UNITED NATIONS HUMAN RIGHTS
OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER

IMPACT OF MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES ON THE ENJOYMENT OF HUMAN RIGHTS BY YOUNG PEOPLE

Human Rights Council
63rd Session
10 July 2026
A/HRC/63/51

Check out the report

WHY THIS REPORT?

A call for inputs (or submissions) is when the UN asks people and organisations to send their views, stories, or recommendations for change on important topics to help shape UN reports, discussions, and recommendations to governments.

In October 2024, the Human Rights Council asked the UN Human Rights Office (OHCHR) to look into the impact of mental health challenges on the enjoyment of human rights by young people.

To prepare the study, OHCHR launched a call for inputs, and received 277 submissions containing information and ideas from governments, human rights organisations, organisations that are led by, focused on, or that support youth, and young people themselves. This included the views of around 4,000 young people from all regions.

One young person's submission indicated that mental health challenges are "common, visible, and deeply connected to [our] ability to enjoy basic human rights", and that is why this report is very significant for protecting and promoting youth rights.

Whenever you see something underlined, it is because there is a hyperlink to other youth-friendly materials or additional documentation that will give you more information on that topic. You can also find a document with youth rights terms here!

YOUTH, MENTAL HEALTH AND TODAY'S WORLD: THE CURRENT PICTURE



Young people are not defined by a fixed age range. Youth is a unique stage of life marked by a transition towards an increasing sense of independence and autonomy. During this period of growth and change, young people develop their identities, make important life decisions, and go through transitions in areas such as education, employment, alternative care, health, and criminal justice. These changes do not happen at the same pace for everyone; they are shaped by age, development, personal circumstances, and social, economic, and cultural conditions.

Young people are growing up in a rapidly changing world driven by economic, food and housing insecurity, rapid technological changes, social change, conflicts, instability, and environmental challenges, as well as the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. While these changes create new opportunities to learn, connect, and contribute, they can also bring stress, uncertainty, and exclusion.

Like having to find a new doctor or mental health service after turning 18

As young people move from childhood into adulthood, they need to navigate complex systems and may lose child-focused protections and services. This happens while taking important decision with long-term implications about their education, work, relationships, and future. This is even tougher for those dealing with additional or overlapping barriers, such as poverty, violence, exclusion, conflict, or discrimination.

DID YOU KNOW?

Today, young people make up around one-third of the world's population, representing approximately 2.6 billion people.

When support isn't there when youth need it, this can affect their education, jobs, personal lives, and ability to live independently, with effects that can extend into later life. Stigma can also make it harder for youth to ask for help or access quality care.

A negative label that society puts on people because of who they are or what they're going through, making them feel ashamed or 'less than,' like being seen as weak for asking for help

> *"Regarding how adults perceive it, there is still a great deal of stigma. 'You're going because you're crazy,' and that stigma can hinder a young person's process..."*

Young people today are dealing with a wide range of mental health concerns, which can affect many parts of their lives. These include anxiety, depression, burnout, stress, trauma-related distress, low self-confidence, eating disorders, body image concerns, psychosomatic disorders, and sleep difficulties. They also face behavioural and substance addictions including too much digital use and gaming, as well as social isolation, loneliness, fear, overwhelm, and uncertainty, particularly about the future.

When stress or difficult feelings show up in your body as real physical pain or illness, like stomach aches or headaches

Many youth still cannot get the support they need when they need it. The services are not accessible, available, acceptable or of high quality. At the same time, timely support that places young people and their rights at the centre can strengthen resilience, inclusion, agency, and well-being.



According to the World Health Organization, suicide is the third leading cause of death among young people globally.

Accessibility - Health services must be affordable, easy to reach, and open to everyone, with no discrimination.
Availability - There must be enough public health services for everyone who needs them.
Acceptability - Health services should be respectful, fit people's cultures and values, and meet the different needs of females, males, and gender-diverse young people.
High quality - Health services must follow science and medicine, and be in good working condition.

> *"When I struggled, the problem was seen as me. Not the system. I felt ashamed, anxious, and unsafe. My mental health became worse."*

More people are now aware of these issues, partly because young people are taking the lead and speaking up. Youth-led advocacy has helped change priorities, question cultural and social taboos, and raise awareness about the legal, policy, and practical barriers that stand in the way.

