

POLICY ANALYSIS

The Youth and Families Mental Health Ecosystem: Why Minneapolis Built It and What It Reveals

Leopoldino Jeronimo · Minneapolis Youth Coordinating Board · July 2026 · [Download PDF](#)

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This analysis synthesizes a chapter of the author's doctoral research at Claremont Graduate University. The full interactive model it describes is published at ycb.org/ecosystem.

Summary

Adolescent mental health is in crisis nationally, and the governments that respond to it in Minneapolis — the City, Hennepin County, the Public Schools, and the Park Board — each hold only one piece of the answer. The Youth and Families Mental Health Ecosystem is the Youth Coordinating Board's response: a working map of thirty-seven elements and forty-seven connections that shows who does what, how money and programs flow, and where the system leaves young people behind. This analysis

explains why the Ecosystem exists, what law and policy sit behind it, what the newest data shows, and what its twelve named gaps reveal. The short version: Minneapolis has the institutions, the programs, and — for the first time in a decade — the data to coordinate youth mental health as one system. What it does not yet have is guaranteed funding for the coordination itself, a referral loop that confirms young people actually receive help, and an accountability owner for every recommendation. Those are fixable problems, and they are named, assigned, and dated on the [Gaps and Actions](#) page.

The problem: a crisis meets fragmented government

By 2019 — before the pandemic — one in three U.S. high school students reported persistent sadness or hopelessness, and the U.S. Surgeon General later issued a formal advisory declaring a youth mental-health crisis. The pandemic roughly doubled clinically elevated depression and anxiety symptoms among children worldwide. Minneapolis felt these national currents alongside shocks of its own: the murder of George Floyd and the unrest of 2020, a spike in violence that peaked in 2021, and the loss — for nearly a decade — of district-level student survey data when Minneapolis Public Schools sat out the Minnesota Student Survey.

No single government is responsible for the whole problem. Minnesota law gives Hennepin County the children's mental-health authority, the school district the classrooms, the City the health department and neighborhood safety, and the Park Board the places young people actually spend their free time. That division is not an accident to be blamed on anyone; it is the statutory architecture. Which is precisely why Minneapolis created the Youth Coordinating Board in 1985 by special state law: to make separate governments act as one for young people.

What the Ecosystem is

The Ecosystem is a seven-layer model built from the YCB's 2024 Community Assessment and the 2025–26 cross-jurisdiction safety forums with the City, Brooklyn Park, and Hennepin County. Layer one is the population itself — roughly 80,000 Minneapolis children and youth. The layers beneath trace needs and protective factors, the organizations responsible, the program families that serve them, the policies and money that fund them, the outputs that can be counted, and a single shared outcome:

youth safety and mental health. Every one of the thirty-seven elements connects, through a verifiable path, to that outcome — select any element on the interactive map and its complete pathway lights up.

The model does two jobs at once. It is a navigation tool — the beginning of the "phone book" partners asked for. And it is an honesty tool: its output layer says "data pending" in plain sight, because counting starts only when a real source is attached. The Ecosystem does not claim the system works; it shows what working would look like and measures the distance.

The policy framework behind it

The Ecosystem sits on four levels of law and policy. Internationally, Minneapolis committed to UNICEF's Child Friendly Cities Initiative in February 2020 and was formally recognized in February 2024 — the second U.S. city — with the 2023 Local Action Plan as its instrument. Federally, Medicaid's EPSDT entitlement, the 21st Century Community Learning Centers afterschool grants, the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act's school mental-health investments, and the 988 crisis line all flow into local programs — and the summer 2025 federal withholding episode, which froze roughly \$74 million destined for Minnesota before releasing it under pressure, showed how fragile those streams can be. At the state level, the 1985 enabling statute and the joint powers law make the YCB possible, while the Comprehensive Children's Mental Health Act assigns the county its role and newer laws fund school-linked behavioral health. Locally, the Youth Master Plan, the CFCI Action Plan, the Blueprint for Action lineage, and the county curfew ordinance with its 2024 Task Force complete the picture.

One pattern runs through all four levels: programs get funded; coordination does not. Nearly every instrument pays for direct service. Almost none pays for the connective work — the directory, the shared indicators, the referral follow-through — that determines whether direct services find the young people who need them.

