

Mental health patients are increasingly younger

By Jocelyn Wiener and Phillip Reese, Sacramento Bee

In recent years, Dr. Jason Bynum has seen the churn: teens in crisis cycling through his south Sacramento psychiatric hospital, admitted, released, and just a few months down the road, back with another breakdown. Increasingly, he lives with a deathly fear that his young patients are going to commit suicide after he sends them home. He worries even more about the ones who are violent toward others.

“One of these kids that I’m discharging is going to go home and kill somebody,” said Bynum, a psychiatrist at Sierra Vista Hospital who is also president-elect of the Sierra Sacramento Valley Medical Society.

A majority of the children and adolescents he treats are suicidal or self-harming – the rest are violent, homicidal or deeply delusional. He sometimes holds onto the sickest of them for weeks or months, trying to keep them safe while he searches for intensive follow-up services.

Around the state, the picture is much the same: Mental health hospitalizations of California’s youngest residents – those 21 and under – increased 38 percent between 2007 and 2012, jumping from 34,000 to 47,000, according to an analysis of state data by The Sacramento Bee and the Center for Health Reporting. Child hospitalizations also rose nationally, but not as quickly as in California, federal data show.

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