

Growing Up Seen, Heard, & Supported

Transforming Youth Mental Health
& Well-being in Greater Cincinnati

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Summer 2026 Interns

Every young person deserves the opportunity to have good mental health and well-being.

Good mental health and well-being in childhood and adolescence are influenced by many things, including when young people feel like they:

Belong
Are seen and accepted for who they are by the people and places in their life.

Have someone to turn to
A trusted adult they can count on when things get hard.

Have a voice that's heard
In their own life, and in decisions that shape their community.

Can get help when they need it
Access to care and support the way they need it, when they need it.

Mental health and well-being are essential for a healthy, meaningful life. When young people thrive and reach their full potential, our community thrives. Young people across Greater Cincinnati are our community's future, and they are, more importantly, *our present*.

They bring real strengths and clear ideas that can lead the way toward a community that supports the well-being of youth across Greater Cincinnati, especially those facing the greatest barriers to opportunity.

Many young people in Greater Cincinnati are hopeful:

87%
are optimistic about their future

85%
feel their life is meaningful

84%
have purpose and direction in life

83%
are satisfied with life

And yet, not every young person can count on the same support.

The systems, resources, and supportive adults around them are not equally – or fairly – available to every young person. Sometimes, without meaning to, they get in the way instead, which can undermine young people's well-being and ability to thrive at home, school, and in the community. This can look like:

- Signs posted at businesses that keep young people out of shared community spaces
- Unfair treatment and policies that marginalize based on who a young person is: their race, gender, sexuality, or background
- Adults who are struggling themselves, with their own mental health, life stressors, or capacity to show up
- Discipline policies that focus on punishment instead of providing an opportunity to learn
- Communities that lack the vital conditions for well-being, such as affordable housing, jobs that pay a living wage, and reliable transportation [1]

What conditions around young people need to change to help them all belong and thrive? This work is urgent and necessary, and solutions need to be designed with youth, not for youth.

Our young people need us all to show up, make room for youth voices and work together to create better opportunities and supports. By doing so, we'll do better as a community.



Cohort 1 Youth Fellows with facilitators at Youth at the Center

About Hopeful Empowered Youth: HEY! Greater Cincinnati

Hopeful Empowered Youth (HEY!) is a regional coalition transforming youth mental health and well-being across a 12-county region in Northern Kentucky and Southwest Ohio by putting youth leadership at the center of systemic change.

HEY! emerged from youth and adults working together – designing with, not for youth. It began with listening sessions involving more than 60 young people from across the region and continued through the creation of the HEY! Youth Fellowship and Greater Cincinnati Youth Mental Health Corps – even the name HEY! came from youth. Young people in the region are clear. They want:

- Safe spaces where they can genuinely belong
- A say in decisions that affect them
- Trusted adults they can count on
- Better access to care that supports the whole person and respects their culture and identity

HEY! brings together over 300 youth leaders, educators, healthcare providers, and community partners to act on what young people told us they need. Integrating the science of mental health with youth-led innovation, HEY! Youth Fellows guide decision-making and shape strategies across three key focus areas:

- **Schools**
- **Community & Caregivers**
- **Treatment**

We are committed to a region where all young people ages 0–24 can thrive, and because different youth face different obstacles, reaching that goal requires tailored support. We are intentionally directing energy and resources to Black and Hispanic youth, LGBTQ+ youth, and system-involved youth ages 12–24, including young people involved in foster care or juvenile justice. By centering their experiences, we can build solutions that work better for young people across our region.

Consider this an invitation to join a HEY! Working Group and be part of building a stronger community where young people have the power, agency, and support to shape their own futures.

Scan to visit **hopefulempoweredyouth.org** and learn how to get involved.

About this report



Amaya, Cohort 1 Fellow

This report is based on a survey of nearly **2,000 young people ages 13 to 24**, living across 12 counties in Greater Cincinnati that span both Ohio and Kentucky, conducted February–March 2026. It looks at how young people are doing when it comes to belonging, agency, trusted adults, and their mental health and well-being. Where relevant, the regional data are compared to national benchmarks from Surgo Health's Youth Mental Health Tracker (YMHT), so we can see how young people in this region are faring relative to their peers across the country.

The survey intentionally reached young people across race, gender, sexual orientation, income level, and geography – including Black, Hispanic, LGBTQ+, and low-income youth – so the results reflect the full diversity of the region, not just the young people easiest to reach.

The results were weighted using U.S. Census data, so they represent the region's youth population as a whole. The sections that follow highlight the groups and settings with the most statistically meaningful differences. The complete results for every measure and subgroup, as well as detailed methodology, are available in the Methodology and Appendix sections at the end of this report.

This report, along with the survey questions and data behind it, is meant to be a shared resource: a way for our community to see where things stand today, track progress over time, and know where investment and attention are most needed. This survey and report were also a collaboration: HEY! Youth Fellows and Interns, researchers, and community stakeholders helped shape the survey from the start – from what to measure to how the questions were worded – and stayed involved through interpreting what the results mean. That same collaboration continues now, as this report is shared and acted on, together.

A letter from HEY! Youth Fellows

To Our Greater Cincinnati Community,

When youth help shape research about their well-being, the results can better show the challenges they face and the conditions that help them to thrive. In the past, conversations about youth mental health and well-being were conducted around youth rather than with youth. We are changing this at HEY!

HEY! Youth Fellows and other young people said that success in improving youth mental health and well-being should be measured by the everyday factors that affect it – factors such as belonging, community, agency, and access to care when we need it. As youth, we recognize that well-being extends far beyond whether someone is experiencing a mental health crisis. Everyday factors such as having a trusted adult can determine whether we feel supported and able to make choices about our futures. We also recognize that these experiences are not shared equally among youth in the region. This is why it was important to include the voices of young people who may have different experiences because of discrimination and other challenges, including Black, Hispanic, LGBTQ+, and economically disadvantaged youth.

This project combines local data and the opinions of local youth. Alongside HEY! and the data team, HEY! Youth Fellows and other young people gave feedback over time that shaped what data was measured, what the survey should focus on, and what questions should be asked. We chose the statistics that felt most important to us and helped brainstorm how the findings could be clearly shared so that they could lead to change that betters our community.

Data and numbers are important, but they are only part of the big picture. Young people can help explain why a finding exists, how these statistics show up in our day-to-day lives, and what types of efforts might make a difference. Combining the data with the direct experiences of youth helps us understand what the findings actually mean in our lives, not just identify where we are struggling.

To young people across Greater Cincinnati – this report is for you. This is our story and the way we tell it belongs to us. Our involvement in this work doesn't end with this survey. We encourage you to share these findings with your friends, teachers, counselors, caregivers, parents, and other trusted adults in your life. Ask your friends if the findings reflect their experiences. Talking about this data in your communities can help ensure we are heard so that adults can better understand what young people across Greater Cincinnati are experiencing.

To those reading this report – to policymakers, educators, parents, doctors and therapists, store owners, funders, and community partners: We hope you see these findings are beyond just numbers. We hope that having open conversations about what these findings mean encourages all of us to think critically about what inequities still exist. We also hope they inspire you to think about how each one of us can take action in our communities to support youth well-being.

With hope,

HEY! Fellows

Key takeaways

This report shares what young people across Greater Cincinnati are experiencing – the strengths, gaps, and inequities – in their mental health, well-being, and the everyday supports that help them thrive.

With this shared understanding, people across the region – from schools, community groups, healthcare providers, policymakers, and funders to families and young people themselves – can ask better questions and act together on the systems and structures that matter most. Below are four key takeaways.

Key terms, as defined by youth

Belonging

Can be true self, accepted, included by others in the groups or places you spend time

Personal agency

Feel trusted to make everyday decisions about your life

Collective agency

Have a real say & share power in decisions that affect your community and the lives of youth

Trusted adult

An adult in your life you feel comfortable talking to about emotional help and support

1. Belonging, agency, and trusted adults are key pillars that help youth thrive. While all three are strongest at home, they are harder to find at school and in the community.

- Youth with belonging, agency, and trusted adults are more likely than peers without them to report greater life satisfaction, optimism, and meaning.
- About **8 in 10** young people feel they belong at home (84%), but fewer feel that way at school (68%) or in the community (59%). A similar pattern holds for agency and trusted adults.
- Fewer than half of youth (48%) have all three pillars in place at school, but when they do, **8 in 10** youth (79%) report good mental health along with a hopeful, meaningful outlook on life.

2. Well-being is strong in the region – but many youth still carry the burden of poor mental health.

- Almost **7 in 10** youth in Greater Cincinnati (68%) are thriving – reporting both good recent mental health and good well-being – outpacing youth nationally (63%).
- Real resilience sits alongside real struggle: Even among youth who reported poor recent mental health, **6 in 10** still reported good well-being. Across all youth, fewer than **1 in 10** reported struggling with both poor recent mental health and poor well-being.
- Positive well-being is common: over **8 in 10** youth report life satisfaction (83%), meaning (85%), and optimism (87%).
- At the same time, many young people are struggling with mental health: more than **1 in 3** youth in Greater Cincinnati (37%) report symptoms of depression or anxiety, higher than youth nationally (33%), and higher than the 21% locally reporting poor recent mental health.

3. Not every young person can count on the same systems and support. Youth whose communities face discrimination, economic injustice, or other challenges are also less likely to have supportive adults in their corner.

- LGBTQ+, low-income, Black, and Hispanic young people are more likely than peers to report struggling with their mental health. Behind this, many of those same youth face more bullying and unfair treatment than their peers because of who they are.
- At home, at school, and in the community, low-income and LGBTQ+ young people are less likely to feel like they belong or have agency, and LGBTQ+ youth also have less access to a trusted adult.
- Geographic differences show a similar pattern: youth in rural Ohio report less agency in every setting and are least likely to have a trusted adult at home or in the community. Youth in rural Kentucky report less access to a trusted adult at school.
- Low-income youth are more likely than their peers to seek professional mental health care (77% versus 59%), and LGBTQ+ youth seek it at similar rates as their peers, yet both groups are far less likely to actually receive care once they ask.

4. Young people are ready to lead. It's the conditions around them that need to change.

- Nearly **8 in 10** young people (78%) say having a real voice in decisions that affect their community is important to them. Almost **9 in 10** young people (87%) report feeling like they can do things to help others, such as family, friends, volunteering, or giving to charity.
- Belonging, agency, and trusted adults are built by specific, changeable actions at home, at school, and in the community: whether an adult notices when a young person is struggling, listens, follows through, and includes them in decisions.



Youth Design Lab participants speak on a panel at the 2026 HEY! Convening and Showcase

What young people told us

Belonging, agency, & trusted adults: pillars that support youth thriving

When we belong, we are deeply connected to others and the places around us. When we have agency, we feel that our voice matters and that we have the power to shape our circumstances. And when we have people we trust and can turn to for support, advice, or connection, we can take joy in good times and cope with difficult events.

All three of these – belonging, agency, and trusted adults – are essential pillars that support youth thriving [2]. By looking at these foundations for good mental health and well-being, we can identify opportunities to build or strengthen them.

The next three sections look at each pillar separately and open with what young people across Greater Cincinnati report overall, then walk through the groups where we see the biggest differences. For each pillar, the survey asked about the same three settings individually (**home**, **school**, and **community**) and about the specific drivers – the everyday actions and conditions – that help support it in each setting.

Here's what we learned.

Belonging and why it matters

Belonging is a feeling of connection to people and places. It involves the sense that you can be your true self, and that you are genuinely accepted and included by the people and groups you spend your time with, whether that is family, friends, school, or community. Research links belonging with better mental health and well-being [1][3], and young people in this project said the same: feeling accepted as your true self matters as much as simply being part of a group.

Belonging matters well beyond the feeling itself. Young people who feel they belong **at home** are about **1.5×** as likely to report life satisfaction as those who do not. **At school**, those who belong are about **1.4×** as likely to report life satisfaction as those who do not. **In the community**, those who belong are about **1.4×** as likely to report confidence in handling stress as those who do not.

Young people's sense of belonging can vary from place to place. You can belong to a sports team and still feel you cannot be yourself at school, for example. That is why this survey measures belonging separately **at home**, **at school**, and **in the community**, and asks about both people (family, peers, teachers) and places.

