



CCAMH Youth Participatory Action Research Survey 2025

San Luis Obispo County

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Supported By

Report Created by CCAMH TAG Research Participants and Mentors under the supervision of Dr. Amy Howes, PhD May 2025

Introduction

The Center for Child and Adolescent Mental Health (CCAMH) invited high school students in San Luis Obispo County to participate in our Teen Advisory Group (TAG) Research Program. The TAG Research Program is an opportunity for students to participate in peer-led research called Youth Participatory Action Research or YPAR. During this program, high school students from San Luis Obispo County collaborated with each other to research the state of youth mental health in their community.

Twenty TAG researchers from San Luis Obispo County collaborated on youth mental health research from January to May 2025. Participants represented all high school grade levels, with ages ranging from 14 to 18. The youth involved in the program collectively contributed over 200 hours of community service. Data was gathered from across San Luis Obispo County, spanning from Paso Robles in the northern county to Nipomo in the southern county.

Research Questions:

1. What are the major mental health challenges teens in San Luis Obispo County are facing today?
2. What are the major barriers to teens in San Luis Obispo County receiving mental health support?
3. How can San Luis Obispo County community members and schools help address mental health challenges?

TAG Research Program Objectives:

1. Discuss youth mental health, emerging issues, and brainstorm ways to address the crisis with teens from other high schools in San Luis Obispo County.
2. Learn about qualitative and quantitative scientific research.
3. Conduct peer-to-peer research mentored by youth mental health researchers and professionals.
4. Collect, compare, and analyze research with the findings of CCAMH YPAR researchers across multiple cities in the county.
5. Bring the youth voice to the table by presenting ideas, research, and recommendations via impactful county-wide channels.

Research Design - Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR):

Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) is an approach to research and social change that encourages young people to utilize their own perspectives and strengths to identify, study, and address issues that impact them.

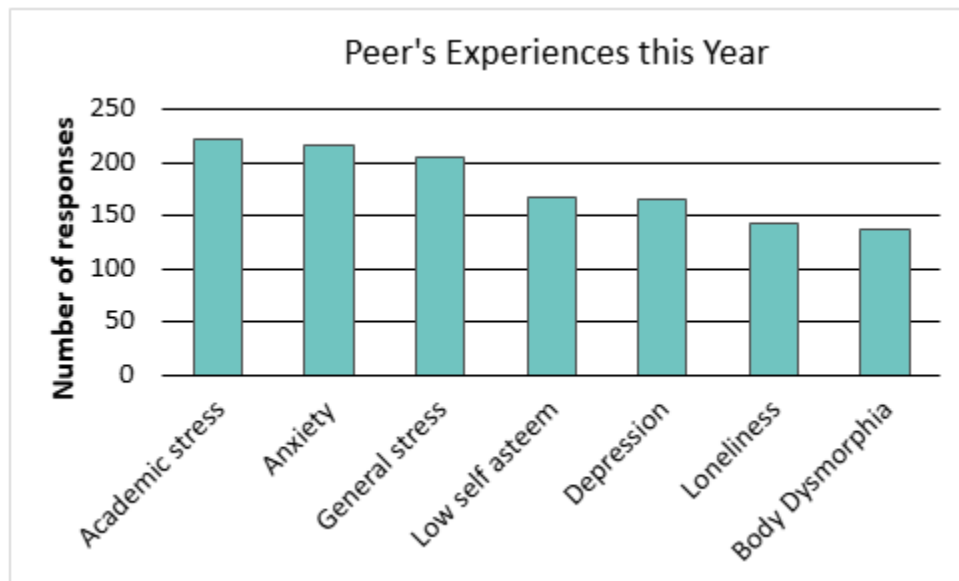
Research Objective: Survey a demographically representative sample of teens in San Luis Obispo County to discover the mental health challenges youth are facing and potential ways to address them.

Survey Distribution: The survey took about 10-15 minutes to complete. There was a total of 21 questions including demographic information like gender, identity, race, and age, as well as youth mental health and support. Responses were collected from February 18 to March 31. The survey was distributed via word-of-mouth, text messages, social media, and flyers. 279 youth in San Luis Obispo County completed the survey. The survey reached students from as far north as Paso Robles and as far south as Nipomo within San Luis Obispo County.

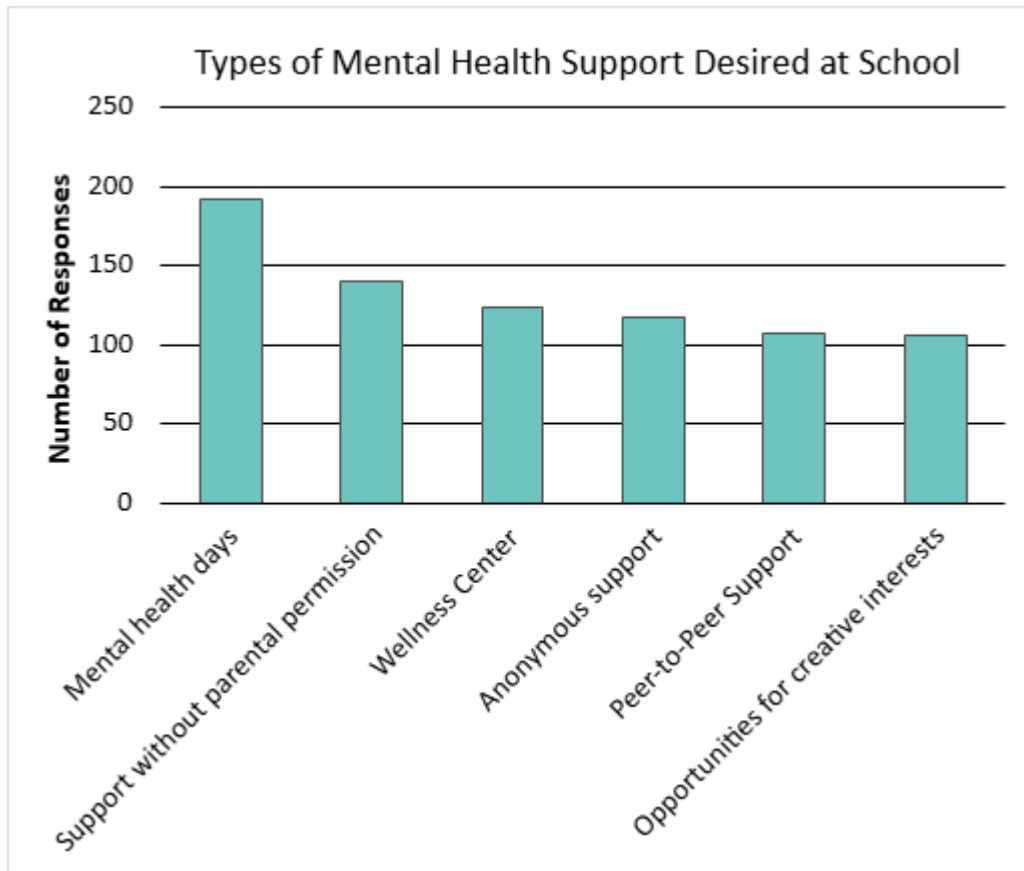
Mixed-Methods Approach: The survey consisted of 19 quantitative (frequencies and percentages) questions and 1 qualitative (open-ended response) question. The questions were analyzed by the youth researchers, mentors, and Dr. Howes to form conclusions and recommendations for youth and adult stakeholders in the community.

