

# Mental Health Impacts of Environmental Volunteer Work

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## Project Motivation & Goals

### The US is Facing a National Mental Health Crisis:

"**63%** of Gen Z say their mental health in the last month was less than good, compared to **52%** of millennials, **49%** of Gen X, and **28%** of Boomers"<sup>1</sup> (Fig 1). **One way to improve mental health is to spend time in nature.**<sup>2</sup>

### Personal Motivation:

During COVID-19, my grandfather suddenly passed away, which brought upon depression, anxiety, and overall devastation. To combat this, I found **refuge within my local recreational trails**. I formed an undeniable connection with nature that restored my mental health (Fig 2).

### Overarching Goal:

Assess how nature exposure and environmental volunteer work affect mental health. My objectives of this study are to:

- Organize and volunteer in five (5) environmental clean up events that focused on restoring Shelton's (my town's) Recreational Areas.
- Assess the connection between nature and environmental volunteer work to mental health, nature connection, and motivations.

"Percent of individuals whose mental health was less than good in the last month, by generation"

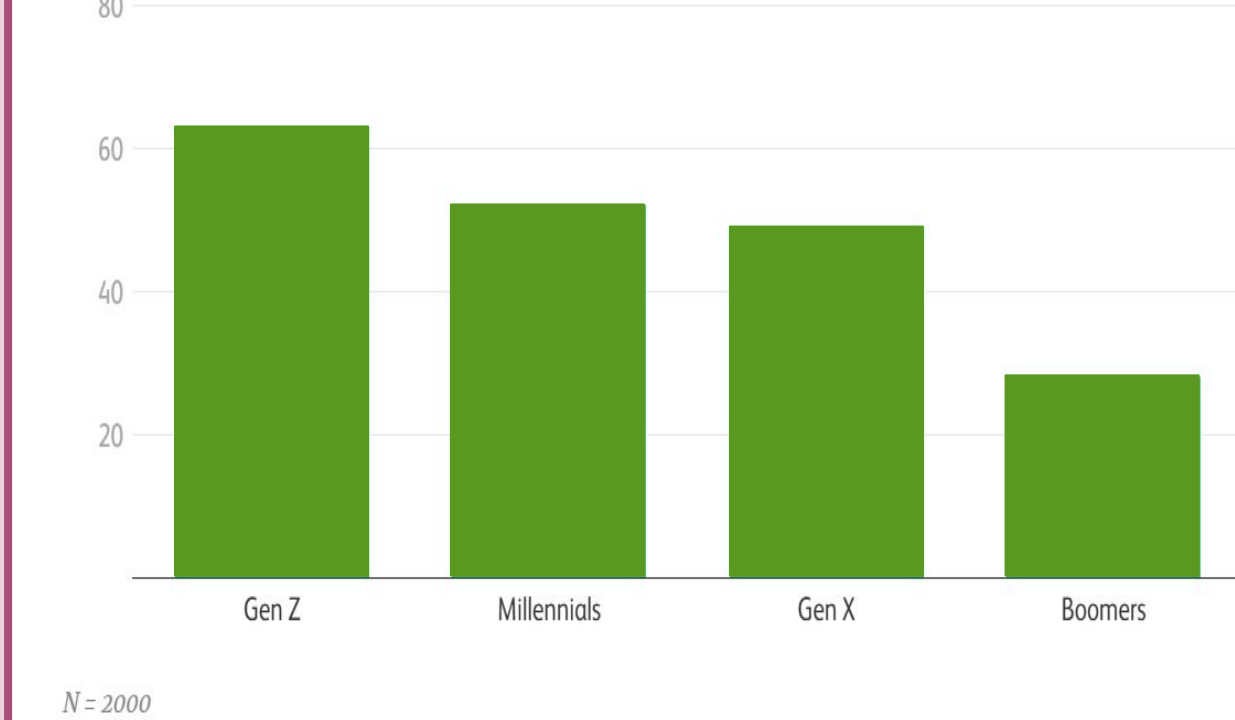


Fig. 1 The bar chart depicts the percent of people by generation who have less than good mental health.<sup>1</sup>