FACTORS AND EFFECTS: WHAT ARE YOUNG PEOPLE TELLING US?



Socioeconomic Pressures

Poverty, financial insecurity, unemployment, and structural barriers can limit opportunities, access to resources, and overall well-being.

Education Pressures

Academic demands, competitive learning environments, and uncertainty around future prospects can increase chronic stress and anxiety about the future.

Discrimination and exclusion

Experiences of discrimination, gender stereotypes, stigma, and unequal treatment can restrict participation, belonging, and the full enjoyment of rights.

Digital Environment

Social media pressures, cyberbullying, misinformation, harmful content, surveillance, and concerns related to Artificial Intelligence (AI) can affect self-perception, relationships, sleep, and concentration.

TURN ME OVER!

Violence, Conflict, and Displacement

Exposure to violence, conflict, insecurity, and displacement can create trauma, distress, fear, and uncertainty.

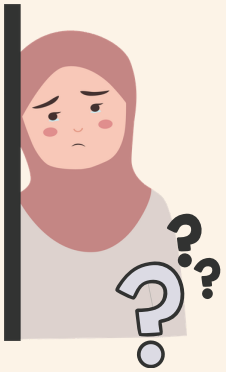
> *"Sometimes I feel like no one cares about us and that we are left behind by the world. I feel powerless and afraid of everything."*

Global Dynamics and Uncertainty

Climate and environmental crises, economic instability, political uncertainty, and other global challenges can contribute to stress, uncertainty, and loss of agency.

Social Connection and Belonging

Weakened support networks and loss of connections can increase loneliness and social isolation, and reduce opportunities for meaningful participation in the community or in public life.



Throughout this report, remember that the challenges young people face are often connected. Together, they can create a cycle that makes it harder for young people to access opportunities and support, and their rights can become more restricted over time.

BARRIERS TO MENTAL HEALTHCARE AND SUPPORT IDENTIFIED BY YOUTH

Designed with young people in mind, so they feel comfortable and understood, and the services are useful for them

Not enough trained professionals or youth-friendly mental health services, especially in rural and remote areas.

Long waiting lists, inflexible opening hours, and the need to have parental consent.

Rules that say you need a parent's or guardian's permission before you can get help

Distance from services, lack of transport, and geographic inequalities in access.

High indirect costs, like the costs of getting to appointments, and limited insurance coverage for psychological treatment.

Poor coordination between services, differences in quality across locations, and variable standards of care.

Administrative obstacles, language barriers, lack of information on how and where to get help, and digital exclusion.

Facilities that are not accessible and a lack of Sign Language interpreters can exclude young persons with disabilities.

Too much focus on medical treatment in institutions rather than on dealing with trauma and getting support communities close to youth.

Being left out because you don't have the devices, internet, or skills to take part in the online world

WHAT CHANGES DO YOUTH WANT?

- Recognise mental health as a human rights issue, with laws and policies that address young people's needs, and make sure suicide or attempting suicide is not a crime.
- Involve young people in decision-making and implementation processes that affect them.
- Provide long-term funding and coordinated action across sectors.
- Make mental health services youth-friendly, culturally appropriate, inclusive, and available closer to where young people live, learn, and spend their time.
- Greater focus on prevention and early intervention.
- Provide mental health support that is responsive to trauma, available in local communities, and designed around young people's needs.
- Increase training for those working with and supporting young people.
- Take action to reduce stigma around mental health.
- Strengthen collaboration with youth-led organisations and civil society.
- Address the social, cultural, environmental and economic conditions that affect mental health and wellbeing.

> *"I don't know where to go when anxiety hits. The internet is scary, and in real life — there is no one."*



WHAT DO 277 SUBMISSIONS TELL US? THE KEY ISSUES

Mental health is a human rights issue

When young people cannot fully enjoy their rights, their mental health and well-being might be affected. Barriers linked to discrimination, inaccessible environments or disability exclusion, migration status, gender, or other factors can increase exclusion and limit opportunities.

If a young person with a disability is not given the support they need in education, their right to education is not fully respected. This can make them feel excluded, increase stress and anxiety, and limit their opportunities to learn and participate. e.g.