Executive Summary

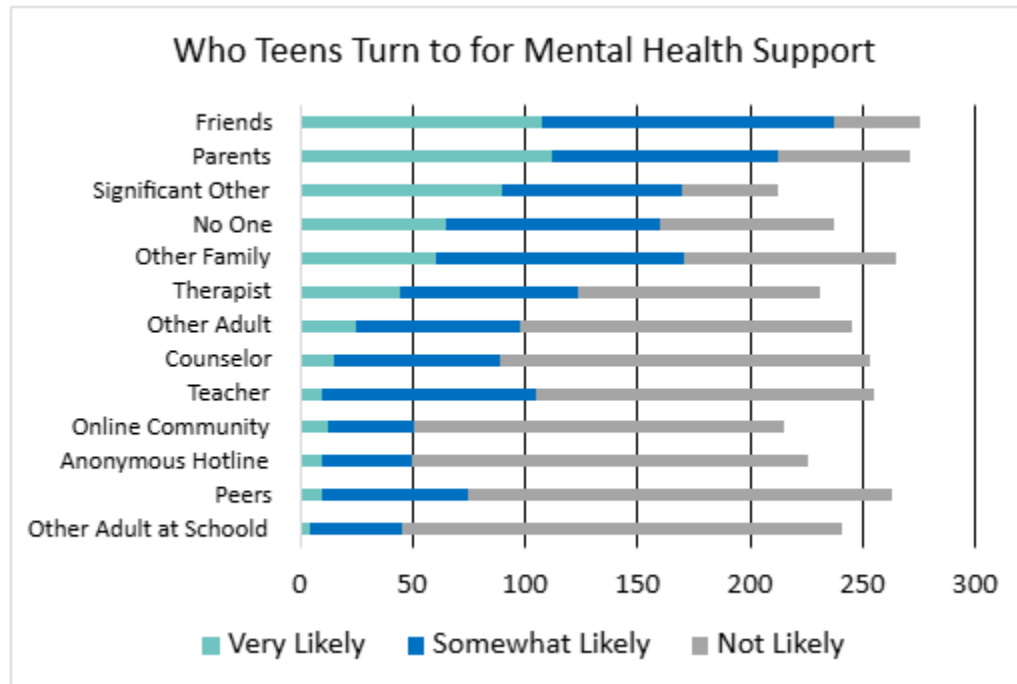
1. Teens in San Luis Obispo County experience significant amounts of academic stress and should be educated on how to equip themselves with the necessary tools and support to manage it effectively. Our data shows that academic stress, burnout, and pressure are the biggest challenge towards the state of their mental health.



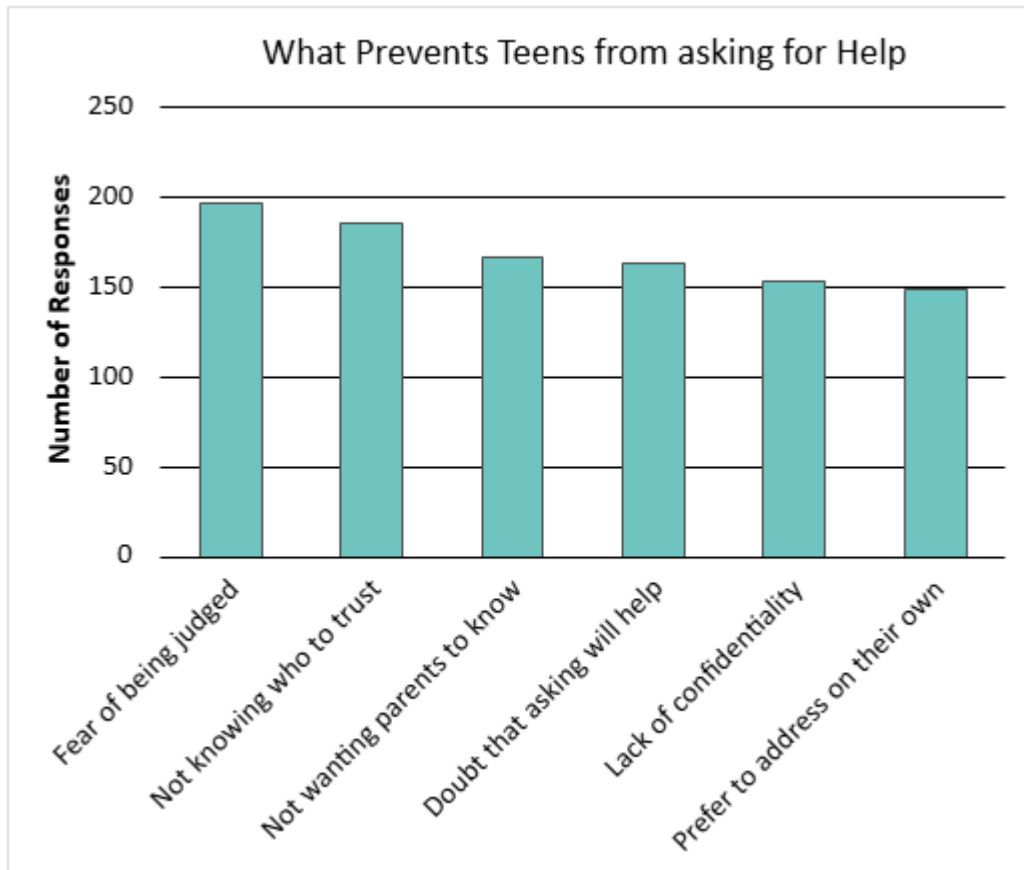
- Schools in San Luis Obispo County should implement more structured measures to strengthen mental health support for their students. This includes actively promoting the option for students to take “mental health days”, like absences for physical illness. Additionally, training staff to be more approachable, promoting mental health resources, and working to destigmatize mental health are steps in the right direction.



3. Teens in San Luis Obispo County do not feel comfortable asking for mental health support from school staff, and some public resources such as the San Luis Obispo Behavioral Health Department and the Central Coast Hotline. They are most likely to feel comfortable reaching out to someone they have a personal connection to, like their friends, parents or guardians, and significant others.



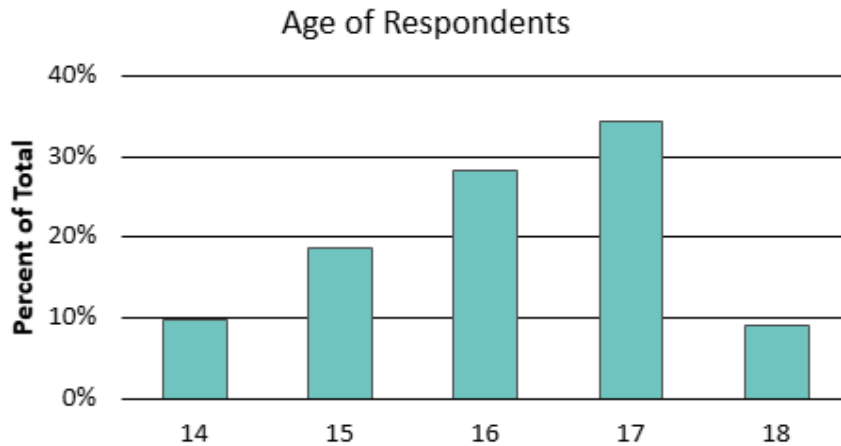
4. The biggest obstacle preventing teens in San Luis Obispo County from seeking mental health support is the fear of being judged, seen as weak, burdening others, or facing bullying. A close second is uncertainty about whom to trust. To address this, both adults and teens should create environments where young people feel safe discussing their mental health without fear of stigma. Encouraging teens to openly share their experiences can help them build connections with peers facing similar challenges, creating a supportive community that eases feelings of loneliness and isolation.



