

Mental Health Research

OCTOBER 2020



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Phases 1 and 2 of research: qualitative

Phase 1

Policy influencer IDIs

- 10 in-depth interviews with DC policy influencers who worked in mental health care policy or policy advocacy.
- The interviews were conducted between March 10 and March 13, 2020.
- NOTE: We encouraged participants to give us a sense of the policy priorities in Washington before the coronavirus issue came to the forefront.

Phase 2

Online diary research

- 34 online diaries conducted over 2 weeks among Americans 13+.
- 3 sets of prompts were given to diarists, with each set consisting of 9-10 multilayered questions.

Phase 3: quantitative

Phase 3

Online survey

- Benenson Strategy Group conducted 1,701 online interviews with Americans ages 13+ from June 24-30, 2020.
- The sample included oversamples of:
 - Black people
 - Latinx people
 - Native American people
 - Asian and Pacific Islander people
 - LGBTQ+ people
 - Pregnant and postpartum women
- The margin of sampling error for the entire data set is $\pm 2.27\%$ at the 95% confidence level.
- Questions asked only of relevant groups:
 - ¹ Parents: Asked of parents of children under and over 18 years old
 - ² Relationship: Asked of those who are currently married or are living with a significant other
 - ³ School and university students: Asked of those who are currently full- or part-time middle school, high school, college, or graduate school students
 - ⁴ Employed: Asked of those who are currently employed full- or part-time

5 things to know about Americans and mental health

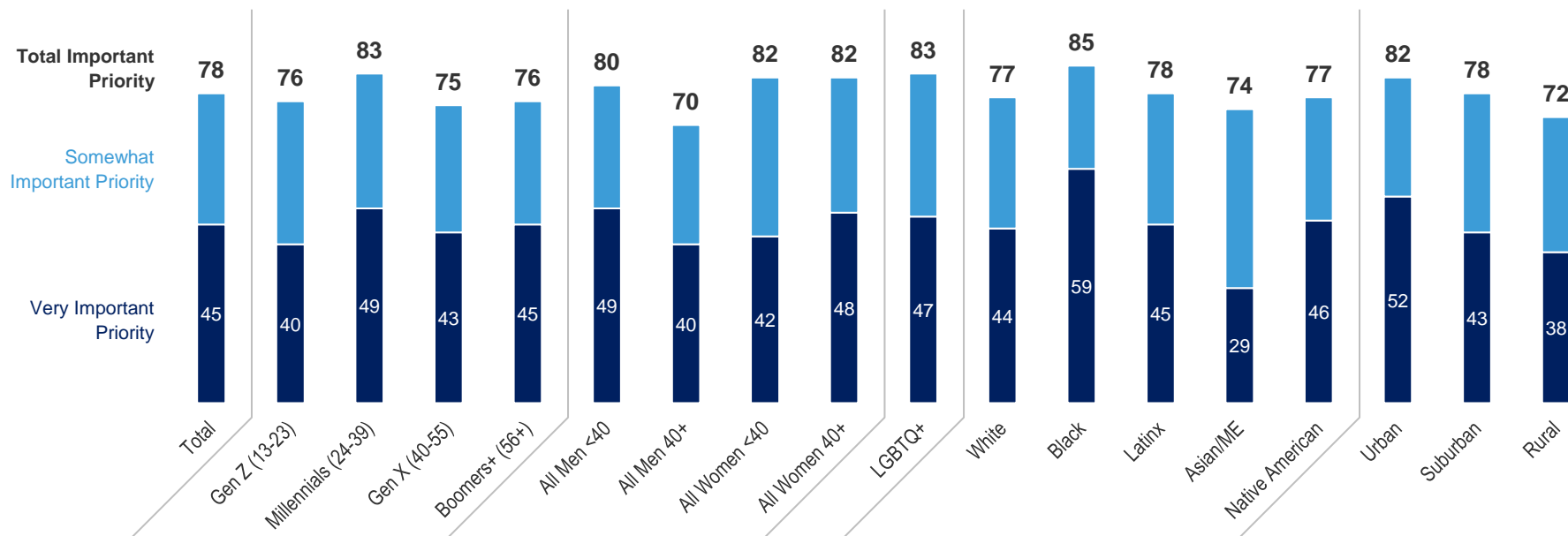
1. **Americans prioritize their mental health.** There are some important distinctions by demographics (notably age) and there are disparities in experiences of mental health care and access to resources.
2. **But they're not talking about mental health much and do not feel very comfortable seeking help from others when they are struggling.** For most, mental health is not coming up in their day-to-day lives often – and even as most say people should discuss MH openly, many who believe this do not personally feel comfortable doing so.
3. **Systemic racism is harming mental health, and mental health care provider diversity is key to encouraging help seeking.**
4. **The pandemic is taking a toll on mental health, and Americans see the pandemic as a reason lawmakers should be doing more to improve mental health care policies.**
5. **Across party lines, there is a strong desire for policy change that will lower the costs of mental health care.** Policy influencers believe mental health care is a bigger priority now than in the past, but it is still not a top priority for lawmakers.



