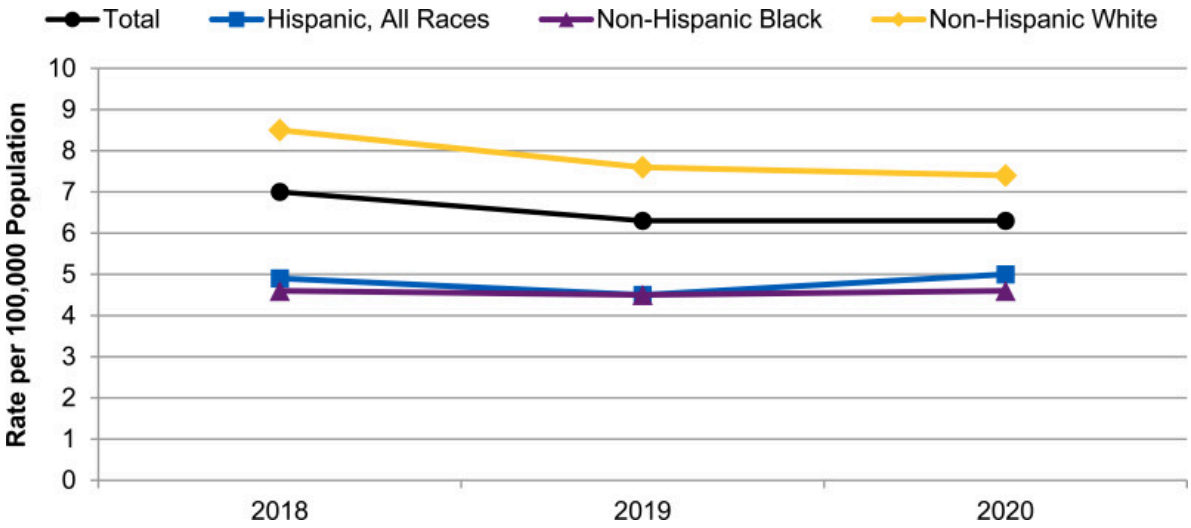

Figure #2 Suicide deaths among youths ages 12-17 per 100,000 population, by ethnicity, 2018-2020. *Source: Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (US), n.d.-c*

These findings underscore the urgency of comprehensive mental health support and awareness initiatives targeting youths across diverse demographic backgrounds.

2.6. Juvenile Crime Rates

Juvenile crime rates in the United States have seen significant fluctuations over the past decades, with youth involvement in serious offenses such as murder and violent crimes drawing notable attention.

2.6.1. Murder Offenses by Youth

Reportedly, a group of young individuals with prior criminal records were connected to approximately 1,122 homicides in the United States in 2020, representing around 8% of all known homicide offenders. From 1994 to 2003, the number of homicides involving a young offender decreased by 65%, reaching its lowest point since at least 1980. However, there was a 28% rise from 2003 to 2006, followed by a 42% drop through 2013. Subsequently, there was an 83% increase in the period leading up to 2020 (*Statistical Briefing Book*, 2022).

In the year 2020, homicides committed by a single young offender saw a 30% increase, those involving multiple young offenders rose by 65%, and homicides carried out by young individuals in collaboration with adults increased by 56% compared to previous years. Over the years, the percentage of homicides involving both a young and an adult offender has been on a steady rise, escalating from 25% in the 1980s to 43% by 2020 (*Statistical Briefing Book*, 2022).

2.6.2. Homicides Involving Firearms

The data on murders committed by known juvenile offenders show a fluctuation in trends, with a significant increase in firearm-related

homicides between 1984 and 1994, followed by a decrease through 2001. The subsequent years saw an increase in firearm-related murders before a decline in recent years. The latest statistics highlight a concerning rise in juvenile offenders using firearms, with a notable increase in firearm-related homicides in 2020 (*Statistical Briefing Book*, 2022).

2.6.3. Age Group Analysis

In recent years, older juveniles, particularly those aged 16 and 17, have been responsible for the majority of known juvenile homicide cases. From 2011 to 2020, 75% of all known juvenile homicide offenders fell into the 16 or 17 age group, while juveniles under the age of 15 accounted for 10% of known juvenile homicide offenders during the same period. Trends in juvenile homicide offenders showed an increase from 1984 to 1994, followed by a decline until the mid-2000s. However, since reaching their lowest points in the 2010s, the number of known juvenile offenders has increased through 2020 for all age groups (*Statistical Briefing Book*, 2022).

Each year since 1980, it has been observed that juvenile offenders tend to commit more homicides against acquaintances rather than strangers. For the period between 2011 and 2020, 53% of known juvenile homicide offenders were involved in the killing of an acquaintance, 35% killed a stranger, and 12% killed a family member. In the most recent year, there was a 66% increase in the number of juvenile homicide offenders who

killed a stranger, compared to a 26% increase in homicides involving an acquaintance (*Statistical Briefing Book*, 2022).

2.6.4. Serious Violent Crime Offending by Youth:

The rate of serious violent crimes committed by youth aged 12 to 17 peaked in 1993 and has since shown a significant decline, with a 49% increase from 1980 to 1993, followed by a 78% decrease from 1993 to 2002. The rate slightly increased until 2006, after which it generally decreased further. By 2019, the rate was 66% lower than in 2006 (*Statistical Briefing Book*, 2022).

In 2019, youth aged 12 to 17 were found to be involved in approximately one out of every eleven (9.1%) serious violent victimization (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2020). The percentage of serious violent crimes committed by youth with multiple offenders involved ranged from 64.8% in 1982 to 30.2% in 2019 (*Statistical Briefing Book*, 2022).

2.7. Emergency Department Visits

There has been a worrisome uptick in emergency department visits related to mental health among youth, indicating a pressing need for targeted interventions. Figure 3 shows that between 2016 and 2019, there was an overall rise in the rate of emergency department visits with a primary diagnosis connected to mental health for children and adolescents, underscoring a growing concern. Specifically, children aged 0-17 saw a significant increase in emergency department visits during this timeframe, with a 25% uptick observed in 2018. This data highlights the escalating mental health challenges faced by

young individuals and underscores the necessity for promoting mental health resilience and providing support to prevent crises among children and adolescents (World Health Organization: WHO, 2021).

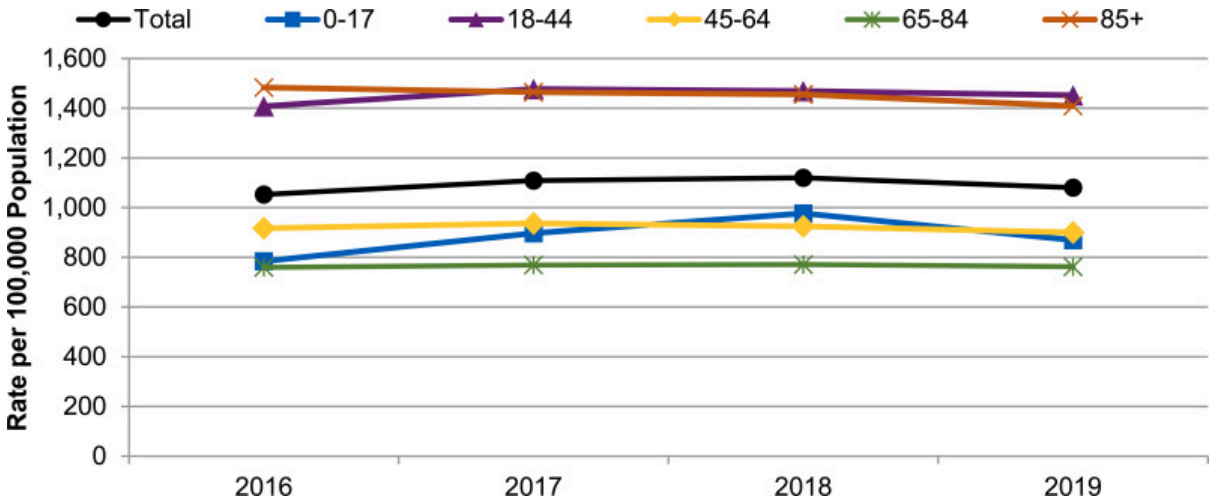

Figure # 3. Emergency department visits with a principal diagnosis related to mental health only per 100,000 population by age, 2016-2019. *Source: Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (US), n.d.-a.*

2.8. Opioid Use

In recent years, the United States has experienced a concerning rise in overdose fatalities. It is crucial to comprehend the statistical impacts of opioid use, as the reasons for usage can vary. One reason is the reliance on prescriptions for pain management, which may initially be innocuous but can lead to dependency. Equally significant are the social influences, such as peer pressure to use opioids recreationally, and environmental influences, which can lead to experimentation and frequent use. In the context of this study, opioid use will be considered as an indication of mental health issues, serving as a form of self-medication and a coping mechanism for stress.

Figure 4 shows that between July 2019 and December 2021, there was a notable uptick in overdose fatalities among adolescents aged 10-19 in the United States. The median monthly overdose deaths surged by 109%, climbing from 32.5 from July–December 2019 to 68 during July–December 2021. Fatalities involving illicitly manufactured fentanyls (IMFs) experienced an even steeper rise, increasing by 182% during the same timeframe. Roughly 90% of overdose deaths in adolescents were linked to opioids, with 83.9% specifically tied to IMFs. Counterfeit pills were identified in nearly a quarter of these deaths, indicating the prevalence of hazardous substances masquerading as prescription medications (Tanz LJ et al. 2021).

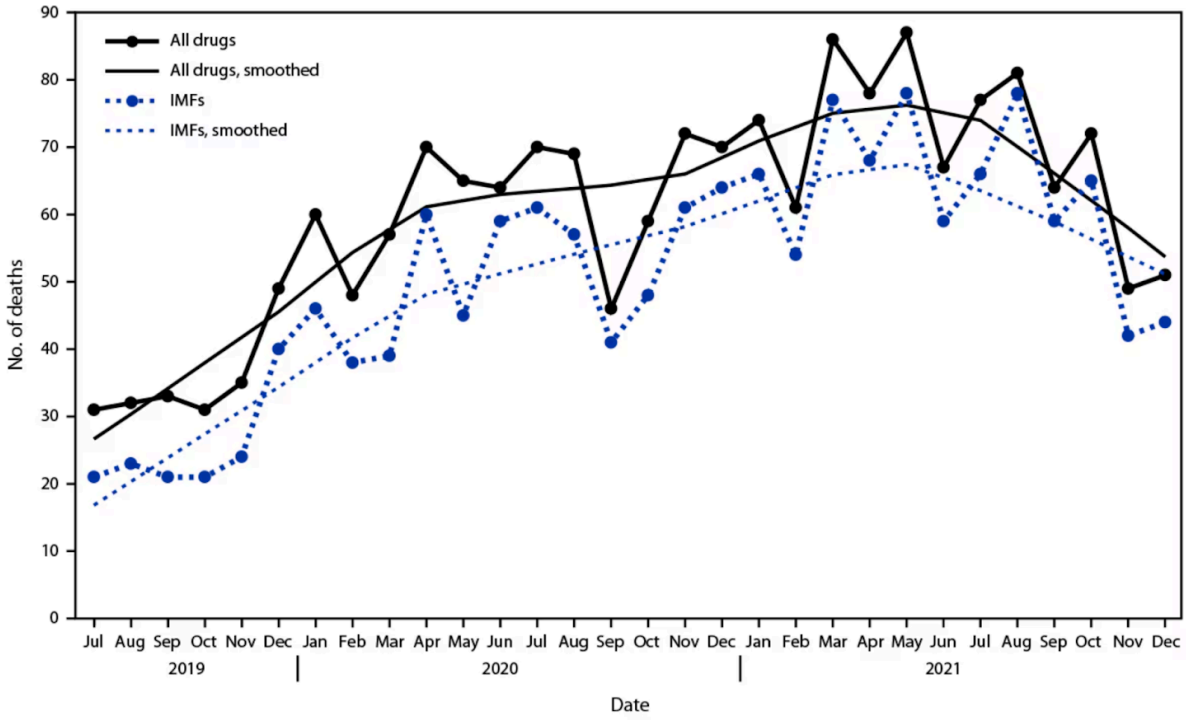

Figure # 4. Number of drug overdose deaths and deaths involving* illicitly manufactured fentanyls† among persons aged 10–19 years (N = 1,808), by month — State Unintentional Drug Overdose Reporting System, 32 jurisdictions,§ July 2019–December 2021. *Source: Tanz et al., 2022.*

Two-thirds of adolescent overdose fatalities occurred in residential settings, with potential witnesses present in 66.9% of incidents. However, most of these bystanders did not intervene during the overdose, often due to physical distance or lack of awareness. Naloxone administration, a critical life-saving measure, was recorded in only 30.3% of cases (Tanz LJ et al. 2021).

Around 41% of adolescents who succumbed to overdose had documented mental health issues or had sought mental health care, highlighting the correlation between substance misuse disorders and mental health challenges in this age group (Tanz LJ et al. 2021).

3. School Crime and Safety

Violent deaths and school shootings have significant impacts on schools and communities, and incidents have been increasing over the last 24 years. In fact, during the 2018-19 school year, there were 39 school-associated violent deaths, including 29 homicides and 10 suicides, with school-age youth accounting for some of these tragic incidents. School shootings, defined broadly to include any instance of a gun being brandished or fired on school property, saw a high of 93 incidents with casualties in the 2020-21 school year. Data from the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) show that students ages 12-18 experienced lower rates of victimization in 2020, most likely due to the COVID-19 impacts on education, compared to previous years, with a significant decrease in school-based victimizations from 2009 to 2020. Additionally, bullying, gang presence, and hate-related speech have declined over the past decade, though these issues continue to affect the school environment (Irwin et al., 2022).

Violent incidents and school shootings significantly impact student well-being and learning, which is concerning given the increase in events over the past 24 years. School is a place where students should feel safe and supported so that they can take risks with their learning and grow. These violent incidents create fear and anxiety among students, disrupting their academic performance and mental health. Efforts to address and mitigate these issues are crucial for fostering safe and supportive educational environments.

4. Teacher Mental Wellness: Addressing America's Teacher Shortage Crisis

The United States is currently experiencing a nationwide shortage of teachers. Federal data indicates a consistent decline in enrollment in teacher preparation programs from 2008 to 2014. Those who do enter the teaching profession often report dissatisfaction with their jobs. The shortage mainly affects certain subjects, such as math, science, and special education, and regions with limited funding or low-performance ratings. School systems face challenges recruiting teachers due to budgetary constraints and other limitations (Aragon, 2016).