Global challenges affect well-being

Conflict, displacement, economic uncertainty, environmental challenges and digital environments can shape mental health in different ways.

Young people living through conflict or displacement may experience trauma, fear, and uncertainty, while those far from conflict may also experience anxiety or distress through constant exposure to upsetting news and content online. e.g.

The conditions around us matter

Poverty, housing problems, a lack of good food, unstable jobs, and uncertainty about education and employment can create stress and make it harder to access safe environments and opportunities. e.g.

A young person facing poverty may have to study while working several jobs and worrying about rent or food, which may lead to chronic stress.

Feeling connected makes a difference

Family, friends, teachers, youth groups, sports, arts, spiritual and community spaces can help young people stay connected and feel a sense of community.

Losing access to a sports club, cultural space or community group can increase feelings of loneliness and isolation. e.g.

WHO IS BEING LEFT BEHIND?

Some young people face extra barriers because of discrimination, exclusion, where they live, or the situations they face. When several barriers overlap - or intersect -, it can become even harder to access support, education, work, or opportunities.



Young women

May face gender inequality, gender stereotypes, pressure about appearance and behaviour, or gender-based violence.

e.g. Constant pressure to look, act, or behave in certain ways can affect self-esteem and create stress or feelings of not being "good enough".

Young persons with disabilities

May face stigma, discrimination, or a lack of accessible services and support. e.g.

If community activities, sports clubs, or youth programmes are not physically accessible or do not include the right support, they may miss opportunities to connect with others and feel a sense of belonging.

LGBTIQ+ youth

May face bullying, rejection, discrimination, or laws and policies that limit their rights. e.g.

If a young Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex or Queer (LGBTIQ+) person faces harassment in education, they may experience stress, isolation, and difficulties fully participating in their education and this may lead to them dropping-out.

Migrant, refugee and displaced youth

May face family separation, migration-related trauma, language barriers, uncertain legal status, and difficulties accessing services.

e.g. A young person on the move may have experienced displacement, family separation, or interruption of education, which can create additional stress while they adapt to a new environment.

Young people in detention or alternative care

May face isolation, loss of autonomy, and limited access to education, family support and physical and mental health services.

Being separated from family and friends, a loss of freedom, moving between places or services and experiencing frequent changes can increase feelings of loneliness and distress. e.g.

Young human rights defenders

May face threats, harassment, stress and uncertainty because of their activism.

e.g. A young activist campaigning for climate action may face online abuse or pressure because of their work, which may make them feel unsafe and deter them from continuing their advocacy work.

Young people who have grown up in alternative care, such as foster or residential care, and are moving into adult life