While belonging is a subjective feeling, it's consistently shaped by factors that communities and policies can influence. In each setting, the survey looked at modifiable factors that drive belonging: opportunities and spaces to belong, youth skills and confidence for connecting, and how other people show up in the space.

> *"You get a sense of camaraderie among your peers, and it is a space that you can come back to. It gives you something to look forward to when it has just been a bad week."*
>
> — Young person, HEY! youth feedback session

Belonging – as defined by youth

Can be your true self, accepted, included by others in the groups or places you spend time.

Belonging is strongest at home, followed by school, then community

In Greater Cincinnati, young people's sense of belonging is strongest at home and then decreases in schools and community (Figure 1.1). The same place-based pattern holds across every group in this data, even when the levels differ.

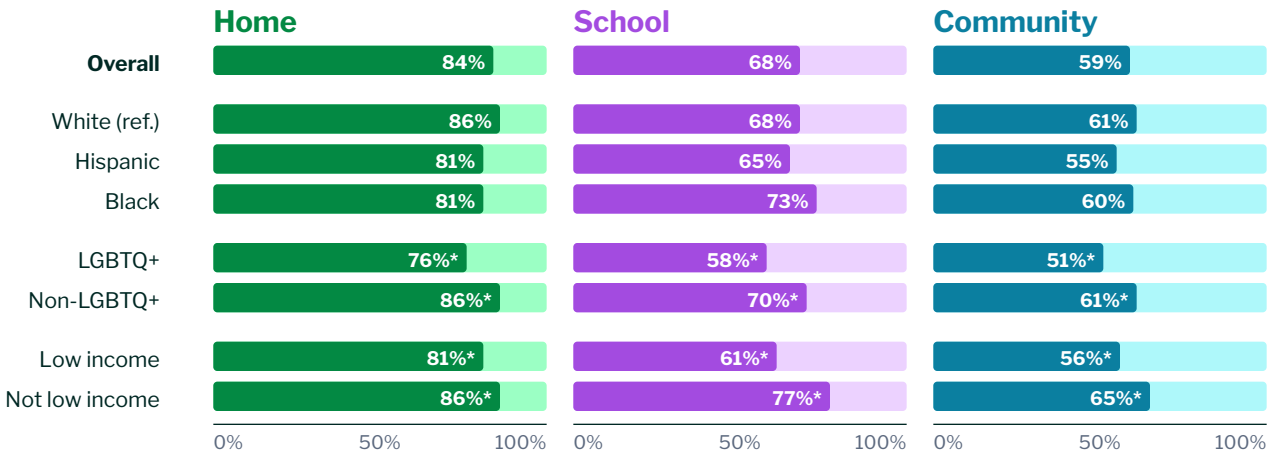
At home:
8 in 10 youth (84%) report belonging.

At school:
7 in 10 youth (68%) report belonging.

In the community:
6 in 10 youth (59%) report belonging.

The largest differences show up by **income** and by **LGBTQ+** status.

Figure 1.1 – Youth who report belonging, by setting and group



Bars show youth who report feeling belonging all or most of the time in that setting. *Statistically significant difference (details in Methodology). White (non-Hispanic) is the reference for race and ethnicity, and each group is compared with it separately. In this report, "low-income youth" describes young people who reported economic hardship based on food/day-to-day money worries and/or receipt of government assistance.

On the broadest measure of belonging, **Greater Cincinnati also compares well to national estimates:** more than **84%** of young people here say they feel part of a group (friends, school, or where they live), compared to about **76%** of youth nationally (YMHT) [4].

Low-income youth report less belonging – and fewer of the drivers that support it

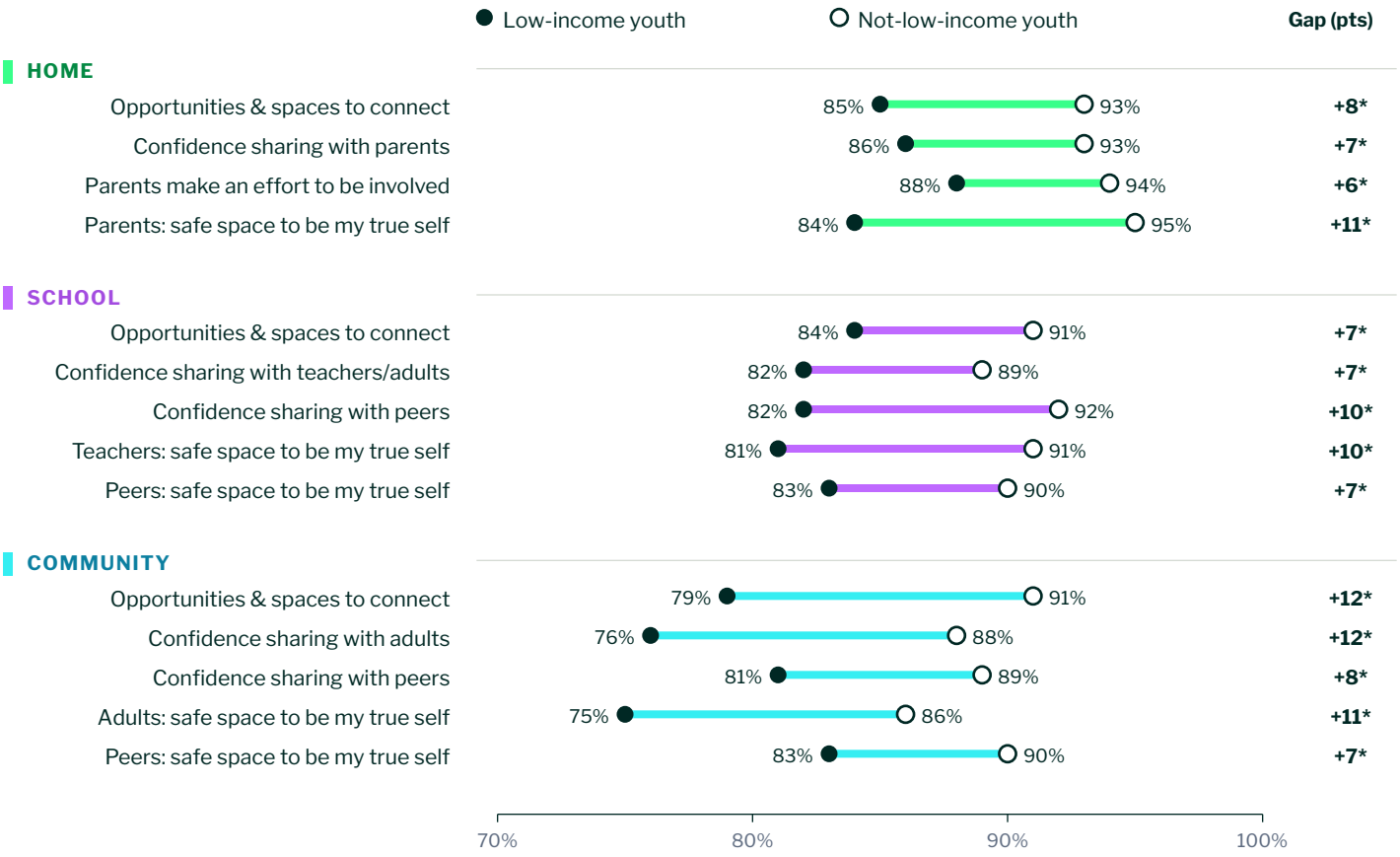
Low-income youth report a lower sense of belonging than peers from higher-income households, a sign that families, schools, and communities have room to build more welcoming environments (Figure 1.1):

At home: 81% of low-income youth report belonging versus **86%** of peers.

At school: 61% of low-income youth versus **77%** of peers – the widest gap of all settings and groups.

In the community: 56% of low-income youth versus **65%** of peers.

Figure 1.2 – Belonging drivers by economic hardship, all settings



Dots show the share of youth who have each driver; gap = percentage-point difference for low-income youth. *Statistically significant difference (details in Methodology). In this report, "low-income youth" describes young people who reported economic hardship based on food/day-to-day money worries and/or receipt of government assistance.

Not only do low-income youth report a lower sense of belonging, but they also face unequal access to the drivers of belonging – the everyday actions and conditions that build it.

Every driver measured here is less available to low-income youth than to their peers, and the gap widens from school to the community (Figure 1.2).

At home: Low-income youth report feeling less space to be their true self with parents.

At school: Low-income youth report less safe space to be themselves with teachers, and less confidence sharing with their peers.

In the community: The widest gaps between low-income youth and their peers are in confidence sharing with adults, and having opportunities and spaces to connect.

Driver Spotlight

Low-income youth report feeling less confidence sharing with adults and fewer opportunities & spaces to connect with others in the community.

LGBTQ+ youth report less belonging – and fewer of the drivers that support it

Driver Spotlight

LGBTQ+ youth report having fewer spaces where they can be their true selves with peers and less confidence sharing with adults in the community.

LGBTQ+ youth show the same place-based pattern as their peers, but at lower levels in every setting (Figure 1.1):

At home: 76% of LGBTQ+ youth report belonging versus **86%** of peers.

At school: 58% of LGBTQ+ youth report belonging versus **70%** of peers.

In the community: 51% of LGBTQ+ youth report belonging versus **61%** of peers.

That pattern carries into the drivers of belonging, too (Figure 1.3): **every driver measured here is less available to LGBTQ+ youth**, with gaps that widen away from home.

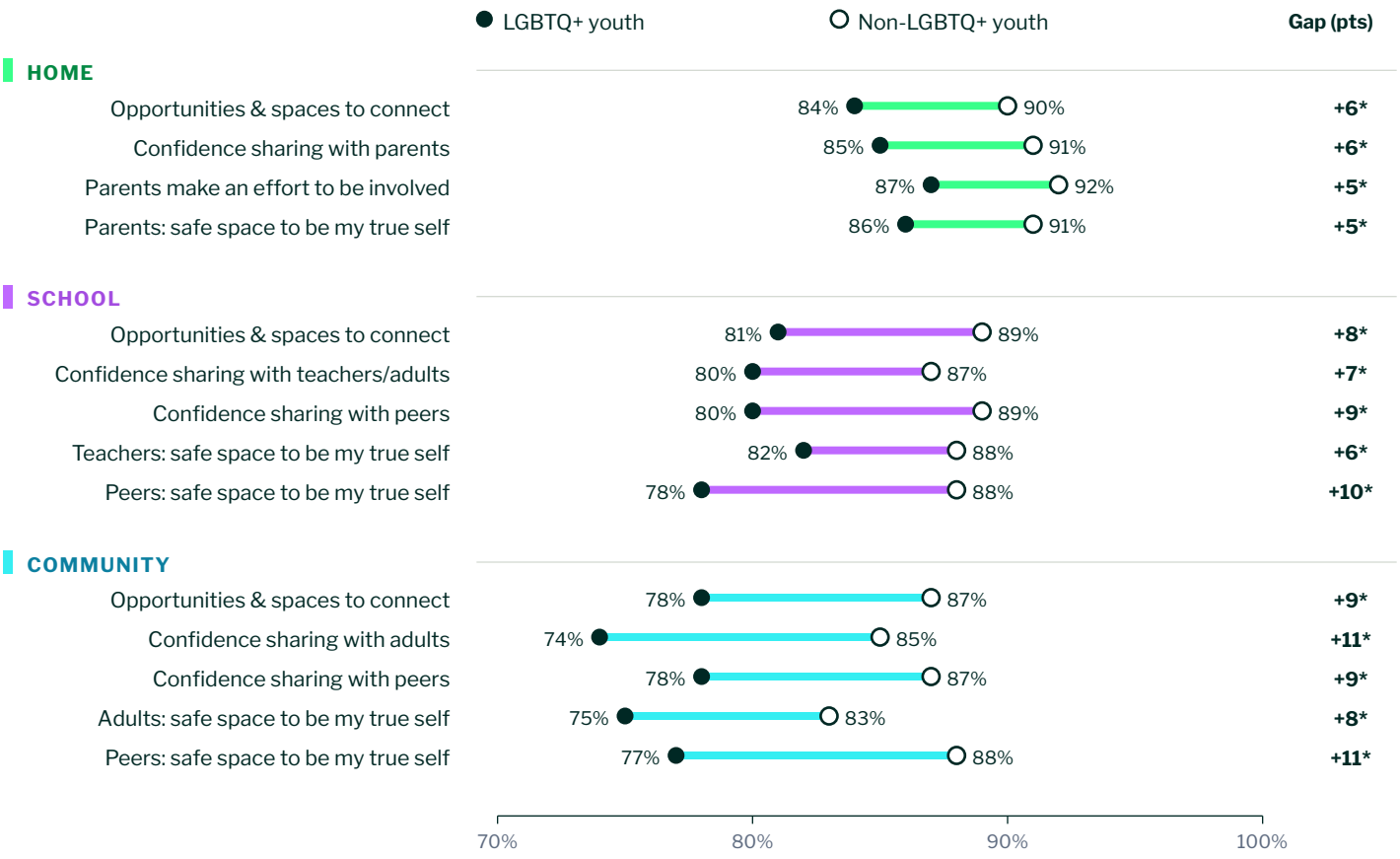
At school: LGBTQ+ youth report less space to be their true self and less confidence sharing with peers.