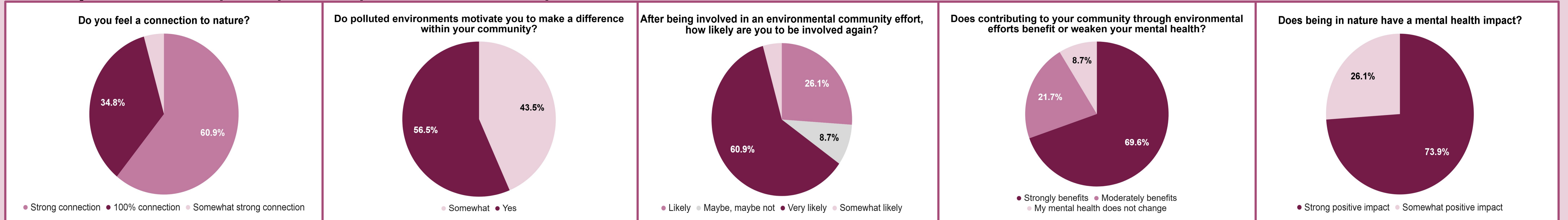
Fig. 2 Me (center) finding refuge and happiness within my local recreational trail.

## Community Mental Health Impact Survey

### Planning the Survey:

- Working alongside Teresa Gallagher and Julianna Service, I constructed a survey that:
  - Goal:** Assessed the association between environmental volunteer work and spending time in nature to nature connection, motivations, and mental health
  - Question Type:** Had 4 open-ended questions and 5 multiple choice questions
  - Audience:** Sent to Shelton Trail Committee, Trail Volunteer Email List, Shelton High School students, and volunteers throughout the clean-ups I hosted and attended

### Survey Results: 25 participants responded to the survey



### Nature Connection:

Over 95% of survey participants indicated a strong connection with nature.

### Motivation:

Overall, participants are motivated to get involved in environmental clean up due to presence of polluted areas (100% survey takers) or after being involved in a community environmental event (91%)

### Mental Health:

Overall, involvement in community environmental efforts (91%) and nature (100% survey takers) benefited/positively impacted participants mental health

### Community Mental Health Impacts:

- When asked to list emotions associated with being in nature and environmental volunteer work, common results consisted of, "peaceful", "happy", "motivated", and "productive," showing that environmental connection and volunteer work has a positive correlation to mental health and well-being
- Allowed environmentally active workers to acknowledge and learn of the benefits of working within nature
- Inspired nature lovers who have not yet worked within nature to make a difference and become active contributors towards change
- Encouraged recognition of the connection between nature and mental health
- Promoted a therapeutic, safe relationship with nature within environmentally active volunteers
- Inspired valuable friendships and, as quoted by Aidyn L., "Brother and Sisterhoods" through communal environmental efforts



## Hosting & Joining Environmental Clean-Ups

### Working with Shelton Trails Commission:

- Attended **a community volunteer event** that restored a recreational trail in Shelton, CT (Fig 3)
  - Evaluated heavily polluted and damaged trail areas with Teresa Gallagher, Shelton's Natural Resource Manager
  - Selected the trail off of Lane Street to attend a communal volunteer session (Fig 3)
  - Volunteered **3 hours** alongside five volunteers to repair storm damage, bag garbage and hazardous debris, and maintain overgrown plants on October 19th, 2024 (Fig 3)
- Organized and hosted **5 of my own community volunteer events** in **5 recreational areas** in Shelton, CT (Fig 5)
  - To find volunteer assistance, I presented to Shelton High science classes and clubs
  - Found two devoted volunteers, Amy N. and Aidyn L., and arranged environmental clean-up days ranging 1.5 to 3 hours the week of November 18th, 2024
  - Together, we repaired the Shelton Lakes Recreation Path, Nell's Rock Trail, around Shelton High School fields/bleachers, Oak Valley Trail, and area between Shelton's power lines on Shelton Ave by bagging pollution and clearing up storm damaged debris (Fig 4)

### Results and Impacts:

- Restored approximately **7 miles** of Shelton's Recreational Trails and polluted environmental areas (Fig 4)
- Removed discarded debris and other pollutants from the environment revitalizing the health, beauty, and safety of Shelton's trails and impacted areas (Fig 5)
- Allowed community volunteers to form impactful connections to nature, themselves, and others through their devotion to environmental service, sustainability, and conservation

Fig. 3 Community volunteers (including me) while restoring a trail off of Lane Street