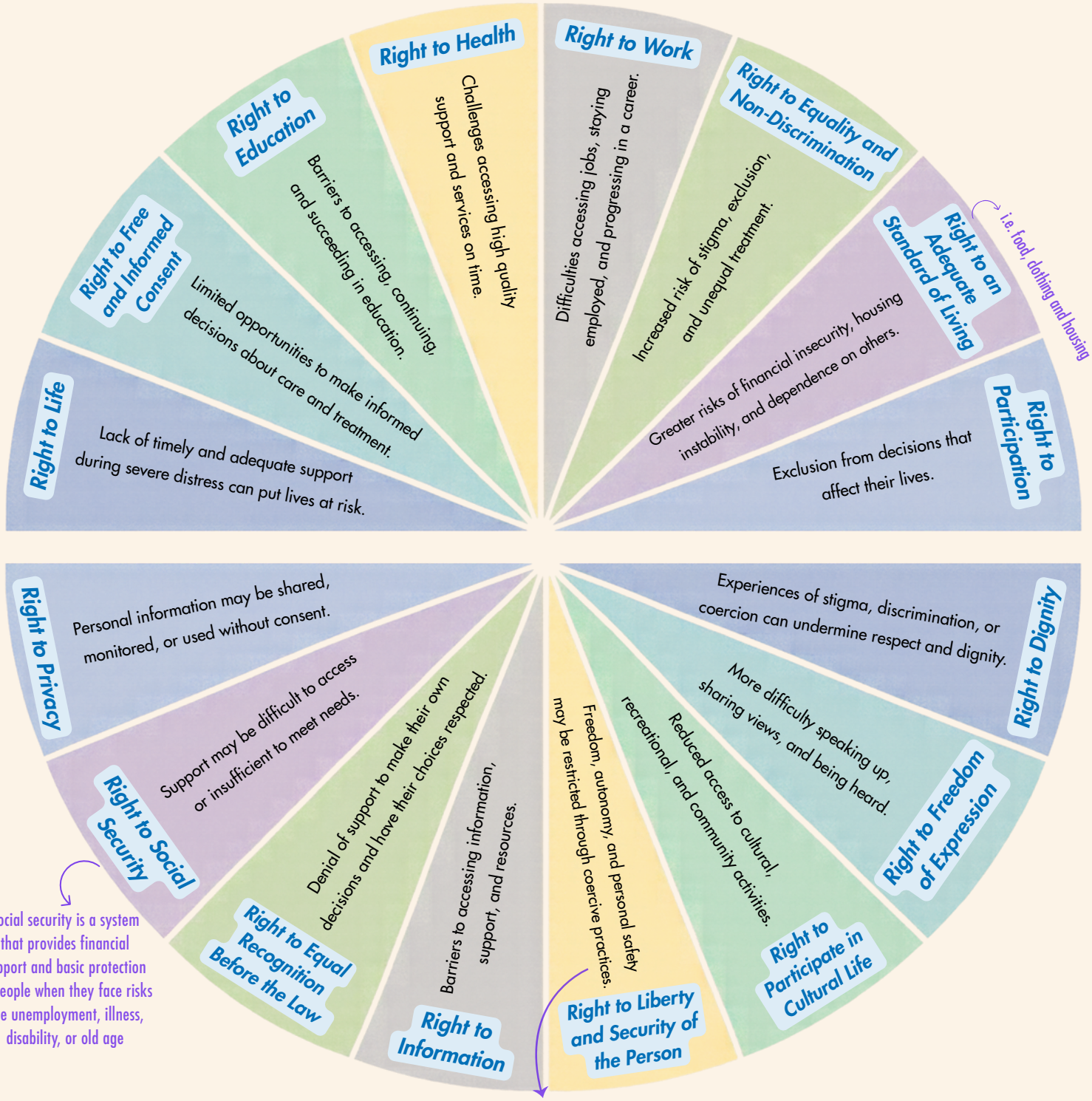
Other groups at risk include Indigenous youth, youth in rural and remote areas, and care leavers, among others.

For example, a young person living in a remote area may have to travel long distances to access mental health support.

IMPACT OF MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES ON YOUNG PEOPLE'S HUMAN RIGHTS

Mental health is not only a health issue; it can affect young people's ability to enjoy many of their human rights. The connection goes both ways: mental health challenges can affect different parts of young people's lives, while barriers to their rights can negatively affect mental health, creating a cycle that can be difficult to break.

Some of the rights that may be affected are:



> *"This [human rights-based] framing helps us understand that long waits or stigma are not just our problem but violations of our rights to health, education, and dignity."*

BARRIERS TO THE ENJOYMENT OF THE RIGHT TO MENTAL HEALTH



Availability

Mental health services for young people are often too few, underfunded, and unevenly distributed. Many countries lack youth-specific services, trained professionals, prevention programmes, and community-based support. Long waiting lists, not enough staff, and weak transitions between child and adult services leave many young people without timely care.

Accessibility

Even when services exist, many young people cannot reach or afford them. Barriers include high costs, lack of insurance coverage, transport difficulties, living in rural or remote areas, complex referral systems, language barriers, digital exclusion, and restrictive parental authorisation requirements. In some countries, making suicide or attempts at suicide a crime also discourages youth from seeking help.

Getting help can be confusing and involve too many steps

> ***"Many young people struggle in silence when support feels unfamiliar, unrepresentative, or unsafe."***

Acceptability

Services must feel safe, respectful, culturally-appropriate, inclusive, and youth-friendly. However, stigma, confidentiality concerns, discrimination, coercive practices, and lack of cultural sensitivity can make young people avoid support. Indigenous, migrant, and LGBTIQ+ youth may face services that do not reflect their experiences or identities.