The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the teacher shortage, resulting in significant job losses in local public education. From February to May 2020, 730,000 jobs were impacted, accounting for 9% of all positions. Despite efforts to address the issue through the American Rescue Plan (ARP), teacher shortages persist, especially in critical subjects like math, science, and special education. These shortages disproportionately affect students of color, those with disabilities, and English learners. While some progress has been made in restoring local public education employment levels in 17 states by fall 2023, ongoing challenges remain evident (Gadermann et al., 2023; Raise the Bar, n.d.).

Even prior to the onset of the pandemic, educators encountered significant stress stemming from an excessive workload, suboptimal working conditions, and health concerns such as obesity, inactivity, musculoskeletal ailments, burnout, depression, and anxiety. The increased demands at work and elevated stress levels led to 56% reporting moderate mental distress and 23% reporting severe mental distress, marking a notable uptick from pre-pandemic figures. The mandatory transition to remote work blurred the professional and personal lifelines, resulting in extended work hours, physical and mental fatigue, and burnout. Female teachers and those below 44 saw more pronounced overall quality of life declines. The impact was especially pronounced among women due to added home responsibilities and heightened stress levels they faced pre-pandemic. Educators who reported lower levels of mental distress cited robust support networks within their schools and communities. Positive relationships with colleagues and a nurturing school environment were crucial for teacher well-being. These elements were shown to alleviate the adverse effects of the pandemic on educators' mental health (Gadermann et al., 2023; Lizana et al., 2021).

Efforts to address the educator shortage in the United States have been centered on various strategies following the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. The American Rescue Plan (ARP) and subsequent federal initiatives have resulted in significant investments to stabilize the teaching profession by utilizing ESSER funds to recruit, train, and retain educators. These efforts include advocating for competitive teacher compensation, promoting career advancement opportunities, and enhancing support through effective mentorship and ongoing professional development. Furthermore, a focused initiative has been to broaden access to high-quality educator preparation

programs and enhance teacher diversity through targeted grants and initiatives. The research underscores the urgent need for increased teacher well-being and professional growth support. The CHART approach aims to provide a supportive environment for educators while also addressing students' Social Emotional Learning needs.

5. Theory of Change

5.1. Importance of Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

As society increasingly recognizes the ongoing mental health challenges, there is a growing emphasis on the importance of Social Emotional Learning (SEL). SEL involves acquiring crucial skills to effectively regulate emotions, cultivate positive relationships, and establish and achieve personal and group objectives. By prioritizing the development of flexible, resilient individuals capable of overcoming various obstacles, SEL has also been shown to contribute positively to academic performance.

Social-emotional learning (SEL) skills are crucial for preparing young individuals with the emotional intelligence and interpersonal abilities needed to navigate the professional world. These skills promote personal development and improve employability by cultivating resilience, adaptability, and effective communication (Marsay et al., 2021). Implementing a comprehensive SEL program at schools is vital to creating a supportive learning environment and enhancing student outcomes. Strong SEL leadership is critical in shaping school culture, fostering positive behavior, and boosting academic achievement through targeted interventions that prioritize emotional and social growth (Li et al., 2023). SEL interventions, like the Social-Emotional Learning Foundations

(SELF) curriculum, benefit students at risk of emotional and behavioral challenges. These interventions help enhance self-regulation, social-emotional language, and overall behavioral functioning, improving school adjustment and reducing internalizing behaviors (Daunic et al., 2023).

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is crucial in promoting well-rounded student growth, facilitating smooth transitions into workforce settings, and establishing nurturing educational environments that promote academic success and emotional wellness. By incorporating SEL principles into educational policies and approaches, educational institutions can nurture individuals who are resilient and socially adept, equipped to excel in various environments.

6. Methodology

6.1. Addressing the Crisis through Arts Integration

(Paraphrased from Grant documents) Incorporating arts in education provides a valuable opportunity for students to delve into their inner selves, enhance literacy skills, and develop social-emotional competencies. By integrating arts forms into academic instruction, students can engage in self-reflection, improve communication abilities, and foster emotional growth.

For instance, literacy education initiates with verbal communication, progresses to written expression, and relies on the writer's emotional depth to better understand the emotions of others. This self-awareness is crucial for effective communication and positive interpersonal relationships (Johnson et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the arts enable students to establish meaningful connections with others, which contributes to academic success (Gullantt, 2008).

Incorporating arts into education offers a multifaceted approach to addressing contemporary challenges such as trauma, racism, and mental health, which are deeply intertwined with social and structural determinants of health. The increasing dialogue on these critical issues highlights the necessity for collective action and innovative solutions. Arts and culture have emerged as essential partners in this effort, offering a powerful means to enhance public health and well-being. As the executive summary outlined, arts and culture can play a transformative role by connecting people, uncovering root issues, and shifting sociocultural norms. They provide unique opportunities to make ordinary moments memorable, offer direct health benefits such as stress reduction, and improve communication by making information more accessible and engaging. Arts-based strategies also foster dialogue, reduce stigma, and increase participation in health programs. By integrating arts into educational settings, schools can leverage these benefits to promote social-emotional development, enhance student engagement, and build a more inclusive and supportive learning environment, ultimately contributing to improved well-being and academic success (Sonke et al., 2019).

6.2. Address Teacher Wellness First

Discussions in the field of education typically center on the impact on students; however, it is important to acknowledge that the quality of education depends greatly on the well-being of the educators themselves. Various studies have

consistently emphasized the vital connection between teachers' emotional well-being and their ability to support students' academic and social development (Zinsser et al., 2016; Kwon et al., 2019). Stressed educators often face difficulties in providing the necessary emotional care, which can negatively affect classroom dynamics and student achievement. By focusing on teacher wellness, the CHART program aims to establish a nurturing environment where educators can flourish personally and professionally. This approach not only improves educators' resilience and job satisfaction but also promotes a supportive educational setting that is favorable for student success and well-being. Through tailored training, assistance, and resources, CHART seeks to enable educators to cope with stress effectively, establish stronger relationships with students, and positively contribute to the school community and overall climate.

6.3. Impact of Art on Social-Emotional Development

When school districts encounter financial challenges, it is common for Arts programs to be among the first areas considered for budget cuts. Despite research indicating that the Arts can benefit student academic performance, personal development, and social and emotional well-being, these programs are often overlooked. While some studies have demonstrated a positive correlation between effective arts programs and improved writing assessment scores, limited evidence supports similar progress in other subject areas. It has been suggested that enhancements in other academic assessments may result from heightened student engagement overall (Bowen, Kisida, 2020; Casciano et al., 2019).

Moreover, integrating arts education for special education students has been shown to enhance student engagement, self-regulation, leadership qualities, and interpersonal skills. Art has been recognized as a tool to promote enjoyable learning experiences and allows for student exploration of various materials, which contribute to heightened engagement. The development of self-control is fostered as students patiently wait for their materials, follow instructions, make decisions, and communicate effectively. Increased student engagement also leads to a higher likelihood of behavior modification. Art activities designed to empower students to assume leadership roles tend to be more successful as students demonstrate ownership and responsibility for the classroom resources. Additionally, collaborative arts projects can enhance interpersonal skills by promoting eye contact, communication, and awareness of peers (Casciano et al., 2019).

Implementing art therapy or counselor-led group drumming in educational settings has also been found to have favorable effects on student focus groups, especially with low-income students. Research indicates significant and moderate improvements in teacher-rated assessments of children's stress levels, behavior, hyperactivity, and social behavior, with a notable impact on how children perceive their own challenges. Children reported that engaging in activities such as creating art, reflecting on their thoughts and emotions, and enjoying the sessions were particularly beneficial aspects of art therapy (Ho et. al., 2011; McDonald et al., 2019).

Numerous studies illustrate the social and emotional advantages of regular and consistent arts education and therapy. These benefits can include reduced disciplinary incidents, enhanced student attendance and participation, and increased emotional empathy, particularly for elementary students and English Language Learners (ELLs) (Bowen, Kisida, 2020; McDonald et al., 2019).

Engaging in various art forms, whether making, listening, collaborating, or appreciating, profoundly impacts social and emotional development, influencing personal growth and interpersonal skills. Music, for instance, can enhance emotional expression and empathy. Playing an instrument or singing fosters self-discipline and collaboration while listening to music can improve mood and reduce stress. Visual arts, including drawing, painting, and sculpture, enable students to explore their emotions and develop fine motor skills. These activities promote patience and attention to detail and provide a non-verbal outlet for self-expression. Dance integrates physical movement with emotional expression, enhancing body awareness and coordination while building confidence through performance and practice. Drama and theater encourage students to explore different perspectives and develop empathy by stepping into various roles and scenarios, thus improving communication skills and emotional intelligence. Media arts, such as film and digital storytelling, offer students innovative ways to express themselves and collaborate, blending technical skills with creative expression. Each type of art contributes uniquely to social and emotional growth by fostering creativity, resilience, and interpersonal connections. Regular exposure to diverse art forms helps students build essential skills such as

self-regulation, empathy, and leadership, ultimately leading to improved academic and behavioral outcomes.

6.4. Curriculum Development

6.4.1. Arts-Integration Approach

(Paraphrased from grant) The CHART program's curriculum is influenced by well-known methodologies, including arts integration and Total Learning™ (TL). Arts integration helps with academic retention through emotional connections and improves important skills outlined in national standards (Gullatt, 2008; State Education Agency Directors of Arts Education, 2014). Students engage in creative processes to create, respond to, present, and connect their work, which promotes self-awareness, self-regulation, relationship-building, problem-solving, and confident decision-making (Harvard, 2021).

Arts integration can support student wellness by fostering emotional expression, enhancing self-awareness, and promoting a sense of belonging. Engaging in artistic activities allows students to explore and express their emotions safely and constructively, which can help alleviate stress and improve mental health. Through the arts, students can develop a deeper understanding of themselves and others, build confidence, and cultivate resilience. The creative process encourages mindfulness and provides an outlet for processing complex feelings, contributing to overall emotional well-being. Additionally, arts integration in the classroom can create a supportive and inclusive environment where students feel valued and

connected, further enhancing their social and emotional development. By integrating arts into education, schools can address various aspects of student wellness and contribute to a more holistic approach to learning and personal growth.

6.4.2. Professional Development

(Paraphrased from grant) The CHART program acknowledges the significant impact of educators' emotional well-being on children's development by strongly emphasizing supporting teachers. Research has shown that stressed teachers may struggle to provide necessary emotional support to children, potentially leading to behavioral challenges and hindering educational progress (Zinsser et al., 2016; Kwon et al., 2019). Story Tapestries is committed to investing in training and resources to empower educators to create positive learning environments and promote children's emotional development.

6.5. Evaluation Plan

6.5.1. Survey Creation and Evaluation

(Paraphrased from grant documents) To maintain the effectiveness and long-term success of the CHART program, a comprehensive evaluation process will be implemented. This evaluation will focus on monitoring changes in student academic performance, social-emotional skills development, and teacher well-being over time. Continuous feedback and data analysis will be used to make informed adjustments to the program,

ensuring that it remains aligned with educational objectives and meets the community's specific needs.

6.6. Data Analysis

(paraphrased from grant documents) Thorough data analysis methods will be utilized to assess the impact of the CHART program. We will use quantitative measures to evaluate changes in student academic performance, such as standardized test scores and classroom assessments, both before and after the program is implemented. Qualitative methods will be used to assess social-emotional development, including student and teacher surveys, focus groups, and observations on interpersonal skills, emotional regulation, and self-confidence.

Additionally, longitudinal studies will track participants to measure sustained improvement and identify any long-term effects on academic outcomes and well-being. Statistical analyses, including regression models and correlation studies, will be used to determine relationships between program participation and various educational and emotional outcomes. This data-driven approach will provide valuable insights into the program's effectiveness, allowing for informed decisions on curriculum adjustments and resource allocations to enhance outcomes for students and teachers within the CHART initiative.

7. Data Collection

7.1. Demographics

Demographic data was accessed using the United States Census Bureau. (n.d.) demographic data platform.

7.1.1. Arundel County

7.1.1.1. Population

The population of Anne Arundel County is approximately 588,261 individuals. The graph below, sourced from the United States Census Bureau Platform, illustrates a fluctuating population trend. Birth rates have experienced a slight decline, with the largest age group being 30 to 34 years old. Conversely, the age group of residents aged 80 and older is the least populated (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.-a). Figure 5, below, provides a visual representation of the Anne Arundel County population broken down by age and sex.

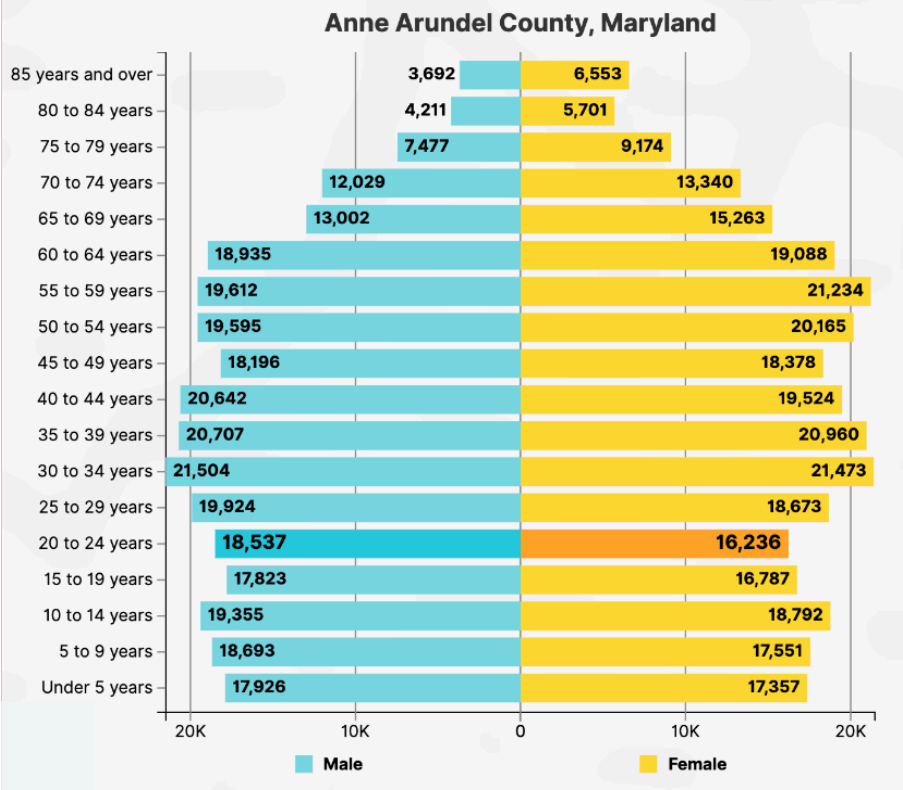

Figure # 5. Population Pyramid: Population by Age and Sex in Anne Arundel County, Maryland. *Source: U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.-b.*

7.1.1.2. Diversity

Anne Arundel County has a varied population, with the largest ethnicities represented being White and Black or African American, while the smallest groups include American Indian and Alaska Native, as well as Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.-a). Figure 6 captures the Anne Arundel County population by race.