In the community: The widest gaps for LGBTQ+ youth include having a safe space to be their true self with peers and confidence sharing with adults.



Youth Design Lab participants pose for a group photo

Figure 1.3 – Belonging drivers by LGBTQ+ status, all settings



Dots show the share of youth who have each driver; gap = percentage-point difference for LGBTQ+ youth.
*Statistically significant difference (details in Methodology).

Agency and why it matters

Agency comes in two forms. Personal agency is the freedom to choose and decide how to act in your own life. Collective agency is having a real voice in decisions that affect young people and community life, not just being asked for input. Research ties both to better youth well-being [5], and the young people and stakeholders who shaped this survey wanted to capture both, because having a say can look very different **at home**, **at school**, and in the **community**.

A sense of agency matters to overall well-being. Young people who feel a sense of personal agency **at home** or **at school** are about **1.3x** as likely to report life satisfaction than peers. Those with personal agency **in the community**, and those with collective agency **at school** or **in the community**, are each about **1.2x** as likely to report a sense of direction in life and life satisfaction.

Differences in a sense of agency point to structures and opportunities worth examining. In each setting, the survey looked at modifiable factors that drive agency, such as: how adults involve young people in decisions, having the information needed to participate, confidence to participate, and adults who make the space feel safe to contribute.

> *"I appreciated having safe spaces to get leadership opportunities, to practice presentations and speaking, where I could fail and learn. Being spat out at 18, 19 and having to learn those things in a more high-stakes setting can be intimidating."*
>
> — Young person, HEY! youth feedback session

Sense of agency stronger at home than at school and in the community

Young people across Greater Cincinnati were more likely to report the ability to make everyday decisions about their own lives (personal agency) than having a say in decisions affecting young people as a whole (collective agency):

Personal agency (Figure 2.1)

At home: about **8 in 10** youth (75%) report feeling personal agency.

At school: **6 in 10** youth (62%) report feeling personal agency.

In the community: **6 in 10** youth (59%) report feeling personal agency.

Collective agency (Figure 2.2)

At school: almost **6 in 10** youth (57%) report feeling collective agency.

In the community: just **half** of youth (51%) report feeling collective agency.

The largest differences show up by **income**, **LGBTQ+** status, and **geography**.

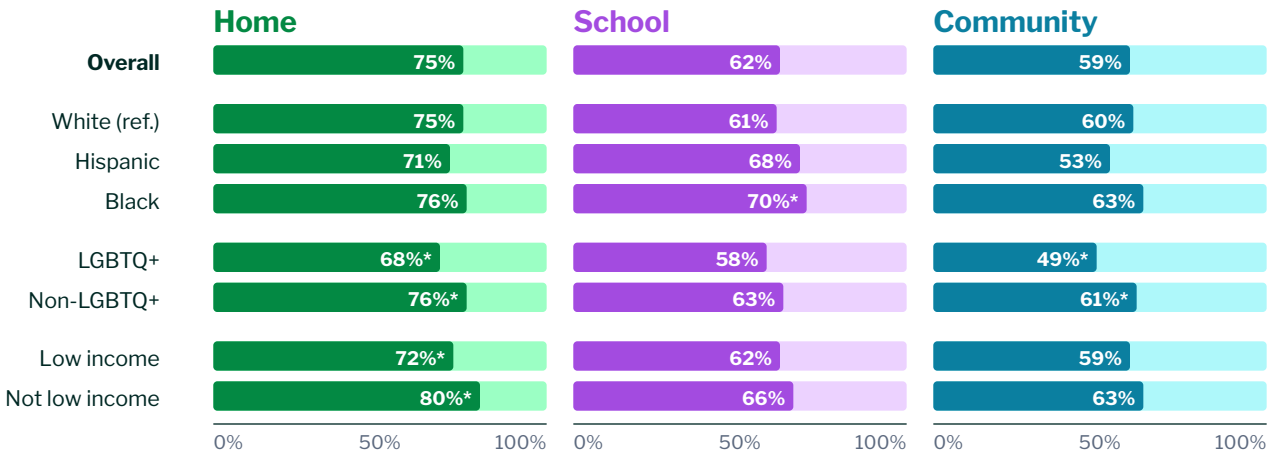
Personal agency – as defined by youth

Feeling trusted to make everyday decisions about your own life, big and small.

Collective agency – as defined by youth

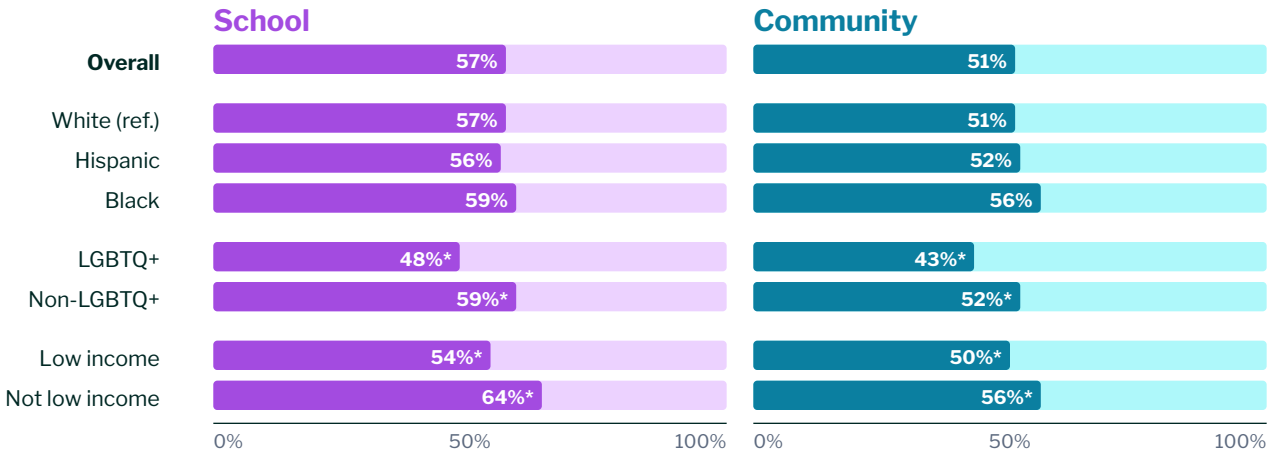
Having a real voice and a real share of power in decisions that affect your community and the lives of youth more broadly – not just being asked for input, but actually being heard.

Figure 2.1 – Youth who report personal agency, by setting and group



Bars show youth who report feeling personal agency all or most of the time in that setting. *Statistically significant difference (details in Methodology). White (non-Hispanic) is the reference for race and ethnicity, and each group is compared with it separately. In this report, "low-income youth" describes young people who reported economic hardship based on food/day-to-day money worries and/or receipt of government assistance.

Figure 2.2 – Youth who report collective agency, by setting and group



Bars show youth who report feeling collective agency all or most of the time in that setting. *Statistically significant difference (details in Methodology). White (non-Hispanic) is the reference for race and ethnicity, and each group is compared with it separately. Collective agency is measured at school and in the community only. In this report, "low-income youth" describes young people who reported economic hardship based on food/day-to-day money worries and/or receipt of government assistance.

Low-income youth report less agency – and fewer of the drivers that support it

Driver Spotlight

Low-income youth report having fewer safe spaces and less confidence to take part in decisions in the community.

Low-income youth report less personal agency at home, and less collective agency at school and in the community (Figures 2.1 and 2.2):

Personal agency

At home: 72% of low-income youth report personal agency versus **80%** of peers.

Collective agency

At school: 54% of low-income youth report collective agency versus **64%** of peers.

In the community: 50% of low-income youth report collective agency versus **56%** of peers.

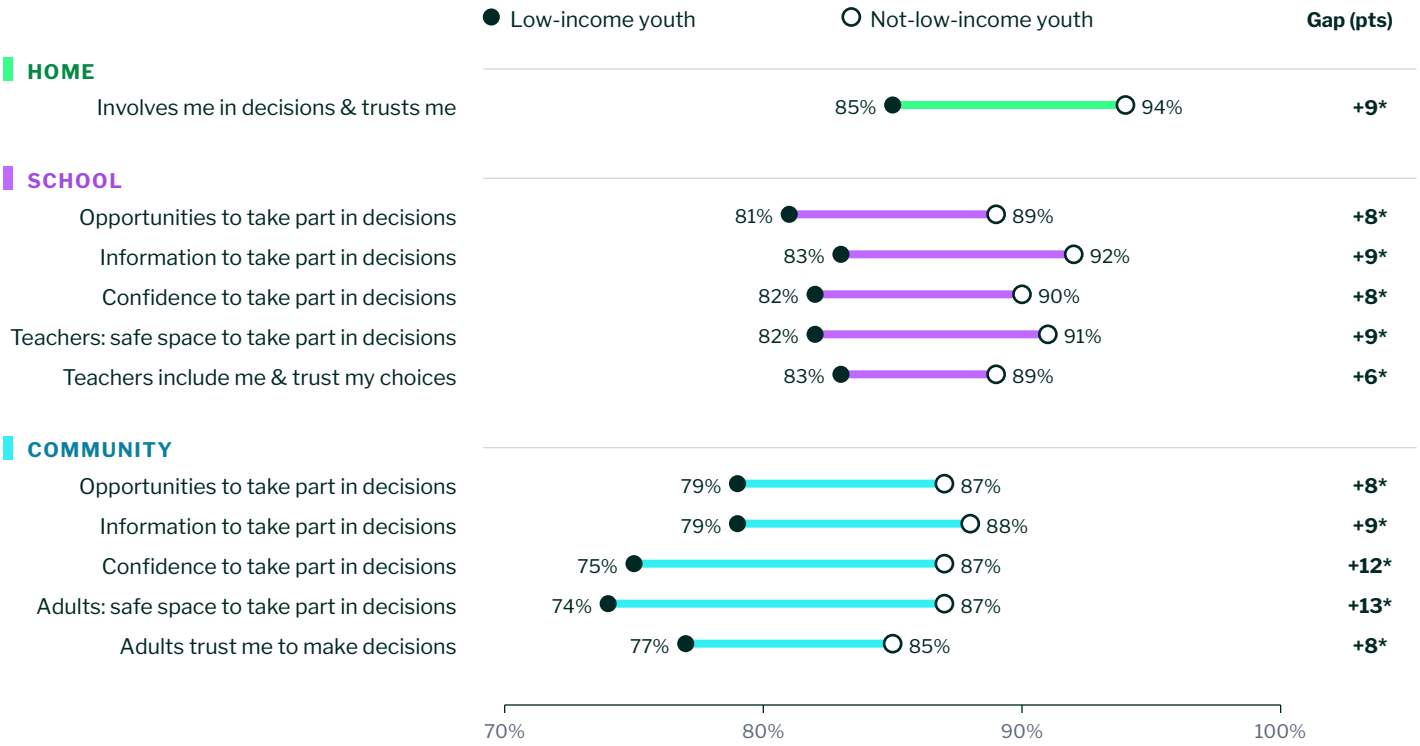
Low-income youth also face unequal access to the drivers of agency (Figure 2.3), with gaps that widen in the community:

At home: Low-income youth report fewer opportunities to take part in decisions than their peers.

