



1 Introduction

Global impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic has brought heightened attention to students' mental health needs due to periods of social isolation, uncertainties about health risks, employment and financial hardships, and the trauma of witnessing severe illness or deaths of loved ones. Attention has focused on academic setbacks due to lockdowns, but there has been less exploration of the Pandemic's effects on mental health initiatives in the schools.

Schools are uniquely positioned to provide behavioral health services for children and youth and have often been described as the 'de facto' providers of behavioral health services for children and youth. As a result, numerous national efforts have been developed to improve the availability and quality of services in schools.

These efforts include prevention, early intervention, and treatment services as well as extending to a wide variety of safety and violence prevention efforts. The implementation of these practices and programs has proved to be a difficult process, with significant barriers to implementation and integration. This research was funded via the National Institute for Justice to examine school safety and mental health programming during the Pandemic.

Research Questions

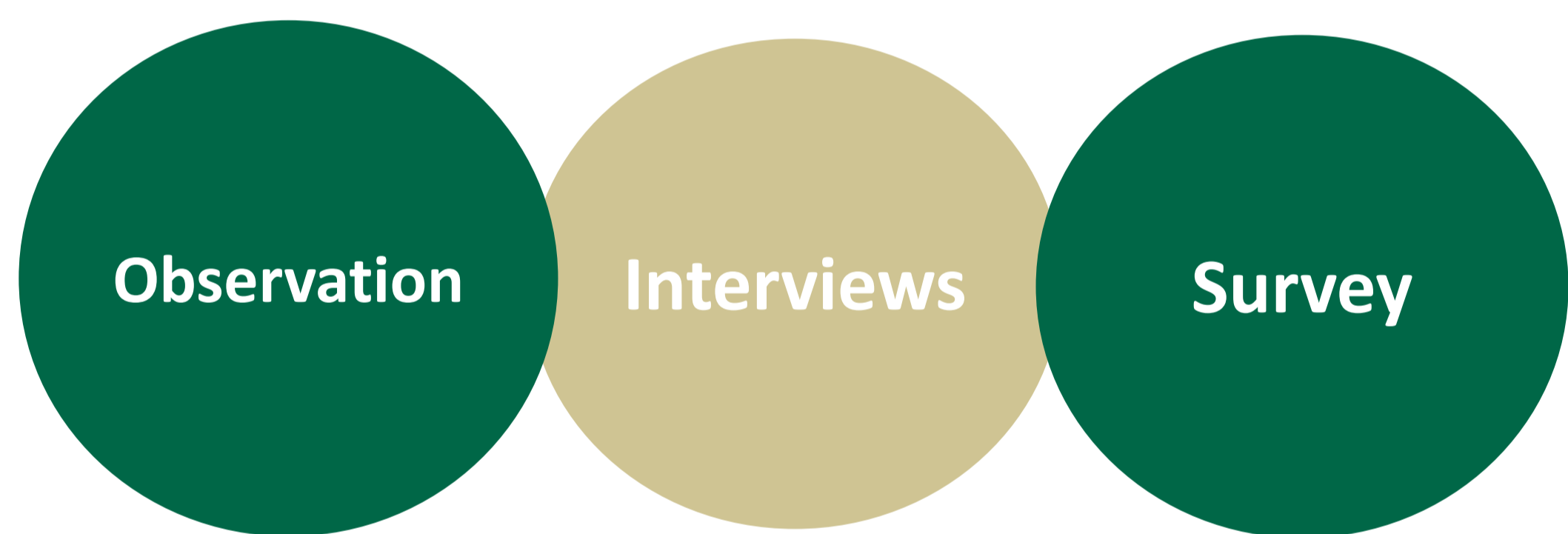
- 1) In what ways did the pandemic reveal mental health capacity and student needs at grant-supported schools?
- 2) What barriers and challenges did grant-supported schools face with continuous implementation of violence prevention and mental health training programs?
- 3) What factors led to resilience in program implementation during the COVID-19 pandemic?

2 Methods

Geographically diverse case studies were conducted inclusive of observation, survey and in-depth interview to examine perspectives on the implementation of violence prevention and mental health school programs, and the impact of the Pandemic on their efforts

PARTICIPANTS

Participants in the study were representatives of state or local government offices, education departments, school districts, law enforcement agencies, private educational or nonprofit agencies, and individual schools, all of whom had working knowledge of programs implemented through the STOP grant.