Respondent Demographics

The following graphs allow for visualization of how the 279 high school students identified in terms of age, gender, race/ethnic group, grade in school, school they attend, and city they reside in.

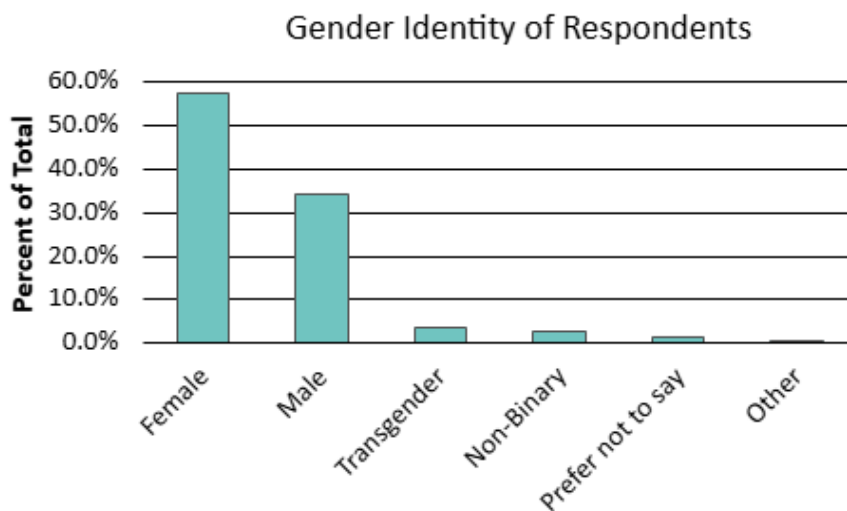
1. What is your age?



- 34% of respondents are 17, 28% of respondents are 16, 19% of respondents are 15, and 9% of respondents are 18.

Recommendation: Future surveys should prevent the overrepresentation of certain ages to get a better idea of the state of youth mental health overall.

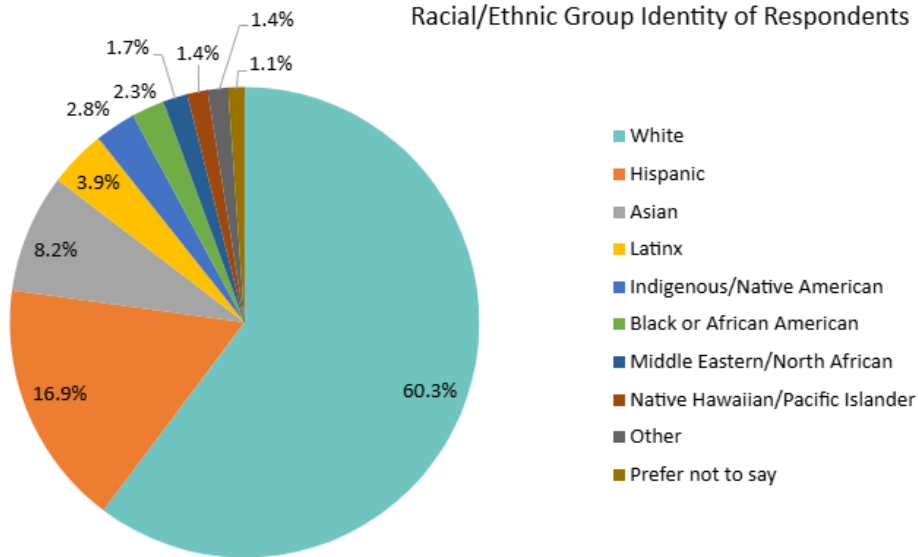
2. What is your gender identity?



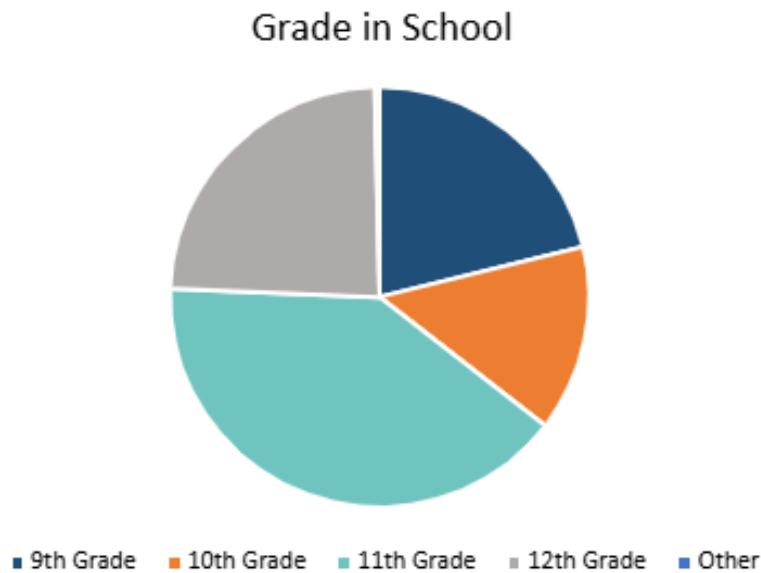
- 57% of respondents identify as female, making up the majority.
- 34% of respondents identify as male, 3% identify as transgender, another 3% identify as non-binary, and 1% responded prefer not to say.

Recommendation: In future surveys, more responses from other genders besides female are needed to collect a more representative sample.

3. What racial/ethnic group do you belong to?



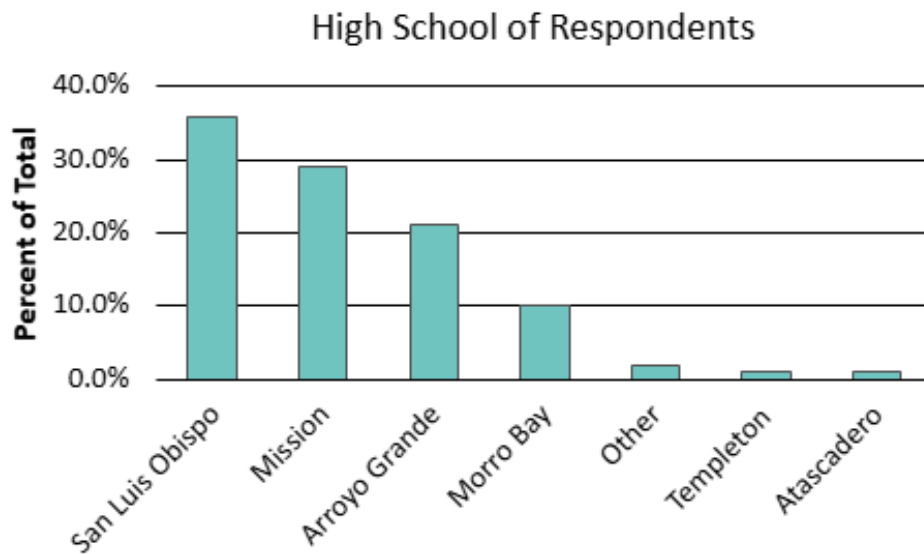
4. What grade are you in school?



