

Research Summary: Hope and Health
Prepared for the Governor’s Interagency Council on Health Disparities
September 2025

- **Hope has been described as:**
 - “an aspirational feeling that circumstances can improve.”¹
 - the “perceived ability to pursue future desired goals, as well the pathways and motivation to achieve the goals.”²
- Researchers have stated that hope theory consists of **3 main constructs: agency, goals, pathways.**¹
 - Agency “reflects a mental assessment of one’s ability to initiate and sustain action toward the desired goal (‘I can do it’ or ‘I am ready’).”¹
 - Pathways “involves the identification of viable routes to goals (‘I can think of new strategies’).”¹
- Researchers have stated hope “[...] is **essential to the pursuit of social, political, and economic justice** because it helps to empower [people] and communities to create a better future for themselves and future generations.”³
- Research suggests that hope is shaped by both genetics and environmental and structural factors such as **family and community support, education, and opportunity.**⁴
- **Emerging evidence suggests hope may be a protective factor for health.**^{1,2,5,6}
 - For example, research on hope and health has found that hope may protect against depression and death by suicide and may be associated with **disease prevention, improved coping, well-being, and engagement in healthy behaviors.**^{1,2}
 - Research related to young adults with chronic illness has found greater degrees of hope are associated with improved coping, well-being, and engagement in healthy behaviors and are linked to **quality of life, self-esteem, and a sense of purpose.**¹
 - Hope has also been associated with **better physical and mental health outcomes** among adults, and people “with higher hope can counter the adverse effects of mental health issues.”⁵
 - Researchers have found, “[h]igh hope individuals are likely to take actions in the present to ensure a healthy future.”²
 - Data from the 2023 Washington State Healthy Youth Survey (HYS) show among 10th graders statewide, those with high levels of hope are less likely to:
 - be absent from school in the past month,
 - not have eaten breakfast,
 - not feel safe during school,
 - have used marijuana in the past 30 days,

- feel sad or hopeless,
 - have seriously considered suicide in the past year.⁶
- Students who reported more hope also tended to have a lower score on the Washington HYS Adverse Childhood Experiences (WAH-ACEs) index.⁶
- **There is limited data on levels of hope across diverse groups of people.** Several definitions of hope are used in academic research, making data analysis challenging.⁷
 - Data from the 2023 HYS show **inequities in student levels of high hope.**⁶ For example, among 10th graders with high hope (43.3% of 10th graders), there were statistically significantly lower levels of high hope among youth identifying as:
 - transgender compared to youth identifying as male or female;
 - male, compared to youth identifying as female;
 - bisexual, gay or lesbian, questioning, or something else compared to youth identifying as heterosexual;
 - having a disability, compared to youth identifying as not having a disability;
 - part of a migratory working family, compared to youth not identifying as part of a migratory working family.⁶
- **There is mixed information on who is most likely to be hopeful and how structural factors impact the ability to have and access hope.**
 - Some researchers have argued more privileged people are more likely to be more hopeful due to access to supportive infrastructure and “perceived availability of viable pathways to achieving goals.”³ For example, people impacted by marginalization may experience a reduced sense of agency.³ While some people experience adverse outcomes due to experiencing inequities, “others have ready access to resources that enable them to flourish.”³
 - Other researchers have stated “associating hope with privilege risks disempowering disadvantaged communities” and a more holistic understanding of hope is needed.³
- **In addition, there is mixed information on how hopefulness may affect groups of people differently due of the effects of systemic racism.**
 - Several studies have shown hope may have a paradoxical effect on well-being for students of color experiencing discrimination.⁸ One study explained, “Black students who trust in the availability of pathways for overcoming challenges may be particularly distressed when systemic obstacles, such as racism, block their goal attainment. [...] Increased hope might, paradoxically, render Black college students unprepared to cope with the sting of entrenched racism, which may have critical personal and academic consequences.”⁸
 - A separate study examined whether hopefulness protects against physiological dysregulation.⁹ Results showed that **hopefulness plays differing roles for people with differing races/ethnicities, and its protective effects are “intricately tied to their experiences of discrimination.”**⁹

- **However, research also shows hope can be taught.**⁶
 - Research suggests that **hope can be bolstered with interventions and policies** aimed at improving resilience among adolescents, reducing isolation among older people, and directing resources to communities in despair.⁴
 - Researchers stated, “the **development of strong social networks and supportive environments** is of vital importance to promoting hope.”³
- Researchers **call for regularly tracking population levels of well-being as a helpful first step to take steps to cultivate hope.**⁴
 - For example, “[i]f the United States had a standard indicator of well-being that could be tracked across populations and places over time, not unlike how the gross national product serves as an indicator of a country’s fiscal well-being, changes in that indicator could serve to alert policymakers that a population’s well-being was declining so they could intervene before a full-blown crisis arose.”⁴
 - “Life satisfaction is the most used metric of well-being... Yet adding a hope metric (as the United Kingdom has decided to do) would further enhance understanding of a critical dimension of the public’s wellbeing and provide a basis for directing interventions.”⁴

¹ Stern A.P. Hope: Why it matters. 2021. <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/hopewhy-it-matters-202107162547>. Accessed 1/14/2025.

² Rasmussen H.N., England E., Cole B.P. 2023. Hope and Physical Health. *Current Opinion in Psychology*. 2023;49(10).

³ Counted, V., Newheiser, D. 2024. How place shapes the aspirations of hope: the allegory of the privileged and the underprivileged, *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 19:4, 724-731, DOI: 10.1080/17439760.2023.2257654

⁴ Graham, C. 2023. Hope & despair: Implications for life outcomes & policy. *Behavioral Science & Policy* Vol. 9(2) 47–52. DOI: 10.1177/23794607231222529

⁵ Ozturk B., Pharris A., Munoz R. , et al. 2022. The Importance of Hope to Resilience in Criminal Justice Diversion Programs. *Criminology, Criminal Justice, Law & Society*. 23(2):56-68.

⁶ Washington State Healthy Youth Survey. 2023. <https://www.askhys.net/SurveyResults/FactSheets>. Accessed 8/28/25

⁷ Pleeging, E., van Exel, J., Burger, M. 2022. Characterizing Hope: An Interdisciplinary Overview of the Characteristics of Hope. *Applied Research in Quality of Life*. 17:1681-1723. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11482-021-09967-x>

⁸ McDermott, R. C., Berry, A. T., Borgogna, N. C., Cheng, H.-L., Wong, Y. J., Browning, B., & Carr, N. 2020. Revisiting the Paradox of Hope: The Role of Discrimination Among First-Year Black College Students. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*. Advance online publication. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/cou0000422>

⁹ Uchechi A. Mitchell, Elinam D. Dellor, Mienah Z. Sharif, Lauren L. Brown, Jacqueline M. Torres & Ann W. Nguyen. 2020. When Is Hope Enough? Hopefulness, Discrimination and Racial/Ethnic Disparities in Allostatic Load, *Behavioral Medicine*, 46:3-4, 189-201, DOI: 10.1080/08964289.2020.1729086