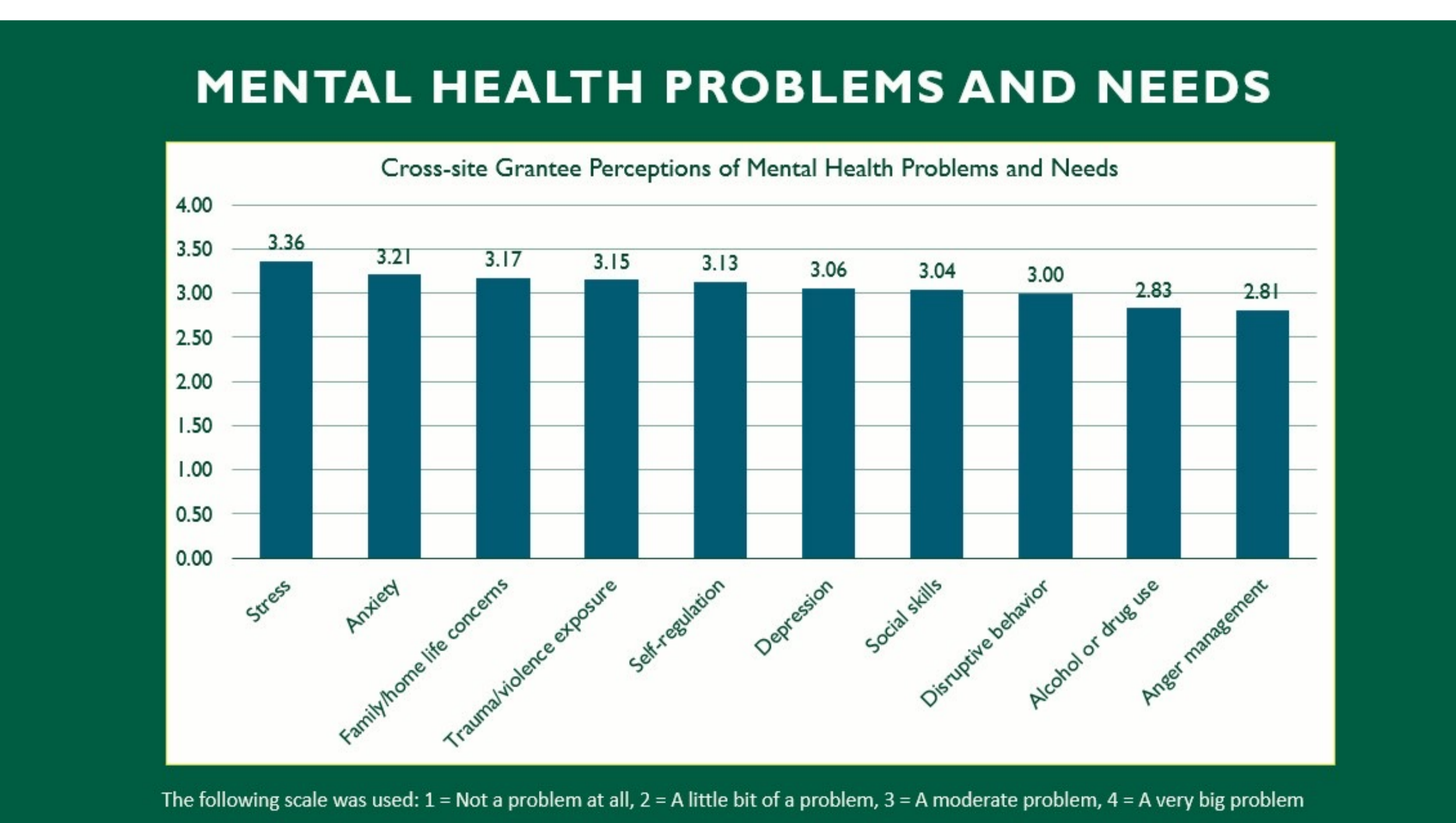
Observations of grantee's project meetings were conducted virtually throughout the Pandemic using an open-ended observation tool.

Interviews were completed with 21 individuals across the six case study sites and included questions regarding the capacity of each agency to support implementation and meet their communities' unique needs, implementation barriers and facilitators, the Pandemic, student and teacher mental health and well-being, and adaptations to stress.

A cross-site survey was designed to assess numerous factors related to program implementation and the capacity of STOP-funded agencies to address mental health needs. Seven key domains were assessed in the survey: Program Components and Stakeholders, Implementation Stage, Mental Health Capacity, Implementation Barriers and Facilitators, COVID-19 Impact, Implementation Satisfaction, and Technical Assistance Satisfaction.

3 Results

Overall, grantees reported similar perceptions of problems related to mental health. Responses were based on a 4-point scale, where 1 = Not a problem at all and 4 = A very big problem.