Personal Experience with Mental Health

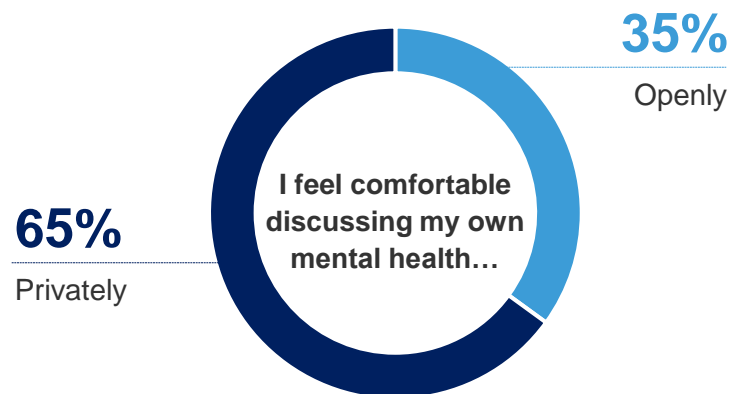
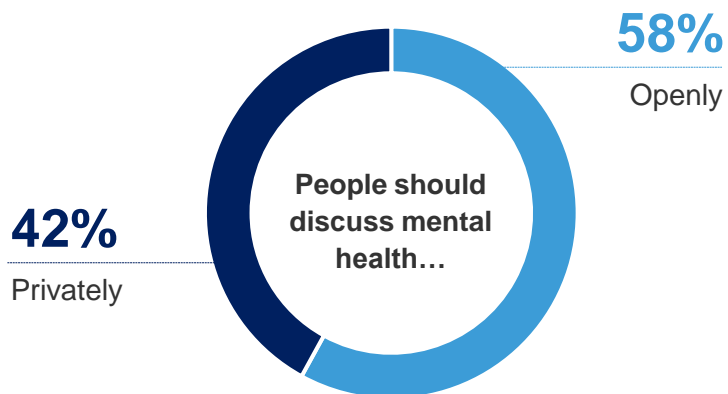
Mental health is a high priority across the board, particularly among Millennials, Black Americans, and those living in urban areas

Now, thinking specifically about yourself, how much of a priority is your mental health to you personally? *Among total*



While people are very likely to feel that MH should be discussed openly, they are much less likely to feel comfortable doing so themselves

Which comes closer to your opinion concerning conversations about mental health? *Among total*



Q32. Which of the following comes closer to your opinion concerning conversations about mental health in general?

Q34. Which of the following comes closer to your opinion concerning your own conversations about your own mental health?

Qualitatively, Americans from all walks of life told us in diary research that mental health is not a topic of discussion

I have not heard people talk about mental health because people are afraid to talk about it. Most people don't understand it and how to help someone with mental health issues.

– Male, 45-49, Black



Most people don't talk about their mental health, especially in the military.

– Female, 25-34, Black



I do not hear other people talk about mental health.

– Female, 55+, Black



We occasionally joke that some people have too much energy or that I'm OCD (jokingly), but that's it. **Serious discussion of mental health is MAYBE a once-in-a-decade event.**

– Male, 55+, White



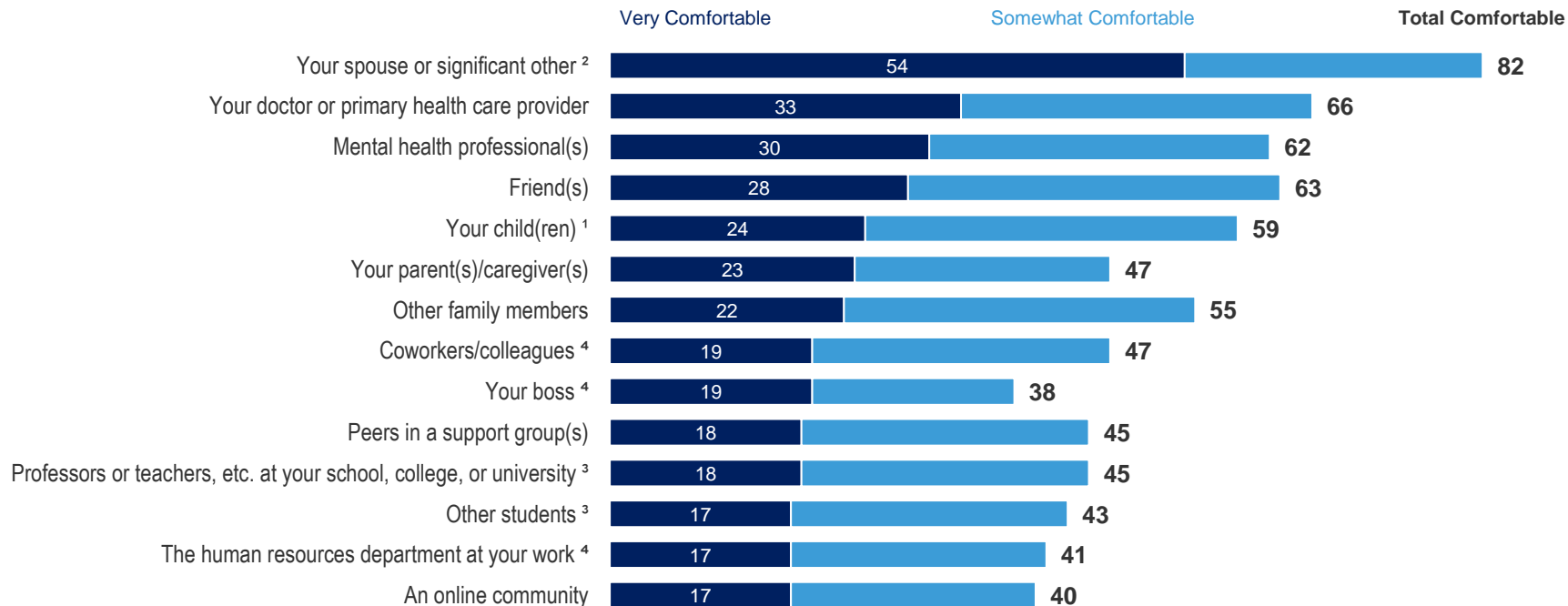
I rarely hear anyone outside of my immediate household talk about mental health.