What the data shows

The newest numbers are genuinely encouraging, and they deserve careful reading. Minneapolis closed 2025 with 64 homicides, about 16 percent below 2024 — real

progress, though still above pre-pandemic levels and coincident with a national decline, so no local program can simply claim the credit. The city reports large drops in juvenile violent crime since the Curfew Task Force began in August 2024; those figures are official claims that have not yet been independently evaluated. The strongest news comes from the 2025 Minnesota Student Survey: students statewide report feeling safer at school than in 2022, eleventh-grade suicidal thinking is at its lowest recorded level in more than a decade, and — critically for this city — Minneapolis Public Schools rejoined the survey after a decade away. For the first time since the mid-2010s, all four YCB member governments can measure the same young people in the same dataset. That is the shared-measurement foundation everything else builds on; protecting it is now a policy obligation.

Twelve gaps, four families

The forums named twelve gaps, each with a lead, supporting actors, a first step, and a timing commitment. Analytically they form four families. **Navigation and infrastructure:** the cross-jurisdiction directory, the accountability tracker, and the shared indicator set — the operating system the joint powers agreement authorizes but does not fund. **Resourcing:** sustainable funding for coordination and for the youth-work workforce, whose burnout is itself a system risk. **Service reach:** safe supervised places after hours, referrals that verifiably land, help for the whole family, connected employment pathways, and consistent program quality across sites. **Legitimacy and trust:** mental-health support that fits culture and language, and getting ahead of social media and AI harms.

Two findings stand out. First, the hardest gaps have the softest ownership — the most cross-cutting problems are the ones no single agency is assigned to. Second, several gaps run ahead of the research literature itself: published evidence on warm-handoff completion for adolescents, on after-hours third spaces, and on closed-loop referral systems is thin. Minneapolis is not behind the field here; it is asking questions the field has not yet answered, which makes its own measurement plan a contribution, not just a compliance exercise.

What it costs, what it pays

Untreated youth mental illness carries enormous costs — hundreds of billions of dollars nationally each year by recent estimates, before counting the human toll. Against that, the benefit-cost evidence for this ecosystem's program types is favorable but must be read honestly. Minnesota's own Results First analysis found returns of up to \$12 per dollar for cognitive-behavioral interventions with justice-involved youth and about \$3.90 for mentoring; the Washington State Institute for Public Policy's current models are more conservative for some of the same program types. The strongest experimental evidence is striking: a randomized trial of a summer jobs program in Chicago cut violent-crime arrests by 43 percent. The lesson is not that every program pays for itself; it is that well-chosen, well-run programs plausibly do — and that the coordination architecture connecting them, which costs a fraction of any single program family, is what makes "well-chosen and well-run" knowable at all.

Three futures

The analysis models three scenarios. In *drift*, the map stays beautiful and the gaps stay open: the directory remains unbuilt, indicators remain drafts, and the 2028 survey arrives with participation again uncertain. In *funded backbone*, member governments jointly fund the coordination infrastructure, the accountability tracker goes live, and every recommendation has an owner and a due date. In *retrenchment*, a repeat of the 2025 federal funding shock meets flat local budgets, and programs contract before the connective tissue exists to cushion them. The difference between these futures is not knowledge — the gaps are already named, assigned, and dated. It is whether gap eleven, the accountability loop, closes.

The bottom line

Forty years after Minneapolis invented a board to make its governments act as one for young people, the Ecosystem is that idea made visible and testable. The city has durable institutions, a recovering safety trend, restored shared data, and a public list of exactly what remains broken. What it needs next is small compared to what it already has: fund the coordination itself, confirm that every referral lands, and give every recommendation an owner. The map shows every pathway ending in the same place —

youth safety and mental health. The work now is making sure young people can actually travel those paths.

About this analysis

This publication synthesizes a dissertation chapter prepared by the author in the PhD in Political Science program at Claremont Graduate University, based on documentary analysis, verified public statistics, and the legislative record. It makes no causal claims about population outcomes; official statistics are identified as such, and city-reported program results are noted as unevaluated claims where independent evaluation has not occurred. Explore the [interactive Ecosystem](#), the [Gaps and Actions](#), and the underlying [Policy Analysis](#) publications.

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