



VOTE

WITH YOUR MIND IN MIND

Your Guide to Voting to Support Mental Health in the 2020 U.S. Elections

**FOUNTAIN
HOUSE**

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Why we should vote with our minds in mind

The 2020 election marks a critical crossroads for the United States. We as Americans will together determine the direction that the country takes on a number of vital and interconnected issues, from healthcare and housing to criminal justice and job creation. And each of these issues have a big impact on the mental health of Americans and how people with mental health struggles are treated.

Before COVID-19, we had a growing mental health crisis. Deaths from suicide, overdose, or alcohol, also known as “deaths of despair”, have been rising at unprecedented rates over the last decade, and nearly 3/4ths of Gen Z and half of Millennials reported dropping out or pausing work or school at some point due to mental health issues. And now, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, things are even worse with more people than ever struggling with their mental health.

In August, over 40% of Americans [surveyed by the CDC](#) reported struggles with mental health or substance use or that they connected with the pandemic. As a result, record numbers of young people, essential workers, caretakers and communities of color say they have experienced suicidal thoughts or have started or increased their alcohol and substance use.

This summer also saw widespread protests over police violence and systemic racism inflicted against Black people. This police violence is not only a constant source of trauma, but it has a disproportionate impact on people who are struggling with their mental health. Tragically, [one in four people killed by police officers](#) is experiencing a mental health emergency that could be addressed with a mental health response instead.

As voters, we have an important role to play in this process. We may not have had a chance to weigh in on how our leaders responded to COVID-19, or how they've handled police violence and systemic racism in the past, but we can impact how we move on from here. By voting with *our minds in mind*, we can help lead to advances and improvements for the tens of millions of Americans who report dealing with mental illness each year.

Here, we offer a guide to discovering where the candidates asking for your vote stand on issues intimately connected to mental health: access to healthcare, criminal justice reform and racial justice, jobs and economic opportunity, and housing. And remember, this is about more than just the critical presidential race — state and local races matter a lot, too.

How to research candidates

Most candidates have sections on their sites labeled “platform” or “issues” where they list the laws and policies that they would pursue if they were to be elected. Not all of their websites address every issue, but if you search for keywords like “healthcare”, “mental health”, “addiction”, “housing”, and “criminal justice”, you should be able to get some idea of what a candidate believes.

If you’re searching for the presidential candidates’ stances on these issues, you can find Vice President Biden’s platform by [clicking this link](#). President Trump does not have a section of his site devoted to his policy positions, but his [record on healthcare](#) is analyzed by the Kaiser Family Foundation, and a media comparison of his and Vice President's positions on [criminal justice issues is here](#).

Healthcare policy

This election will help decide the fate of our health insurance system. This is ultra-important because health insurance makes it possible, let alone affordable, to receive mental healthcare. In addition, when someone doesn’t have health insurance for themselves or their family, it can be incredibly stressful, which takes an even bigger toll on their mental health. This creates a negative cycle that can be very hard to break.

While it’s been a political football for the last ten years, the truth is that the Affordable Care Act has made insurance more affordable and opened up access to mental healthcare to tens of millions of Americans. For this reason among others, we believe that keeping the ACA intact is essential. When someone can’t get help, it can begin a long, devastating journey of illness, isolation, and economic insecurity.

Here are some questions to ask about healthcare access and mental healthcare when considering your vote:

- Does the candidate support maintaining and expanding the Affordable Care Act? Or would they rather repeal the law?
- Does the candidate support policies that would expand access to affordable mental healthcare? Are they willing to support the government’s paying for mental healthcare treatment for those who are uninsured?
- Do they understand that there are big gaps in the mental healthcare system and acknowledge the [spike in reported crises during COVID-19](#)?

- Where do they stand on [requiring that insurers treat mental healthcare](#) just like physical treatment, so that you don't pay more for therapy than you do for a checkup?