– Female, 25-34, White



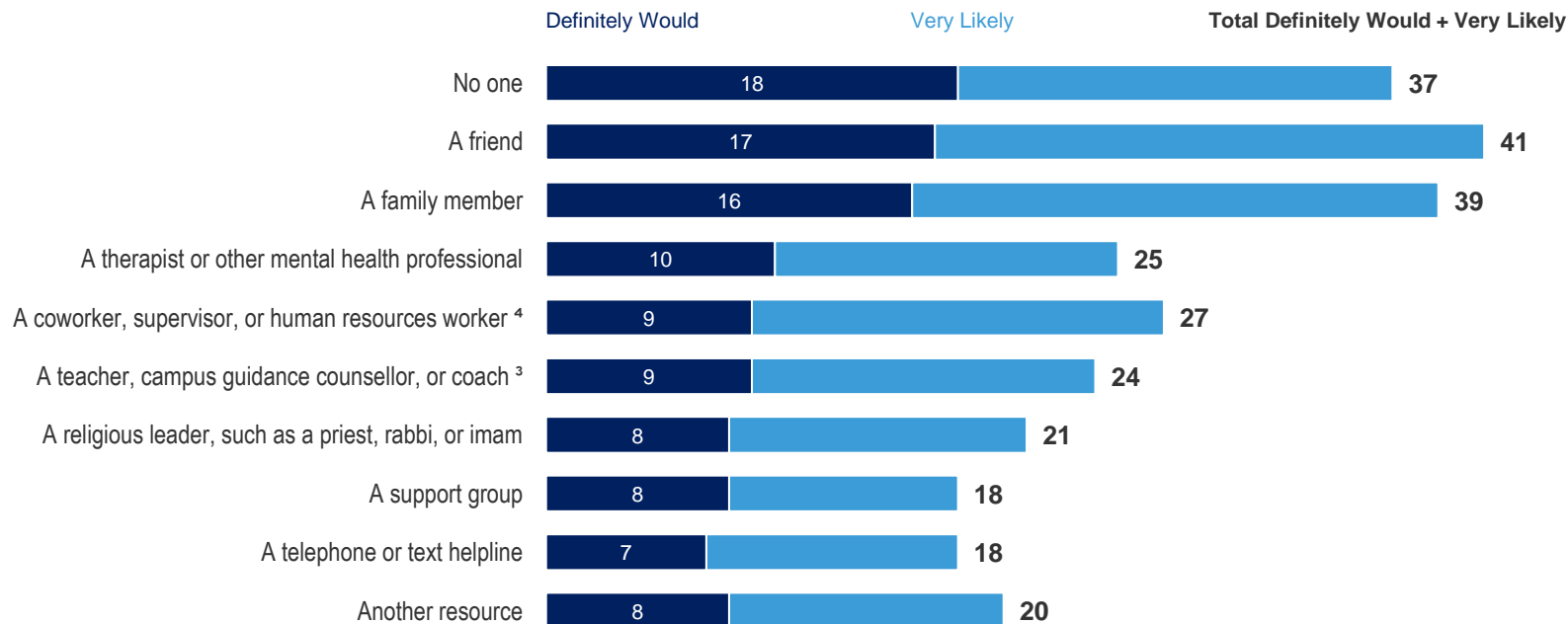
In most cases, people don't feel very comfortable discussing their MH with others – even loved ones and mental health pros, with spouses and significant others being the main exception

In general, how comfortable are you with talking with each of the following people about difficult or challenging feelings? *Among total*



And more than 1 in 3 say they would likely not confide in anyone if they were struggling with difficult feelings

How likely are you to reach out for help to each of the following if you are struggling with your thoughts, feelings, or behaviors? *Among total*



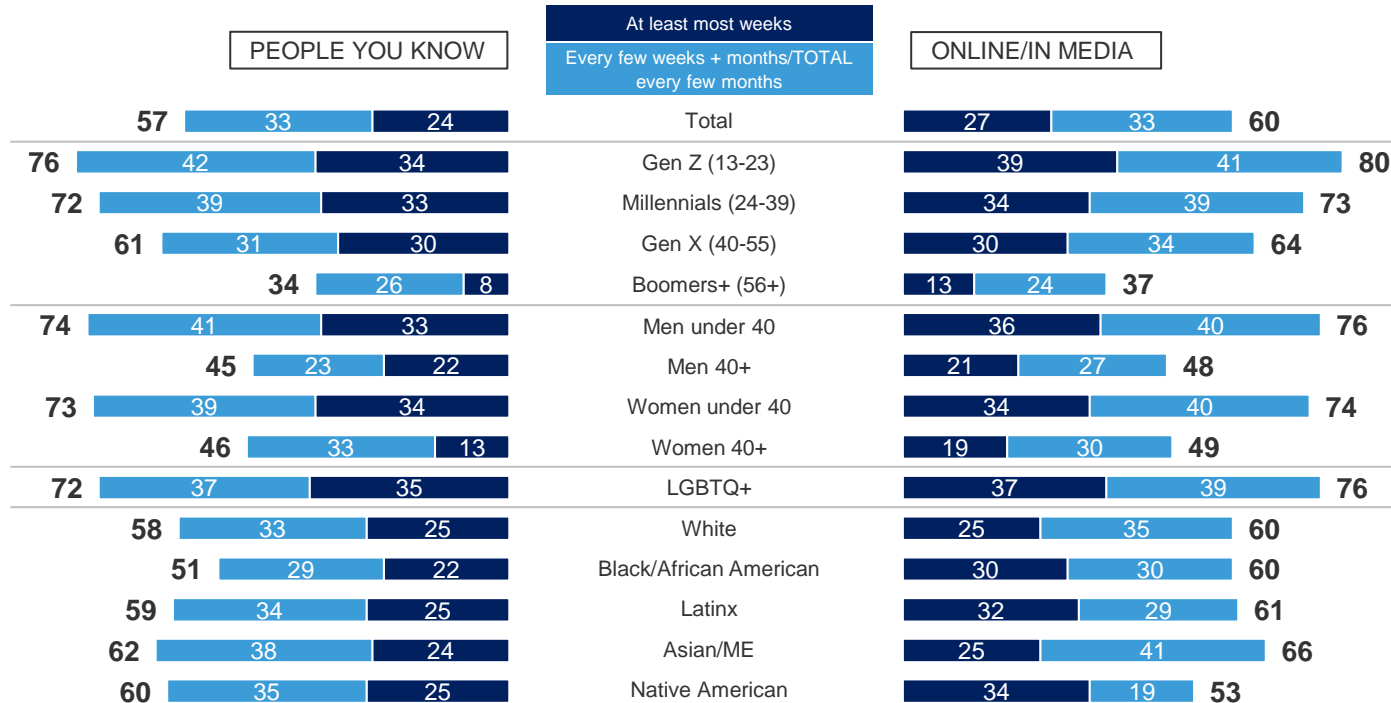
Across the board, Americans would first turn to friends and family if they were struggling with their mental health – although LGBTQ+ Americans are less likely to reach out to family for help