- Most respondents are in 11th grade (40%)
- 24% of respondents are in 12th grade, 21% are in 9th grade, and 14% are in 10th grade

Recommendation: Future surveys should prevent the overrepresentation of certain grades to get a better idea of the state of youth mental health overall.

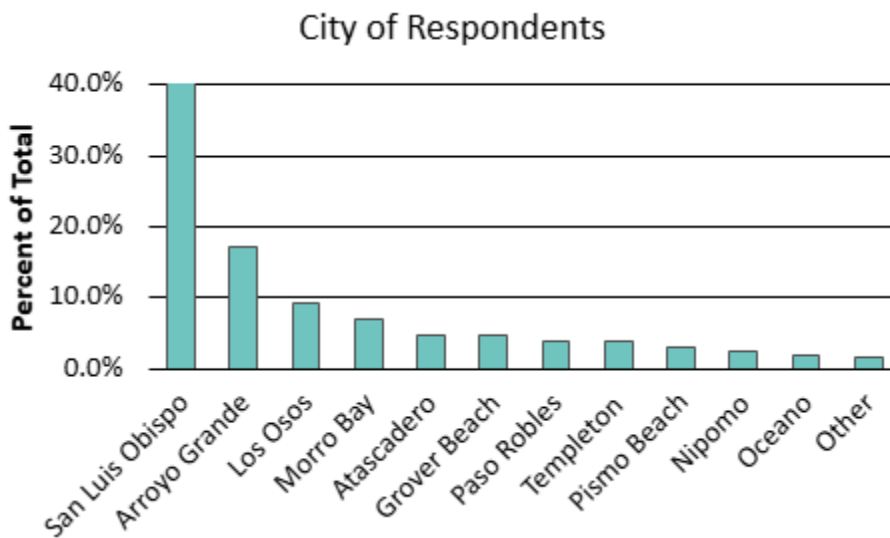
5. What school do you attend?



- 36% of respondents go to SLO High, 29% go to Mission College Prep, 21% of respondents go to AG High, 10% of respondents go to Morro Bay High, and the remaining 4% either go to Atascadero High, Templeton High, or are homeschooled.

Recommendation: Future surveys should try to get responses from more schools to get a better idea of the state of youth mental health overall.

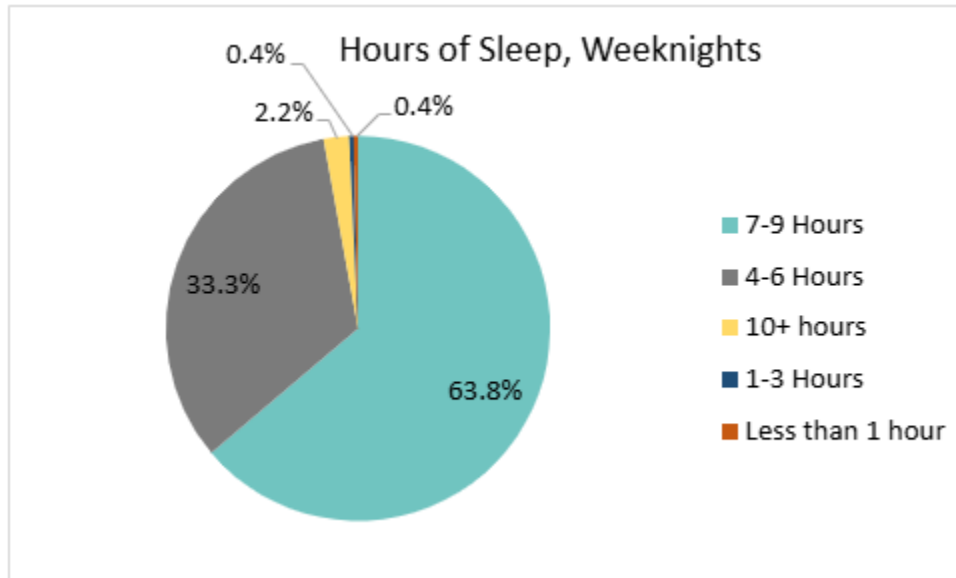
6. What city do you live in?



- Most respondents live in SLO, but this may be reflected in this way since it is the most populated area of the county.

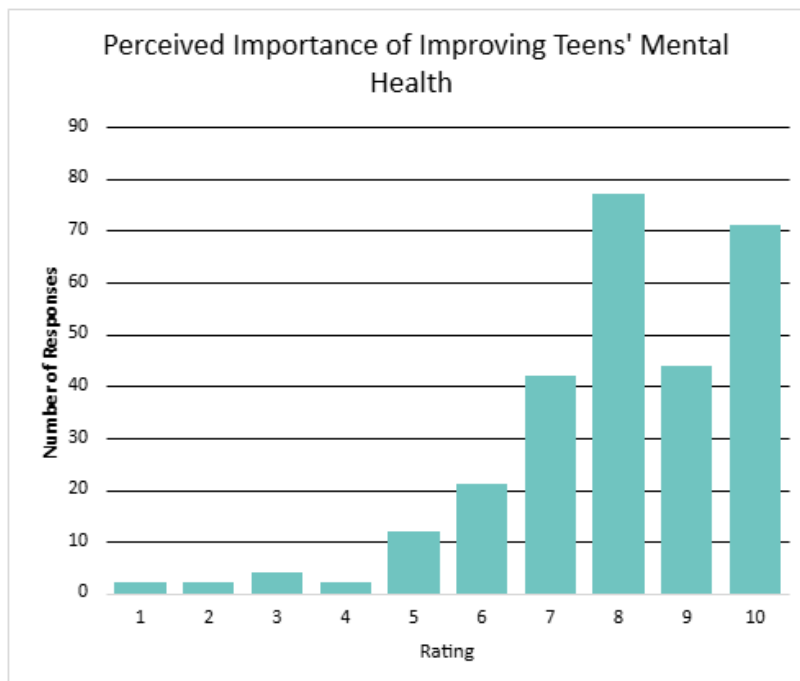
Survey Results & Discussion

Q1: On average, how many hours of sleep do you get on a typical weeknight?