Criminal justice reform and racial justice

Lawmakers at all levels of government — as well as other elected officials such as district attorneys and judges — also have a hand in the criminal justice system, which is another hot-button issue at play in this year's election. This too intersects with mental health and healthcare. [Nearly 20% of inmates in jails and 15% of inmates in state prisons have serious mental illnesses.](#)

Additionally, it's been estimated that [65% of the country's prison population](#) has an active substance abuse disorder. Instead of treating addiction as a matter of mental health, many cities and states continue to pursue a war on drugs. As a result, Americans who are struggling with addiction are too often abandoned, left to criminal justice systems not known for focusing on rehabilitation. As the opioid epidemic continues to rage and [even escalate](#) during the isolation caused by the COVID-19 crisis, the pharmaceutical companies responsible have continued to [largely avoid](#) significant legal or financial consequences.

The criminal justice system also continues to inflict physical and emotional trauma on Black people and other communities of color. More frequent surveillance, arrests, and unnecessary violence against people of color creates a psychological burden for community members and subjects them to the harmful prison cycle at very unjust rates, beginning as early as school age.

Reforming the police is important, but it's not just about responses to individual incidents — there is an entire system that has to be remade at all levels. Look for candidates who promise to support eliminating charges for minor drug possession, ending harsh mandatory punishments for certain other offenses, and focusing more on rehabilitation than imprisonment.

A candidate's dedication to providing additional protections to vulnerable groups who continue to experience both social stigma and legal discrimination is also key. There remains a persistent and pernicious bias against LGBTQIA, ethnic, and religious minorities in the United States, which both inflicts and exacerbates mental health issues. It's incumbent on our leaders to prioritize ending that unjust treatment.

By voting, we can make sure that fewer people with mental health needs get caught up in the justice system, and those that do are able to get help and return to a healthy, happy, and productive life.

Here are some questions to consider about criminal justice, mental healthcare, and your vote:

- Do they support increased de-escalation training for police?
- Do they support proven models that have medical and mental health professionals as first responders to mental health emergencies, with only limited law enforcement involvement?
- Are they committed to enacting racial justice and correcting the imbalance of people of color disproportionately being arrested and prosecuted?
- Have they addressed or shown interest in improving the treatment of people with mental health issues in police custody?
- Do they favor alternatives to imprisonment that facilitate restoration instead of repeating the cycle of incarceration?
- Will they commit to voting in favor of civil, legal, and social protections to combat stigma and discrimination against vulnerable groups including LGBTQIA, racial and ethnic minority groups and new immigrants?

Jobs and opportunity

Prosecuting poverty is one of the most significant problems we face, especially in the mental health community. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, people living with mental health needs were more likely to struggle with both economic opportunity and stable housing.

The unemployment rate for those experiencing mental health challenges was already higher than average. Job loss is linked with increases in depression and anxiety, which can lead to substance abuse, self-harm, and even suicide. For those already dealing with such issues, the results of unemployment can be dire.

Here are some key questions to ask of a candidate's economic policy platform:

- Are they in favor of work training provided or facilitated by state and local governments?

- Will they commit to strengthening ADA requirements and accommodations to protect and assist those with mental health struggles in the workplace?
- Do they support hiring incentives for businesses that hire employees who have experienced mental health trauma?
- Where do they stand on paid time off to handle both medical and mental health issues?

Housing

Being out of work also leads to trouble with maintaining housing — it's hard to pay the rent if you can't keep a job, and it's hard to keep a job if you're experiencing a mental health crisis or dealing with discrimination at the workplace.

In fact, [one in five people who experience homelessness](#) in a given year are simultaneously dealing with mental health needs. With pauses on evictions and foreclosures set to expire soon, new homelessness could trigger an unprecedented disaster.

- Will they support and continue to support a pause on evictions and foreclosures throughout the ongoing pandemic and economic fallout?
- Will they stand up to developers and fight for increases in affordable housing units and vouchers, as well as responsible development?
- Are they committed to increasing investments in public transportation that makes it easier for those without cars to get to their jobs and live independent lives?

The election in November is shaping up as the most consequential in generations. It will also be a remarkably tight contest, with candidates who possess very different worldviews and approaches to the many issues and problems facing the United States. This means that your vote is absolutely pivotal. Every single ballot filled out represents an active effort to shape both our collective future and the future that each of us faces as individuals.

By voting with your mind in mind, you can help ensure that the United States becomes a supportive, inclusive community that provides help to those in need and allows everyone a fair shot at living healthy, happy lives.

Vote with Your Mind in Mind is prepared by Fountain House in collaboration with Jordan Zakarin.