How likely are you to reach out for help to each of the following if you are struggling with your thoughts, feelings, or behaviors? *Among total*

% Definitely/TOTAL Would	Total	White	AfAm	Latinx	Asian/ME	Native American	LGBTQ+
No one	18/37	19/38	21/44	15/33	13/30	24/39	20/41
A friend	17/41	17/41	19/42	16/39	21/47	20/48	19/48
A family member	16/39	17/40	20/41	9/34	14/39	11/35	9/28
A therapist or other mental health professional	10/25	10/25	13/29	8/28	6/21	12/21	14/29
A coworker, supervisor, or human resources worker ⁴	9/27	11/32	10/25*	3/16	8/20*	5/21*	5/22
A teacher, campus guidance counsellor, or coach ³	9/24	11/31	11/19*	3/14*	5/17*	11/42*	4/11
A religious leader, such as a priest, rabbi, or imam	8/21	7/20	11/24	9/28	5/12	6/17	7/17
Another resource	8/20	9/20	11/23	4/19	5/18	8/14	7/20
A support group	8/18	7/17	13/24	6/20	5/12	5/14	10/18
A telephone or text helpline	7/18	8/18	10/23	4/17	4/10	5/10	9/17

Most are not exposed to regular conversations about mental health, and there appears to be a relationship between frequency of discussion in media and with people they know

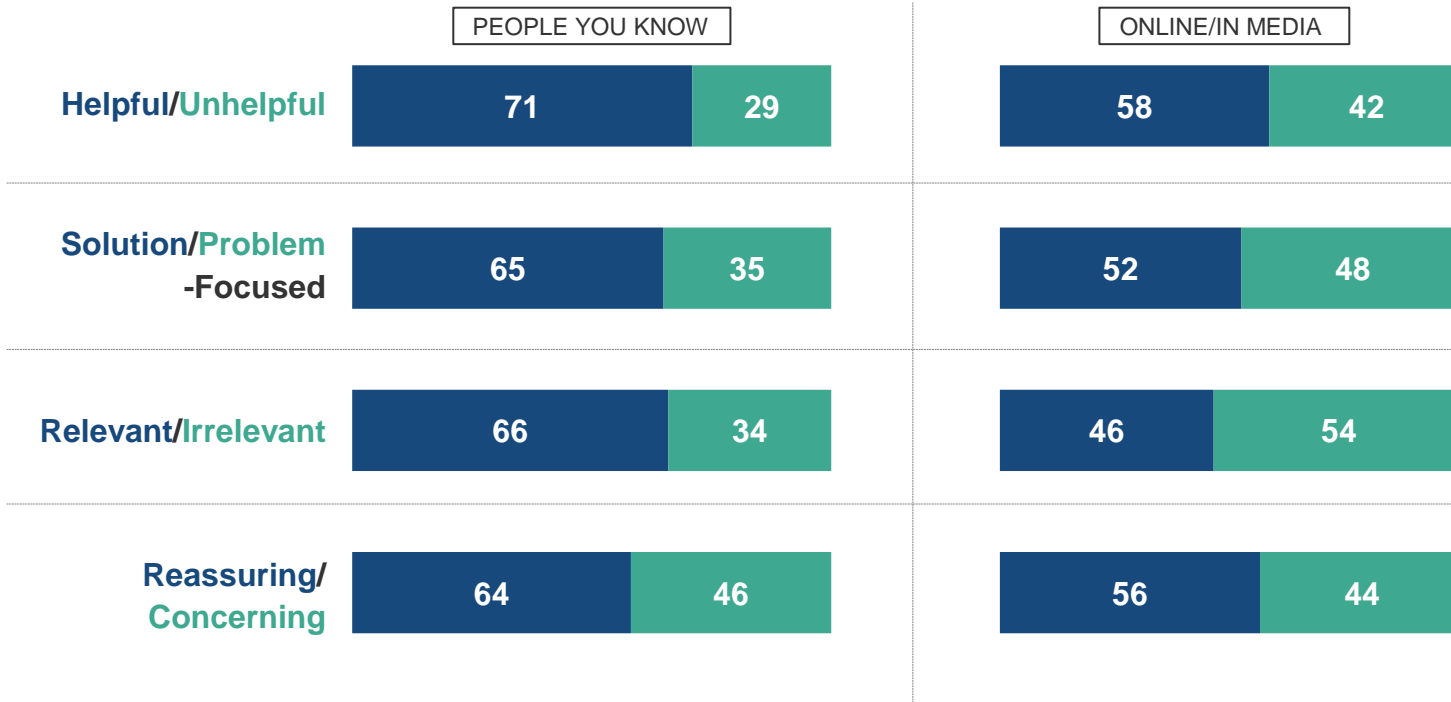
How often do you hear people talking about mental health and mental health-related topics in your day-to-day life?



Discussions of MH become less frequent with age – with a major gap between Boomers+ and younger generations

Conversations in real life about mental health are seen as more focused on solutions than problems and are more likely to be helpful, relevant, and reassuring

In general, would you say the conversations you hear about mental health from each group of people listed below are...? *Among total*



