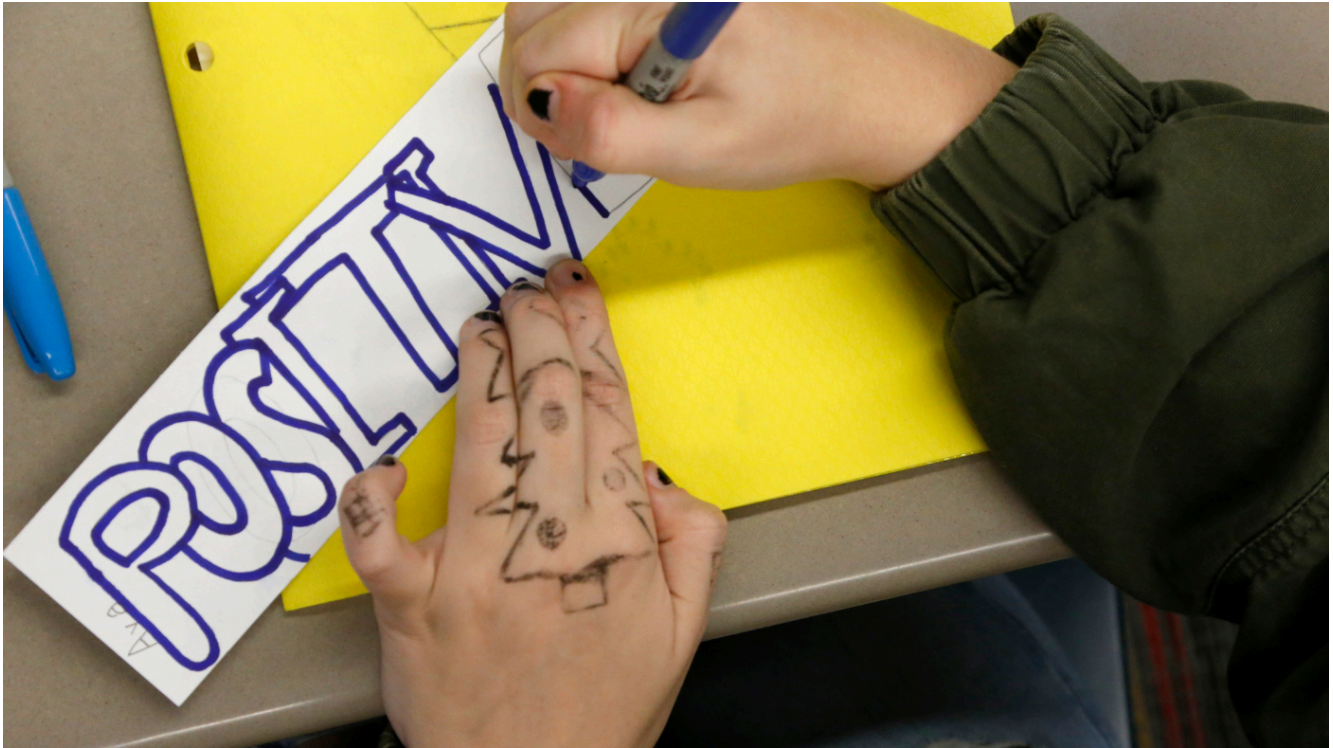


Gen Z put mental health on the map. Let them lead in solving the crisis.



An 8th grader works on a class project at Paw Paw Middle School on Thursday, Dec. 2, 2021, in Paw Paw, Michigan. An AP-NORC/MTV poll found that nearly half of U.S. teens said the pandemic has made it harder to be happy and maintain their mental health. (AP Photo/Martha Irvine)

It's hard to comprehend that a 10-year-old could be feeling so much pain, that ending their life feels like the only escape. And yet, [suicide is the second leading cause of death among 10-14-year-olds](#).

We shouldn't be ok with any child enduring that much pain and suffering.

We see the [data](#). We feel the loss and the toll this crisis is taking on our loved ones. As the head of AmeriCorps, a federal agency that's all about harnessing the power of young people to address societal challenges, I see something else we rarely talk about.

Gen Z. Not only as the social media savvy, TikTok enthusiast, boundary-breaking generation that it is — but as a powerhouse going further in mainstreaming mental health than any generation before it.

We must stop underestimating this most capable, passionate and convicted generation. Here's why:

1. **Gen Z is far better suited than older generations at connecting with today's students.** Gen Z has always had social media in their lives. They know what it's like to live in a world where so much social interaction, positive and negative, unfolds online. Their near-peer status makes them not only relatable to today's students but also more effective at building trusting relationships where mental health struggles can be shared openly.
2. **Gen Z is the most diverse generation in history.** This undoubtedly fuels their deep sense of social justice and fierce commitment to making the world better especially for people on the margins of society. Gen Z wants a world where they, and all the kids coming up behind

them have access to the free and fair future they deserve. Mental health is the foundation of that dream. It touches every aspect of who we are, what we accept, what we pursue and how far we're willing to go. This means we have to move away from a one-size-fits-all approach to mental health, making care affordable, accessible and culturally relevant.

- 3. Gen Z is willing to go right to the frontlines of the mental health crisis to make change possible.** [Nelly Grosso](#) is a 24-year-old in Colorado who's been serving on the frontlines as a youth mental health navigator for high school students for two years. Grosso told me that getting to walk alongside students, being the guide to help them cope with anxiety and stress healed a part of themselves that they didn't know was so broken.

A new initiative that [AmeriCorps](#) is launching this month will work to put more people like Grosso in students' lives across the country. In partnership with [Pinterest](#), a social media brand [trusted by Gen Z](#), and a long-time supporter of national service, the [Schultz Family Foundation](#), the new [Youth Mental Health Corps](#) is poised to make a meaningful sustainable impact on the mental health crisis.

It's a state-embedded approach to mental health that leverages AmeriCorps' 30-year infrastructure to hire and train 18-24-year-olds and deploys them to provide mental health support to students in schools and communities in 11 states: California, New York, New Jersey, Colorado, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Texas, Virginia, Maryland and Utah.

With certifications, support and incentives like childcare and housing, we're creating an on-ramp for Gen Z to join the mental health workforce and address [the urgent shortage of mental health professionals that impacts 1 in 3 Americans](#).

The initiative builds on the success and learnings we've seen from our [Public Health AmeriCorps](#) program, a more than \$200 million partnership with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that's brought AmeriCorps members into nonprofits and municipalities to address urgent health needs of young people and their families.

None of the progress we hope to make this year will be possible without Gen Z.



With their help, and only then, we can build a future where mental health is prioritized, stigma is eliminated and all individuals have the support and resources they need to live fulfilling lives.

I'm done with underestimating. In fact, I'm all in on Gen Z.

Michael Smith is the CEO of AmeriCorps, the federal agency for national service and volunteerism. Visit www.youthmentalhealthcorps.org for more information.