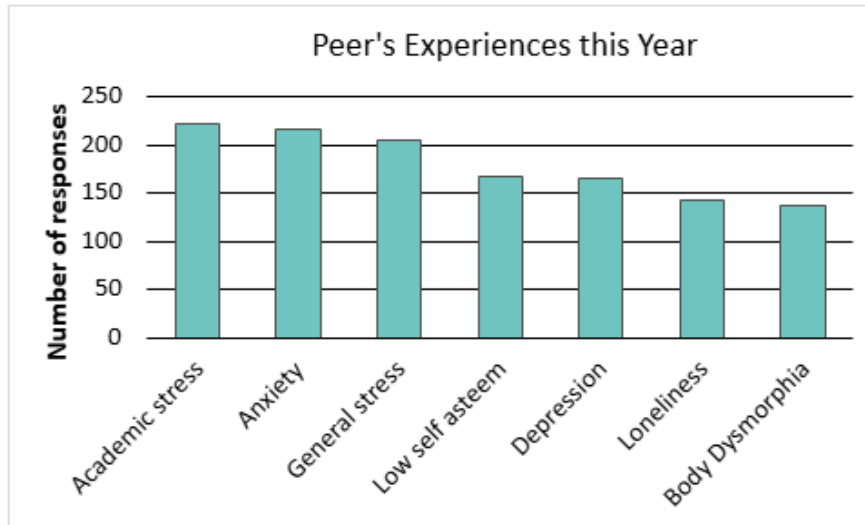
- While most students receive the recommended 7–9 hours of sleep on a typical weeknight, many later report that “lack of sleep” is a major contributor to the struggles of youth mental health in San Luis Obispo County. This suggests that stress, burnout, and mental health challenges may be causing fatigue, even when students technically get enough rest.
- Among all grade levels, 9th graders reported the most sleep, with 71% sleeping 7–9 hours per night. In comparison, 60% of 10th and 11th graders and 66% of 12th graders reported getting the same amount of sleep.

Q2: How important do you think it is to find better solutions to improve the mental health of teens in SLO County on a scale of 1 to 10? (1 being not important; 10 being very important)



- The overall average rating of importance was an 8.
- Most teens recognize the importance of mental health, so it's important we act on it.
- Females rated the highest level of importance, followed by transgender or non-binary individuals, with males reporting the lowest importance ratings.

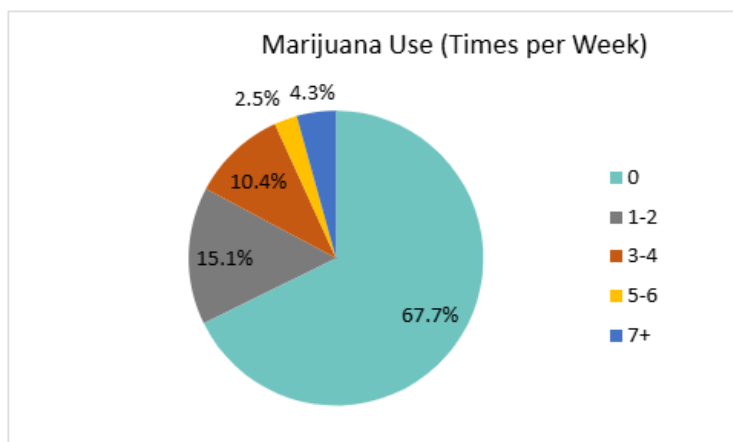
Q3: Have any of your friends or peers shared with you that they have experienced any of the following this past year?



- Overall, academic stress/burnout was the top reported mental health challenge, followed by anxiety and general stress.
- The percentage of respondents who reported having direct or indirect experience with self-harm or thoughts of ending their life is concerning (29.75%), but maybe not surprising given the prevalence of anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and loneliness.
- Identity issues, trauma and/or PTSD, grief, and substance misuse/abuse were among the lowest ranked experiences.

Recommendation: Working with schools to reduce academic stress, pressure, and burnout may be extremely beneficial to their students' mental health.

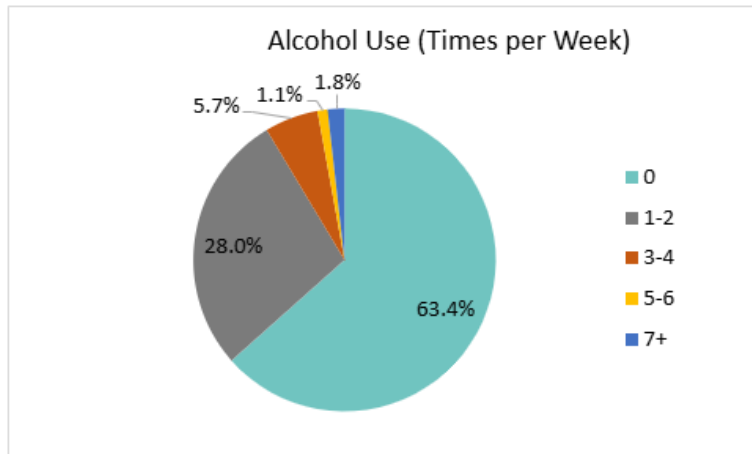
Q4: How often do your friends use marijuana per week?



- 32% of respondents use marijuana at least once per week, which is concerning when taking in account that respondents are 14-18 years old.

Recommendation: In the next survey, offer smaller timeframe options (once a month, twice a month, etc). TAG Researchers believe that if there were larger timeframe options such as one a month or on special occasions, responses would significantly change.

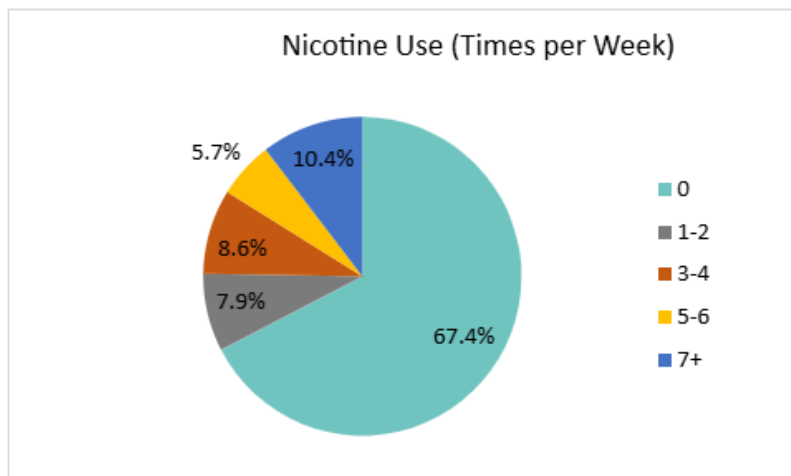
Q5: How often do your friends drink alcohol per week?



- 37% of respondents drink alcohol at least once per week, which is concerning when taking in account that respondents are 14-18 years old.

Recommendation: In the next survey, offer smaller timeframe options (once a month, twice a month, etc). TAG Researchers believe that if there were larger timeframe options such as one a month or on special occasions, responses would significantly change.