Gen Z: 48/52
Millennials: 59/41

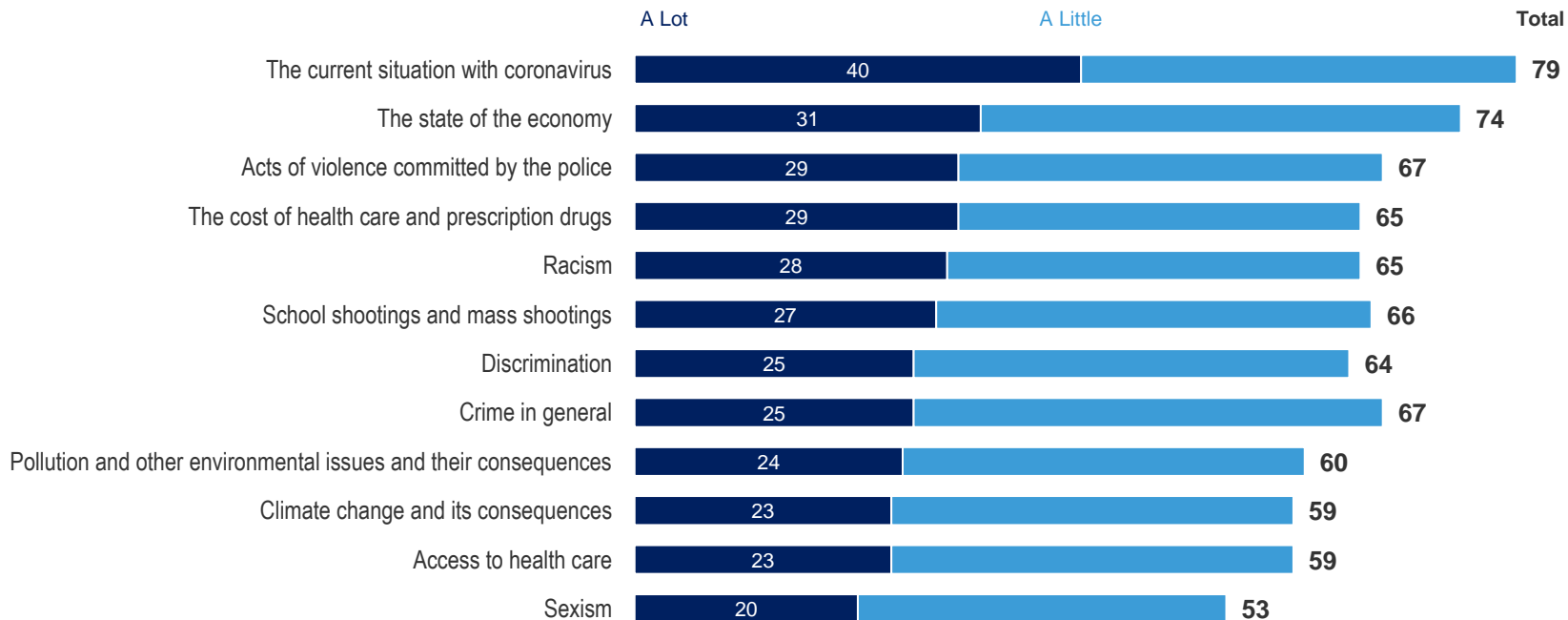
Key difference between younger generations: Millennials see more solution-focus in their media ecosystem



Social Forces and Mental Health

A wide range of social, financial, and environmental factors impact people's mental health, but COVID-19 is taking an outsized toll

While this may vary over time, how much do you feel each of the following have affected your own mental health? *Among total*



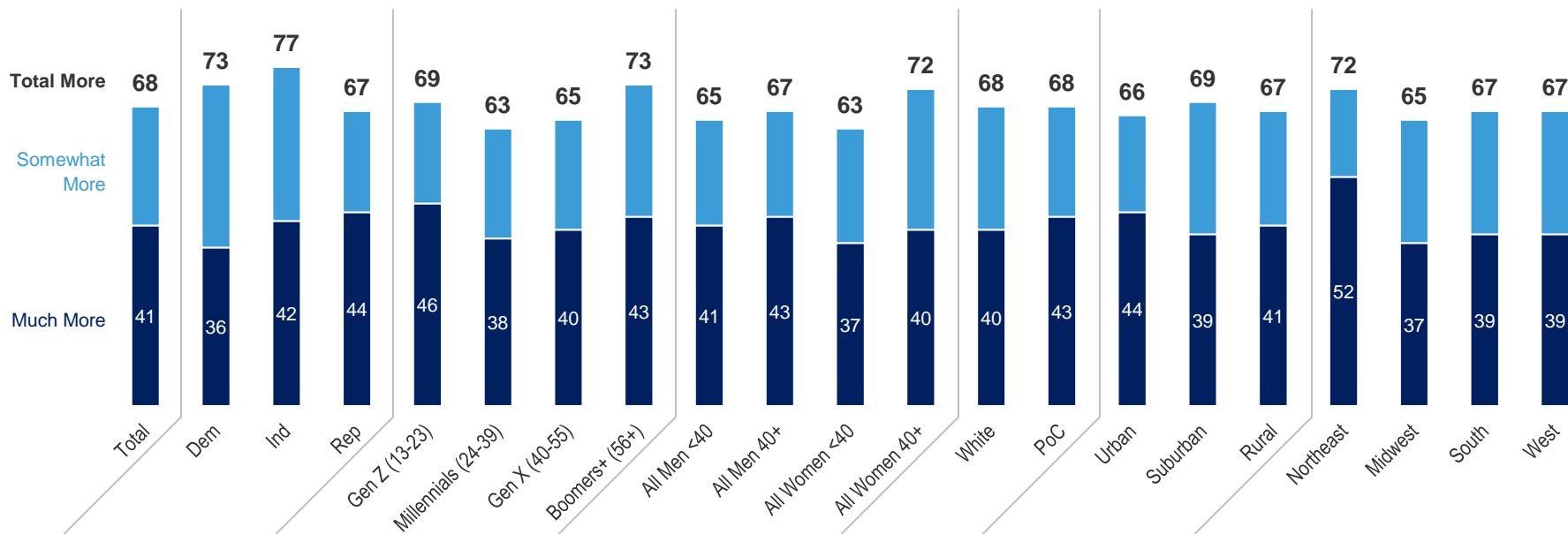
We know COVID-19 has disproportionately impacted communities of color – that includes the toll it has taken on mental health; discrimination, violence, and access to care have disproportionately harmed Black Americans’ MH

While this may vary over time, how much do you feel each of the following have affected your own mental health? *Among total*

	A Lot	Total	White	Black	Latinx	Asian/ME	Native American	LGBTQ+
The current situation with coronavirus		40	37	45	48	42	42	48
The state of the economy		31	30	32	36	31	29	27
Acts of violence committed by the police		29	25	44	31	32	32	35
The cost of health care and prescription drugs		29	30	26	26	24	40	36
Racism		28	22	46	32	32	32	31
School shootings and mass shootings		27	25	32	27	32	29	30
Discrimination		25	21	39	25	30	34	33
Crime in general		25	23	35	25	23	27	24
Pollution and other environmental issues and their consequences		24	24	24	25	20	34	32
Climate change and its consequences		23	24	19	25	18	27	31
Access to health care		23	22	32	23	23	26	28
Sexism		20	20	23	19	19	25	27