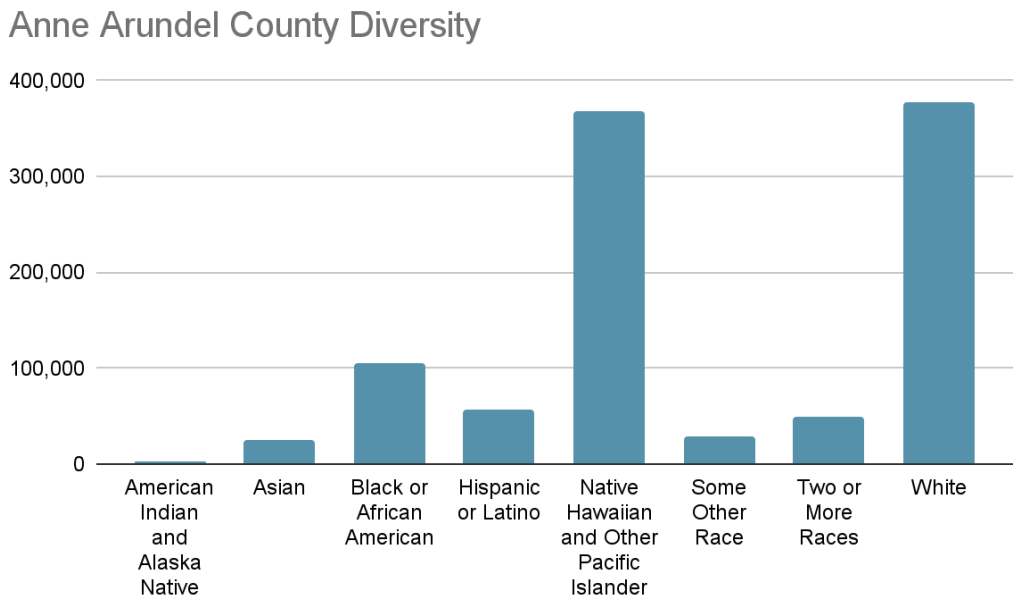

Figure # 6. Anne Arundel County Diversity. *Source: U.S. Census Bureau, n.d*

7.1.1.3. Education

The educational attainment levels of residents in Anne Arundel County exhibit significant diversity, with some areas demonstrating high levels of education and others presenting opportunities for enhancement. According to census data, approximately 47.8% of residents hold a bachelor's degree or higher, about 4% above the state average. Additionally, data indicates that 67.3% of school-aged individuals in the county are presently enrolled in Kindergarten through 12th grade (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.-a).

7.1.1.4. Economic Status

The median household income in Anne Arundel County is $113,125. Anne Arundel County has a relatively low poverty rate of 6.2% (±1.0%). The poverty rate is slightly higher among individuals under

18 years of age at 7.1%. As age increases within the county, poverty rates tend to decrease, with residents aged 18 to 64 years at 5.6% and residents 65 years and over at 7.6% (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.-a).

7.1.2.

7.1.3. Montgomery County

7.1.3.1. Population

Montgomery County is home to approximately 1,062,061 residents, as data from the United States Census Bureau Platform indicates. The graph below displays Montgomery County residents' most recent age demographic data. Like Anne Arundel County, the graph shows a consistent bell curve pattern reflecting population distribution. However, there is a slight decline in the curve for individuals aged 20-34, possibly due to housing affordability and limited access to higher education opportunities within the county.

The largest age group in Montgomery County consists of residents aged 35 to 39, with the smallest population numbers found among residents aged 80 and above (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.-c). Figure 7, below, provides a visual representation of the Montgomery County population broken down by age and sex.

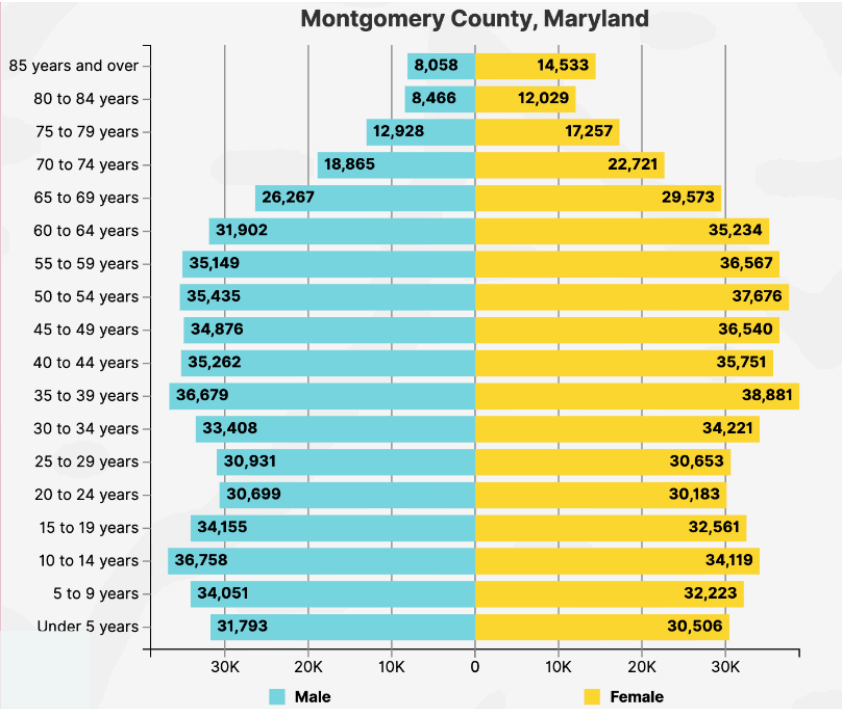

Figure # 7. Population Pyramid: Population by Age and Sex in Montgomery County, Maryland. *Source: U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.-d.*

7.1.3.2. Diversity

Montgomery County has a varied population, with the largest ethnicities being White, Hispanic or Latino, and Black or African American, while Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islanders make up the smallest ethnic group (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.-c). Figure 8 represents the Montgomery County population by race.

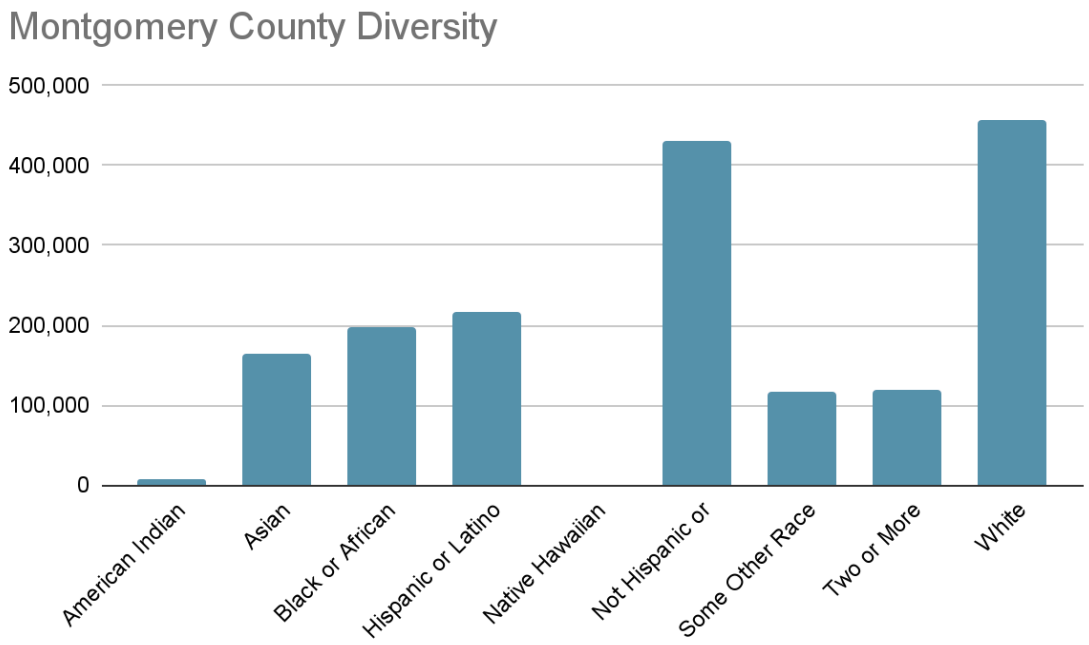

Figure # 8. Montgomery County Diversity. *Source: U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.-c.*

7.1.3.3. Education

Montgomery County is recognized for its thriving economy, which is driven by biotechnology, healthcare, and government industries. Census data shows that 60.9% of residents have achieved a bachelor's degree or higher, exceeding the state average by 17.1%.

Additionally, 69.1% of school-aged individuals in Montgomery County, Maryland, are currently enrolled in K-12 education (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.-c).

7.1.3.4. Economic Status

The median household income in Montgomery County is $118,323, with a margin of error of $3,608. Poverty rates in the county vary among age groups, with an overall rate of 7.9% and a margin of error of 0.9%. Specifically, poverty rates are higher among children under 18 years old at 10.1%, lower among adults aged 18-64 at 7.5%, and lowest among seniors aged 65 years and over at 6.4% (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.-c).

7.1.4. Prince George's County

7.1.4.1. Population

The population of Prince George's County is estimated to be around 967,201 individuals, as per data from the United States Census Bureau Platform. The data visualized in the graph shows a relatively even distribution with a slight decrease in numbers for individuals aged 15 to 34, resulting in a dip in their representation. The largest age group in the population falls within the 35 to 39 age range, with the smallest numbers being among residents aged 80 and above. Figure 9, below, provides a visual representation of the Prince George's County population broken down by age and sex (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.-e).

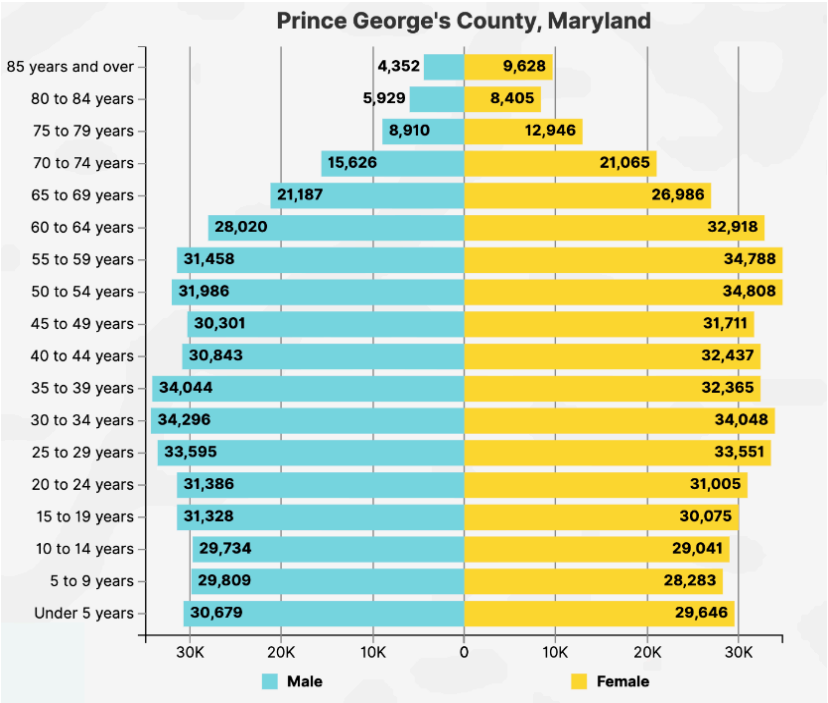

Figure # 9. Population Pyramid: Population by Age and Sex in Prince George's County, Maryland. *Source: U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.-f.*

7.1.4.2. Diversity

In Prince George's County, MD, the largest ethnic group is Black or African American, comprising 578,703 residents, while the smallest group is Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, with 546 residents (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.-e). Figure 10 shows the Prince George's County population by race.

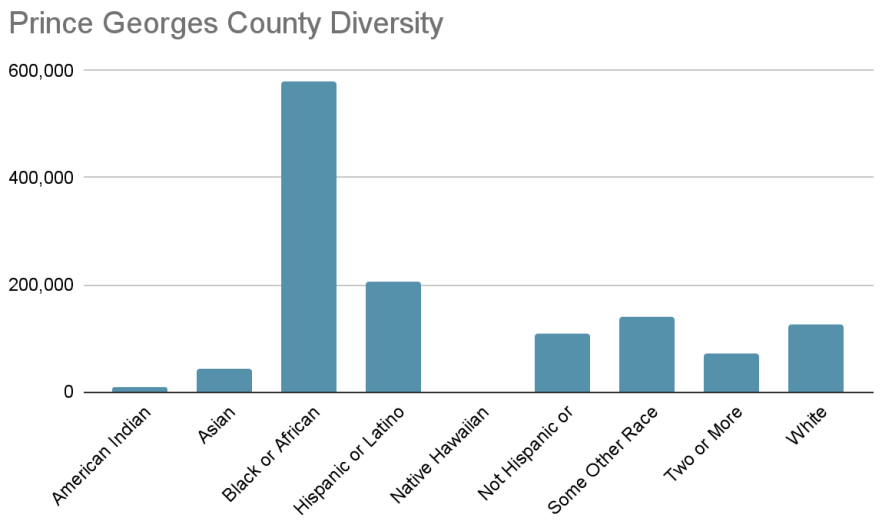

Figure # 10. Prince Georges County Diversity. *Source: U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.-e*

7.1.4.3. Education

Elevated poverty levels and economic uncertainty may be linked to decreased educational achievements in Prince George's County. It is worth noting that around 36.9% of individuals in the county have obtained a bachelor's degree or higher, a figure approximately 7.0% below the state average of 43.8%. Additionally, roughly 63.1% of Prince George's County school-aged children are enrolled in Kindergarten through 12th grade (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.-e).