At school: Low-income youth report less access to information for decision-making and fewer safe spaces for taking part in decisions than their peers.

In the community: Low-income youth face the widest gaps here, especially in having safe spaces to take part in decisions and feeling confident in doing so.

Figure 2.3 – Agency drivers by economic hardship, all settings



Dots show the share of youth who have each driver; gap = percentage-point difference for low-income youth. *Statistically significant difference (details in Methodology). In this report, "low-income youth" describes young people who reported economic hardship based on food/day-to-day money worries and/or receipt of government assistance.

LGBTQ+ youth report less agency – and fewer of the drivers that support it

LGBTQ+ youth report less personal agency at home, and less collective agency at school and in the community (Figures 2.1 and 2.2). In fact, collective agency is lower for LGBTQ+ youth than for any other group in this report, a sign that having a voice in shared decisions, not just personal ones, is an important place to focus:

Personal agency

At home: 68% of LGBTQ+ youth report personal agency versus **76%** of peers.

In the community: 49% of LGBTQ+ youth report personal agency versus **61%** of peers.

Collective agency

At school: 48% of LGBTQ+ youth report collective agency versus **59%** of peers.

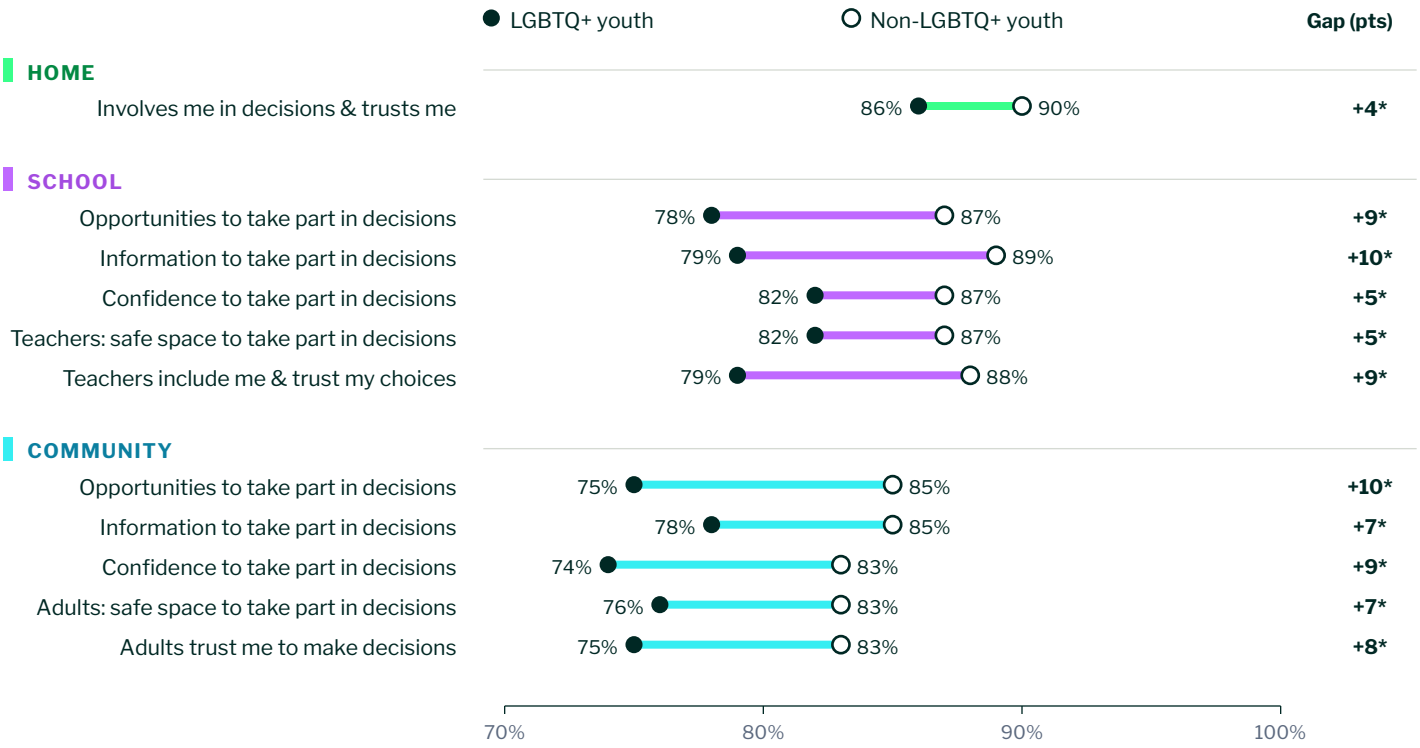
In the community: 43% of LGBTQ+ youth report collective agency versus **52%** of peers.

LGBTQ+ youth also face unequal access to the drivers of agency (Figure 2.4) – a sign that families, schools, and communities can create more space and opportunities to have their voices heard:

At school: LGBTQ+ youth report less access to information for decision-making than their peers.

In the community: LGBTQ+ youth report having fewer opportunities to take part in decision-making.

Figure 2.4 – Agency drivers by LGBTQ+ status, all settings



Dots show the share of youth who have each driver; gap = percentage-point difference for LGBTQ+ youth.
*Statistically significant difference (details in Methodology).

Driver Spotlight

LGBTQ+ youth report less access to information and opportunities to take part in decisions at school and in the community.

Youth from rural Ohio report less agency across every setting

Consistent differences in agency were associated with where youth lived: youth from rural Ohio reported less agency on every measure (personal and collective) across each setting compared to youth from Hamilton County, Ohio:

Personal agency

At school: **44%** in rural Ohio report personal agency versus about **66%** in Hamilton County, Ohio.

At home: **63%** of youth in rural Ohio report personal agency versus **77%** in Hamilton County, Ohio (and **81%** in suburban areas of Ohio).

In the community: **44%** of youth in rural Ohio report personal agency versus **63%** in Hamilton County, Ohio.

Collective agency

At school: **41%** of youth in rural Ohio report collective agency versus **59%** in Hamilton County, Ohio.

In the community: **38%** of youth in rural Ohio report collective agency versus **54%** in Hamilton County, Ohio.

This is unlikely to reflect rural young people wanting any less of a say in their lives or communities. It more likely reflects fewer formal chances to practice having agency: smaller schools with fewer clubs or student leadership structures, and community organizations that are harder to reach. This lines up with what young people themselves say builds agency and belonging alike: clubs are easier to sustain where there are more students and more adults to run them, and fewer transportation barriers to access shared spaces.

County clusters: Suburban Ohio = Butler, Warren · Rural Ohio = Brown, Clermont.

Black youth reported higher levels of personal agency at school

Black youth reported higher personal agency at school than white peers, 70% compared to 61%. This finding sparked real discussion when youth analyzed and reviewed this finding.

Rather than reading this as empowerment, **youth reviewers offered a more complicated interpretation**: it may reflect survival-driven responsibility more than genuine choice. Youth observed that Black students often must navigate barriers white students do not face. As one participant put it, "being exceptional can end up being treated as merely equal to [a white peer's] average," so some of what looks like 'agency' here may really be the burden of extra responsibility with less support, not more genuine power or choice.

The finding calls for further research to explore the meaning of agency across groups. Future surveys may ask directly whether a young person's sense of agency feels tied to their identity, for example. Or, to separate "more power" from "more responsibility," surveys may ask whether agency feels positive.

Trusted adults and why they matter

> *"Vulnerability is one of the first things you have to do for somebody to really trust you and actually get to know you. And both sides need to be vulnerable with each other."*
>
> — Young person, HEY! youth feedback session

Trusted adults – as defined by youth

Having adults in your life who you feel comfortable turning to for emotional support and guidance when things get hard.

Trusted adults are the people that youth can turn to for emotional help and support. Youth benefit most when they have more than one adult across settings and roles, because different adults may be better situated to support different developmental needs – emotional support, school help, career advice, and general mentorship can sit with different people [6]. This survey focuses on emotional help and support, based on HEY!'s mission and youth and stakeholder feedback.

Young people with a trusted adult **at home** are about **1.6x** as likely to report confidence in achieving their goals. Those with a trusted adult **at school** are about **1.5x** as likely to report optimism about the future. Those with a trusted adult **in the community** are about **1.2x** as likely to report finding life meaningful.

National surveys sometimes use a single, broad item to explore this pillar of youth well-being, asking whether youth have "at least one trusted adult." This survey explores the issue in more depth: one trusted adult may not be enough if support is limited elsewhere, may not be well-equipped to offer the type of support a young person needs, and in some cases may not be consistently safe. In each setting, the survey looked at modifiable drivers behind trusted adults that better capture the quality of those relationships to show where to act. These drivers focus on access (whether supportive adults are present) and emotional qualities that make it feel safe to share: listening, noticing struggles, being reliable, and offering a private space for support [6].

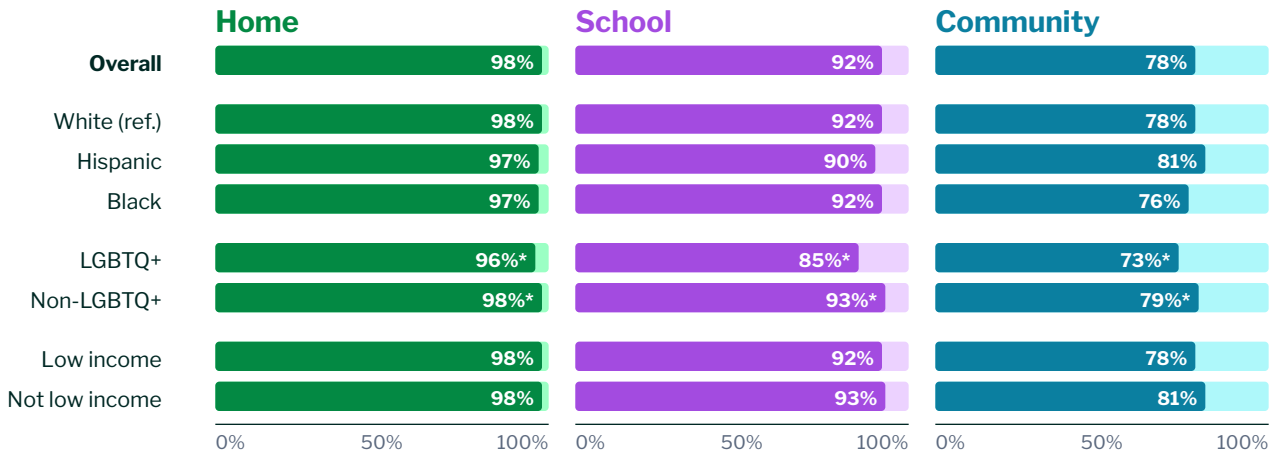
Most young people have a trusted adult at home and at school, but the quality of that support varies

On the broad measure of Greater Cincinnati's young people having at least one trusted adult, access is strong at home and school, then drops in the community (Figure 3.1):

- **At home: 98%** of youth report having a trusted adult.
- **At school: 92%** of youth report having a trusted adult.
- **In the community: 78%** of youth report having a trusted adult.

The largest differences in trusted adult access show up by **LGBTQ+** status and **geography**.

Figure 3.1 – Youth who report a trusted adult, by setting and group



Bars show youth who report at least one trusted adult in that setting. *Statistically significant difference (details in Methodology). White (non-Hispanic) is the reference for race and ethnicity, and each group is compared with it separately. In this report, "low-income youth" describes young people who reported economic hardship based on food/day-to-day money worries and/or receipt of government assistance.

LGBTQ+ youth report less access to trusted adults and lower quality of support

LGBTQ+ youth report having a trusted adult less often than non-LGBTQ+ peers in every setting (Figure 3.1):

At home: 96% of LGBTQ+ youth report having a trusted adult versus **98%** of peers.

At school: 85% of LGBTQ+ youth report having a trusted adult versus **93%** of peers – the widest access gap.