COVID-19 does not mean that people are deprioritizing mental health policy; they see a greater need for better mental health care policies now

Given the current situation with coronavirus, do you think elected officials should be paying more, less, or the same amount of attention to policies that provide affordable, accessible mental health care? *Among registered voters*



We also tested the impact of representing mental health care provider diversity on help seeking

All in the treatment group were shown the following statement:

We all know that there are things we can do every day to improve our physical health, but too many of us don't think about protecting and improving our mental health until things become a problem. As a mental health professional, I can tell you from experience that being proactive about your mental health can prevent and improve problems like depression and anxiety. And reaching out for help when you first notice changes in your feelings, thoughts, or behaviors, can prevent those problems from negatively impacting your life. Learn more and find ways to get help at www.mentalhealthtips.com.

But half of those in this group were shown an accompanying (stock) image of an MH professional of the same race/ethnicity group, while half were shown a provider from a different race/ethnicity group.



Seeing diversity in mental health care providers on screen has a major impact on openness to help seeking and sharing of important information – especially for People of Color





Mental Health Policy Vision

Most people do not think the current mental health care system works well – and many point to low-income and unhoused people as particularly neglected populations

Many could not point to a single thing that they believed works well, and all had criticisms of the system.

People recognize the problems of cost and accessibility for the general public, but especially for poor and unhoused people.

I think accessibility and cost are not working well. **It's not working well since not everyone who needs help can get it or can afford it.**

– Male, 25-34, Asian American



In the United States, mental health care doesn't exist for low-income individuals as they are the most neglected in this area of the health care spectrum as a whole.

– Female, 18-24, Mixed Race



People recognize that not everyone has equal access to care, and that the system works differently for different segments of the population.

In the areas where mental health care facilities are abundant, **I feel it's safe to say those Americans are doing better than the more rural areas where there is little to no help with mental health.**

– Female, 25-34, White



People also stress the need for reform to the criminal justice system, and the need to treat people as opposed to incarcerating them.

The biggest non-working area of mental health is in the justice system. A good deal of the people incarcerated have mental health issues. **If the judge would put them in a mental health facility, instead of a prison cell, most of them would not reoffend.**

– Female, 50-54, White



Among Mental Health Policy Influencers, there is a strong sense that MH is a priority for elected officials, but not at the top of the list

The general sense is that mental health care policy is not *the* top priority and in general it gets crowded out by other health care concerns.

That said, there is broad agreement that the issue is a bigger priority now than in recent years.

I don't think [mental health] is a huge priority in DC... It's treated like a secondary issue.

– Male, 39, White, Think Tank



I think it is growing as a priority... There is interest there... [but people are] focusing in more on prescription drugs and focusing on the price.

– Female, 35, White, NGO/Advocacy



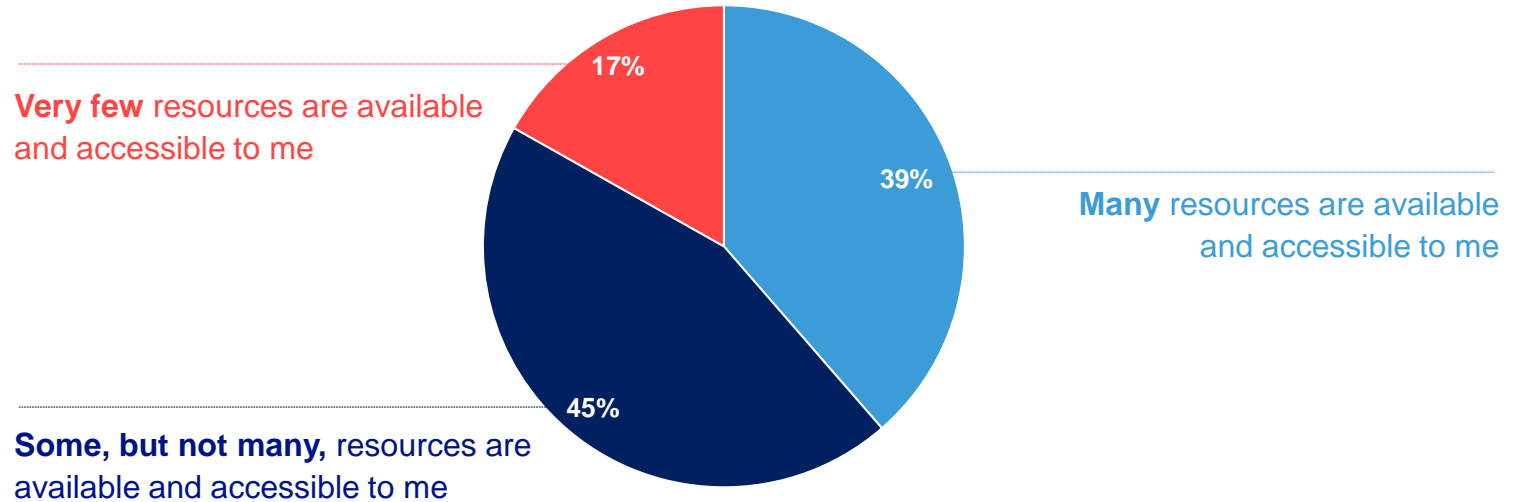
I think it's a priority. I just think there are so many competing priorities which is a challenge overall with health policy. Everybody would like their issue to be number one in the top priority, but there are competing topics.