7.1.4.4. Economic Status

The median household income stands at $94,441 ± $2,680. Prince George's County demonstrates a favorable poverty rate, with an overall rate of 10.9%. Within this, there is a 14.4% poverty rate among individuals under 18 years old, 10.0% among those aged 18 to 64 years, and 9.5% among individuals aged 65 years and older (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.-e).

7.2. Indicators of Student Mental Health and Wellness Needs

Monitoring student mental health and wellness needs indicators is crucial for educators to provide effective support and intervention. These indicators include changes in behavior such as withdrawal or irritability, suicidal thoughts or attempts, opioid use, declining academic performance, chronic absenteeism, and addiction to social media. Family dynamics, cultural factors, trauma history, teen pregnancy, and access to resources also play significant roles. By monitoring these indicators, educators can identify students who may be at risk and implement targeted interventions to promote mental health, create a supportive environment, and enhance both well-being and academic success.

7.2.1. Nationwide

National data on mental health challenges among youth, including suicide rates, opioid use, and the influence of social media, offer valuable insights into the current landscape. These findings underscore the pressing need for solutions like arts integration programs. By analyzing data on juvenile crime rates and suicide, vulnerable populations who could benefit from arts

integration initiatives focused on bolstering mental well-being can be identified. Utilizing data-driven approaches in advocating for arts integration further enhances the credibility of our recommendations. This approach highlights the potential of the arts as a tool for promoting mental health and counteracting the adverse effects of social media and substance abuse. Tailoring arts integration programs to align with specific national trends enables interventions to be tailored to meet the unique needs of today's youth. Using data to support our proposals, we can make a compelling case for funding support from stakeholders to enhance youth wellness through arts-based interventions. Emphasizing the value of early intervention and holistic support strategies is essential in prioritizing the well-being of young people.

7.2.2. Anne Arundel County

7.2.2.1. Suicide Rates

Anne Arundel County is experiencing notable challenges in the area of mental health and well-being, especially among its youth population. The data collected underscores the urgent necessity for comprehensive wellness initiatives and support networks.

Suicide rates in Anne Arundel County reveal alarming trends and demographic disparities over the past few years. The following sections provide a detailed overview of these findings, highlighting the number of deaths, emergency department visits, hospitalization

trends, and specific data related to youth suicide attempts and deaths (Anne Arundel County Department of Health, 2024).

The Anne Arundel County Youth Risk Assessment and related data indicate concerning trends in youth suicidal behaviors. Findings from the 2021 Youth Risk Behaviors Survey show that a significant percentage of respondents have had serious thoughts of suicide, with the highest rates among 13-year-olds and 8th graders. Racial disparities are also evident, with multiple races and Hispanic/Latino youth reporting higher percentages. Additionally, a considerable number of respondents have considered attempting suicide in the past year, with older individuals and certain racial and ethnic groups showing higher rates. Over the past four years, there have been 393 reported suicide deaths in Anne Arundel County, alongside a notable increase in suicide attempts, particularly among individuals under 34 years old, as seen in Emergency Department visits. These data underscore the pressing need for targeted mental health support and interventions for youth in the county (Anne Arundel County Department of Health, 2024; *Youth Risk Behavior Survey,* n.d.)

The majority of suicide deaths are among white males, making up 66% of cases. This is followed by white females, Black males, and other demographic groups. These varying suicide rates demonstrate disparities in mental health support across different demographics (Anne Arundel County Department of Health, 2024).

Individuals under the age of 34 demonstrate elevated rates of suicide attempts and deaths. While precise data for adolescents aged 11-17 is unavailable, they make up a considerable proportion of the overall statistics.

7.2.2.2. Gun Violence

In 2019, the Anne Arundel County Executive declared gun violence a public health issue, aiming to reduce firearm-related injuries and deaths, which impact over 100,000 people annually in the U.S., including more than 300 in Anne Arundel County. Gun violence disproportionately affects young Black males and older White males, with nearly 80% of firearm suicides occurring among White males and 58% of firearm homicides among Black males. This disparity underscores the need for tailored strategies for different populations. Between 2013 and 2020, the majority of firearm deaths were due to suicide, although the proportions varied each year. In 2018, suicides and homicides were equal, but by 2019, suicides once again comprised the majority. From 2016 to 2020, suicides accounted for 59% of all gun deaths, while homicides made up 40%. The data from these years also reveal significant racial disparities: the homicide rate among Black non-Hispanic males was 20.3 deaths per 100,000 population, compared to 1.9 deaths per 100,000 among White non-Hispanic males, while the suicide rate among White non-Hispanic males was 10.4 deaths per 100,000, versus 3.2 deaths per 100,000 among Black

non-Hispanic males. These statistics highlight the critical need for targeted interventions to address the specific needs of these demographic groups (Anne Arundel County Department of Health, 2019; Anne Arundel County Department of Health, 2022).

7.2.2.3. Juvenile Crime Rates

Over the past few years, the primary source of feedback has been from community members, representing 93.0% of complaints in FY2021, 95.5% in FY2022, and 96.0% in FY2023. Moreover, there has been a notable rise in complaints, escalating from 589 in FY2021 to 965 in FY2022 and peaking at 1,506 in FY2023 (Intake & Community, 2023a).

In the fiscal year 2023, the demographic breakdown of complaints was as follows: White individuals represented 69.5%, Black individuals 30.5%, and Hispanic/Other 12.6%. Regarding gender, males accounted for 76.2% of the complaints, while females comprised 23.8% (Intake & Community, 2023a).

In 2023, there was a significant change in the distribution of crime types. The percentage of crimes involving violence increased from 10.1% to 10.9%, while felonies increased from 4.9% to 5.4%. On the other hand, the percentage of misdemeanors decreased from 79.7% to 77.0% (Intake & Community, 2023a).

7.2.2.4. Emergency Department Visits and Inpatient Hospitalizations

The increasing number of ED visits, rising from 533 to 589, suggests a growing trend in suicide attempts. Conversely, the decreasing inpatient hospitalization trends, dropping from 368 to 151, could indicate either more severe suicide attempts that do not require hospitalization or a shift in treatment patterns.

7.2.2.5. Drug Use/ Risky Behaviors

The 2021 Anne Arundel County Youth Risk Assessment provides insights into substance use among students. In terms of marijuana use in the past 30 days, the majority of respondents (96.6%) reported abstaining from it, with slight variations observed across different age groups, grades, and racial backgrounds. A small percentage (2.1%) acknowledged using marijuana once or twice, with higher rates seen among students of multiple races (4.5%). For steroid use without a prescription, 1.9% of students disclosed usage, with the highest percentage reported among students of multiple races (3.5%). Furthermore, 3.3% of students admitted to being offered, sold, or given illegal drugs on school premises within the past year, with the highest percentage observed among younger students (aged 11 or younger) at 4.2% and Black students at 4.8% (*Youth Risk Behavior Survey*, n.d.).

In 2023, Anne Arundel County witnessed a total of 242 overdoses, showing a marginal 0.4% uptick from the 241 cases reported in 2022.

However, there was a noticeable decrease in fatal overdoses, with 35 fatalities recorded, reflecting a significant 22.2% drop from the 45 deaths in the previous year. In the 15-19 age group, the overall opioid overdose rate per 10,000 was 2.7. Rates varied notably by gender and race: white males had an overdose rate of 0.9, while black males had a higher rate of 6.1. White females had an overdose rate of 7.8, whereas black females had a rate of 0.4 per 10,000. These statistics highlight the uneven impact of opioid use among diverse demographic groups, emphasizing the necessity for tailored prevention and intervention strategies (Anne Arundel County & City of Annapolis, 2023).

The data from Anne Arundel County offers a detailed insight into opioid-related incidents from 2022 to 2023. While the total overdoses saw a minor increase of 0.4%, from 241 in 2022 to 242 in 2023, the fatal overdoses significantly decreased by 22.2%, from 45 in 2022 to 35 in 2023. Examining the youth demographic, the overall opioid overdose rate per 10,000 for the 15-19 age group saw a marked increase from 0.3 in 2022 to 2.7 in 2023. Amongst this age group, black males displayed the highest rates, rising from 3.2 per 10,000 in 2022 to 6.1 per 10,000 in 2023, while white females saw a substantial increase from 0.5 to 7.8 per 10,000. Conversely, white males showed a slight increase from 0.3 to 0.9 per 10,000, and black females experienced a decrease from 7.5 to 0.4 per 10,000. This data indicates a complex and evolving landscape of opioid usage and its impact on

various demographic groups, pointing towards specific areas for focused intervention and assistance (Anne Arundel County & City of Annapolis, 2022; Anne Arundel County & City of Annapolis, 2023).

7.2.2.6. Social Media Influence

In 2019, the Anne Arundel County School Board established a mental health task force with subcommittees dedicated to analyzing the factors contributing to poor mental health in students, developing community resources, implementing proactive measures, and enhancing service delivery. The Social Media Subcommittee of the Anne Arundel Mental Health Task Force identified notable deficiencies in the oversight and use of social media in the public schools of Anne Arundel County. The task forces observed inadequate social media policies, limited resources, and a lack of positive social media initiatives. They stressed the importance of adapting to student communication preferences and integrating mental health support into the digital platforms students engage with daily. Additionally, the task force recommended creating green spaces to encourage a healthier balance between online activity and physical exercise, promoting overall well-being (Voegtlin & Mickler, 2020).

Anne Arundel County and other Maryland counties are participating in a lawsuit against social media companies. Anne Arundel County Public Schools have observed adverse effects on student academic performance and well-being, worsening educational and social

challenges. The lawsuit seeks to hold social media companies accountable for their role in this crisis and to implement lasting solutions to address the negative impact on children's mental health (Board of Education Anne Arundel County, et al., 2023).

The lawsuit highlights the detrimental effects of social media use on children and teenagers, including a concerning increase in youth suicide rates, anxiety disorders, and other mental health issues. It also argues that the features of social media platforms are contributing to excessive screen time, which detracts from real-life interactions, creativity, and physical activity, thereby exacerbating a range of mental and physical health problems (Board of Education Anne Arundel County, et al., 2023).

7.2.2.7. Chronic Absenteeism

Chronic absenteeism is defined as a student missing 10% or more school days while enrolled. In Anne Arundel County, the chronic absenteeism rates were 25.3%, indicating that 25.3% of 84,452 students missed 10% or more school days during the 2023 school year (Wright, 2024). This marks a decrease from the 28.7% reported in the 2022 school year. Data prior to the 2023 school year indicates a yearly increase in the number of chronically absent students from 2019 to 2022 (Superintendent’s Note, 2022).

Furthermore, the data highlights that the highest percentage of chronically absent students are Hispanic at 34.2% and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander at 33.1% during the 2022 to 2023 school year. Additionally, ELL students, Special Education students, and economically disadvantaged students also represented a significant portion of chronically absent students (Superintendent's Note, 2022). Figure 11 provides a breakdown of the attendance data in Anne Arundel County, Maryland.

Student Group	Count (N)*	Attendance Rate	Chronic Absenteeism Rate
All Students	83,870	91.7%	28.7%
American Indian/Alaska Native	234	90.1%	31.2%
Asian	3,318	93.5%	21.8%
Black/ African American	18,475	91.1%	31.0%
Hispanic	16,991	90.5%	34.2%
Multi-racial	5,337	91.2%	30.1%
Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	142	91.6%	33.1%
White	39,373	92.3%	25.5%
ELL	7,788	90.4%	34.9%
Non-ELL	76,082	91.8%	28.0%
Special Ed	8,830	89.0%	38.8%
Non-Special Ed	75,040	92.0%	27.5%
Economically Disadvantaged	24,292	88.5%	42.8%

Non-Economically Disadvantaged	59,578	92.9%	22.9%

Figure # 11. SY22 - 23 Attendance and Chronic Absenteeism Rates as of December 31, 2022. *Source: Superintendent's Note, 2022.*

7.2.2.8. Suspension and Expulsion Data

Another potential indicator for wellness needs is county suspension data. Students who are mentally well and/or have resilience are less likely to be suspended from school. The total number of suspensions and expulsions in Anne Arundel County Public Schools for the 2022 to 2023 was 5,321. The total enrollment was 82,058 students. The graph below depicts the percentage of students that were suspended or expelled in Anne Arundel Public Schools during the 2022 to 2023 school year. The data notably depicts a fluctuation in the percentage of students expelled or suspended over a 15 year timeframe. There were notable decreases and increases at various points (*Suspensions by School and Major Offense Category Out-of-School Suspensions and Expulsions Maryland Public Schools 2022-2023*, 2023; *Suspensions by School and Major Offense Category Out-of-School Suspensions and Expulsions Maryland Public Schools 2021-2022*, 2022).

Figure 12 is the graph depicting the percentage of student incidents in Anne Arundel County from 2008 to 2023. The data shows fluctuations over the years, with notable decreases and increases at various points, particularly the significant drop to 0.1% during the year that COVID-19 caused schools to transition to virtual learning. Following

the return to buildings, there was a subsequent rise, equating to 2.1% during the 2021 - 2022 school year and rising to 6.2% during the 2022 to 2023 school year.

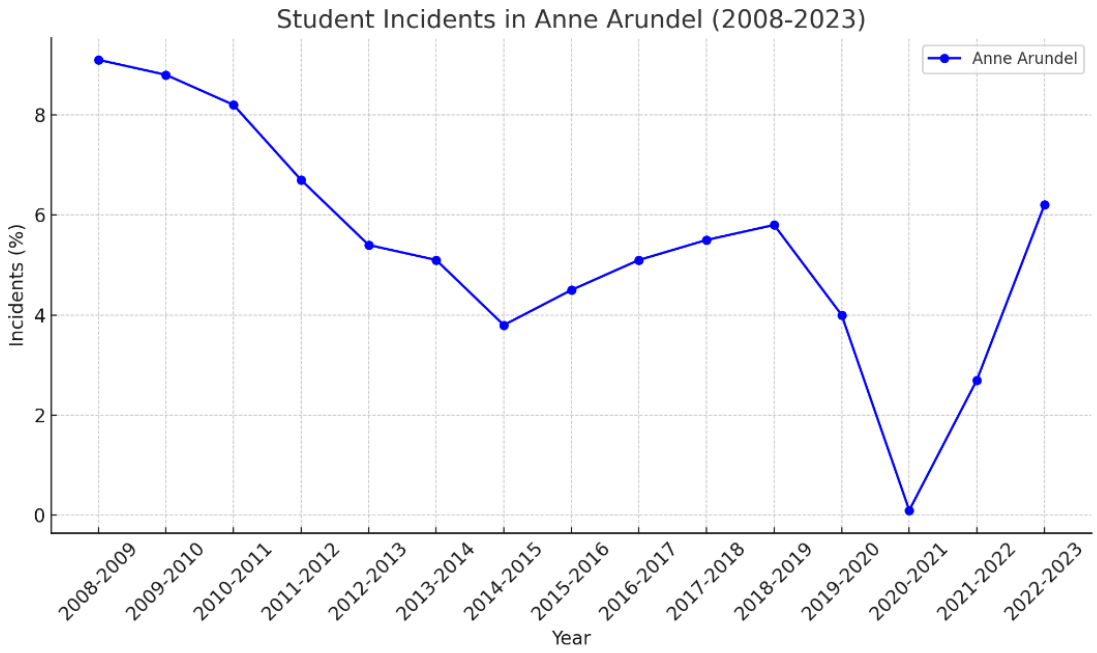

Figure # 12. Student Incidents in Anne Arundel (2008 - 2023). *Source: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d.*

It is also important to note that 56.6% of the suspension and expulsions occurred at the middle school level. 39% of the data was attributed to students at the high school level, with a mere 4.6% occurring at the elementary level.

