

## Using Data to Improve Children's Mental Health

For those who work with youth and are concerned about their mental health, the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) is most likely familiar. It is a voluntary, school-based, and anonymous questionnaire taken by middle and high school students across the country that shows how youth are doing across a number of categories. While many communities and school districts in Wisconsin embrace the survey, some really dig into the data and use it to drive youth initiatives. La Crosse County is one of those.

### Driving the work

[Better Together in La Crosse County](#) is a collaborative that brings youth serving organizations together with the goal of improving the mental health of adolescents in their county. They understand the value of the YRBS to provide powerful county level data, but also acknowledged a lack of awareness of the data within the community. So, as they dug into the YRBS data in 2019 and 2021 they had two goals – to create awareness of the data among the community and really use the data to drive youth-focused initiatives.

### Solution: Data awareness

Schools in La Crosse County have participated in the YRBS for a long time, but there was a disconnect between schools administering the survey and the community being aware of the data when it was available. Better Together wanted to change that. "The data is so important to helping us understand the issues our youth are facing and how that trends," said Diana DiazGranados, Better Together's Project Director. "If we use the data to show us where we need to focus, and intervene early, we will see better outcomes for our youth."

With the intention of having the community understand the value of the YRBS data and use it, Better Together created a concise summary report of the data and did presentations on the YRBS to key stakeholders including school boards, school staff, and other key youth-serving organizations. They also did workshops where they dove into the data, showing community stakeholders how to break down the data to make discoveries that aligned with their work.



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— **Diana DiazGranados**

Project Director - Better Together La Crosse County

### Solution: Use the data

There have been many successes at using the La Crosse County YRBS data to drive change. Initial strategies have focused on increasing youth coping skills and creating understanding in adults to support youth. The community amped up use of Youth Mental Health First Aid, a program that teaches adults how to help an adolescent who is experiencing a mental health challenge or addiction. As a result, they have trained 2,000 people in the program.

Additionally, high schools are using the data to measure success of mental health interventions and social emotional learning, many organizations use the data in grant writing, some local health organizations have a greater focus on teens as a result of using the data, and many smaller groups, like Parent Teacher Associations and a local dance studio, have used the data to understand the youth they serve better.