

POLICYLAB

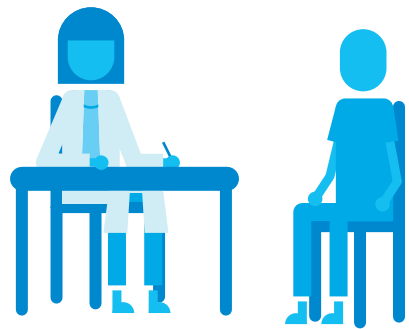
RESEARCH AT A GLANCE | SPRING 2024

A SYNOPSIS OF EMERGING POLICYLAB RESEARCH

**EXPLORING THE
EFFECTS OF
PEDIATRIC MENTAL
HEALTH BOARDING
ON ADOLESCENTS,
THEIR FAMILIES,
AND HEALTHCARE
PROVIDERS**

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM:

Annually, approximately 2 million U.S. adolescents experience suicidal ideation or attempts, and suicide is the leading cause of death among 10–24 year olds.¹



There has been a nearly 200% increase in emergency department visits for mental health emergencies by children and adolescents over the past decade.²

This issue impacts not only the children and adolescents who are awaiting psychiatric treatment, but also the clinicians who care for them and the caregivers who support them. Clinicians are challenged by the demand for mental health services that outpaces available resources, leading to prolonged waiting periods for definitive mental health treatment, including “boarding”—that is, waiting in a medical hospital until mental health treatment is available. Adolescents find themselves in medical settings that are not designed to treat mental health concerns, and caregivers are often left navigating a complex and fragmented mental health care system, all of which contribute to heightened levels of stress and helplessness.

We conducted three studies that sought to understand the experiences and perspectives of those involved in the boarding process: the adolescents who are hospitalized, the caregivers who support them, and the clinicians who provide care. The goal was to identify the main challenges and areas for improvement in the care and management of mental health boarding in acute care settings.

WHAT WE ASKED:

“Can you describe what’s going well during your hospital stay?”

“Do you feel impactful when caring for boarding patients?”

“How do you feel about your child’s boarding stay?”

WHAT WE DID:

Qualitative studies were conducted involving semi-structured interviews with the three key stakeholder groups: adolescents, caregivers, and clinicians. Interviews aimed to uncover successful elements of care experiences of the boarding process, perceived gaps in care, and systemic issues within the current healthcare model.

“What’s taking so long to find me a bed? Why am I still here?”

—Child participant

WHAT WE FOUND:

Across the three groups, several common themes emerged:



Emotional and Practical Support Needs

Each group highlighted the need for emotional support. Clinicians and caregivers both identified a need for resilience-building resources, while caregivers also grappled with the practical challenges of managing life outside the hospital during their child’s boarding stay.



Communication Barriers

Difficulties in communication were a recurring theme. Adolescents struggled with repetitive questioning and a lack of information about their care plan. Caregivers faced challenges in understanding the healthcare processes and in communicating both with their child and the clinical staff.



Information and Transparency

There was a clear need for better information dissemination about treatment plans, care expectations, and systemic processes. Adolescents and caregivers desired more transparency and guidance throughout the boarding experience.



Training and Preparedness

There was a consensus among clinicians about the lack of training in mental health care, which sometimes left them feeling ineffective and ill-equipped to address the complex needs of boarding adolescents and their families.



Systemic Frustrations

Clinicians expressed dissatisfaction with the broader mental healthcare system and the lack of appropriate resources. Caregivers echoed these frustrations, often feeling lost within the healthcare system and desperate for accessible, timely, and effective care options for their children.

“Most days I don’t feel impactful.”

—Clinician

WHAT IT MEANS:



¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. National suicide statistics. <https://www.cdc.gov/suicide/suicide-data-statistics.html>. 2022

² Center for Disease Control and Prevention. National Health Statistics Report. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nhsr/nhsr191.pdf>. 2023

STUDY METHODS

The three studies utilized a qualitative research approach, using semi-structured interviews, to explore the experiences of clinicians, adolescents, and caregivers with mental health boarding in a hospital setting. We spoke with 48 clinicians, 27 adolescents and 14 caregivers. For all three studies, the interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and facilitated by NVivo software. An inductive thematic analysis was employed to identify emergent themes from the interviews. The analysis process involved coding the data and iteratively refining the themes with the study team.

RELATED POLICYLAB WORK

Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, PolicyLab. Mental Health Conditions Among Hospitalized Children. <https://policylab.chop.edu/project/mental-health-conditions-among-hospitalized-children>.

PUBLICATIONS

Worsley, D., Bowden, C., Keating, K., Cassidy, K., Douppnik, S. Exploring the Impact of Pediatric Mental Health Boarding on Children's Hospital Clinicians. (2024). *Journal of Hospital Medicine*, 19(3).

Bowden C., Worsley, D., Douppnik S. Caregiver Experiences During Their Child's Acute Medical Hospitalization for a Mental Health Crisis. (2021). *Journal of Child Health Care*, 26(1).

Worsley, D., Barrios, E., Shuter, M., Pettit, A., Douppnik, S. (2019). Suicidal Adolescents' Experiences during "Boarding" Hospitalization while Awaiting Psychiatric Treatment. *Hospital Pediatrics*, 9(11).

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Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. National suicide statistics. <https://www.cdc.gov/suicide/suicide-data-statistics.html>. 2022

Center for Disease Control and Prevention. National Health Statistics Report. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nhsr/nhsr191.pdf>. 2023



The mission of PolicyLab at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP) is to achieve optimal child health and well-being by informing program and policy changes through interdisciplinary research. PolicyLab is a Center of Emphasis within the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia Research Institute, one of the largest pediatric research institutes in the country.

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