Figure 13 below displays the major offenses that led to expulsions and suspensions by category. The categories included are Attendance, Dangerous Substances, Weapons, Attacks/Threats/Fighting,

Arson/Fire/Explosives, Sex, Offenses, Disrespect/Disruption, and Other causes.

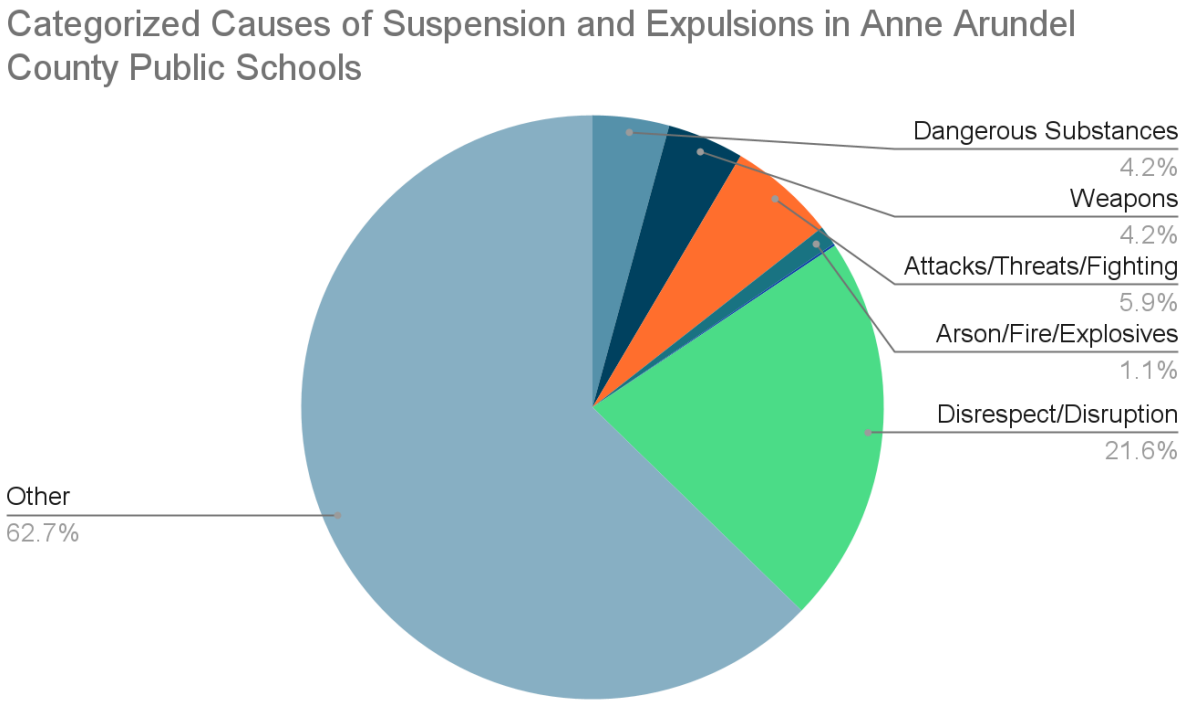

Figure # 13. Categorized Causes of Suspension and Expulsions in Anne Arundel County Public Schools. *Source: Maryland Public School Suspensions by School and Major Offense Category Out-of-School Suspensions and Expulsions 2021 - 2022, 2022.*

The Maryland State Department of Education Division of Assessment, Accountability and Performance Reporting completed two reports that identified suspensions by county, school, and major offense for the 2021 - 2022 school year and the 2022 - 2023 school year. A comparison of the data from both years demonstrates an increase in out-of-school suspensions and expulsions across the majority of major offense categories. In total, the number of suspensions and expulsions escalated from 3,121 in 2021-2022 to 9,372 in 2022-2023, an increase

of approximately 200.29%. The increase in incidents involving weapons, which rose from 178 to 719, and those related to attacks, threats, and fighting, which surged from 1,883 to 5,348 are particularly concerning. Cases of disrespect and disruption also witnessed a significant rise, from 784 to 2,524 (*Suspensions by School and Major Offense Category Out-of-School Suspensions and Expulsions Maryland Public Schools 2022-2023*, 2023; *Suspensions by School and Major Offense Category Out-of-School Suspensions and Expulsions Maryland Public Schools 2021-2022*, 2022).

An analysis of the reports showed that there was a marked increase in suspensions and expulsions for both male and female students. Male suspensions and expulsions increased from 2,166 to 6,353, approximately 193.31%, and suspensions and expulsions involving females showing a larger increase from 953 to 3,016, approximately 216.47% . Ethnically, Black or African American students registered the highest number of suspensions and expulsions in both years, increasing from 1,634 in 2021-2022 to 4,648 in 2022-2023. Hispanic students also observed a significant rise, from 427 to 1,514, as did White students, who increased from 809 to 2,462. Students with disabilities experienced a notable increase in suspensions and expulsions, from 868 in 2021-2022 to 2,396 in 2022-2023. Figure 14 below provides a visual representation of the data trends for both of the years reported (*Suspensions by School and Major Offense*

Category Out-of-School Suspensions and Expulsions Maryland Public Schools 2022-2023, 2023; *Suspensions by School and Major Offense Category Out-of-School Suspensions and Expulsions Maryland Public Schools 2021-2022*, 2022).

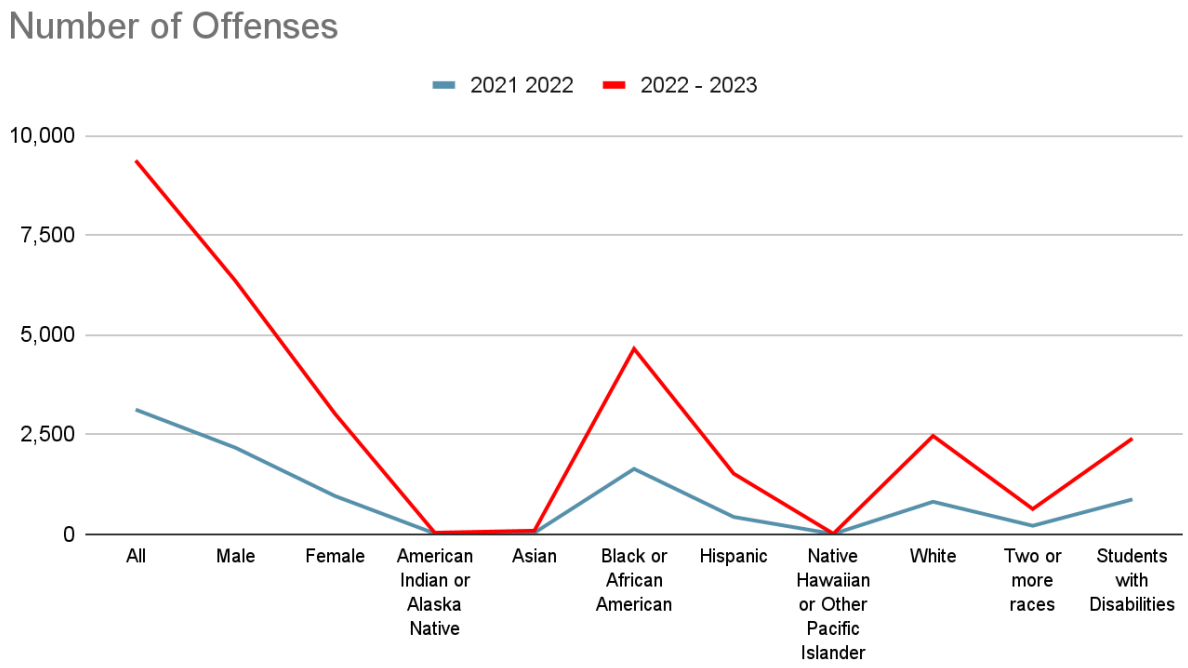

Figure # 14. Percentage Increase in Suspensions and Expulsions by Gender in Anne Arundel County (2021-2022 to 2022-2023) *Source: Maryland Public School Suspensions by School and Major Offense Category Out-of-School Suspensions and Expulsions 2021 - 2022, 2022, and Suspensions by School and Major Offense Category Out-of-School Suspensions and Expulsions Maryland Public Schools 2022-2023, 2023.*

Overall, this data indicates a deteriorating trend in student behavior and disciplinary actions, underscoring the necessity for targeted interventions and support systems within the public schools of Anne Arundel County.

7.2.3. Montgomery County

7.2.3.1. Key Mental and Behavioral Health Concerns

Based on the Healthy Montgomery Community Health Needs Assessment 2023 findings, mental and behavioral health issues are of notable importance within the county. These include conditions such as depression, anxiety, stress, youth suicides, feelings of loneliness, social isolation, and the stigma hindering individuals from accessing mental health services (Department of Health, 2023).

Based on the findings of the Healthy Montgomery Community Health Needs Assessment (2023), it was noted that the suicide mortality rate in 2020 was reported at 7.2 per 100,000 residents, displaying a varying trend. Meanwhile, the rate of hospitalizations due to suicide was 45.8 per 100,000 residents, showing a decline from the previous year. Furthermore, the rate of emergency room visits related to suicide was recorded at 356.4 per 100,000 residents, also demonstrating a decrease in comparison to 2019 (Department of Health, 2023).

7.2.3.2. Gun Violence

Gun violence in Montgomery County, Maryland, though less severe than in some urban areas, has seen troubling trends, particularly among youth. According to the Montgomery County Police Department (MCPD), there was a notable increase in gun-related incidents and arrests involving juveniles. In 2022, the Gun Violence Archive reported 20 juvenile arrests for firearms-related offenses, a significant

rise from just seven arrests in 2019 (Gun Violence Archive, n.d.). Additionally, data from the county's Department of Health and Human Services indicates that firearm-related injuries among youth under 18 have doubled over the past ten years, underscoring the urgent need for immediate action (McKnight & McCarthy, 2022).

One of the most concerning aspects is the increasing number of guns found in schools. In the 2021-2022 school year, 13 firearms were seized from Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) students, up from 5 in the previous year (Gun Violence Archive, n.d.). These incidents not only pose a direct threat to the safety of students and educators but also contribute to a growing climate of fear and insecurity, disrupting the educational environment and placing tremendous stress on the entire school community.

The impact of gun violence on youth in Montgomery County extends beyond immediate physical harm. From 2016 to 2020, Montgomery County had a gun death rate of 4 per 100,000 people, which is among the lowest in Maryland, trailing only Howard County. This contrasts sharply with Baltimore City, where the gun death rate soared to 44 per 100,000. Between 2017 and 2021, firearm-related offenses in Montgomery County primarily involved robberies and assaults, which made up 80-90% of gun crimes annually. Homicides accounted for a smaller percentage, fluctuating between 2% and 5% during the same period. The data also shows a troubling rise in the recovery of

privately made firearms, also known as "ghost guns," which increased from 2% of recovered firearms in 2019 to 17% by August 2022, with the highest recoveries occurring in Silver Spring, Wheaton, and Montgomery Village. Despite the county's relatively low gun death rate, the increasing presence of ghost guns and the fluctuation in firearm-related offenses highlight ongoing concerns about gun violence in the area (Office of Legislative Oversight, 2022).

The rise in gun violence among Montgomery County's youth has several underlying causes, many of which are rooted in developmental, social, and cultural factors. Research indicates that a complex mix of individual, family, and community factors contributes to the likelihood of youth engaging in gun violence. These include exposure to violence in the home, socialization into criminal behaviors, affiliations with deviant peer groups, and the pervasive influence of media that glamorizes gun use. For instance, the American Psychological Association's 2013 report on gun violence emphasizes that there is no single profile for individuals who commit gun violence; instead, it is the confluence of various risk factors that increases the probability of such acts (American Psychological Association, 2013).

These statistics underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions and preventive measures, such as enhanced gun control policies, community outreach programs, and mental health support services, to

address the growing gun violence issue and safeguard the well-being of Montgomery County's youth.

7.2.3.3. Juvenile Crime Rates

The trend in juvenile crime rates has been concerning over the last three fiscal years. Complaints from citizens have been the main source, representing 87.6% in FY2021, 90.4% in FY2022, and 91.9% in FY2023. Additionally, there has been a notable increase in the total number of complaints, increasing from 588 in FY2021 to 886 in FY2022 and further to 1,256 in FY2023 (Intake & Community, 2023b).

In the fiscal year of 2023, the data on juvenile crime rates indicated that 77.5% of the individuals involved were classified as White, 22.5% as Black, and 23.3% as Hispanic/Other in relation to their race/ethnicity. When considering gender, 77.5% were male, and 22.5% were female (Intake & Community, 2023b).

In fiscal year 2023, juvenile crime rates changed noticeably. The percentage of violent crimes increased from 15.3% in FY2022 to 17.9%, and felonies rose from 9.6% to 14.5%. On the other hand, misdemeanors decreased from 68.2% in FY2022 to 59.8% in FY2023. This trend suggests a higher prevalence of serious offenses among juvenile crime incidents (Intake & Community, 2023b).

7.2.3.4. Opioid Use

Based on the findings of the Healthy Montgomery Community Health Needs Assessment 2023, it has been determined that substance abuse disorders remain a significant concern in Montgomery County. The report emphasizes issues related to high levels of alcohol consumption, marijuana addiction, drug abuse, and misuse of opioids, including fentanyl (Department of Health, 2023).

Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) acknowledges the Opioid Related Overdoses as a National Crisis. The county references data from the Montgomery County Police Department indicating a 120% increase in fatal youth overdoses from 2021 to 2022. Additionally, non-fatal overdoses witnessed a 68% rise during the same period (Preventing Substance Use, n.d.).

Youth Overdoses	2021	2022	% Change (2021 to 2022)
Fatal	5	11	+120%
Non-fatal	22	37	+68%
Grand Total	27	48	+78%

These data show only fatal and non-fatal overdose events to which MCPD personnel responded

Most opioid related overdoses were due to illicit fentanyl, often found in other substances including counterfeit pills (e.g., Oxycontin, Percocet, Xanax, Adderall).

Figure # 15. Youth Overdose in Montgomery County: 2021-2022. *Source: Preventing Substance Use, n.d.*

In an effort to address the national crisis of opioid-related overdoses, MCPS has partnered with the Montgomery Goes Purple community coalition. This partnership aims to raise awareness and facilitate emergency access to naloxone (Narcan), enhance youth support programs in schools throughout the county, provide resources for families in need, and develop public service announcements (Preventing Substance Use, n.d.).

7.2.3.5. Social Media Influence

In June 2023, Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) made the decision to join a lawsuit against social media companies, following the lead of neighboring school districts. While MCPS has not yet

released an official report on the impact of social media on student well-being, they have started addressing issues related to viral videos and social media usage during the COVID-19 pandemic. A recent news report stated that MCPS believes social media has contributed to negative effects such as body image issues, eating disorders, and low self-esteem among students, placing blame on the social media companies for their negligence (Gonzalez, 2023).

In August 2020, MCPS issued a memo to parents expressing concerns about student social media habits. The memo urged parents to monitor their child's online activities and provided seven tips for doing so. It also included statistics and quotes highlighting the potential risks associated with children and teens using social media (Monitoring Your Kids' Social Media, 2020).

Despite taking steps to address social media concerns, MCPS has not updated Regulation IGT-RA: User Responsibilities for Computer Systems, Electronic Information, and Network Security since 2012. Additionally, there is no countywide policy on cellphone use in classrooms to regulate device usage during class time. While cellphones are permitted for instructional purposes in MCPS classrooms, the lack of a standardized policy hinders schools from effectively managing personal device usage during instructional hours.

7.2.3.6. Chronic Absenteeism

Chronic absenteeism in Montgomery County, MD, reflects significant concerns about school engagement and student success. The Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) defines chronic absenteeism as the percentage of students who miss 10% or more of school days while enrolled. This metric indicates school quality and student success on the Maryland Report Card. The impact of chronic absenteeism includes lower academic achievement, increased likelihood of future absenteeism, higher dropout rates, adverse health outcomes, and more significant interaction with the criminal justice system. Factors contributing to chronic absenteeism range from illness and housing instability to bullying and a lack of perceived value in education (Wright, C. M., 2024).

In Montgomery County, the chronic absenteeism rate for the 2022-2023 school year was 25.3%, indicating that a substantial portion of students are missing significant amounts of school. This rate is notably higher than Howard County's lowest rate of 18.4% but lower than Baltimore City's highest rate of 51.4% (Wright, C. M., 2024).

Specifically, in Montgomery County, absenteeism trends reveal that high school students face the highest chronic absenteeism rates, with 35.79% in the 2022-2023 school year, up from 29.48% in 2018. Middle and elementary school levels also saw increases, with 22.18% and 19.99%, respectively. The rates for Pre-K students are notably

high, rising from 31.78% in 2018 to 45.63% in 2022-2023, highlighting a critical area for targeted intervention (Montgomery County Public Schools Unveils Comprehensive Attendance Action Plan to Combat Chronic Absenteeism, 2023).

Addressing chronic absenteeism in Montgomery County Public Schools through arts integration is crucial for fostering a more engaging and supportive learning environment. Art integration can offer students a compelling and relevant reason to attend school by linking academic content with creative expression, which can reignite their interest in learning. Engaging in artistic activities can also help mitigate the factors contributing to absenteeism, such as a lack of perceived value in education, unsafe conditions, or bullying. By incorporating the arts into the curriculum, schools can create a more inclusive and stimulating environment that addresses students' emotional and social needs. Art integration promotes positive school experiences, boosts student morale, and can improve overall attendance by making school more meaningful and enjoyable. Furthermore, arts integration supports students' mental health and well-being, providing them with a constructive outlet for their feelings and challenges, which can reduce the likelihood of chronic absenteeism and improve academic performance.

7.2.3.7. Suspension Data

Data analysis of the Maryland State Department of Education report on suspension and expulsion data from 2022-2023 suspension and expulsion data for Montgomery County reveals several trends that indicate significant behavioral and disciplinary trends. A significant number of the incidents identified leading to suspension and expulsion in Montgomery County involved violent behavior, particularly attacks, threats, and fighting, which accounted for the majority of the suspensions. The data also highlights noticeable disparities based on gender, ethnicity, and students with disabilities. Overall, the data indicates a need for comprehensive and targeted strategies to improve student behavior and social emotional wellness, ensure safety, and promote equity within Montgomery County schools.

The reported data for suspensions and expulsions in Montgomery County during the 2022-2023 school year indicates a recorded a total of 2,891 out-of-school suspensions and expulsions. While there were no suspensions related to dangerous substances, 495 suspensions and expulsions were due to weapons-related incidents. 1,657 of the suspensions and expulsions for attacks, threats, and fighting. A total of 371 incidents were due to disrespect or disruption, 84 incidents classified under “other”, 75 identified for sex offensives, and 30 incidents atributed to arson, fire, or explosives (*Suspensions by School and Major Offense Category Out-of-School Suspensions and*

Expulsions Maryland Public Schools 2022-2023, 2023; (*Suspensions by School and Major Offense Category Out-of-School Suspensions and Expulsions Maryland Public Schools 2021-2022*, 2022)..

When broken down by gender, 1,877 of the recorded incidents involved male students with 1,023 of incidents being attribuded to attacks, threats, and fighting. Female students accounted for 1,014 suspensions, with the majority (634) of the suspensions and expulsions resulting from attacks, threats, and fighting (*Suspensions by School and Major Offense Category Out-of-School Suspensions and Expulsions Maryland Public Schools 2022-2023*, 2023; (*Suspensions by School and Major Offense Category Out-of-School Suspensions and Expulsions Maryland Public Schools 2021-2022*, 2022)..

The ethnic breakdown shows 5 suspensions or expulsions for American Indian or Alaska Native students, 99 for Asian students, 182 for students with two or more races, 284 for White students, 1,096 for Hispanic students, and 1,224 for Black or African American students. There is a notible disparity for black or african american students and hispanic students with the majority cause of attacks, threats, and fighting being identified as the primary reason. It is also notable that students with disabilities were involved in 820 suspensions, with 501 to attacks, threats, and fighting, 152 to disrespect or disruption, and 78 related to weapons (*Suspensions by School and Major Offense Category Out-of-School Suspensions and Expulsions Maryland Public*

Schools 2022-2023, 2023; (*Suspensions by School and Major Offense Category Out-of-School Suspensions and Expulsions Maryland Public Schools 2021-2022*, 2022)..

A comparision of the suspension and expulsion data from 2021 - 2022 and 2022 - 2023 indicates a significant increase in occurrences, with suspensions rising from 2,392 to 2,891, or 20.86%. Suspensions and expulsions among male students increased from 1,601 to 1,877, while incidents involving female students rose from 790 to 1,014. Weapon-related suspensions and expulsions saw an increase from 277 to 495. Similarly, incidents involving attacks, threats, and fighting also rose from 1,511 to 1,657. Arson/fire/explosives-related incidents increased from 19 to 30, while sex offenses slightly decreased from 77 to 75. Disrespect and disruption cases increased from 288 to 371. Among different ethnic groups, Black or African American students saw an increase in suspensions and expulsions from 1,077 to 1,224, while Hispanic students experienced a rise from 889 to 1,096. Incidents involving Asian students rose from 80 to 99, and those involving White students saw the most significant increase from 197 to 284, approximately 44.16%. The number of suspensions and expulsions among students with disabilities rose from 739 to 820. Additionally, incidents involving students identifying with two or more races increased from 144 to 182. Overall, the data highlights a widespread increase in disciplinary actions across various

demographics and offense categories. Figure 16 below provides a visual comparison marking the increase (*Suspensions by School and Major Offense Category Out-of-School Suspensions and Expulsions Maryland Public Schools 2022-2023*, 2023; (*Suspensions by School and Major Offense Category Out-of-School Suspensions and Expulsions Maryland Public Schools 2021-2022*, 2022)..

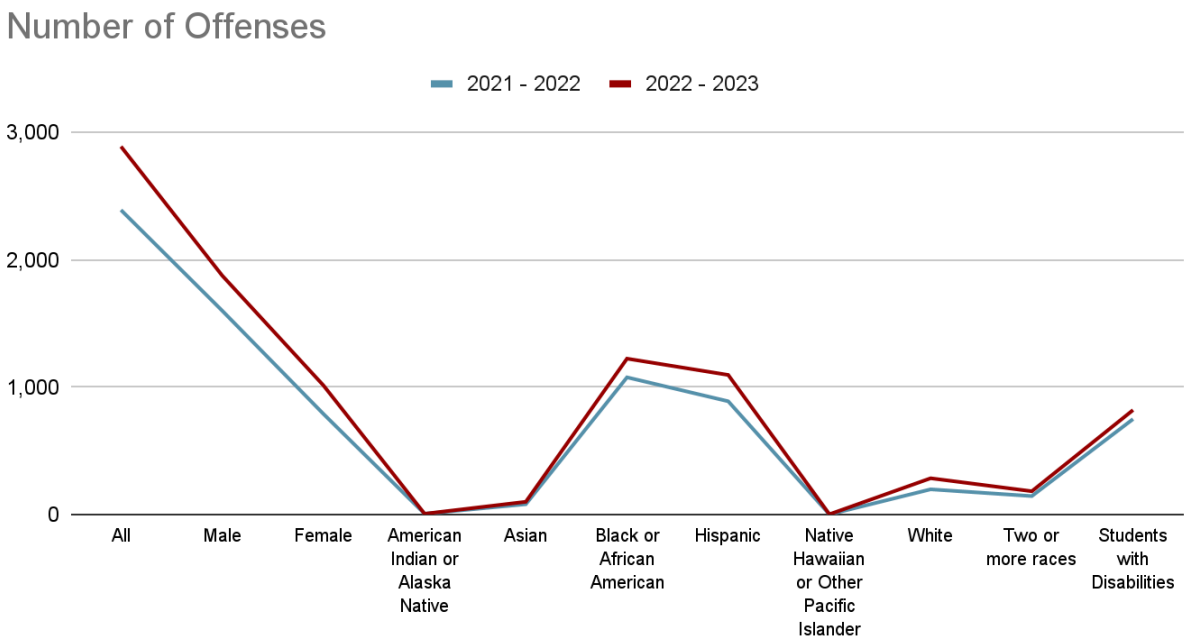

Figure # 16. Percentage Increase in Suspensions and Expulsions by Gender in Montgomery County (2021-2022 to 2022-2023) *Source: Maryland Public School Suspensions by School and Major Offense Category Out-of-School Suspensions and Expulsions 2021 - 2022, 2022, and Suspensions by School and Major Offense Category Out-of-School Suspensions and Expulsions Maryland Public Schools 2022-2023, 2023.*

The increase in numbers of suspension and expulsion data for Montgomery County in 2022-2023 highlight pressing issues related to student behavior, safety, and equity.

7.2.4. Prince Georges County

7.2.4.1. Mental and Behavioral Health Concerns

In the 2021-2022 period, Prince George's County encountered notable mental and behavioral health issues among its young population. A significant portion of high school students, about 21.0%, disclosed having seriously considered suicide, with 42.0% experiencing feelings of sadness or hopelessness. In middle schools, 24.2% of students were physically inactive, and 43.6% reported similar feelings of sadness or hopelessness. The suicide mortality rate stood at 6.2 deaths per 100,000 residents, pointing towards a worrisome pattern. Visits to emergency rooms due to mental health concerns were prevalent, with an age-adjusted rate of 1,955.6 visits per 100,000 individuals in 2017. Additionally, 16.1% of high school students mentioned having plans to attempt suicide, highlighting the critical need for mental health assistance and intervention strategies within the county (Prince George's County Health Department, n.d.).

7.2.4.2. Gun Violence

Addressing gun violence in Prince George's County is a critical concern for both the community and the school system. In a recent communication, the Prince George's County Public Schools (PGCPS) underscored the importance of safe firearm storage to protect students. Maryland law mandates that all handguns must be secured with an external safety lock to prevent accidental discharge, and the state

strictly prohibits minors from accessing firearms. The alarming statistic that guns are the leading cause of death among children and teens in Maryland, with an average of 58 fatalities annually and 82% of these being homicides, highlights the urgent need for vigilance (Goldson & Prince George's County Public Schools, 2022).

In 2023, crimes involving firearms committed by individuals under 18 in Prince George's County included seven incidents: 1 homicide and six assaults, with a total of 9 juvenile offenders. This represents a notable decrease compared to 2022, when there were 17 incidents involving firearms and 20 offenders under 18, including five homicides and 12 assaults. The decrease in both the number of incidents and the number of offenders suggests some progress in addressing youth gun violence. However, the persistence of serious offenses highlights the ongoing need for effective prevention and intervention strategies (Maryland State Police, n.d.).

Recent data from the Prince George's County Police Department reveals mixed trends in gun-related violent crimes from early 2024 compared to 2023. Non-fatal shootings have decreased by 16%, while first-degree assaults involving firearms have increased by 16%. Notably, carjackings involving guns have decreased by 25%, but armed robberies have risen by 9%. The rise in juvenile gun arrests and the recovery of ghost guns emphasizes the need for continued efforts in firearm safety and regulation. PGCPS's proactive measures,

including educating parents on safe gun storage and ensuring campus safety, are essential in mitigating these risks and fostering a secure learning environment for students (Prince George's County Council, n.d.).

7.2.4.3. Juvenile Crime Rates

Juvenile crime rates have fluctuated significantly over the past three fiscal years. The majority of complaints, 70.0% in FY2021, 68.2% in FY2022, and 74.6% in FY2023, were filed by citizens. The total number of complaints escalated from 454 in FY2021 to 811 in FY2022 and 968 in FY2023. These statistics point to a notable uptick in reported incidents, signaling an increasing apprehension regarding juvenile crime in the county (Intake & Community, 2023c).