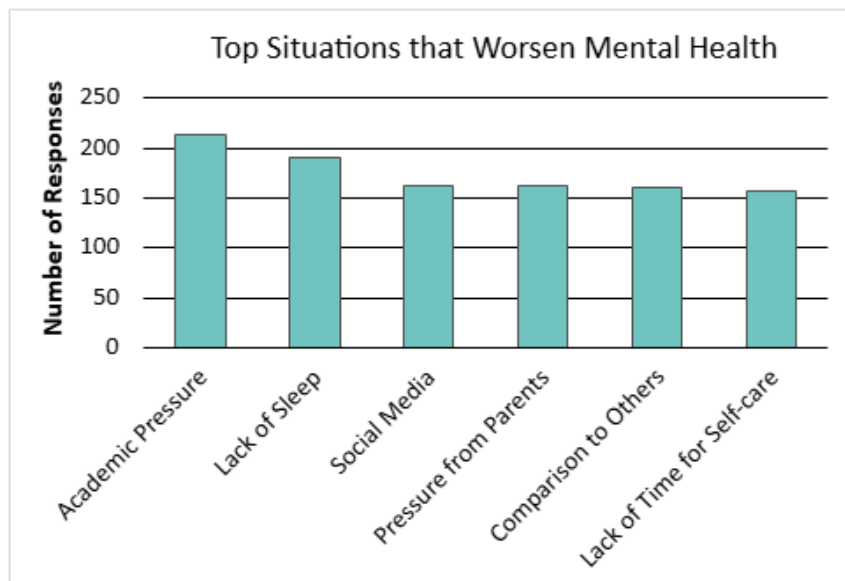
Q6: How often do your friends use nicotine per week?



- 33% of respondents use nicotine at least once per week, which is concerning when taking in account that respondents are 14-18 years old.
- Of those who are using nicotine, more reported using it daily than occasionally or the other options.

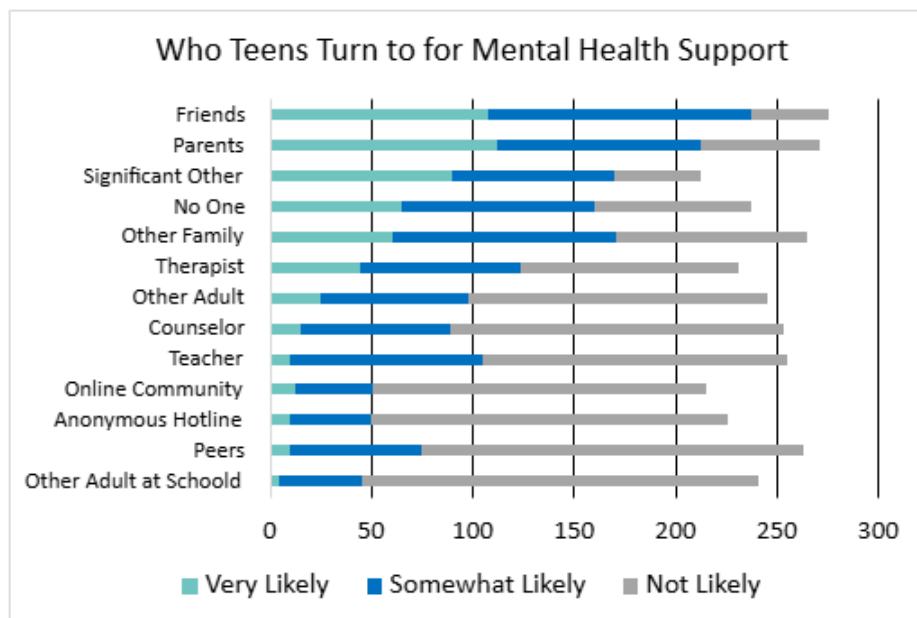
Recommendation: In the next survey, offer smaller timeframe options (once a month, twice a month, etc). TAG Researchers believe that if there were larger timeframe options such as one a month or on special occasions, responses would significantly change.

Q7: Which of the following do you think worsens mental health for teenagers in SLO County?



- Academic pressure was significantly the highest reported factor for worsening teens' mental health. School administration and staff should be open to discussing how to create better support for students struggling with academic pressure and mental health challenges.
- Lack of sleep was the second highest reported factor for worsening teens' mental health, which is surprising since Q1 showed that most respondents reported getting 7-9 hours of sleep on a typical weekday.

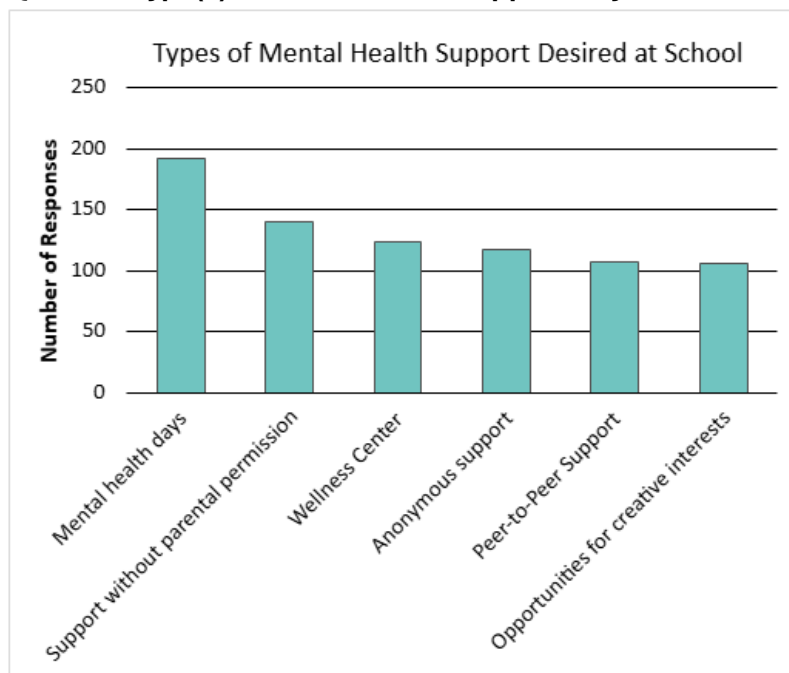
Q8: If you were going through a challenging time, how likely are you to ask the following people for mental health support?



- Teens are far more likely to seek mental health support from their friends and guardians than school staff, other peers, the online community, and anonymous hotlines.
- There are many responses for choosing to ask “no one” for help with mental health support, showing that many teens feel like they do not have anyone to talk to or do not feel comfortable talking to someone else. We should continue to work on destigmatizing mental health and encourage people that it’s okay to talk about.

Recommendation: As friends are highest rated for who students would turn to for support, training students on how to be active listeners and be good supports would be beneficial. The same can be said for parents. Additionally, students are more likely to turn to teachers for support than counselors or other adults at school, so ensuring teachers have training and are equipped to handle these situations is extremely important. Lastly, students are more likely to turn to no one than to turn to teachers or counselors, so we should work to destigmatize getting help for mental health.

