



# Youth Wellness Zones as a Strategy to Support Child & Adolescent Mental Health

In 2021, the U.S. Surgeon General issued an advisory on youth mental health, saying, **“Mental health challenges in children, adolescents, and young adults are real, and they are widespread.** But most importantly, they are treatable, and often preventable.”<sup>1</sup>

**A young person’s environment is a key consideration in mental health prevention and treatment efforts.** This includes aspects of the physical or built environment (e.g., presence of vandalism, noise, or toxins), as well as the social environment (e.g., availability of emotional support, experiences of discrimination).<sup>2</sup> **This brief describes zones, a promising approach for bringing about environmental changes to support youth mental health.**

## What Are Zones?

**Zones are an approach to improving community health and wellness that focuses on making lasting changes to the built and social environment, resources, and policies.** (These are sometimes called “community networks,” “community empowerment zones,” or “place-based efforts.”) Zones are hyperlocal; they focus on a small geographic area, like a neighborhood or a small city/town, and they leverage local knowledge and community participation. This approach brings organizations and sectors together for community outreach, planning, capacity-building, intervention, and tracking progress, **often using the Collective Impact framework.**

## WHAT IS THE COLLECTIVE IMPACT FRAMEWORK?<sup>3</sup>

Common agenda for change



Shared measurement system



Mutually reinforcing activities



Continuous communication



Backbone support organization



### Zones have several strengths relative to other public health approaches.

First, they can be tailored to unique local conditions related to social capital, housing, education, employment, and resources. Second, zones can be used to address geographically specific racist and classist policies, such as those related to redlining and construction zoning. This approach also requires specialized skills in community leadership, complex strategic planning, and absorbing and integrating multiple sources of information.<sup>4</sup>

Philanthropic organizations have shown considerable interest in zones<sup>5</sup>, and there has been a resurging interest among federal policymakers.<sup>6</sup> This interest

appears to be driven by several factors, including scientific findings on environmental contributors to mental health and a demand for ways to foster democratic participation.

### ZONE INITIATIVE EXAMPLES

Education

[Promise Neighborhoods](#)

Economic Growth, Employment

[Empowerment Zones](#)

Intergenerational Poverty

[Harlem Children's Zone](#)

Health

[Newport Health Equity Zone](#)

Youth Mental Health

[Youth Wellness Hubs Ontario](#)

[Live4Life communities](#)

## The Zone Approach in Action in Washington State



In 2015, residents and community organizations in Northeast Spokane, Washington, came together to form The ZONE. The ZONE uses a collective impact approach to support the social, health, economic, educational, and recreational needs of households, schools, and neighborhoods.

The ZONE's 2023 annual report<sup>7</sup> documents some of its recent successes, including:

- Funding **77,192 hours** of **afterschool and summer programming** at school sites and in community spaces. This was associated with a 77% decrease in disciplinary incidents and a more than 50% increase in social emotional learning.
- Support of a **housing diversion program** that provided rent/mortgage assistance, case management, financial coaching, employment supports, benefits cliff navigation, and wraparound services for the entire household.
- Partnership on **food security activities** (e.g., free meals, food boxes, community garden beds).
- Sponsorship of a **farmers' market** that supported **21 microbusinesses**, provided fresh food that could be purchased with public benefits, and hosted community resource fairs.

## What Do We Know About Zones and Mental Health?

Educational attainment has been a common focus of zone efforts; **few have focused on youth mental health, behavioral health, or wellness.** The relatively few zone efforts that have targeted child and family health have focused largely on early childhood development and adolescent substance use prevention. This may be because mental health is seen as an issue to be addressed by the healthcare industry and treatment organizations, rather than by the community.

**The University of Washington's CoLab for Community and Behavioral Health Policy recently reviewed published scientific journal articles about zone efforts to support mental health.** The CoLab team identified 16 relevant articles. Most articles presented their findings as unique initiatives, rather than part of a unified body of work around youth mental health zones. In general, the primary goal of these initiatives was to promote equitable access to, and quality of, services to support youth mental health and well-being. Many focused on additional outcomes such as physical health and family support. Most of these initiatives were relatively new, with two-thirds having been in operation for 1-5 years.

CoLab identified the following **lessons learned** from their review:

- An important first step in zone efforts is listening to community perspectives on existing services and community strengths.
- Intervention development and implementation require community support and developing trust across sectors.
- This includes engaging young people and families in initiative conception, design, and operation.

- Meeting community needs requires the collaboration of housing, education, law enforcement, mental health, and social services sectors. However, it is challenging when individuals from different sectors have competing priorities.
- Addressing social determinants of health promotes engagement in traditional health systems.
- Different forms of capital (economic, social, political) can be leveraged to build community infrastructure and promote access to existing services.
- Peer-led messaging, community events, and formal education can break down stigma and build familiarity with local mental health services.

CoLab is part of a statewide coalition of partners to plan and implement strategies for improving youth mental health and wellness in existing place-based collective impact initiatives. Four zones are working to integrate youth mental health: The ZONE Spokane, the Renton Innovation Zone Partnership, Parkland in unincorporated Pierce County, and a Yakima County zone of dispersed projects. These zones are supported by a legislative proviso supporting a coalition convened by Shine Strategies, including CoLab and Evans School of Public Policy at UW.

**You can support this effort** by donating through Shine Strategies, spreading the word, and [signing up for the CoLab newsletter](#).

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Office of the Surgeon General (2021). *Protecting youth mental health: The U.S. Surgeon General's advisory*. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-youth-mental-health-advisory.pdf>
- 2 Bjørndal, L. D., Ebrahimi, O. V., Lan, X., Nes, R. B., & Røysamb, E. (2024). Mental health and environmental factors in adults: A population-based network analysis. *American Psychologist*, 79(3), 368–383. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0001208>; Tost, H., Champagne, F. A., & Meyer-Lindenberg, A. (2015).
- 3 Kania, J., & Kramer, M. (2011). Collective impact. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 9(1), 36-21. <https://doi.org/10.48558/5900-kn19>
- 4 Chaskin, R. J. (2001). Building community capacity: A definitional framework and case Studies from a comprehensive community initiative. *Urban Affairs Review*, 36(3), 291-323. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10780870122184876>
- 5 e.g., Blue Meridian Partners (2024). *Place Matters*. <https://www.blumeridian.org/funds/place-matters/>
- 6 e.g., U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (2024). *Promise Zones overview*. HUD Exchange.
- 7 The ZONE (2024). You belong here: Northeast Community Center ZONE 2023 annual report. <https://thezonespokane.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/2023-Annual-Report-Digital.pdf>