In the community: 73% of LGBTQ+ youth report having a trusted adult versus **79%** of peers.

Driver Spotlight

Fewer LGBTQ+ youth have a trusted adult who provides private support, notices when they struggle, or listens and takes their opinions seriously, especially in the community.

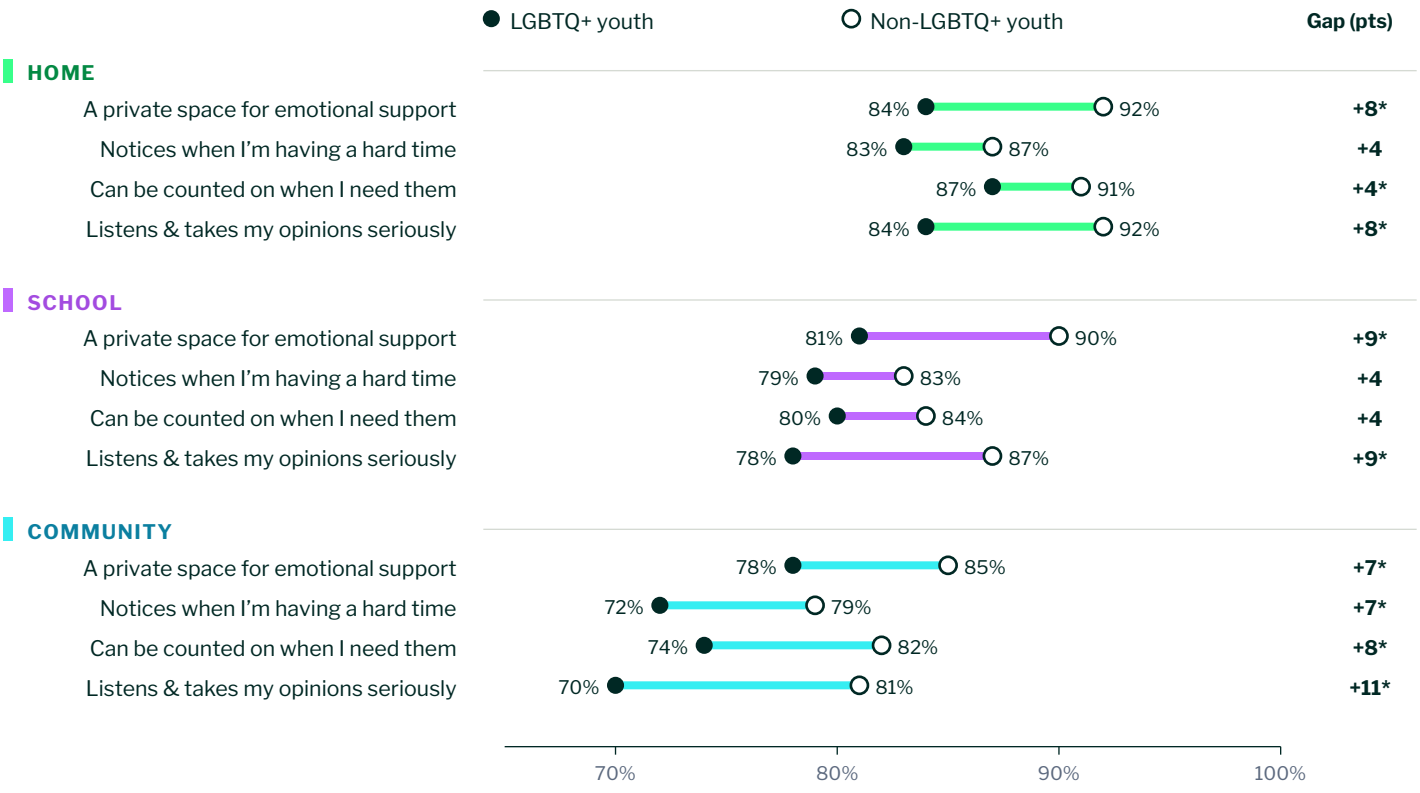
LGBTQ+ youth also face unequal access to the drivers of quality support (Figure 3.2):

At home and **at school**: LGBTQ+ youth report feeling less emotional support and confidence that adults listen and take their opinions seriously.

In the community: LGBTQ+ youth report notably less confidence than peers that adults there will listen and take their opinions seriously.

Where gaps exist, they point to an opportunity for schools and communities to build more consistent support. For LGBTQ+ youth, the gaps lie not only in access to trusted adults, but in whether adults around them feel safe to turn to for support.

Figure 3.2 – Trusted-adult drivers by LGBTQ+ status, all settings



Dots show the share of youth who have each driver; gap = percentage-point difference for LGBTQ+ youth. *Statistically significant difference (details in Methodology).

Youth report less access to trusted adults in rural Kentucky schools and rural Ohio communities

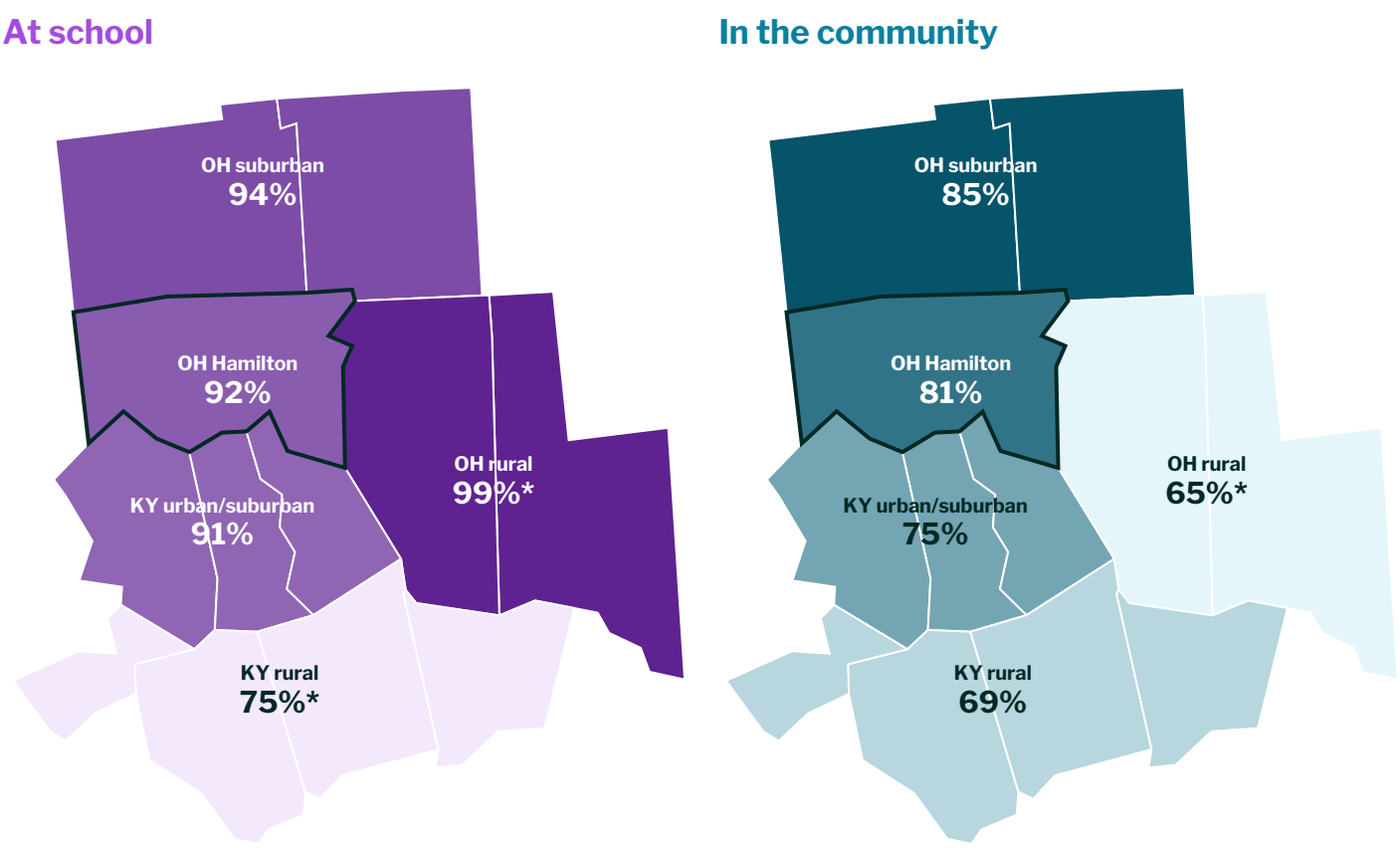
Geography is the other dimension where gaps in trusted-adult access show up (Figure 3.3):

At school: **75%** of youth in rural Kentucky report having a trusted adult at school – the lowest rate in the region – versus about **90%** or more of peers elsewhere.

In the community: **65%** of youth in rural Ohio report having a trusted adult in the community – the lowest rate in the region – versus about **80%** of peers elsewhere.

School appears to function as an especially important adult-support anchor for youth from rural Ohio. Youth here reported more trusted adults at school than peers in other areas, even while reporting fewer at home and in the community. Youth feedback suggests trusted adults at school are simply easier to reach than community organizations that require transportation in rural areas.

Figure 3.3 – Trusted adults by geography, at school and in the community



Percentage of youth who report having at least one trusted adult, by county cluster. *Statistically significant difference from Hamilton County, OH. County clusters: Hamilton County, OH (reference) · OH suburban = Butler, Warren · OH rural = Brown, Clermont · KY urban/suburban = Boone, Kenton, Campbell · KY rural = Grant, Gallatin, Pendleton, Bracken.

Lower % Higher % Hamilton County, Ohio (reference)

Mental health and well-being: the bigger picture

This report opened with a simple idea: good mental health and well-being take root when young people belong, have a voice that's heard, and have trusted adults in their corner. The first three sections showed where those key pillars stand across Greater Cincinnati. This section turns to what they add up to: how young people are actually doing when it comes to their overall mental health and well-being.

Ages 13 to 24 are formative years [8] when belonging, connection, and emotional well-being shape how young people learn, grow, and find their place in the community. Part of helping young people thrive means supporting good mental health and good mental well-being at the same time.

This section starts with where young people across Greater Cincinnati stand overall, how that compares nationally, and how mental health and well-being relate to each other. From there, it walks through where we see the biggest differences, and closes with the path young people take to access mental health care and where that path breaks down.

Struggles and strengths sit side-by-side

Good mental health

Lower burden from conditions like depression and anxiety, and fewer periods of feeling sad or overwhelmed by emotional difficulties.

Good mental well-being

Feeling content, connected, and purposeful, including feeling life satisfaction, meaning, optimism, and resilience.

Overall, young people across Greater Cincinnati have real struggles and strengths when it comes to their mental health and well-being (Figures 4.1 & 4.2):

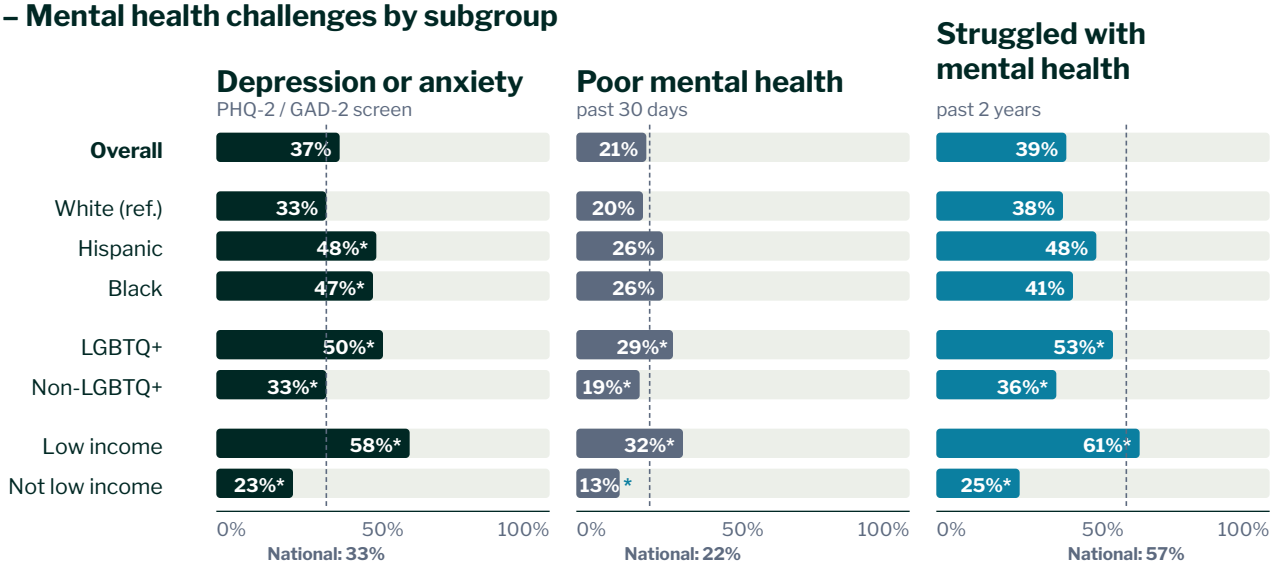
- More than **1 in 3** youth (37%) report symptoms of depression or anxiety.
- About **4 in 10** youth (39%) report a mental health struggle in the past two years, while about **2 in 10** youth (21%) report poor mental health in the past 30 days.
- At the same time, at least **8 in 10** youth report positive well-being on life satisfaction (83%), meaning (85%), direction in life (84%), and optimism (87%).

