

# Mental Health and Community College Students of Color

A STEVE FUND LANDSCAPE BRIEF

THE KRESGE FOUNDATION



## Introduction

There is an ongoing demographic revolution in higher education in the United States, and the state of mental health in this group is a crucial public health issue. Students of color are more likely than white students to attend community college<sup>1</sup> and more than half of community college students are students of color. In 2020, students of color made up 53% of students at community colleges and 44% of students at 4-year public colleges.

Depression, anxiety, self-harm, and suicidal ideation are prevalent among college students generally (Tseng et al., 2016) and have been exacerbated by the pandemic, extended isolation and racial tensions. Compared to students at four-year institutions, students in community colleges face additional challenges, have fewer campus mental health resources, and report more severe psychological issues and less frequent use of mental health resources (Katz and Davison, 2014).

## This Research at a Glance

82%

of community college students of color said that **emotional or mental difficulties had hurt their academics** in the past month.



About one in seven students of color at least somewhat agreed that **receiving mental health treatment is a sign of personal failure**.



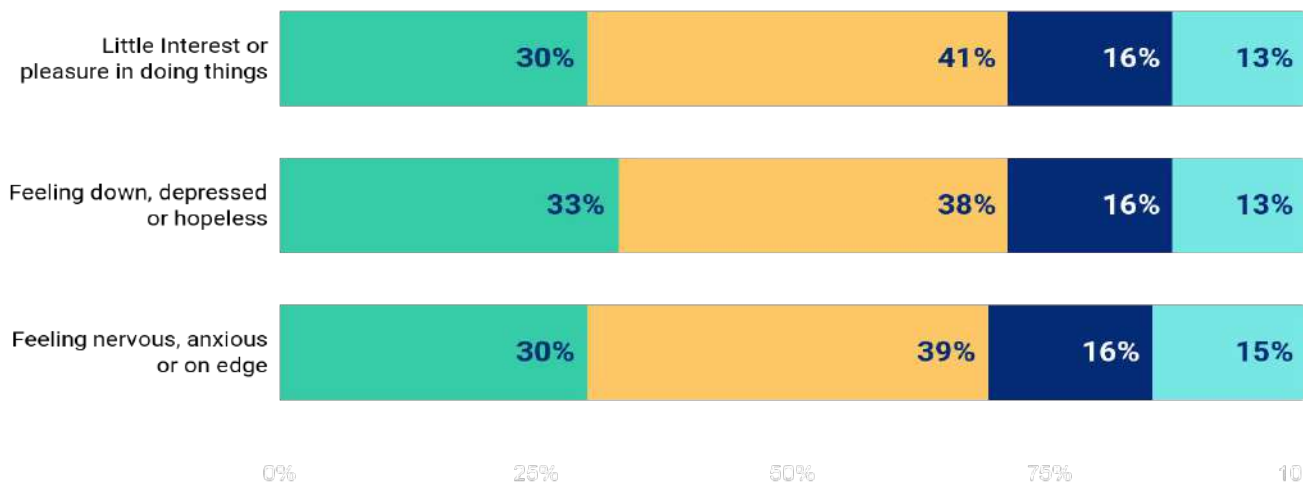
Students of color were **less likely than white students to say medication would be helpful** (44% vs 53%).

63%

Nearly two-thirds (63%) of community college students of color said they were **not aware of mental health outreach efforts on their campus, yet they feel a strong sense of belonging** at their institutions.

## Feelings of Depression or Anxiety in the Past Two Weeks Among Community College Students of Color

■ Not at all  
 ■ Several Days  
 ■ More than Half the days  
 ■ Nearly Every Day



# Introduction

This brief<sup>2</sup> summarizes the state of mental health among students of color at community colleges, including the prevalence of mental health problems; mental health services utilization; and knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs about mental health. It is intended to build the literature of mental health status and needs of community college students of color and to identify potential means of better serving them.