– Female, 43, African American, Federal Agency



A plurality of Americans say they have “some” access to mental health care, but nearly 1 in 5 say it is off the table to them

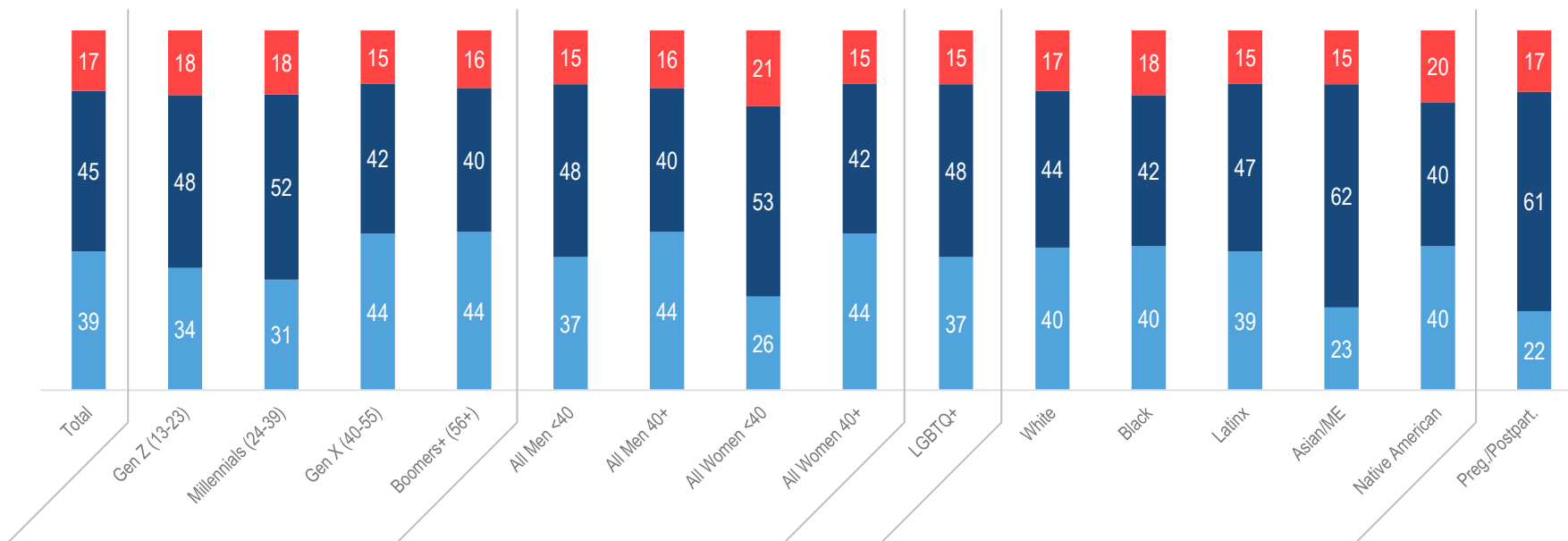
Generally speaking, which of the following best describes the accessibility of mental health care resources to you? *Among total*



Younger people, especially younger women, are less likely to say they have access to “many” resources

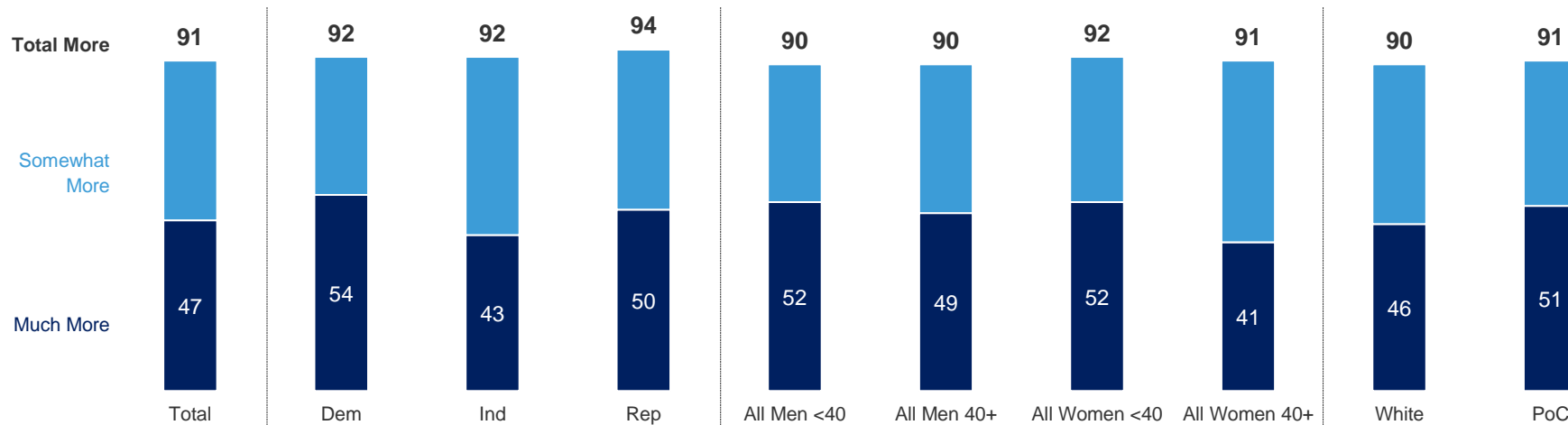
Generally speaking, which of the following best describes the accessibility of mental health care resources to you? *Among total*

■ Many resources ■ Some, but not many resources ■ Very few or no resources



Across partisan and demographic groups, there is a strong desire for policymakers to prioritize mental health care more than they do today

In your opinion, should elected officials be focusing on mental health...? *Among registered voters*



Mental Health Policy Influencers see a need to address cost and access...

Cost and access are the top issues in health care broadly and policy influencers see high prices and limited access as the biggest problems in mental health care, as well.

I would say the biggest issues facing the health care system are the ones that you hear talked about so much in the presidential campaign right now. It's the fact that we have so many folks who are uninsured, so many people who can't afford prescription drugs, and people who are a loss of a job away from losing their health coverage. It's a huge problem.

– Male, 50, White, NGO/Advocacy

We have to make sure that mental health services are available. I guess, the things like mental health parity... Your doctors, your insurance should cover visits to see mental health providers. We need to not only make sure that's covered, but that there are enough providers for people to see.