How does this compare nationally? The picture is mixed, depending on the measure (Figures 4.1 & 4.2) [4]. Young people in Greater Cincinnati report:

- Symptoms of depression or anxiety slightly more often than youth nationally (**37%** locally, **33%** national).
- Fewer mental health struggles over the past two years (**39%** here, **57%** national).
- Greater optimism about the future (**87%** here, **83%** national) and greater meaning in life (**85%** here, **81%** national).

> *If they are having a hard time with difficulties in their life, there are a lot of people who are going to struggle with just even [admitting] how they're doing."*
>
> — Young person, HEY! youth feedback session

Figure 4.1 – Mental health challenges by subgroup



*Statistically significant difference. Dashed lines: Surgo Health Youth Mental Health Tracker (YMHT), national survey of youth ages 13–24; shown for context, not tested for significance. PHQ-2 and GAD-2: Brief validated scales to measure depression and anxiety, combined into a single score. White (non-Hispanic) is the reference for race and ethnicity, and each group is compared with it separately. In this report, "low-income youth" describes young people who reported economic hardship based on food/day-to-day money worries and/or receipt of government assistance.

Everyday stressors

- About **2 in 3** young people (66%) report feeling academic pressure.
- Roughly **4 in 10** report bullying or cyberbullying (40%), and a similar share report unfair treatment because of who they are (44%).
- Nearly **9 in 10** youth (87%) use social media often, and close to half (44%) say it affects their well-being both positively and negatively.

Everyday stressors put this in more context and are a reminder that mental health and well-being are not shaped by young people alone – they are shaped by the environments around them.

Figure 4.2 – Well-being and resilience by subgroup



*Statistically significant difference. † Reverse-coded: the bar shows the share who do not report difficulty, so higher is better on every measure shown. Dashed line: Surgo Health Youth Mental Health Tracker (YMHT), national survey of youth ages 13–24; shown for context, not tested for significance. White (non-Hispanic) is the reference for race and ethnicity, and each group is compared with it separately. In this report, "low-income youth" describes young people who reported economic hardship based on food/day-to-day money worries and/or receipt of government assistance.

Mental health and well-being are related, but distinct – and both matter for thriving

Many factors shape whether a young person thrives [11], yet in this report, thriving specifically means reporting both good mental health and good well-being. A young person's experience of mental health and well-being can shift along a continuum from thriving to struggling, as life and the support around them changes. Looking at mental health and two measures of well-being together reveals four different patterns:

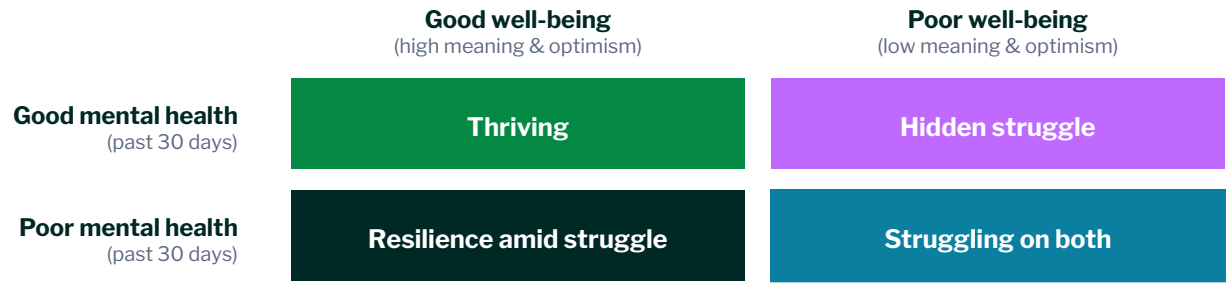


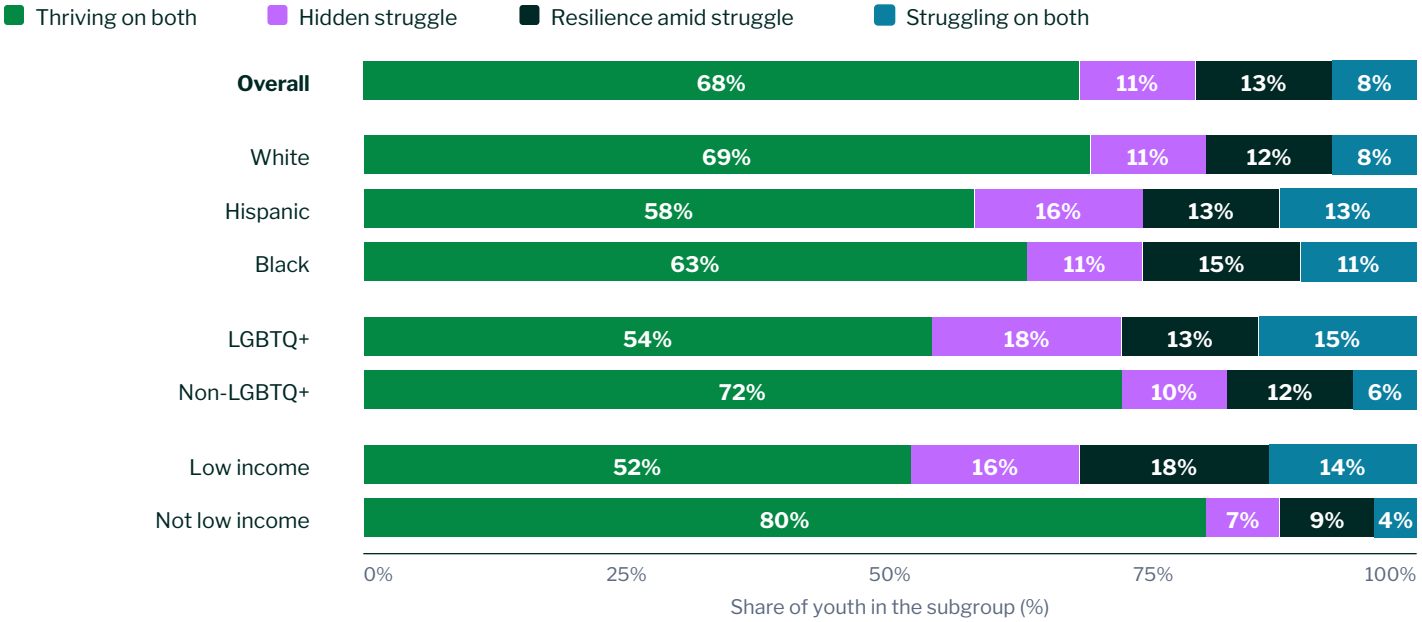
Figure 4.3 shows the share of youth in each of these patterns overall and by group:

- **Thriving on both: 68%** of young people report good mental health and good well-being.
- **Resilience amid struggle: 13%** report poor mental health but good well-being.
- **Hidden struggle: 11%** report good mental health but poor well-being.
- **Struggling on both:** Around **8%** report poor mental health and poor well-being.

Unequal struggle

Roughly **1 in 7** LGBTQ+ and low-income youth are struggling with both poor mental health and low well-being.

Figure 4.3 – Many youth are thriving, but those who struggle do so in different ways



Thriving on both = good recent mental health and good well-being (high meaning and optimism). Resilience amid struggle = poor mental health but good well-being. Hidden struggle = good mental health but poor well-being. Struggling on both = poor mental health and poor well-being.

What's more, even among youth who report poor mental health, **60%** still report good well-being. And likewise, even among youth who report good recent mental health, **14%** still report poor well-being.

Together, these patterns show that mental health challenges and good well-being can coexist, and that well-being matters even when mental health symptoms are absent.

How does this compare nationally? Young people nationally (YMHT) show a similar overall pattern, but with lower levels of thriving and greater struggle compared to youth in Greater Cincinnati:

63% thriving nationally (versus **68%** here); **15%** hidden struggle (versus **11%** here); **11%** resilience amid struggle (versus **13%** here); and **11%** struggling on both (versus **8%** here).

Belonging, agency, and access to a trusted adult contribute to youth thriving

Thriving depends on both mental health and well-being, and on the everyday pillars that support them (belonging, agency, and trusted adults). Access to these three pillars differs across settings (Figure 4.4):

At home: about **7 in 10** youth (67%) report having all three pillars.

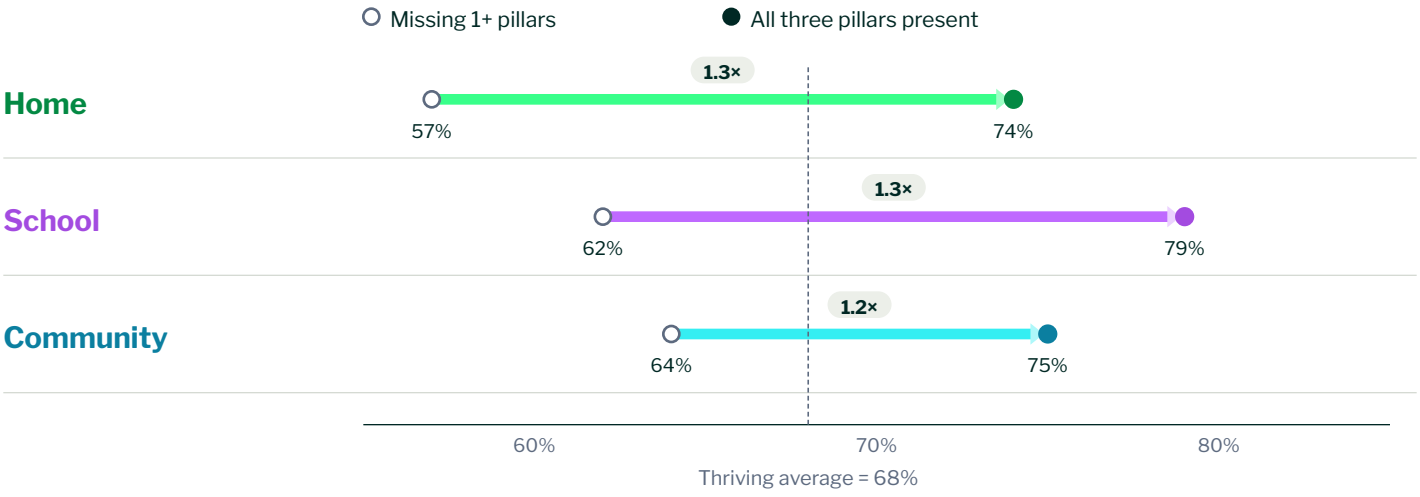
At school: nearly **half** of youth (48%) report having all three pillars.

In the community: about **4 in 10** youth (43%) report having all three pillars.

Young people are about **1.3x** more likely to thrive when all three pillars are in place **at home** or **at school**, and about **1.2x** more likely to thrive when all three are in place **in the community**, compared to peers missing at least one pillar.