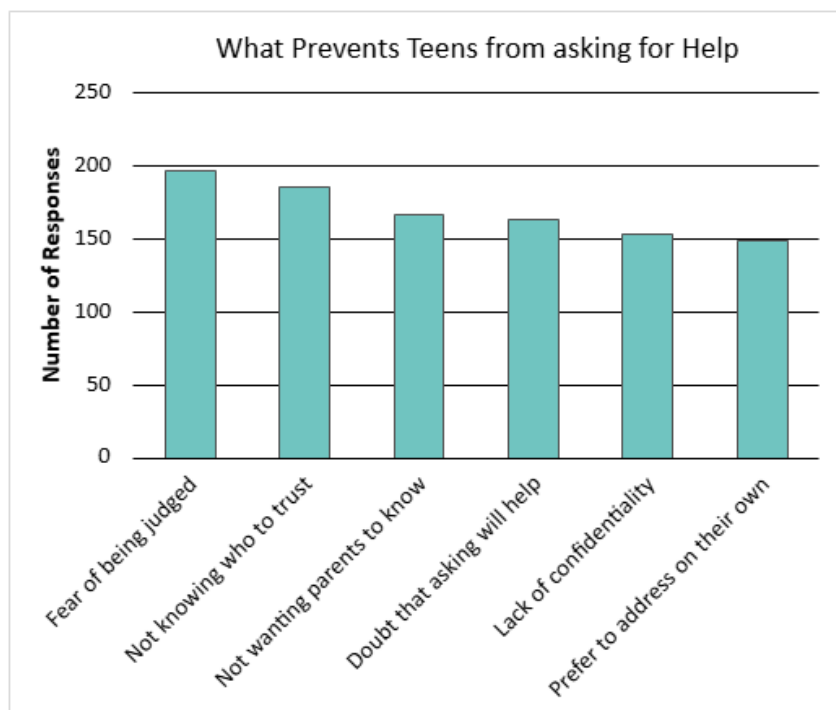
Q9: What type(s) of mental health support do you think would be most helpful at your school?



- Data indicates a strong demand for mental health support that does not require parental or guardian consent, highlighting the value of an on-campus wellness center. By providing an accessible space for all students, the center can serve as a safe space where they can seek guidance and utilize essential mental health resources.
- Students ranked the ability to take mental health days as the most valuable form of support. In California, "mental health days" qualify as excused absences, yet many students remain unaware of this option. Schools should proactively inform students and foster an environment where they feel comfortable prioritizing their well-being when needed.

Recommendation: The desire for a wellness center at schools should be highlighted. Additionally, students should be more aware of the resources available to them because a lot of the requested resources are already provided.

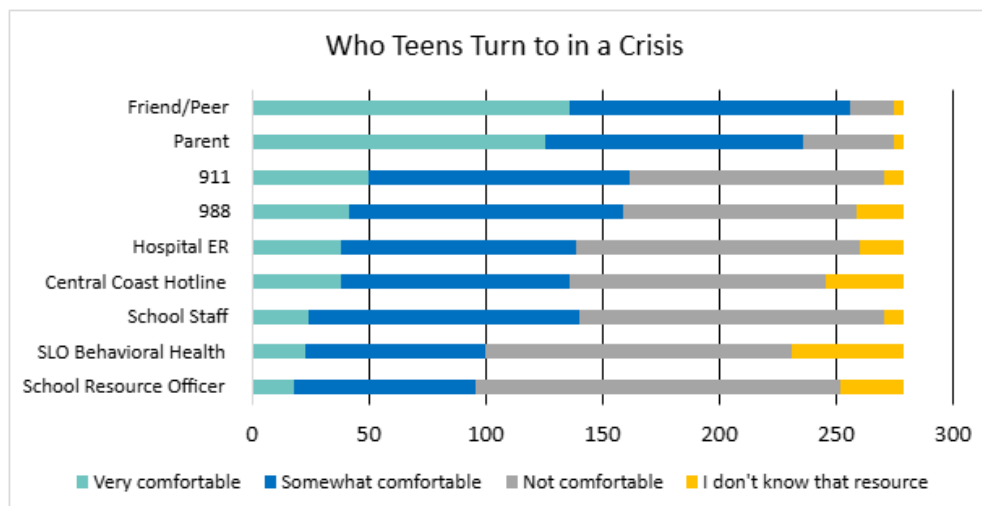
Q10: Which of the following do you think prevents teens in SLO County from asking for mental health support?



- The top answer choice is “fear of being judged” addressing the apparent stigma that comes with having a mental health condition.
- Flyers and posters with mental health information and resources was the least selected response, indicating that schools should explore more effective ways to raise awareness and connect students with support services.

Recommendation: Providing teens with more ways to anonymously express their emotions could alleviate feelings of insecurity, fear of judgment, and uncertainty about whom to trust. While anonymous support resources already exist, such as hotlines, many teens hesitate to use them. Understanding the barriers to engagement and identifying the types of anonymous support they would find truly helpful is extremely important.

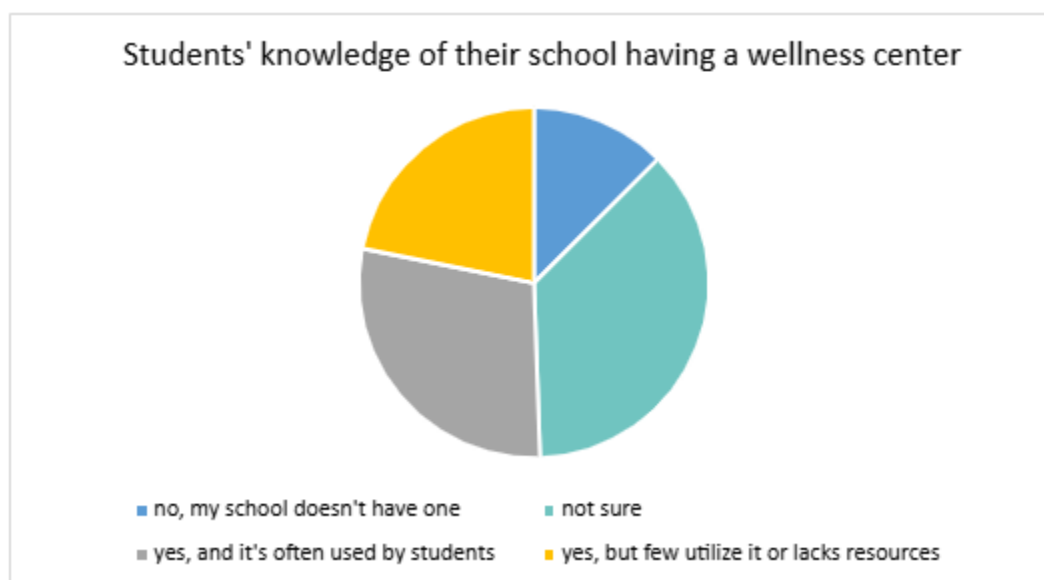
Q11: If you or a friend were in a mental health crisis and needed immediate support, how comfortable are you asking for help from the following resources?



- Teens are only likely to use an anonymous phone line when emergency mental health issues are going on.
- School resource officers were ranked the lowest on who teens would trust during a mental health crisis, followed by other school staff.

Recommendation: Educate teens on the difference between a warmline and hotline (aka crisis line or lifeline). Warmline should be more promoted and normalized, especially since they are anonymous and free.

