
StarTribune Editorial

Our perspective

Children

Neglecting the sick, and the future

The next time a troubled kid walks into a school and starts shooting, remember this number: 72,000. That's how many Minnesota kids are suffering from serious mental disorders. Only a handful in that throng have their minds on murder. But all of the 72,000 are too sick to enjoy being children — let alone grow into healthy adults. Their afflictions could be eased — even prevented — if Minnesota had a mind to try. But it doesn't.

Back in 1989, legislators thought about trying. They passed the Children's Mental Health Act — a law promising a unified mental health system for all Minnesota kids. More than 10 years after its passage, says a new Citizens League report, the law's promise remains "utterly unfulfilled." The League's indictment couldn't be more scathing: Currently, it says, "no one is in charge of Minnesota's mental health system. Many would say there is no 'system' at all. No one is held accountable when a child's mental health needs go unmet."

The upshot is that the needs of most of the 72,000 do go unmet. Indeed, we don't even know who these 72,000 kids are. Screening programs to detect mental illnesses in kids are underfunded and few. Only 3 percent of Minnesota's public spending on children's mental health goes to early identification — and only a fraction of Minnesota kids have ever had a mental-health checkup. Even in private health plans, children with mental illnesses are often given short shrift.

It's a shame, because detecting mental illness is the first step toward treating it. And there's no question that many sick children have been overlooked. In 1999 Minnesota spent \$144 million in federal, state and county funds to treat 22,000 children — not even a third of those believed to be in

Mental health

Seeking a system

need. The numbers square with January's report by the U.S. Surgeon General, which found that more than two-thirds of children with mental illnesses don't get help.

This is state-sponsored child neglect, as wasteful as it is cruel. Children left in the grip of mental illnesses falter in school, in their families and in society. Without early care, they're likely to end up in expensive residential treatment programs and juvenile-detention beds. A horrifying number die from suicide. A few show up in heartbreaking headlines. In adulthood, many join the ranks of life's "losers" — and the welfare rolls.

Can't something be done about this? The Citizens League has many remedies in mind — all aimed at facing childhood mental illness as a public-health threat. There's no mystery about what will work: Minnesota needs to build the system it has long lacked — and get down to the business of screening, early intervention, prevention and education.

A system can't be built in a day, but its foundation could be laid this year. Lamentably, legislators are resistant to focusing on children's mental health. A few weeks back, a House committee laid aside Roseville DFLer Mindy Greiling's bill to encourage mental-health screening in Minnesota schools — bowing to complaints that such screening would intrude on family privacy.

Is that why the 72,000 have to suffer — because finding and helping them would be pushy? That can't be. Leaving disordered young brains untreated is every bit as wrong as leaving broken bones unset. And more dangerous.