School is where the biggest opportunity lies. Fewer than **1 in 2** young people (48%) report all three pillars at school. Yet when all three are in place at school, youth report the highest rate of thriving of any setting: **8 in 10** (79%).

Figure 4.4 – Share of youth thriving, by pillar coverage and setting



Share thriving (good mental health plus high meaning and optimism) among youth with all three pillars present versus those missing at least one. Labels such as 1.3× show how many times as likely youth with all three pillars were to thrive compared with youth missing at least one. The dotted line marks thriving among all youth with complete data in that setting (≈68%). This is correlational and does not establish that pillars cause thriving.

Low-income and LGBTQ+ youth carry the heaviest burden

Differences in mental health and well-being often reflect uneven access to support and opportunity. The overlap of poor mental health and poor well-being is most concentrated among LGBTQ+ and low-income youth.

- **58%** of low-income youth report symptoms of depression or anxiety versus **23%** of peers (Figure 4.1).
- **29%** of LGBTQ+ youth report poor mental health in the past 30 days versus **19%** of peers (Figure 4.1).
- Low-income and LGBTQ+ youth report lower life satisfaction and more difficulty letting go of bad feelings, expressing themselves, and feeling confident in their goals (Figure 4.2).
- Low-income youth are **3x** and LGBTQ+ youth are **2x** as likely to report "struggling on both" poor mental health and well-being together compared to peers. Both groups are also less likely to report "thriving on both" good mental health and well-being (Figure 4.3).

Young people who struggle with discrimination, economic injustice, and other challenges are more likely to carry a heavier mental health burden [12] – and the same pattern holds here when we look at everyday stressors.

These gaps point to structural conditions that affect low-income and LGBTQ+ youth in their everyday environments, not individual differences in coping. Some young people carry more than one identity at once, and uneven support likely compounds at those intersections.

Everyday stressors

- **Low-income youth** report bullying or cyberbullying about **3x** as often as peers (65% versus 23%), unfair treatment about **2x** as often (60% versus 31%), and feeling overwhelmed about **2x** as often (69% versus 34%).
- **LGBTQ+ youth** report bullying or cyberbullying about **1.8x** as often as peers (63% versus 35%), unfair treatment about **1.6x** as often (64% versus 40%), and feeling overwhelmed about **1.4x** as often (65% versus 45%).

Black and Hispanic youth report higher depression or anxiety

The everyday conditions young people navigate differ by race and ethnicity too, and Black and Hispanic youth face some of the starkest mental health and well-being gaps as a result:

- **47%** of Black youth and **48%** of Hispanic youth report symptoms of depression or anxiety versus **33%** of white peers (Figure 4.1).
- Black and Hispanic youth report lower life satisfaction and less sense of direction in life compared to white peers. Hispanic youth also report less confidence in achieving their goals (Figure 4.2).

Everyday stressors

- **Black youth** report bullying or cyberbullying about **1.3x** as often as white peers (47% versus 37%), unfair treatment about **1.4x** as often (56% versus 40%), and feeling overwhelmed about **1.2x** as often (56% versus 46%).
- **Hispanic youth** report bullying or cyberbullying about **1.5x** as often as white peers (57% versus 37%) and unfair treatment about **1.6x** as often (64% versus 40%).

On top of these mental health and well-being struggles, Black and Hispanic youth also face more everyday stressors, often rooted in experiences of racism, discrimination, and other challenges:

These everyday stressors help explain part of why Black and Hispanic youth report more mental health and well-being struggles, but not all of it. Unlike for low-income and LGBTQ+ youth, these gaps are not mirrored by clear gaps in belonging, agency, or trusted-adult access, as examined in previous sections. That contrast is a reminder that different groups may face different kinds of barriers, and that more listening and data collection may be needed to fully understand what's driving these disparities for Black and Hispanic youth.

Geography: high distress in Hamilton County, Ohio – quieter struggle in rural Kentucky

Place also shapes mental health and well-being in many ways, and young people in different geographical regions show different kinds of struggle.

- Hamilton County, Ohio, had the region's highest rate of reported symptoms of depression or anxiety at **42%**, compared with **19%** in rural Kentucky.
- **70%** of youth in rural Kentucky feel optimistic about the future versus **87–88%** elsewhere, and **71%** report confidence in achieving goals versus **80–87%** elsewhere.

Place shapes both the kind of struggle young people face and where support may need to focus: caring for symptoms and emotional strain in some communities, and hope and confidence in others.

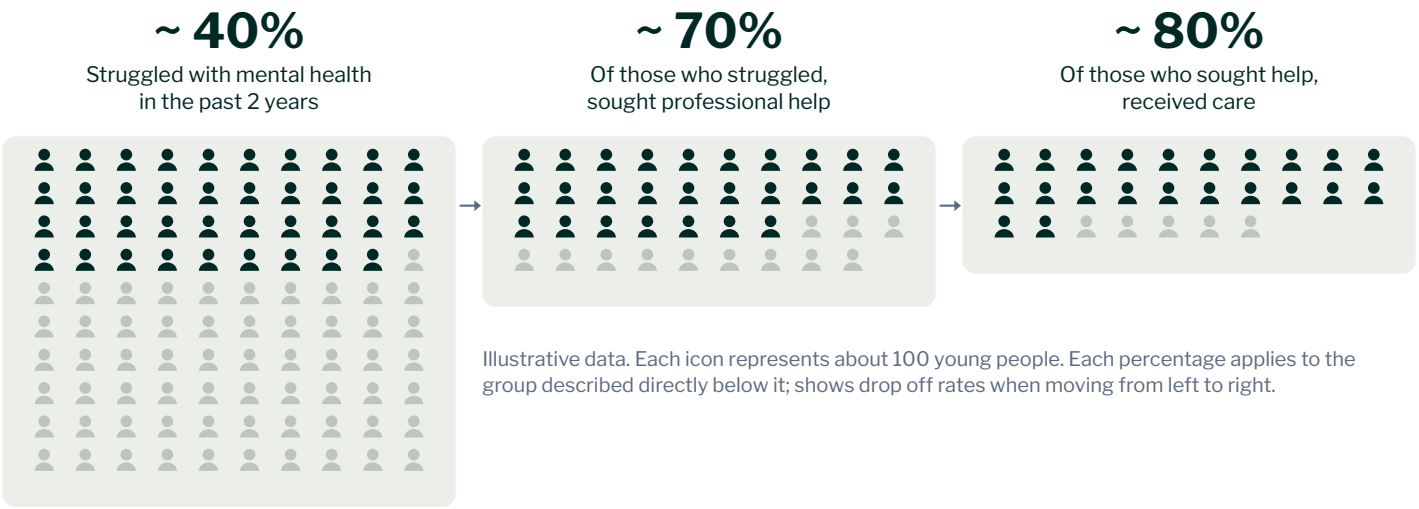
Our youth mental health system serves many who need it – but not all

While some of the most powerful supports for good youth mental health are supportive relationships, schools, and community spaces, young people sometimes need professional care for mental health challenges. When that is the case, it is vital that young people can access care when they need it, in the ways they need it.

"Access" is a simple word that covers a range of issues and challenges, from whether youth and families recognize the need for professional care to whether the type of care they need is available, affordable, and trusted.

When it comes to accessing mental health care, the experiences that young people reported back up what other studies of our region have shown: Greater Cincinnati's mental health system is reaching many young people who need care, but significant gaps remain. The pathway to care is challenging, takes longer than it should, and the path gets longer and steeper for youth facing the greatest barriers.

The pathway toward mental health care loses young people at two points:



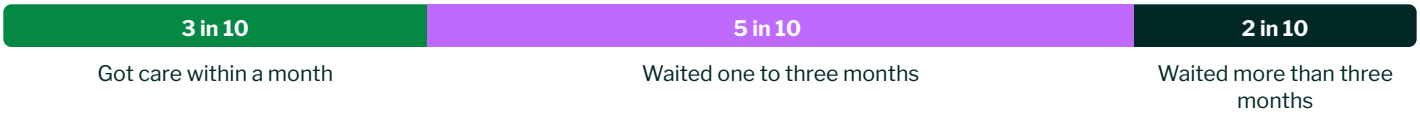
Illustrative data. Each icon represents about 100 young people. Each percentage applies to the group described directly below it; shows drop off rates when moving from left to right.

The care pathway often breaks down for those who need it most

The groups more likely to experience poor mental health are also those who report less access to care. **Low-income youth** were more likely to seek help than their peers (77% versus 59%), but less likely to receive it once they did (81% versus 93%). **LGBTQ+ youth** also receive care less (77% versus 87%), despite seeking help at similar rates as their peers.

4 in 10 of all youth who struggled never ended up receiving professional care – either because they never sought it, or because they sought it and still did not get it. Among those who did seek care, **25%** turned to a parent or caregiver first, and **18%** went straight to a mental health professional.

For those who eventually received care, it rarely came quickly:



Youth in Greater Cincinnati reported encountering different barriers on the pathway to care. They shared, in their own words, what made getting help hard:

Cost & Logistics

"I could not afford therapy."

Stigma

"I was scared of being judged."

Opaque Systems

"I didn't know where to start or who to contact."

LGBTQ+ Barriers

"I was not sure the therapist would be affirming or knowledgeable about LGBTQ experiences."

All of this matches what practitioners and stakeholders said in survey development: barriers are mostly systemic (reimbursement, siloed systems, clinician capacity), and young people often have little voice in treatment once care begins. Many of these barriers sit with the system, not with young people's willingness to ask for help. This is exactly why closing these gaps will take changes to the system itself.

Gender and Age Shape How Youth Connect to Their Communities – And Need Further Exploration

Boys and girls in Greater Cincinnati report similar mental health and well-being. And yet, in the community, girls are less likely to feel they belong (53% versus 64%), have collective agency (45% versus 56%), or have a trusted adult (73% versus 82%) outside of home and school.

Age matters too. Young adults (ages 18–24) report more say in decisions about their own lives than teens (ages 13–17) – for example, personal agency at home (79% versus 71%) and at school (67% versus 58%). And yet, young adults fare worse than teens on many aspects of their mental health and well-being: 48% report symptoms of depression or anxiety versus 26% of teens, and 27% often feel lonely versus 13%.

Looking at gender and age together, teen girls report the weakest sense of belonging and agency at school and in the community. By young adulthood, gaps in belonging and collective agency between young women and young men narrow at school but widen in the community.

While not highlighted throughout this report, these gender and age differences resonated with youth reviewers and are part of national conversations [7]. Further exploration with young people and community partners is needed to better understand what's driving these gaps. The Appendix includes separate breakdowns by gender and by age.

Turning data into action

All young people in Greater Cincinnati deserve to feel a sense of belonging, have a voice that's heard, and have a trusted adult they can count on. These aren't just "nice extras"; they are essential for a young person to develop and thrive. No young person can construct these conditions alone; these pillars are built, day to day, by the people and places around young people. That also means they can be built differently. We know that our systems make building those pillars more challenging for Black, Hispanic, LGBTQ+, and system-involved youth. Addressing these barriers means focusing resources where they are needed most and working together – at home, at school, and in the community – so every young person has real support for their mental health and well-being.

Young people have already told us they're ready to lead. Almost **9 in 10** young people (87%) say they can help others by supporting family or friends, volunteering in their community, or giving to charity. And, nearly **8 in 10** (78%) say having a real voice in decisions that affect their community is important to them. The work now is building the structures, spaces, and relationships to make it possible. HEY! has begun this effort with the young people and adults in Community & Caregivers, Schools, and Treatment working groups. We invite you to **join us** to help turn these findings into action.

What educators and schools can do

Youth who report belonging, agency, and trusted adults at school were also the youth who reported thriving. That makes changing the conditions around young people at school a big area of opportunity for coordinated action.

Create more opportunities for belonging. Young people consistently pointed to clubs as the most effective way to build belonging: specifically, clubs built around a shared interest, with flexible attendance, structured leadership that actively facilitates connections, and friendships that extend beyond the club itself. School-based clubs are easier to access because they do not require transportation or extra cost and are already built into the day.