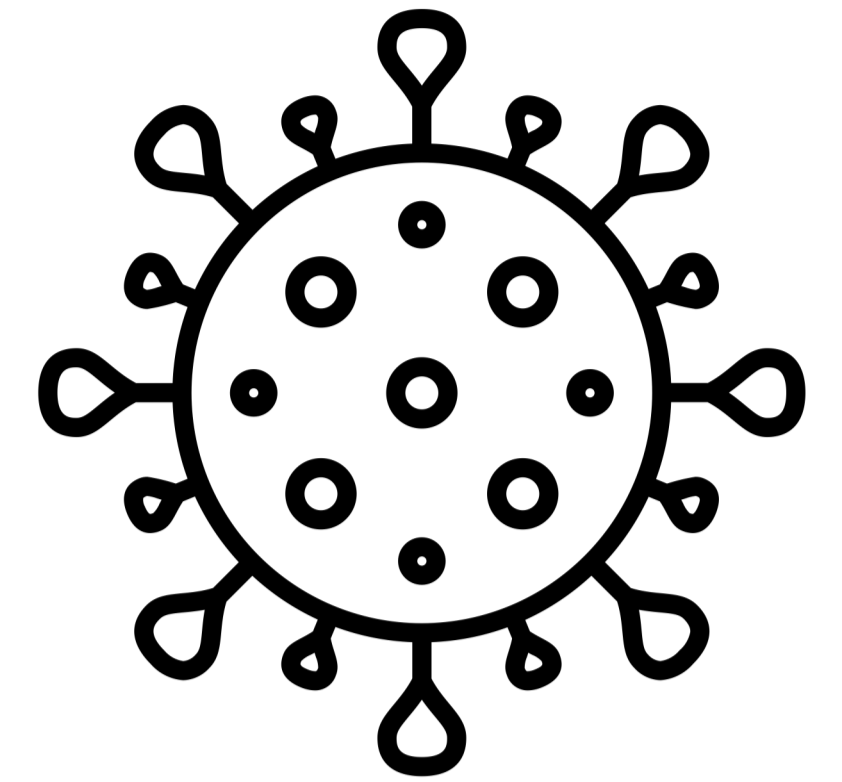
Though there was little variation overall, scores indicate that grantees saw the severity of mental health problems as relatively high across the board, with almost all areas being rated a moderate problem or a very big problem.

Barriers to Implementation of programming:

- Social and emotional impacts of Pandemic
- Prioritization of academics over social and emotional learning
- Staff turnover, stress, and lack of buy-in

Facilitators to Implementation of programming:

- Training in mental health, trauma, risk behaviors, SEL and intervention strategies
- Addressing inclusion by enhancing social supports and connections for students
- Implementing collaborative initiatives with local agencies



COVID IMPACT		
Challenges	Strengths	Opportunities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of in-person meetings • Training cancellations • Stress and anxiety among teachers and students • Inadequate staff to address mental health 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prioritization of mental wellbeing • Enhanced innovation • Inter-school collaborations • New uses of technology 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hiring additional personnel • Prioritizing professional development • Establishing crisis responses • Developing clear goals and plans

Grantees almost unanimously indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic was the most significant challenge to successful implementation due to school closures and the lack of in-person meetings.

Grantees also suggested that the pandemic increased stress, anxiety, and depression among teachers and students. Along with the rise in mental health concerns, grantees reported a lack of qualified professionals and supports available to meet the needs of students and staff.

4 Discussion

When faced with a significant event such as the Pandemic do school administrators, teachers and staff pivot and adapt or do they hit a prolonged pause?

Interestingly, those that commented on positive adaptations to the pandemic expressed opposite thinking at times from those grantees who felt a more significant toll on implementation efforts.

While some respondents reported successfully adapting to online platforms of training and program implementation, for many sites, school closures and the shift to online instruction significantly limited their ability to carry out components of their STOP grants, as in some cases, trainings and other supplemental activities were put on hold for six months or more.

THOSE WHO PIVOTED

- Felt that virtual meetings were a more comfortable, more expedient, and more cost-efficient way of bringing together different levels of people from different places geographically.
- Resilience was also seen in the way program implementation team members collaborated around meeting immediate community needs.
- Focused on new opportunities and long-term program stability.

THOSE WHO STRUGGLED

- Automatically saw virtual interactions as a roadblock to implementation and learning and experienced the Pandemic as a significant loss.
- Feared people on calls were not listening or paying attention during trainings.
- Saw the schools shutting down as basically shutting down the grant.

Overall, grantees said that the COVID-19 pandemic has emphasized the importance of mental health and student well-being, enhanced innovation among school administrations, led to inter-school collaborations and partnerships, and supported the use of technology and virtual platforms.

5 Conclusion

Findings from this study elucidate consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on violence prevention and mental health training program implementation efforts in schools. The effects of the pandemic not only disrupted routine academic processes, but it interfered with—and in some cases dismantled—initiatives that were recently put in place in response to legislation addressing violence and mental health in schools. Some of the very issues that these programs aimed to address, such as worsening mental health conditions among students, became even more urgent due to the widespread psychological effects of pandemic restrictions.

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