In the fiscal year of 2023, Prince George's County displayed a demographic breakdown showing a majority racial composition of 80.4% Black, 17.8% White, and 1.8% Hispanic/Other. The gender distribution leaned towards males at 80.5%, with females making up 19.5% of the population. These figures highlight the county's diverse demographic composition, demonstrating a substantial Black population in addition to smaller White and Hispanic/Other communities (Intake & Community Services, 2023c).

In Prince George's County, the distribution of crimes in FY2023 is as follows: crimes of violence accounted for 26.7%, felonies for 25.6%,

and misdemeanors for 47.3%. This breakdown indicates a noteworthy proportion of violent and felony offenses among the reported crimes within the county for that fiscal year (Intake & Community Services," 2023c).

7.2.4.4. Opioid Use

From 2017 to 2021, Prince George's County accounted for 5.73% of the total opioid-related deaths in Maryland, with an average of 129.4 deaths per year, representing a significant increase of 35.48% over the period. Despite Prince George's County comprising 17.23% of Maryland's total population, the opioid crisis has disproportionately affected the county (Maryland Department of Health, 2021). In the first half of 2021, opioid-related intoxication fatalities were reported across all 24 local jurisdictions in Maryland, with notable disparities in the number of deaths among counties. Baltimore City experienced the highest number of fatalities, with 485 deaths, followed by Baltimore County, with 184 deaths, and Anne Arundel County, with 115 deaths. Prince George's County reported 75 opioid-related deaths, placing it fourth highest in the state, behind the more heavily impacted jurisdictions of Baltimore City, Baltimore County, and Anne Arundel County. Montgomery County followed with 60 deaths, and Harford County had 44 deaths (Opioid Operational Command Center, 2021).

Comparing these figures to the previous year, 2020, Prince George's County saw a decrease from 87 deaths to 75, reflecting a slight decline

in opioid-related fatalities. This reduction, while noteworthy, does not fully offset the severe impact of the opioid crisis observed in neighboring counties. Baltimore City's increase from 434 deaths in 2020 to 485 in 2021 underscores the ongoing severity of the crisis in urban areas, while Baltimore County and Anne Arundel County also saw increases. The data highlights the persistent challenge of opioid use in the region and underscores the need for continued and enhanced efforts to address this public health issue across all counties in Maryland (Opioid Operational Command Center, 2021).

Demographically, non-Hispanic Black Marylanders experienced the highest impact, representing 64.36% of opioid-related deaths in the county. This is notably higher than their 64.1% county population share. In contrast, non-Hispanic White Marylanders, who account for 11.9% of the county's population, represented 26.06% of opioid-related deaths. Hispanic Marylanders, who make up 20.4% of the population, represented 9.58% of the deaths(Maryland Department of Health, 2021).

From 2016 to 2018, the county experienced a notable increase in opioid overdose incidents among various age groups, including those under 18. In 2018, there were 136 emergency department visits related to opioid overdoses, although specific data for individuals aged 18 and under is not directly broken down. Moreover, Prince George's County's 2018 opioid-related death statistics indicate an overall

increase in opioid deaths from previous years, though specific data for those under 18 is not explicitly detailed. The report underscores the critical need for targeted prevention and intervention strategies to address opioid misuse and its severe consequences for the youth in Prince George's County. The rise in opioid-related emergencies and the high numbers of Narcan administrations reflect ongoing challenges and the urgency for enhanced support and resources to mitigate this public health crisis (Office of Assessment and Planning & Perkins, 2019).

7.2.4.5. Social Media Influence

On May 16, 2023, Prince George's County Public Schools (PGCPS) made headlines by joining a nationwide legal battle against major social media giants, including Meta, Google, ByteDance, and Snap Inc. This lawsuit claims that the companies' platforms are contributing to a severe mental health crisis among students. As one of the largest school districts in the United States, PGCPS argues that these social media products, designed with addictive algorithms, have led to a troubling rise in mental health issues among students, such as disordered eating, depression, and suicidal ideations. The district contends that the platforms' business models prioritize profit over the well-being of children, putting an undue strain on educational resources and forcing schools to divert funds from academic programs to address these mental health challenges (Lieff et al. at Law, 2023).

The legal action undertaken by PGCPS reflects a broader movement among school districts nationwide. These districts are collectively challenging the social media industry, alleging that the design and algorithms of platforms like Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat, and TikTok are specifically engineered to exploit young users, trapping them in cycles of excessive use. The lawsuit underscores how this exploitation exacerbates mental health issues, placing additional burdens on schools that are already struggling to meet the increasing demands for mental health support. By pursuing this litigation, PGCPS aims to hold social media companies accountable for their role in this crisis and to seek financial redress to alleviate the financial strain imposed on the educational system by these harmful practices (Board of Education Anne Arundel County et al., 2023).

In response to these growing concerns, PGCPS is revising its policies to address the implications of social media use and digital technologies in schools. New and updated policies, including those related to artificial intelligence, intellectual property, and the use of electronic devices, aim to provide more explicit guidelines and protections for students and staff. The updated policies seek to balance the benefits of technology in education with the need to safeguard students from potential risks associated with digital media, reflecting a proactive approach to managing the complex interplay between technology and student well-being (Briggs et al., 2024).

7.2.4.6. Chronic Absenteeism

Recent data from Prince George's County Public Schools (PGCPS) reveals notable student attendance and discipline improvements. According to reports from February 2024, student suspensions and chronic absenteeism have significantly decreased compared to January 2023. Out-of-school suspensions have dropped by 31.6%, from 1,129 in January SY2023 to 862 in January SY2024. This decline reflects the district's commitment to enhancing social-emotional support and implementing progressive discipline strategies. Chronic absenteeism, defined as missing more than 10% of enrollment days, has also reduced by nearly 6%, falling from 34.89% in January 2023 to 29.10% in January 2024, the lowest rate in three years (Communications, 2024).

The district has significantly reduced chronic absenteeism, with an improvement of approximately six and a half percentage points from February SY23 to February SY24. This positive trend is particularly notable among K-8, elementary, and middle schools, which have demonstrated the most substantial gains. When comparing the data for March, the chronic absenteeism rate has decreased by 2.32%, from 33% in SY23 to 30.68% in SY24. Figure 17 charts the chronic absenteeism rates in Prince George's County from 2022 to 2024, categorizing the data by categories (Truancy Study Workgroup, 2024).

CA Comparison March (SY22) - March (SY24)				
Category	SY22-March	SY23-March	SY24-March	Difference
District	28.69%	33.00%	30.68%	-2.32%
Charter	10.87%	13.16%	13.41%	0.25%
Elementary	26.65%	32.12%	29.05%	-3.07%
K8	21.44%	23.03%	19.85%	-3.18%
Middle	24.64%	27.02%	24.42%	-2.60%
K8/Middle	23.81%	26.00%	23.17%	-2.83%
High	37.86%	41.48%	40.45%	-1.03%
Regional	43.52%	53.39%	53.06%	-0.33%

Figure # 17. (Prince George's County) Chronic Absenteeism Comparison March (SY22) - March (SY24) *Source: Truancy Study Workgroup, 2024.*

Despite these advancements, the chronic absenteeism rate has been trending upward each month compared to the previous year. Although the district's current rate is slightly lower than it was last year, the monthly comparisons indicate that the improvement is incremental and ongoing. This suggests that while progress is being made, there is a need for continued efforts to further reduce absenteeism and address the underlying factors contributing to these patterns (Truancy Study Workgroup, 2024).

7.2.4.7. Suspension Data

This section examines the trends and patterns in out-of-school suspensions and expulsions within Prince George's County Public Schools during the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 academic years. It highlights critical changes in student behavior and disciplinary actions

over the two years by analyzing data across various offense categories and demographic groups and the increased trends. The findings underscore significant increases in incidents involving weapons, as well as rising suspension and expulsion rates among male students, Black or African American students, and Hispanic students. These trends provide crucial insights into the evolving challenges faced by the school system in maintaining a safe and conducive learning environment and the social-emotional state of the enrolled students.

In the 2022-2023 school year, Prince George's County Public Schools saw a rise in out-of-school suspensions and expulsions, totaling 9,251 incidents compared to 8,443 in the previous year, an increase of approximately 9.6%. This represents a notable increase, particularly in the category of weapons-related incidents, which rose from 755 to 1,292 cases (*Suspensions by School and Major Offense Category Out-of-School Suspensions and Expulsions Maryland Public Schools 2022-2023*, 2023; (*Suspensions by School and Major Offense Category Out-of-School Suspensions and Expulsions Maryland Public Schools 2021-2022*, 2022).

Male students continued to account for most suspensions and expulsions, rising from 5,360 in 2021-2022 to 5,801 in 2022-2023, an increase of approximately 8.2%. Female students experienced a more notable increase, from 3,083 to 3,449 incidents, approximately 11.9%. Among racial demographics, Black or African American students had

the highest number of suspensions and expulsions in both years, increasing by 3.4% from 6,659 to 6,883. Hispanic students had the highest increase in suspensions and expulsions by approximately 37%, from 1,498 to 2,052 incidents (*Suspensions by School and Major Offense Category Out-of-School Suspensions and Expulsions Maryland Public Schools 2022-2023*, 2023; (*Suspensions by School and Major Offense Category Out-of-School Suspensions and Expulsions Maryland Public Schools 2021-2022*, 2022).

The category of attacks/threats/fighting showed a slight decrease from 595 to 591 cases. Disrespect/disruption incidents remained stable at 264 cases each year. Notably, the number of suspensions and expulsions for students with disabilities remained almost constant, with a slight increase from 1,790 to 1,805 cases. Overall, the data indicates an upward trend in disciplinary actions, particularly in the use of weapons and among certain demographic groups (*Suspensions by School and Major Offense Category Out-of-School Suspensions and Expulsions Maryland Public Schools 2022-2023*, 2023; (*Suspensions by School and Major Offense Category Out-of-School Suspensions and Expulsions Maryland Public Schools 2021-2022*, 2022). Figure 18 below shows the visual increase in suspensions and expulsions.

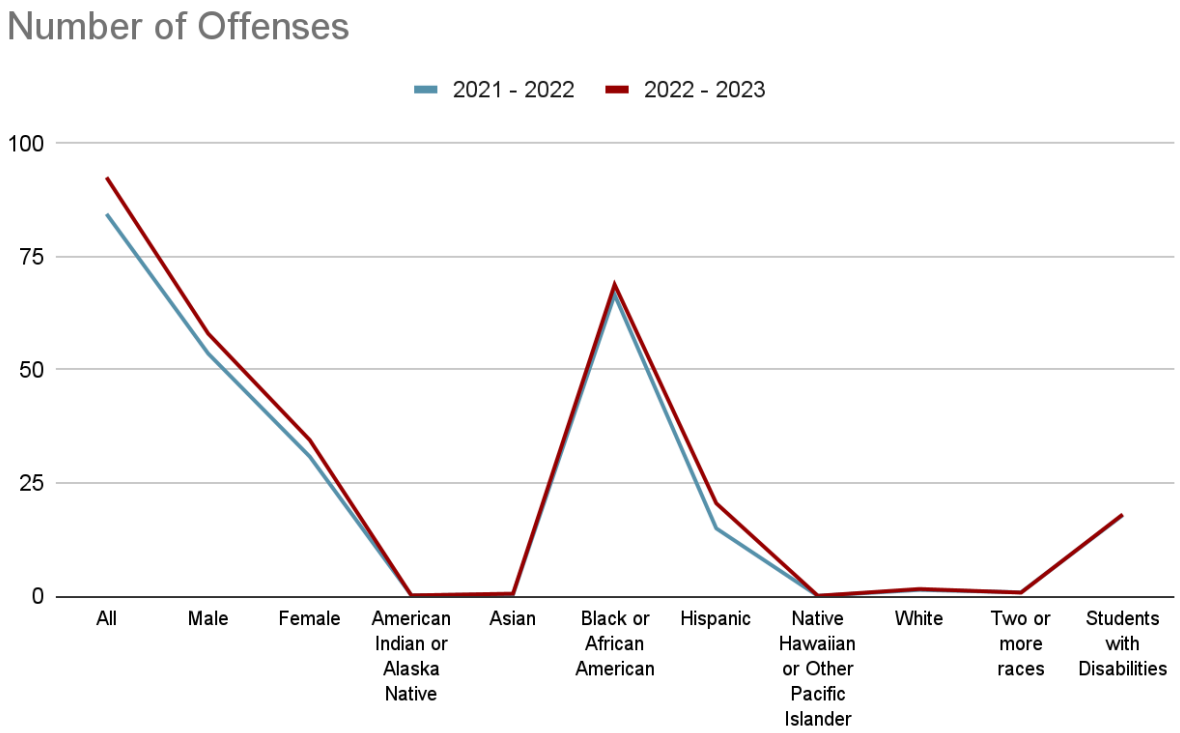

Figure # 18. Percentage Increase in Suspensions and Expulsions by Gender in Prince Georges County (2021-2022 to 2022-2023) *Source: Maryland Public School Suspensions by School and Major Offense Category Out-of-School Suspensions and Expulsions 2021 - 2022, 2022, and Suspensions by School and Major Offense Category Out-of-School Suspensions and Expulsions Maryland Public Schools 2022-2023, 2023.*

The data on out-of-school suspensions and expulsions in Prince George's County for the school years 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 reveals notable trends and increases across various offense categories. The total number of suspensions and expulsions rose from 8,443 to 9,251, reflecting an increase of approximately 9.6%. Significant increases were observed in offenses involving dangerous substances, weapons, and disrespect/disruption, while attacks, threats, and fighting incidents slightly decreased. The largest demographic increase was seen in Hispanic students, whose suspensions and expulsions increased substantially. The demographic with the most suspensions and expulsions was Black or African American.

7.3. Indicators of Teacher Mental Health and Wellness Needs

7.3.1. The State of Maryland Teacher Turnover

In 2022, the Maryland Teacher Workforce: Supply, Demand, and Diversity Report highlighted several factors contributing to teacher turnover in the state. The report revealed that voluntary resignations accounted for 39.2% of teacher exits, with 55.4% of these resignations coming from educators with less than five years of experience. Additionally, 5.3% of teachers took a leave of absence, and 2.5% transitioned to non-education-related roles.

The report also noted that Montgomery County consistently saw around 500 teacher resignations annually from 2018 to 2022. Prince George's County had the highest turnover rate but has decreased to approximately 500 resignations per year since 2018.