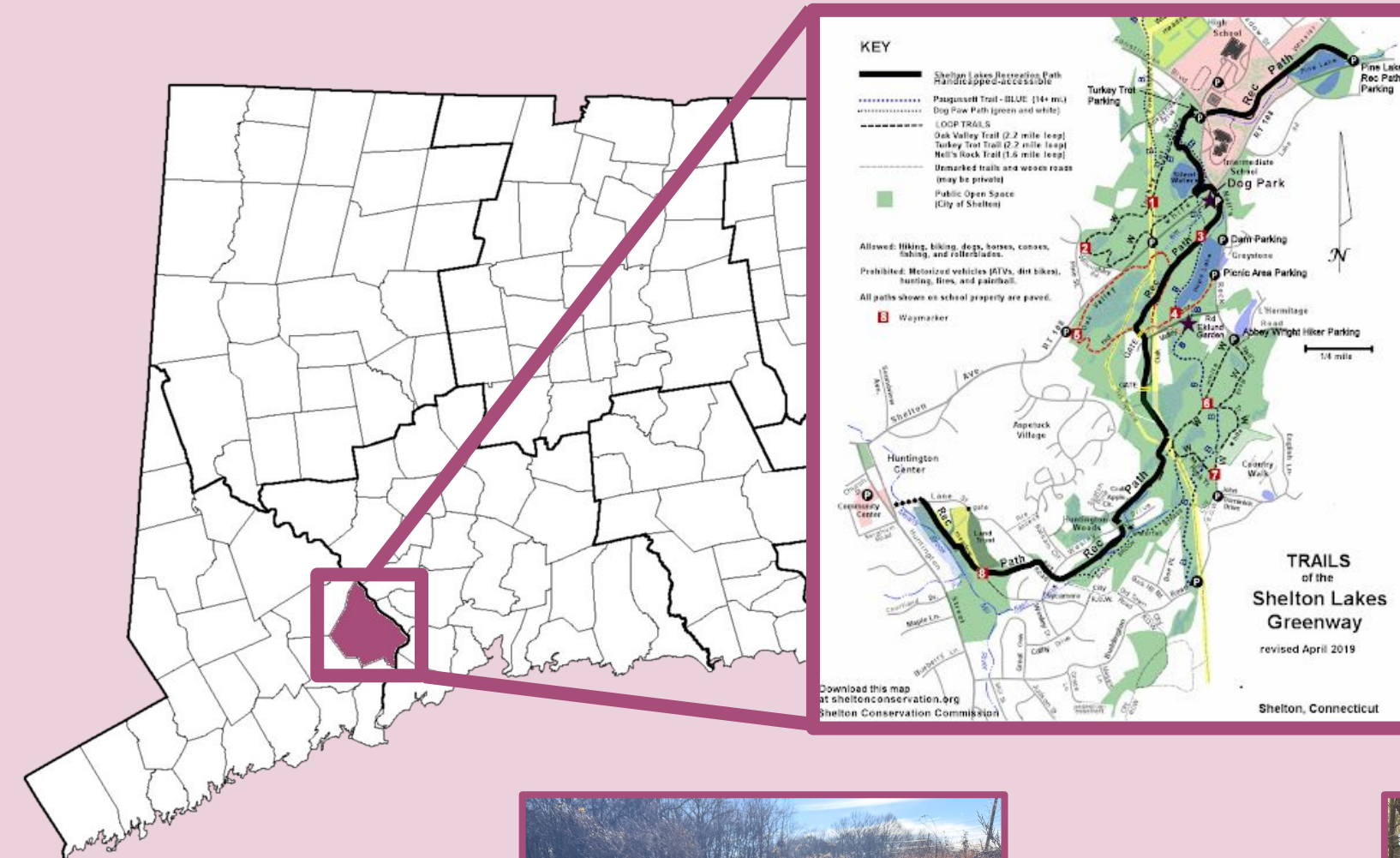


Fig. 4 This study was conducted in Shelton, CT (shaded town) within Shelton's Recreational Trails.

Fig. 5 Me and my high school volunteers at my hosted clean-up events



## Community Partnership

- My community partner, Teresa Gallagher, Shelton's Natural Resource manager, tremendously assisted me with my project. With her reputable name throughout Shelton's community, she was able to promote my cause and share my survey more broadly.
- By informing the Shelton Conservation Commission of my events and purpose, my survey was spread city wide with outstanding results. She also informed me of polluted areas to restore, where to discard my garbage and buy materials, and connected me with respected environmental volunteers.
- Through many preparatory meetings, Teresa shared her expertise about how she prioritizes areas in need of a clean up based on high garbage concentration, pollution, and neglect, as well as recommended the best locations around Shelton for my own event with that information in mind.

## Next Steps

- My research has shown that mental health is improved by nature and environmental volunteer work. The positive correlation between nature and improved mental health status is further supported by current research that states, "Spending time in nature is linked to both cognitive benefits and improvements in mood, mental health and emotional well-being,"<sup>2</sup>
- Through my volunteers' and my devotion and hard work, the environment of Shelton was successfully restored. Working together as a community was extremely impactful which promoted unity, purpose, and overall happiness.
- I plan to continue joining and hosting clean-ups throughout the Shelton Recreational Trails.

## Acknowledgements & References

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