– Female, 48, Black/African American, NGO/Advocacy

Far too often patients request mental health care, and they are forced to wait for three weeks or longer [to receive care]. We know, so many times, when you reach out to set that appointment, you need the care right then. So, having enough health care providers and having the right level of coverage and access is important to me.

– Female, 36, Black/African American, Legislative

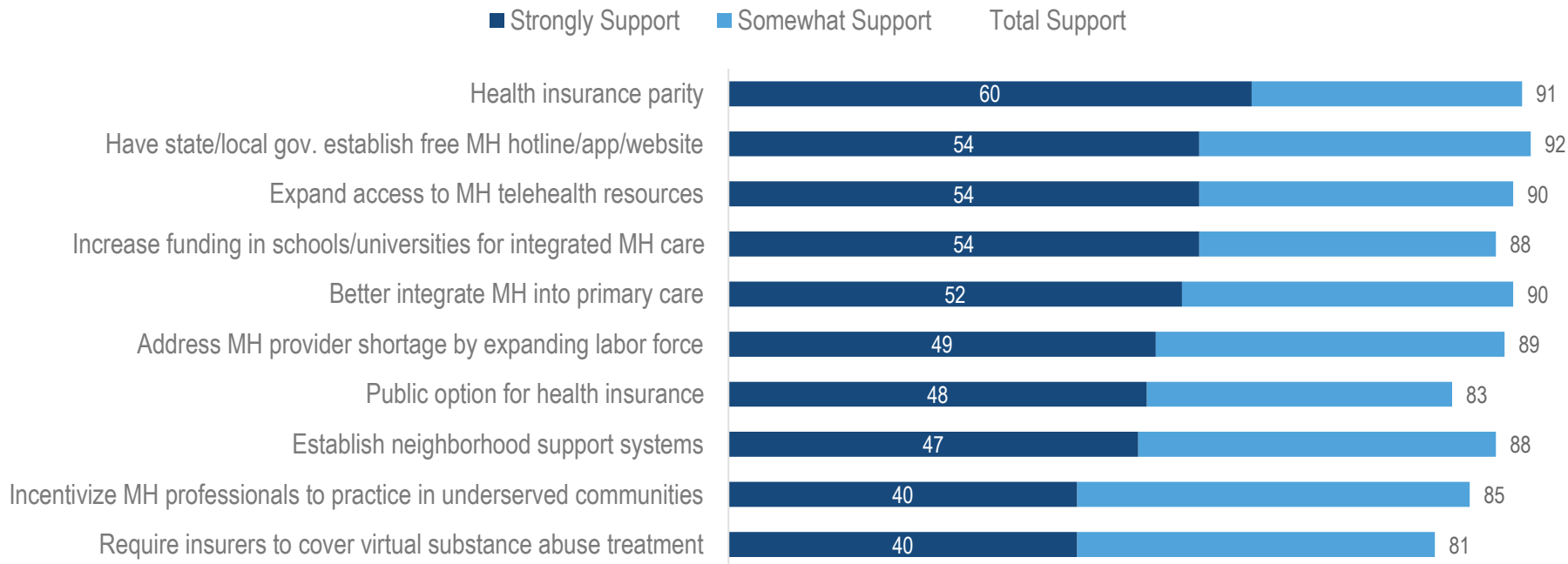
...Voters across the political spectrum feel the same way

How much of a priority should each of the following be for elected officials? *Among registered voters*

	Very Important Priority/ Total Important Priority	Total	Dem	Ind	Rep
Expanding access to mental health resources		59/90	68/94	69/94	64/88
Making mental health resources more affordable		58/90	71/93	58/97	67/92
Providing education and raising awareness of the warning signs of mental health problems		54/91	52/93	55/97	61/88
Funding mental health research		52/88	57/92	49/92	56/88

Parity is a top priority across the board, although a greater share of Inds prioritize creating a system that provides free virtual care

H Thinking about each of the following policy proposals, do you support or oppose each of the following policies? *Among registered voters*



Q20. Thinking about each of the following policy proposals, do you support or oppose each of the following policies?

See appendix for full text of policies tested

Americans see a need to emphasize that everyone deserves access to quality, affordable mental health care and to draw on empathy to drive support for these policies

Mental health is a serious issue and one that cannot be ignored any longer. **Mental health affects us and many of our loved ones, friends, and colleagues.**

– Male, 35-44, Asian American



Many in our country experience mental health issues. These issues can serve as the basis of other issues including homelessness, domestic violence, property crimes, and physical crimes such as assault and homicide. **It's time we seek to meet the needs of those dealing with mental health issues to work in preventing these potential outcomes.**

– Male, 50-54, White



Everyone here has had a breakdown at some point, some worse than others. ...No one deserves to feel so helpless and lost because they cannot pay for it.

– Female, 25-34, Latinx



The bible teaches us to care for one another, and a nationalized health system where we all pay in and no one has to incur bankruptcy to get medical treatment is the epitome of that notion. **To be a good Christian, Catholic, Atheist, or human being is to care for others and treat others the way they want to be treated.**

– Male, 25-34, Asian American





Appendix

Full text of policies tested

Require health insurers to cover virtual substance abuse services through a phone, app, or texting platform.

Require health insurers to provide equal coverage for mental and physical health conditions.

Give everyone, regardless of age, the option of buying a public insurance option through the government.

Have the state or local government establish a mental health hotline, app, or web service that puts residents in touch with mental health professionals free of charge.

Expand access to remote mental health resources so that individuals can connect with mental health resources online, by text, or by phone.

Establish neighborhood support systems that will help to promote understanding, connection, and empathy within communities, and reduce social isolation.

Increase funding in schools and universities to expand the availability of mental health resources on campuses, including counseling, peer discussion groups, and online classes that teach ways to counter anxiety.

Offer mental health professionals financial incentives and other loan repayment programs to encourage them to move to communities that lack access to in-person mental health professionals.

Address the shortage of mental health professionals by expanding the field's labor force, including by creating more programs to train specialists who are less expensive to visit than others in the field but can still prescribe medications for those who need them.

Better integrate mental health care treatment into existing primary care treatment systems by ensuring that primary care providers are trained to deliver this kind of care and that health insurers cover mental health services as a part of primary care.

Thank You

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