Quality

Too many people

Old instructions that need updating

Many systems struggle to provide high-quality care due to having too few staff members, outdated guidance, inadequate training, overcrowding, and being overloaded. Support is not always designed around young people's needs or shaped by an understanding of trauma. When systems rely too heavily on institutions or only respond in times of crisis, it can reduce trust and lead to poorer outcomes.

> ***"It is necessary to adopt a preventive approach to youth mental health, in addition to providing clinical treatment for those already struggling."***

> ***"Without care and recognition, rights remain inaccessible; with support, youth can thrive, participate, and lead."***

Accountability

No independent checks to make sure things are working properly

Hard to raise concerns

Not checking regularly if things are working

Young people often face barriers when trying to report rights violations or seek justice. Weak monitoring systems, lack of independent oversight, inaccessible complaints mechanisms, poor data collection, and limited youth participation in decision-making make it difficult to hold systems accountable and improve services.

Accountability - Governments and health providers are responsible for protecting everyone's rights.
If someone is denied care, they should be able to speak up and get justice.



Enabling legal and policy environment

Laws and policies relevant to youth mental health should protect young people's rights, dignity, and equality, and respect their right to make their own choices. They should help young people make informed decisions with enough information, and support community-based help that includes everyone without discrimination and is offered close to where young people live, study and work.



Integrated rights-based systems

Rights-based systems connect health, education, finance, social protection, justice, and community services, and offer continuous, accessible, and culturally appropriate support based on young people's needs.



Addressing social determinants

Youth mental health is shaped by the conditions in which young people live, learn, work, and grow. A rights-based approach has to think about and work on poverty, inequality, violence, discrimination, insecure housing, environmental crises, digital harms, and other factors that can harm mental wellbeing before harm occurs.



YOUTH-RIGHTS BASED APPROACH





Enabling environments

Safe, inclusive, and supportive environments help young people feel connected, valued, and empowered. At home, in education, in sports, in cultural, arts and spiritual spaces, and in their communities, young people thrive when they feel they belong, are treated with dignity, and have a say in decisions that affect them.





Financing youth mental health

Giving fair priority to those who need more support

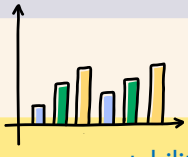
Mental health requires adequate, equitable, and continuous investment in prevention, early support, strong public systems, community services, and mental health programmes focused on youth.





Meaningful participation and agency

Young people's experiences, needs, and recommendations should shape the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of policies and services related to youth mental health, both at national and international levels.



Accountability, data and oversight

Sharing clear, honest information so everyone can see what's being promised and what's actually happening

To turn promises about youth mental health into real action, these key things matter: transparency, accountability, strong monitoring, reliable data, independent oversight, and accessible complaints mechanisms.

Taking responsibility for actions and results

Using trustworthy information and evidence

THE HIGH COMMISSIONER INVITES MEMBER STATES TO:

01 Improve laws and policies that promote young people's mental health across different sectors, including health, education, justice, social services and employment. They should also end laws that treat suicide attempts as a crime.





Support young people so that they can make informed decisions about their mental health care. In addition, provide them with safe and high-quality support that meets their needs, even when they move between different services and contexts. **02**

03 Make mental health services available, accessible, and ready to support young people when and where they need it.





Address the factors behind discrimination, poverty, inequality, violence, rapid digital change, and other factors affecting youth mental health, and provide safe, inclusive and empowering environments for youth. **04**

05 Include young people meaningfully in decisions about youth mental health, such as laws, policies, and programmes. Young people know what works and what needs to change.





Provide young people with clear information about what mental health support is available, how and where, and how to make a complaint, and get help when their rights are not respected. **06**

07 Address the transition from children's to adult services and ensure services continue; challenges around digital technologies; gender inequality and unequal power relations; poverty and living conditions; mental health support during conflict, crises, and displacement; and young people's participation in decisions that affect them.





Governments should use all available resources and work together, including with other countries, to make sure young people can fully enjoy their right to mental health. **08**

09 Include young people's mental health in national human rights monitoring and reporting.



As one young person's submission stated, "Mental health is not a privilege, it is a right."