> *'It was a small club, but it was really a good, safe space for me and my friends, we could talk about anything. Then the school shut it down because there weren't enough members."*
>
> — Young person, HEY! youth feedback session

Build trust through vulnerability and authenticity. Young people notice immediately, and disengage, when an adult leans on their authority in a difficult conversation. They emphasized that adults who acknowledge mistakes honestly can build trust over time. Staying current on what matters to young people, from AI to social media, also matters. Youth noted that when adults are visibly out of touch, it can undermine trust before a conversation even starts.

> *'[The teacher] opened up about that, which is a very vulnerable thing to do, and a thing I don't hear a lot of adults talk about. I know three people who, once they graduated high school, reached out to him when they were struggling in college. He built a lot of trust just by sharing a little bit about himself."*
>
> — Young person, HEY! youth feedback session

What parents and caregivers can do

Build agency gradually. Young people described a gradual build-up of responsibility at home as the most effective way to develop real agency. Young people said transitions such as graduating high school, moving out, starting a job, or starting college gave them a chance to practice adult skills in lower-stakes situations.

> *'I feel like mine was kind of gradual, my parents started letting me make decisions really young. If I didn't have those small steps that my parents took me through, and I just left and went to college, that transition would be really hard."*
>
> — Young person, HEY! youth feedback session

Be consistent, listen, and treat young people as capable. Across the youth feedback, young people were asking for adults who are consistent, willing to be vulnerable, and willing to treat them as capable of handling real responsibility, including the chance to fail and learn from it. Adults can act on the specific drivers named throughout this report: noticing when a young person is struggling, being reliable when needed, listening, and including young people in decisions that affect them.

What HEY! and community members can do

Prioritize the groups and settings with the steepest gaps. HEY! and community partners can focus on the groups and settings where this report identifies the greatest disparities, while continuing to build on the strengths young people already bring.

Create meaningful opportunities for youth to lead and shape decisions. Move beyond asking young people for input and create ongoing roles where they have real influence over decisions that affect them. Schools and community organizations can involve youth in shaping programs, policies, spaces, and priorities. Give young people the information, support, and real authority to lead, make decisions, and see their ideas put into action.

Create and protect places where young people can belong. Community-based organizations matter especially for groups facing restrictions at school, such as LGBTQ+ or Black student groups. Young people said that if community clubs had the same level of resourcing as school clubs, they would often be the preferred option. Young people also identified a gap in "third spaces": places to be outside home and school that are not tied to a specific program. Repurposing underused spaces was raised as a practical starting point, as long as they are accessible and staffed by adults that young people feel safe with and not judged by. A space adults consider safe is not always one young people experience that way.

> *'It's less about the space itself and more about the people that are there… You need to be able to walk in and not feel like, 'okay, they're staring at me like I've done something wrong, so now it's time to leave.'"*
>
> — Young person, HEY! youth feedback session

Focus adult training on authentic behavior change. Young people pointed to trauma-informed practice, humility, and genuine openness to feedback as the markers that matter. They said they can tell right away when training is a checkbox exercise versus a genuine effort to improve.

Across schools, homes, and communities, the message from young people is consistent: belonging, agency, and trust are shaped by the conditions we create around them.

That means ensuring adults listen, show up authentically, and take care of their own mental health and well-being. It also means changing policies, practices, investments, and decision-making structures so young people have meaningful opportunities to belong, lead, and shape the decisions that affect their lives.



HEY! Fellows Cohort 3

Acknowledgments

We would like to express deep gratitude to all the young people who shaped this project and participated in the survey. Your insight and leadership are why this report tells a different story: not what's wrong with young people, but what needs to change around them so they can thrive. We encourage you to continue using your voice and taking action to improve our community, now and for years to come.

This is a project of Hopeful Empowered Youth (HEY!) Greater Cincinnati. It was conducted by Surgo Health in partnership with HEY! Youth Fellows and Interns. It was made possible by the HEY! Funders Collaborative, with additional support from the bi3 Fund and Interact for Health.

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For more information, please visit hopefulempoweredyouth.org.

Methodology

Sample and recruitment

Analyses use youth ages 13 to 24 in the 12-county Cincinnati priority MSA (Kentucky and Ohio) – **1,939** youth included in the analysis (weighted N ≈ 1,898), drawn from 2,065 surveys collected across four recruitment channels, minus exclusions for being outside the priority counties. The broader project recruited and calibrated weights against a wider 20-county, tri-state area (adding Indiana), but this report's analytic sample is restricted to the 12 priority counties, which are entirely in Kentucky and Ohio. Weighting adjusts each respondent's contribution so estimates better reflect the regional youth population (ACS Census), rather than reducing the analysis sample size itself. Data were collected February–March 2026.

To recruit Cincinnati-area youth, the sampling strategy combined a panel and CATI phone interviews (Prodege), targeted social media and influencer recruitment (Capulet), and partnerships with community-based organizations (CBOs). While not probability-based, this opt-in approach is a cost-effective way to collect data at scale within the specific geographic locality; combining diverse recruitment streams with demographic targeting of harder-to-reach youth was intended to ensure a robust, diverse sample.

- Recruiting youth through parents, requiring parental and youth consent (ages 13–17 via panel; ages 13–15 via CATI)
- Recruiting youth directly, without parental consent (ages 13–24 via social media and CBOs; ages 16–24 via CATI; ages 18–24 via panel)
- An equity-focused approach ensuring representation from priority subgroups: Black youth, Hispanic youth, LGBTQ+ youth, and economically disadvantaged youth

Respondents recruited through social media and CBOs received a $10 gift-card incentive; panel and CATI incentives were managed directly by Prodege.

Sample composition

Demographic	Category	Unweighted N	Unweighted %	Weighted %
Age group	13–17	857	44.2%	51.2%
	18–24	1,082	55.8%	48.8%
Sex assigned at birth	Female	871	44.9%	46.8%
	Male	1,032	53.2%	52.1%
	Missing	36	1.9%	1.1%
Race / ethnicity	White (non-Hispanic)	1,099	56.7%	70.8%
	Black (non-Hispanic)	426	22.0%	14.4%
	Hispanic	245	12.6%	6.6%
	Other / multiracial / missing	169	8.7%	8.2%
LGBTQ+ status	LGBTQ+	762	39.3%	18.2%
	Non-LGBTQ+	1,130	58.3%	80.3%
	Missing	47	2.4%	1.5%
Economic hardship	Low income	988	51.0%	40.2%
	Not low income	845	43.6%	53.5%
	Missing	106	5.5%	6.2%
State	Ohio	1,367	70.5%	79.5%
	Kentucky	572	29.5%	20.5%

LGBTQ+ and Black youth were intentionally oversampled relative to their weighted population share (39% of respondents versus 18% weighted, and 22% versus 14%, respectively) to ensure enough respondents in harder-to-reach groups; weighting corrects for this by design.

Survey design

Insights from HEY!'s internal research, stakeholder interviews, and HEY! Youth Fellows sessions clarified the core levers to explore within each pillar (belonging, agency, trusted adults). Youth-informed definitions of each pillar (developed through this same process) were included in the survey instrument ahead of the corresponding questions, so that all respondents answered from a shared, youth-defined understanding rather than their own varying interpretations. HEY! Youth Fellows were involved throughout the project, from initial survey design through interpretation of findings, so that the instrument and its measures reflect youth-defined priorities.

Data quality and cleaning

During fielding, automatic screening and quality checks terminated or disqualified 1,947 participants before their surveys could count as valid completes – for reasons such as ineligible age or location, declined consent, failed bot or attention checks, and data-quality flags including speeders (completing in under 1/3 of the median time for their age group), straightliners (identical responses across a battery of questions), and skippers (leaving 40% or more of items blank). Respondent validity was also protected through platform-level safeguards: CAPTCHA, IP/cookie checks, multi-factor authentication, and timezone stamps on the hosting platform. Of the 2,065 valid surveys that remained, 126 were excluded (124 for falling outside the 12 priority counties, and 2 that could not be assigned a survey weight because of missing demographic information) leaving **1,939** included in the analysis. A duplicate-response check found none in the final data.

Weighting

Survey weights are built in three steps. First, hard raking (iterative proportional fitting) adjusts weights so weighted counts match known population benchmarks from the U.S. Census Bureau [9] for the Cincinnati metro area – the 2024 American Community Survey for age, gender, race/ethnicity, state, and economic hardship (via SNAP/food-stamp receipt), and the 2020 Decennial Census for urbanicity – drawing on ACS tables including B01001 for age/sex, B03002 for race/ethnicity, and S2201 for SNAP receipt (1-year estimates, with 5-year county tables for the tri-state county margins). Second, very large or small weights are trimmed to no more than 3 and no less than 0.3 to improve stability. Third, a gentler soft calibration nudges weights toward LGBTQ+ population share benchmarks (from the Williams Institute [10]), a proxy benchmark that is informative but less precise than the hard-raked variables, using a penalized approach that approaches this target without distorting the rest of the weighting. The final analytic weight used throughout this report is this soft-adjusted, trimmed weight, rescaled so weights sum to the analytic sample size. For the 1,939-youth analytic sample, weighting carries a design effect of about 1.6, for an effective sample size of roughly 1,200.

Data analysis

Descriptive tables and figures throughout this report answer how common an experience, behavior, or outcome is among priority-region youth, overall and within key groups. They support transparency, equity, and monitoring alongside HEY!'s broader analysis; they are not predictive/causal claims about why rates differ. All percentages in this report are survey-weighted, with 95% confidence intervals, as calculated on the logit scale for survey-weighted proportions.

Mental health x well-being duality analyses cross poor recent mental health (past 30 days) with a well-being composite defined as top-two agreement on both a meaningful life and optimism about the future. This operationalization comes from Surgo Health's Youth Mental Health Tracker (YMHT). This framing highlights patterns such as "resilience amid struggle" and "hidden struggle" that symptom screens alone can miss. The underlying correlation between mental health and well-being measures in this survey was modest in magnitude (roughly –0.3 to –0.2), consistent with the idea that the two are related but distinct constructs.

On overall-sample HEY! pillar figures (results chapters 1–3), curated callouts report prevalence ratios (expressed in the text as "about X more likely") linking high pillar scores (belonging, agency, trusted adults) to selected well-being and resilience outcomes. Subgroup gaps throughout are shown in the survey-weighted subgroup prevalence table in the Appendix. That table has one significance column, "Significant difference (FDR)", that already reflects the test used in the figures: Benjamini–Hochberg FDR-adjusted Rao–Scott omnibus tests for two-group dimensions (economic hardship; LGBTQ+ status; age group; gender), and FDR-adjusted pairwise comparisons versus the reference group for dimensions with more than two groups (race/ethnicity versus White youth; geography versus Hamilton County, Ohio).

A gap is treated as statistically supported in this report only when that column is Yes in the 'Complete Study Data' in the Appendix; chart asterisks follow the same rule. Only differences that are statistically supported in that table are reported as findings in the body text; non-significant patterns are either omitted or explicitly labeled as not statistically significant. Percentages are rounded and often described in plain terms (such as "about 8 in 10") to keep the focus on meaningful patterns rather than small differences.

National comparisons cited in this report come from Surgo Health's Youth Mental Health Tracker (YMHT), a national survey of young people ages 13–24 (2024 wave) that uses identically worded items for the measures compared: the depression/anxiety screen, poor past-30-day mental health, optimism about the future, a meaningful life, and feeling part of a group [4]. Four further compared measures (life satisfaction, confidence in achieving goals, and the ability to let go of bad feelings or express oneself (asked as "hard to…" items in both surveys and reverse-coded for reporting)) use national estimates for ages 15–24, set against the regional 13–24 sample; these are slightly less direct comparisons. All comparisons are descriptive context only: regional-versus-national differences were not formally tested, and the two surveys differ in sampling and weighting approaches.

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Appendix

Complete study data

The companion data tables provide survey-weighted results by household income, LGBTQ+ status, race and ethnicity, geography, age, and gender, with sample sizes and flags for statistically significant differences.

See Appendix A: Complete Study Data — https://hopefulempoweredyouth.org/appendix

Survey instrument

The full survey instrument is maintained as a companion document. See Appendix B: Survey Instrument — https://hopefulempoweredyouth.org/instrument