## The key takeaways are:



**Students of color experience high levels of stress and mental health issues**



**Stigma and lack of information contribute to low service utilization in students of color**



**Students of color value their community college experience, creating an opportunity to leverage this environment and provide new and augmented services to support them**



The Steve Fund is committed to transforming educational, organizational, and workplace environments by ensuring every young person of color is fully supported by peers, families, communities, and institutional cultures. Efforts like this landscape brief, which was developed with generous support from the Kresge Foundation and helped us to focus specifically on the needs of community college students, allow us to better help higher education leaders and administrators, philanthropists, and policymakers as they work to shape the field with improvements in, and broad delivery of, high quality supports for students of color.

# Major Findings



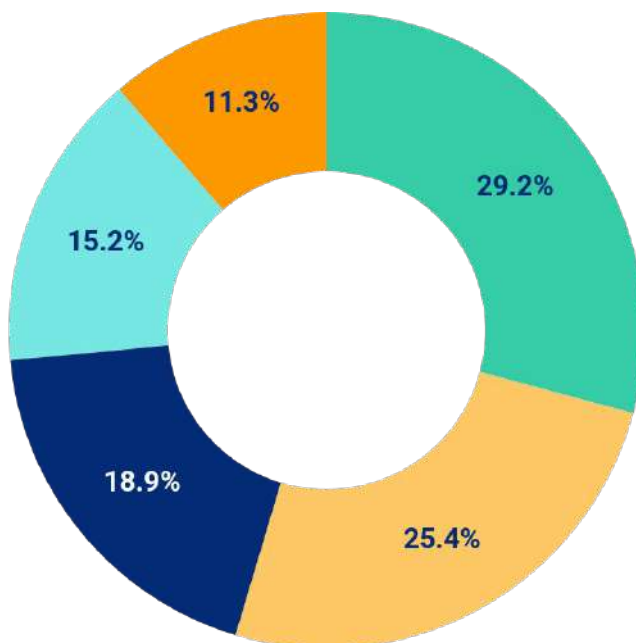
## Students of color experience high levels of stress and mental health issues

During data collection (Fall 2020 to Spring 2021) many college students experienced the compounded effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the country’s racial reckoning in addition to the ongoing stresses experienced by many community college students such as academic pressures, financial concerns, balancing the demands of school with employment and/or family obligations and the day-to-day stressors of life.

A 2021 study by Lipson et al, found that compared to same-age peers enrolled in four-year institutions, community college students aged 18-22 reported a higher prevalence of mental health issues. The most prevalent psychological problem reported was depression (37.9%) followed by anxiety (33%), eating disorders (24.5%), non-suicidal self-injury (19.7%), and suicidal ideation (14.7%) (Lipson et al., 2021)

In the Healthy Minds Study, 82% of community college students of color said that emotional or mental difficulties had hurt their academics in the past month. Almost a third said they were bothered by feelings of depression or anxiety for more than half of the days in the past two weeks. More than half (58%) indicated they needed help with an emotional or mental health problem in the past year.

Finances are a major source of stress: nearly half of all community college students said their financial situation is often or always stressful. Students of color were more likely than white students to say the pandemic made their financial situation more stressful.



### Psychological Problems

Reported by community college students of color aged 18-22

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Eating Disorders
- Non-Suicidal Self-Injury
- Suicidal Ideation

Source: Lipson, S. K., Phillips, M. V., Winqvist, N., Eisenberg, D., & Lattie, E. G. (2021).

Participants in the focus groups expressed that the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic and the racial reckoning facing communities in the wake of George Floyd’s murder had profound effects on their mental health.

Here are examples of feelings shared by two participants:



I had to stop watching the news. I had to stop reading about it because it was just too much, like there was already too much happening in the world.



After the whole Black Lives Matter thing, it just became too much for me to handle.

Despite the high levels of stress, about half of community college students (both students of color and white students) indicated they are emotionally resilient (bounce back quickly after hard times). Less than one in five indicated they did not feel they would bounce back quickly.

## 2

## Students of color generally feel a sense of belonging on campus

Students’ perceptions of campus climate can affect their psychological health. For example, the stress of encountering a hostile campus climate, discrimination, and racial prejudice can take a toll on mental and emotional health.

Both the quantitative and qualitative research reviewed for this brief finds that community college students of color generally feel a sense of belonging on campus. Students of color report that being enrolled in colleges with a critical mass of students and educators of color engenders feelings of belonging and a welcoming campus climate, both of which have implications for their mental health and well-being.