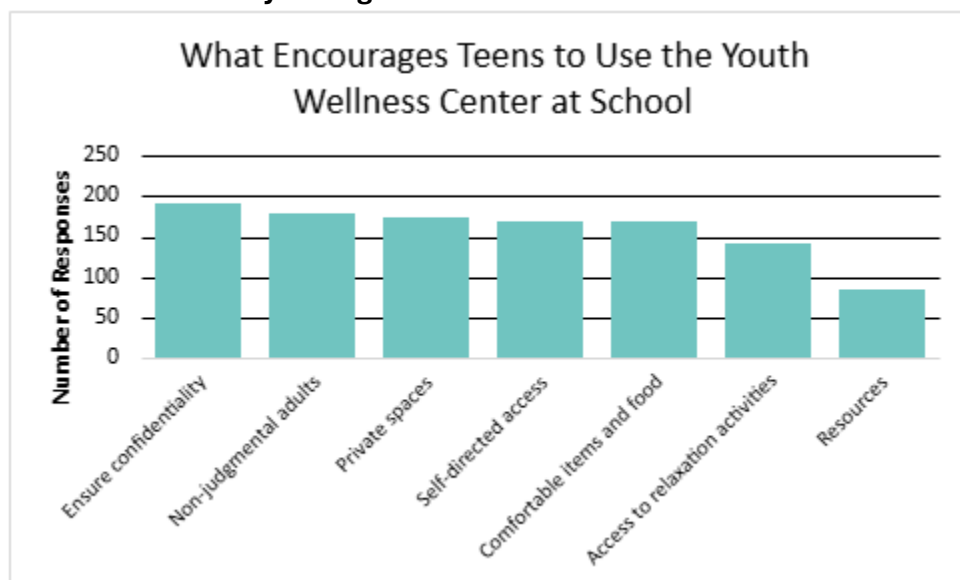
Q12: Does your high school have a youth wellness center?



- 37% of teens reported being unsure if their school has a wellness center, which is a surprisingly high amount.
- 22% of teens reported going to a school that has a wellness center, but it not being used or lacking resources.

Recommendation: If the school has a wellness center or safe space for students, it should be more publicized and advertised to students.

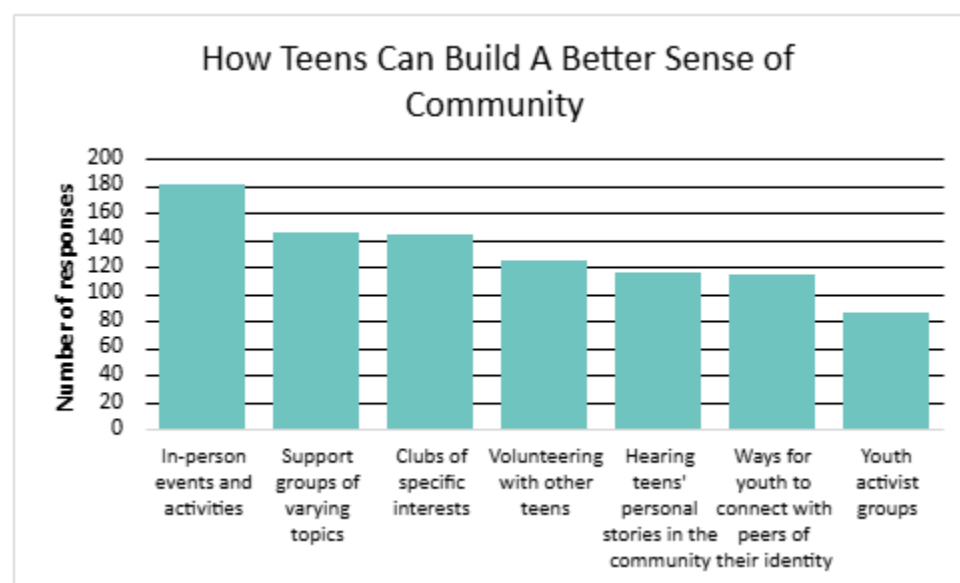
Q13: Which of the following do you think are important to encourage teens to use the youth wellness center at your high school?



- Privacy and confidentiality are very important to teens using their school's wellness center.

Recommendation: Students should be informed about how their wellness center is run so that they feel comfortable using it.

Q14: Which of the following do you think would help teens in SLO County build a sense of community?



Recommendation: Creating more opportunities for students to connect in person is needed to help teens build a sense of community.

Q15: Do you have any further recommendations as to how teens can better be supported in regard to their mental health?

Common Theme:	Direct Quotes:
Academic Stress & Burnout – The intense amount of coursework, homework, and the pressure of college competitiveness leave students feeling overwhelmed. Students are in need of support to help them navigate these challenges and maintain their well-being.	“Academic stress really affects me and my friends. We take a lot of rigorous courses and sometimes we find ourselves in a depression because it is so difficult to manage it. But at the same time we are afraid that if we lessen our workload, we won’t be competitive for college applications.” “Some way for kids to miss a few days of school due to sickness or mental health without the stress of their grades going down and them falling behind”
Building a More Empathetic School Culture & Promoting More Support – Teachers and staff should be better educated on students’ mental health challenges, show empathy, and support students beyond just academics. There is a strong need for schools to prioritize mental health by reducing stigma, providing better resources, and offering flexible policies.	“I just think school staff and adults in this community need to be advised to care more about our mental health. I think so many people just brush it off, so even when students are taught things when they see the adults around them saying that mental health isn't a priority they also don't care... We need to educate the people here.” “better on campus resources, and less stigmatization around mental health. I think people don’t see how it is helpful because they don’t see other students struggling or getting help. I think some way to show the community that other teens struggle with mental health could help people be more open about their struggles.” “I'd say teachers and everyone in general just need to give more grace for students and people that could be going through things that they don't talk about” “Allow for more required education by teachers so that they know the issues that are facing their students.” “If I'm at school and my mental health becomes overwhelming, I should be able to take a break/ leave school. mental health is a totally valid reason to need time off”

Creating a Safe & Approachable Space for Youth – When youth feel heard, values, and free from judgement, they are more likely to seek help and connect with resources.	“Trying to create an environment for teens where they don't feel that seeking help is not something that is seen with a negative light by peers.” “Have them be heard, pay attention to their actions, and don’t make them feel like there is something wrong with them.” “Ways to socialize with those who share similar identities is key for people of those identities to feel supported and stable.” “Prioritizing engagement in community activities, whether solo or in pairs, is a great way to mitigate, prevent, or even turn around the effects of mental health issues. Encouraging opportunities in the community, like community service and community events, are a great way to achieve this end goal.” “Posters, videos, teaching a classroom, and online ads for mental health support honestly don’t help anybody, there needs to be confidential places, where parents aren’t notified and nobody will get in trouble, with people that went through similar things.”
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Conclusion

The findings of the CCAMH Youth Participatory Action Research Survey underscore the significant impact of academic pressure and social expectations on teen mental health in San Luis Obispo County. While students acknowledge the importance of mental health, many face barriers that prevent them from seeking support, fear of judgment, uncertainty about whom to trust, and stigma surrounding mental health struggles.

Schools play a crucial role in addressing these challenges, and the data highlights the need for more structured and accessible mental health resources. Students overwhelmingly support the implementation of wellness centers, peer-to-peer support programs, and flexible policies such as mental health days. Additionally, educators and staff should receive training to foster an environment where students feel comfortable discussing mental health without fear of stigma.

Beyond school-based solutions, the survey also reveals a strong need for community-driven efforts to support youth mental health. Expanding opportunities for in-person engagement, ensuring confidentiality in support services, and destigmatizing mental health struggles can help build a stronger, more supportive environment for teens. By listening to youth perspectives and implementing these recommendations, schools and community members can take meaningful steps toward improving adolescent well-being in San Luis Obispo County.