The teacher turnover rate in Maryland presents a pressing issue with significant implications for the state's education system. High teacher attrition threatens the stability and quality of student learning and strains economic resources. The cost of recruiting, hiring, and training new teachers is substantial, ranging between $9,000 and $21,000 per teacher. This turnover also perpetuates the need for more qualified educators as the profession struggles to establish a consistent reputation. Newer teachers, often less experienced, may not be as effective in meeting students' needs, further compounding the challenge (Choudhury, 2022).

Maryland's teacher attrition trends reflect a complex and evolving landscape within the state's education system. In the most recent year, 10.7% of Maryland teachers did not return to teaching in the state, showing a gradual increase from previous years. Specifically, the percentage of teachers who did not return to the same school rose from 9.2% in 2018-2019 to 12.7% in 2023-2024. Attrition at the LEA level saw similar fluctuations, with a current rate of 12% in the 2023-2024 school year, varying significantly across different counties—from a low of 7% to a high of 18%. The percentage of teachers who did not return to the same school or Local Education Agency (LEA) varied, with 10% of teachers leaving their LEA in the 2021-2022 school year. The rates also showed significant variability across different counties, from as low as 7% in Allegany and Cecil to as high as 18% in Dorchester (Meadows & Haislet, 2024; Choudhury, 2022).

New teachers are particularly vulnerable, with a 13.6% attrition rate within the first three years of service, and teachers of color face even higher turnover rates. Understanding and addressing these dynamics are crucial for improving teacher retention and student outcomes in Maryland (Choudhury, 2022).

The reasons for teacher exits are varied, with a substantial portion leaving for positions in education-related fields (27%) or due to voluntary resignation (22%). Other reasons include retirement (15%) and a smaller percentage citing dissatisfaction with teaching or personal circumstances (Meadows & Haislet, 2024).

The Maryland Initiatives and Opportunities presentation revealed that overall turnover has increased over time in elementary schools, with some fluctuations. The lowest turnover rate was 4.7% in 2010, while the highest was 8.9% in 2016. On average, 6.6% of elementary teachers switch to another MCPS school yearly (Choudhury, 2022).

Middle school turnover rates showed a distinct pattern, with middle school science teachers displaying a higher likelihood of turnover than teachers of other subjects. While middle school attrition rates have remained relatively stable, they were not as prominently documented as elementary turnover rates (Choudhury, 2022).

High school turnover rates displayed patterns different from those in elementary and middle schools. High school science teachers had the lowest

attrition rates among high school subject teachers. Additionally, teachers at high schools with a higher percentage of Free and Reduced Meals (FARMS) students were less likely to leave than educators with lower FARMS rates (Choudhury, 2022).

The study recommended enhancing support for teachers in high-stress environments and schools with high FARMS populations and addressing the specific needs of middle school science teachers to improve teacher retention and well-being in Maryland. Since the study, societal factors have introduced additional personal and professional stressors to teacher responsibilities and workloads (Choudhury, 2022).

This dynamic underscores the need for ongoing efforts to address teacher retention, especially given the high costs associated with turnover and the impact on student learning continuity.

7.3.2. Anne Arundel County

7.3.2.1. Staff Climate Survey

Anne Arundel County Public Schools (AACPS) has proactively enhanced its school climate. While the public school system website has not published specific staff climate survey data, the school board presentation identifies an effort to improve teacher retention by focusing on elevating teachers and school leadership. Key initiatives include increasing teacher pay, implementing a performance-based career ladder, and significantly improving teacher preparation and

professional development. These efforts aim to build a teaching workforce that more accurately reflects the racial and ethnic diversity of the student body. Despite these measures, teacher recruitment remains challenging, with Maryland historically importing more educators than it produces locally. Only 45% of educators are from Maryland institutions, while the remaining 55% come from out-of-state colleges (Schallheim, 2024).

The 2023-2024 school year has shown a positive trend, with a 13% increase in the applicant pool, indicating that recent efforts to attract more teachers are beginning to yield results. However, teacher retention remains an area of concern. Following a spike in turnover rates to 13% during the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a notable decline to 10% in the past academic year. This improvement reflects a concerted effort to stabilize staffing across various roles, from teaching to support staff positions. In the 2021-2022 school year, 11% of teachers did not return, which has since been matched by the statewide attrition rate of 12.6% for the SY 2023-2024. Teacher vacancies have fluctuated significantly, with 108 positions unfilled in the 2021-2022 school year, highlighting ongoing challenges in maintaining a stable and effective teaching workforce (Meadows & Haislet, 2024).

Integrating arts into wellness programs aligns seamlessly with the Anne Arundel County School Board's mission, which emphasizes students' holistic development and fosters a supportive learning

environment. The district can enhance students' emotional and mental health by focusing on arts integration for wellness while enriching their academic experience. Art has been shown to reduce stress, improve emotional expression, and foster resilience, which are critical components in supporting students' overall well-being. Incorporating creative activities into the curriculum can also help build a more inclusive and empathetic school culture where students feel valued and understood. This approach supports individual student growth and aligns with the board's commitment to creating a nurturing and dynamic educational environment, ultimately contributing to improved student engagement and academic success.

7.3.3. Montgomery County

7.3.3.1. Staff Climate Surveys

The Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) Staff Climate Survey, administered in the spring of 2023, provides critical insights into the perceptions and experiences of school-based staff. With a response rate of 8,638 completed surveys, the data offers a snapshot of staff engagement, satisfaction, and areas needing improvement. This survey, conducted in alignment with the Strategic Plan's focus on well-being and Family Engagement, serves as a tool for evaluating staff morale and the effectiveness of the work environment (Montgomery County Public Schools, 2023).

Survey results highlight several critical areas of staff sentiment. Notably, most respondents feel a sense of belonging at their schools, with 73.6% of all school-based staff indicating a positive sense of belonging. However, there is variability across racial and ethnic groups. For instance, Asian respondents reported a slightly higher sense of belonging (77.6%) than White respondents (74.8%). Similarly, the sense of connection with other adults in the school is relatively high. However, it varies by demographic, with Asian and Hispanic/Latino staff feeling slightly more connected than their Black or African American counterparts (Montgomery County Public Schools, 2023).

The survey results also reflect on the positive and negative aspects of the working environment. Respectful relationships between staff and students are viewed positively by 70.7% of respondents, though this figure shows some variation among racial and ethnic groups. Overall, 56.2% of staff reported a positive working environment, with Asian respondents showing a more favorable view (68.9%) compared to White respondents (54.8%) (Montgomery County Public Schools, 2023).

Responses regarding the frequency of engagement in race-related discussions and professional development opportunities indicate a mixed experience. A substantial proportion of staff (75.9%) report that students have opportunities to learn about diverse cultures frequently,

though only 66.7% feel encouraged to think deeply about race-related topics. The frequency of discussing major race-related news events and providing feedback on teaching or work also reflects areas where there is room for growth (Montgomery County Public Schools, 2023). The survey data underscores the importance of addressing disparities in staff experiences and perceptions. The variation in responses among different racial and ethnic groups suggests that targeted actions may be needed to foster a more inclusive and supportive work environment. By incorporating these insights into School Improvement Plans (SIPs), MCPS aims to enhance staff satisfaction and engagement, ultimately supporting better student outcomes.

7.3.4. Prince Georges County

7.3.4.1. Staff Climate Surveys

In 2023, Prince George's County Public Schools (PGCPS) administered its Climate & Culture Survey in partnership with Hanover Research to gain comprehensive insights into the perspectives of staff, students, and parents regarding critical aspects of the district's mission, including Educational Excellence, Excellence in Equity, Workforce & Operational Excellence, and Mental Health. This annual survey aims to identify strengths and areas for improvement, fostering a supportive and effective educational environment (Hanover Research, 2023).

The 2023 survey revealed several notable findings. On the positive side, staff expressed high confidence in their ability to deliver culturally responsive, standards-aligned, and social-emotional instruction. Most respondents, including staff and parents, felt welcomed and connected to their schools. However, there were significant areas of concern. A notable gap was observed in students' perceptions of the emotional climate at school, with lower levels of agreement than staff and parents. Additionally, issues related to safety and bullying, particularly concerning physical appearance and race/ethnicity, were highlighted as areas needing attention. Furthermore, while students and parents generally found the provided mental health resources informative, there was room for improvement in addressing the physical conditions of middle and high school environments (Hanover Research, 2023).

In contrast, the 2024 survey showed both progress and ongoing challenges. The percentage of staff feeling connected to their schools remained high, and the overall participation rate increased significantly, indicating growing engagement with the survey process. A notable improvement in the applicant pool for teaching positions suggested successful recruitment efforts. Retention rates also showed some improvement, with decreased turnover from the previous year. Nevertheless, the survey results continued to reflect similar concerns regarding student safety and the cleanliness of school facilities. The

district has responded by focusing on several key strategies, including enhancing academic achievement, improving school climate, and expanding social-emotional learning (SEL) and mental health supports (Hanover Research, 2024).

These efforts underscore PGCPS's commitment to addressing the issues identified through the survey and fostering a positive and inclusive educational environment.

7.3.5. Summary of Findings

7.3.5.1. Demographic Data

The demographic data for Anne Arundel, Montgomery, and Prince George's Counties reveal distinct characteristics and trends critical for understanding local needs and planning interventions.

Anne Arundel County, Montgomery County, and Prince George's County each present unique demographic and socio-economic profiles, though they share some similarities. Anne Arundel County has a population of approximately 588,261, with a predominant age group of 30 to 34 years old, a high educational attainment rate (47.8% with a bachelor's degree or higher), and a relatively low poverty rate of 6.2%. Montgomery County, with a larger population of 1,062,061, peaks in the 35 to 39 age range, higher educational attainment (60.9% with a bachelor's degree or higher), and a slightly higher poverty rate of 7.9%. Prince George's County, with a population of 967,201,

exhibits a significant decrease in the 15 to 34 age range, the lowest educational attainment among the three counties (36.9% with a bachelor's degree or higher), and the highest poverty rate at 10.9%. While all three counties have high rates of K-12 enrollment (67.3% in Anne Arundel, 69.1% in Montgomery, and 63.1% in Prince George's), the economic and educational disparities highlight varying socio-economic challenges and opportunities across these regions.

7.3.5.2. Indicators of Student Mental Health Needs

The analysis across Anne Arundel, Montgomery, and Prince George's Counties reveals critical insights into youth's mental health and behavioral challenges, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions and holistic support strategies. Nationwide, rising suicide rates, opioid use, and the detrimental impact of social media highlight the urgency of implementing effective programs, such as arts integration, to enhance mental well-being. This need is echoed in Anne Arundel County, where increasing suicide rates, particularly among younger individuals and white males, alongside a rise in juvenile crime and substance use, underscore significant mental health challenges. Gun violence and chronic absenteeism also present substantial issues, suggesting that targeted interventions and enhanced support systems are necessary.

Montgomery County's data further emphasizes these challenges with rising gun violence and juvenile crime, coupled with a troubling

increase in opioid-related incidents. Despite a decline in suicide-related hospitalizations, the county faces significant issues with firearm offenses and chronic absenteeism, indicating a pressing need for improved mental health and wellness programs. The impact of social media on student well-being has prompted legal actions and policy updates, reflecting growing concerns about digital influences on mental health.

In Prince George's County, high rates of suicidal thoughts and opioid-related deaths highlight severe mental health struggles. Although there has been a decrease in juvenile firearm crimes and opioid-related deaths, the persistence of these issues, combined with rising juvenile crime and chronic absenteeism, necessitates continued focus on prevention and intervention strategies. The county's efforts to address social media's impact and recent improvements in student attendance are positive steps, yet challenges remain in combating behavioral issues and supporting mental health effectively.

Overall, the data from these counties reveal a clear need for comprehensive, evidence-based interventions to address the complex mental health and behavioral issues faced by youth. Art integration programs and other holistic approaches could be vital in improving outcomes and addressing the disparities identified across these regions.

7.3.5.3. Indicators of Teacher Mental Health Needs

The staff climate surveys from Anne Arundel, Montgomery, and Prince George's Counties reveal a nuanced picture of educational environments and staff experiences, with implications for school improvement strategies.

In Anne Arundel County, efforts to enhance teacher retention through increased pay, professional development, and improved preparation are showing positive results, with a 13% increase in the applicant pool and a reduction in turnover rates to 10%. However, challenges remain in recruitment and maintaining a diverse teaching workforce. Integrating arts into wellness programs aligns with the district's goals by addressing students' emotional and mental health and supporting a more inclusive and empathetic school culture.

Montgomery County's survey data highlights a generally positive sense of belonging among staff, with 73.6% feeling connected to their schools. However, there are disparities among racial and ethnic groups, with variations in staff perceptions of the working environment and engagement in race-related discussions. The survey underscores the need for targeted actions to foster a more inclusive and supportive work environment, aligning with the district's focus on improving staff satisfaction and student outcomes through School Improvement Plans (SIPs).

In Prince George's County, the 2023 Climate & Culture Survey revealed high staff confidence in delivering effective, culturally responsive instruction but identified concerns regarding student perceptions of school climate, safety, and bullying. The 2024 survey indicated progress in recruitment and retention, with improvements in the applicant pool and staff retention rates. Nonetheless, issues related to student safety and facility conditions persist, prompting the district to enhance academic achievement and expand social-emotional learning (SEL) and mental health supports.

Overall, while each county has made strides in addressing staff and student needs, the surveys highlight ongoing challenges that require continued focus on improving climate, support systems, and inclusivity within schools.

7.3.5.4. Conclusion

By addressing critical mental and emotional well-being, arts integration can significantly enhance student and teacher wellness across Anne Arundel, Montgomery, and Prince George's Counties. For students, incorporating arts into the curriculum provides a creative outlet for emotional expression, reducing stress and fostering resilience. This holistic approach helps create a supportive and engaging learning environment, improving overall student engagement and academic performance. In Anne Arundel County, where there is a focus on integrating arts to bolster emotional health, this can

contribute to a more inclusive school culture and better support for students facing mental health challenges. For teachers, arts integration offers a refreshing pedagogical approach that can alleviate burnout and enhance job satisfaction. By participating in creative processes and seeing the positive impact on their students, teachers can experience increased professional fulfillment and reduced stress.

In Montgomery and Prince George's Counties, where staff surveys indicate a need for improved school climate and support, integrating arts into educational practices can enhance the work environment, promote teacher well-being, and help bridge gaps identified in staff engagement and morale.

Arts integration supports wellness by fostering a positive and dynamic learning environment, benefiting students and educators.

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