In the Healthy Minds Study, nearly two-thirds of students of color described their campus as welcoming or somewhat welcoming to students of diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds; only 4% described their campus as hostile or somewhat hostile. The vast majority of community college students of color (92%) report not having experienced discrimination or other hostile behavior at their school.



# 3

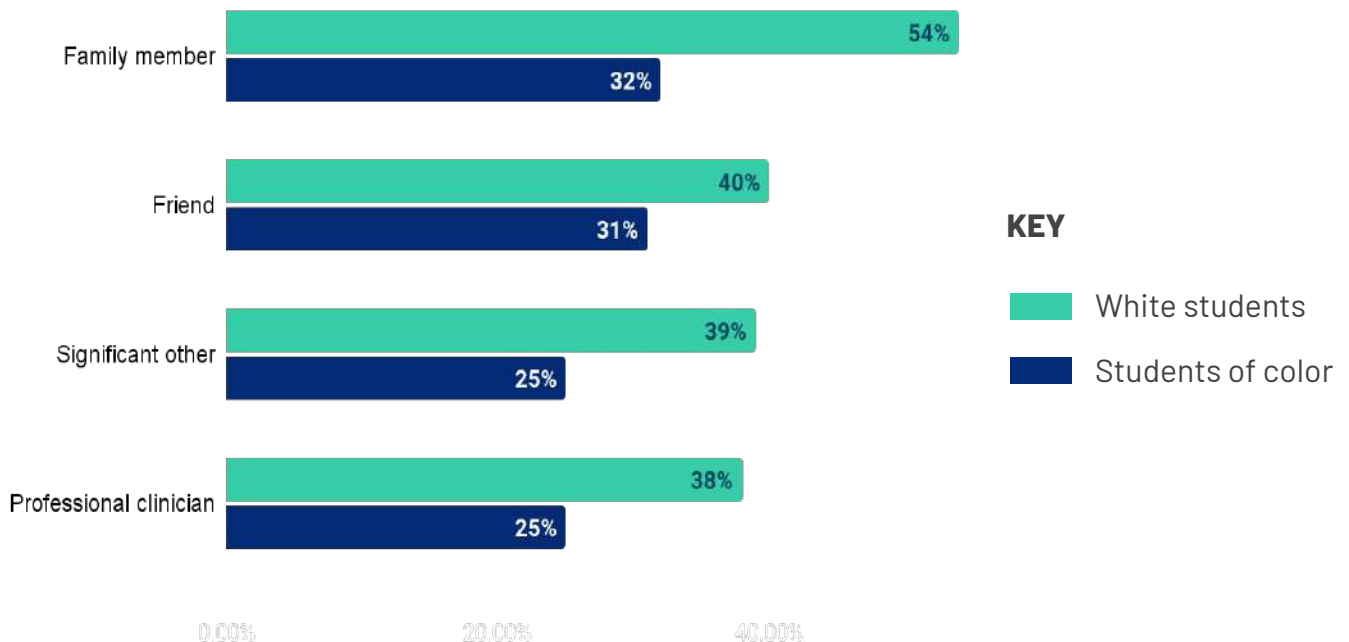
## Students of color have low service utilization and help-seeking behaviors

Compared to white community college students, students of color are less likely to reach out for help for mental health concerns. In the Healthy Minds Study, community college students of color reported that they would turn to a family member, a friend, a significant other, or a professional clinician at rates far below those of white students. For example, about 25% of students of color would turn to a professional clinician if they were experiencing serious emotional distress, compared to about 38% of white students.

The student focus group participants provided insights into the reasons for low service utilization, including limited access to campus mental health support, the cost of services, stigma and fear of judgment, and perceptions of a cultural mismatch between students and clinicians. These factors, when considered both individually and collectively, played a substantial role in students' decisions to utilize or not utilize campus mental health support.

Slightly more than half of community college students of color (53%) reported that they have been diagnosed with a mental health disorder, primarily anxiety, depression, or trauma and stressors-related disorders. Among white students, 65% said they had been diagnosed with a mental health disorder.

### People community college students of color would turn to if experiencing serious social distress



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## Perceptions about mental health are barriers to seeking help for students of color

Students' knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs about mental health problems and their perceived and personal stigma can influence their help-seeking. Mental health stigma persists among some students of color: about a quarter of community college students of color indicated a perceived stigma about mental health (i.e., they agreed with the statement that “most people feel that receiving mental health treatment is a sign of personal failure”). While most students disagreed, about one in seven students of color at least somewhat agreed that receiving mental health treatment is a sign of personal failure.

The students in the focus groups also expressed that access to mental health support was impacted by the “stigma” and “fear of judgment” that people of color often feel when considering therapy. For example, one student noted:



I definitely feel like there's a stigma in the Black community about going to therapy. From my experience, I actually was very hesitant at first.



In the Healthy Minds Study, nearly two-thirds (63%) of community college students of color said they were not aware of mental health outreach efforts on their campus and only about one-third said they would know where to go on campus if they needed to seek professional help for mental or emotional health. Therapy is broadly viewed as helpful by community college students: four in five students (both students of color and white students) said it would be helpful. Medication was less likely to be viewed as helpful and students of color were less likely than white students to say medication would be helpful (44% vs 53%).

In addition, students of color were less likely to see themselves as knowledgeable about mental health than white students. Forty percent of students of color rated their mental health knowledge as above or well above average compared to 54% of white students.

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## Outreach is effective at helping students connect with services

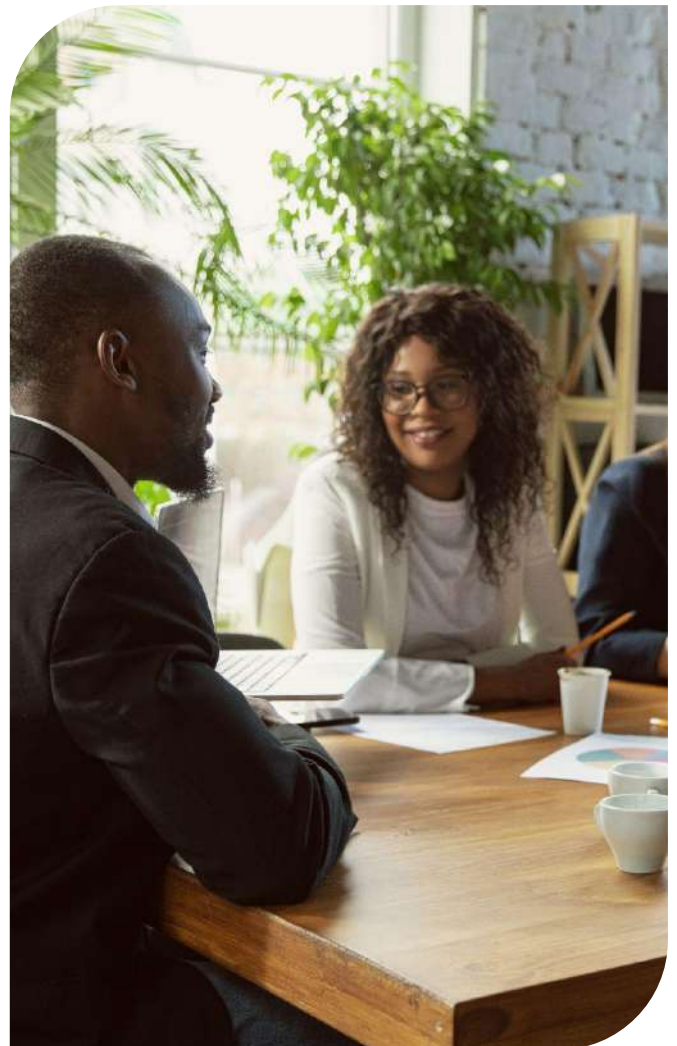
Interviews with students revealed that outreach efforts and messages from trusted authority figures are effective. Most frequently mentioned were email announcements, posts on the college’s social media accounts, tabling during new student orientation, classroom presentations (sometimes by peers who worked at the counseling center), and class announcements (by the professor).

In addition, being referred to the counseling center by a faculty or staff member was noted as a critical step in students’ decisions to actually seek support. This was especially true among students who knew they needed support but were reluctant to seek it out. One student spoke positively of recommendations from advising staff:

“

I was actually recommended therapy from my advisor . . . . And so she explained to me like, ‘Hey, this could really help you. This is the link to it. This is how you get there.’ And I feel like if more advisors were more knowledgeable on this topic, it could definitely help students flow a lot better because I feel like no offense.

Students in the focus groups also noted that learning about other students with similar racial/ethnic backgrounds and similar mental health challenges who had undergone therapy was helpful in accepting it. They shared that having a therapist of the same race/ethnicity was helpful and potentially made it easier to overcome the stigma of seeking mental health treatment and to build rapport based on shared experiences. However, they also noted that it was more important for the therapist to have cultural humility and an authentic understanding and appreciation of the lived experiences of people of color than to have the same racial/ethnic identity.





# Conclusion



**The mental health challenges facing students of color in community college, coupled with the complex barriers of stigma and accessing care, should be a wakeup call to public health professionals, educators, higher education leaders and administrators, philanthropists, and policymakers.**

As more students of color seek educational opportunities through community colleges, this situation of concern has the potential to become a crisis. Now is the time to act.

These students, using their own voices, have provided a way forward. The research summarized in this brief presents a few potential pathways to improved access, utilization, and mental wellbeing. **Overall, it is clear that community colleges represent an opportunity to dramatically improve access to care for students of color experiencing care disparities stemming from social determinants of health.**

Students trust their community college community and have a demonstrated need for care. To help them, administrators can take steps to:



**Ensure access to and efficacy of support services**



**Expand institutional outreach and information sharing efforts**



**Improve students' knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs about mental health**

The scope of this research means that it did not consider additional factors that can play intersecting and overlapping roles in student mental health, both as protective factors and as stressors. These include social, religious, cultural, and personal factors. For example, spirituality and/or religion may buffer mental health challenges. Half of students of color at community colleges who responded to the survey said that religion was important in their lives in terms of coping skills and emotional resilience. Better understanding the impact of these complex and overlapping factors would require additional research and analysis.



# Addendum: Note on Data Sources

This brief summarizes the results of a mixed methods study commissioned by The Steve Fund to provide a descriptive analysis of the mental health of students of color at community colleges. The analysis draws from three sources: 1) prior literature, 2) national survey data, and 3) in-depth interviews; the full report is available upon request by emailing [info@stevefund.org](mailto:info@stevefund.org).

1. **Literature review:** The literature review on mental health experiences of community college students and students of color provides context and relevant findings from previous research.
2. **Survey data:** Analysis of current mental health status, service utilization, and related issues were drawn from the 2020-2021 Healthy Minds Study (HMS), an annual survey of college students. This is the largest known survey of the mental health needs of community college students in the U.S. (Lipson et al., 2021). HMS surveyed more than 14,800 community college students from winter 2020 through spring 2021, 38% of whom identified as students of color.
3. **Focus groups:** The lived experiences, mental health, and wellness needs of students of color enrolled in community colleges were explored through a series of focus groups. During the fall 2021 semester, 21 students of color at five community colleges participated in semi-structured, virtual group interviews. The students represented a range of backgrounds and identities; most identified as African American/Black or Mexican/Mexican American, most were enrolled full-time, and most had indicated that their primary educational goal was to transfer to a four-year university.

It is important to note that the timing of data collection for the survey and focus groups coincided with the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Lockdowns, restrictions, quarantine, and isolation, combined with fear and uncertainty about contracting the virus and unemployment due to lockdowns likely had a differential impact on student mental health.

## Acknowledgments/Contributors

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## References

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Edgecombe, N, 2021. "Demography as Opportunity." *Community College Research Center Working Paper*, no. 106. [https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/League\\_13\\_Ideas\\_Demography\\_as\\_Opportunity\\_CCRC\\_WP\\_final\\_r1\\_1.pdf](https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/League_13_Ideas_Demography_as_Opportunity_CCRC_WP_final_r1_1.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> This landscape brief is based on a larger study consisting of a scientific literature review; qualitative research consisting of in-depth focus groups with students; and quantitative analysis of national survey data from the Healthy Minds Study. The full report is available upon request by emailing [info@stevefund.org](mailto:info@stevefund.org).