

AI Chatbots and the Changing Landscape of Youth Mental Health Crisis Care

Elizabeth A. Olson, Kelly L. Zuromski, Tomás Madeira,
Tracy E. Costigan, Lili Török, Margaret Meagher
Research & Impact, Crisis Text Line

Introduction

- Youth mental health needs have escalated, with 4 in 10 teens and young adults now indicating that they need mental health support¹.
- There is an urgent need for services that are free, anonymous, accessible, and available 24/7 to address unmet mental health needs globally.
- One avenue that youth increasingly turn to is general-purpose chatbots².
- We use a broad national dataset to examine how chatbot interactions in youth have shifted the landscape of crisis support.

Methods

- We analyzed data from Crisis Text Line, a United States-based national nonprofit organization that provides free, confidential 24/7 text-based crisis support in English and in Spanish.
- We examined responses to an optional post-conversation survey from Nov. 2025-Aug. 2026, including responses from N = 29,931 conversations (N = 16,838 conversations under age 25).
- We also used natural language processing (NLP) to understand how chatbots are mentioned.

Data Analysis

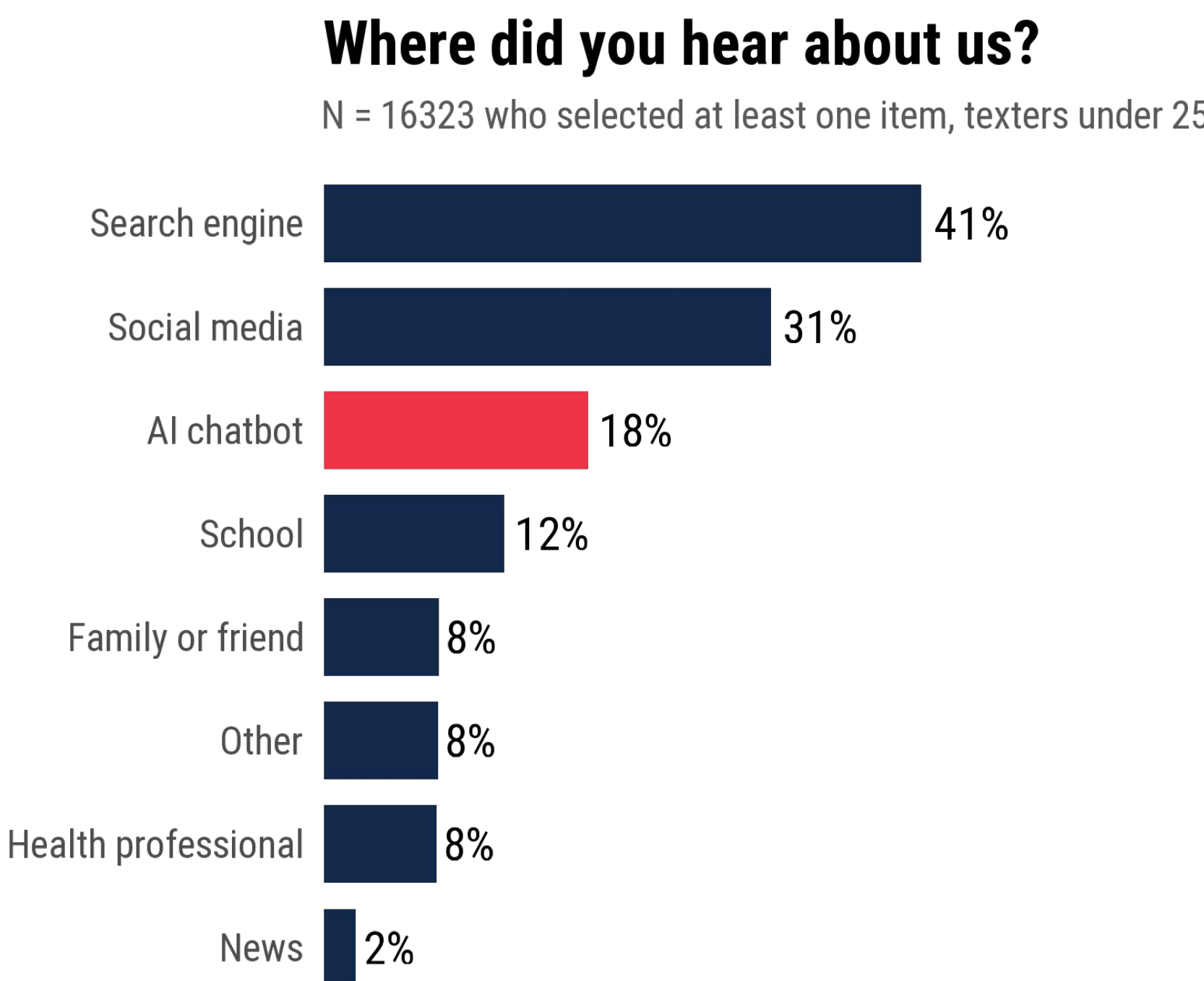
- All data were deidentified prior to analysis.
- For NLP, we examined data from **26,116** conversations from unique texters since the beginning of 2022 where the texter mentioned AI, chatbots, or LLMs in any context. We then evaluated a number of regex- and LLM-based strategies to classify AI mentions into six categories. We used 'gemma-4-31B-it' completely in-house to maintain data privacy. A gold standard dataset was manually coded by two reviewers.

Conclusions

- A surge of texters in crisis are reaching crisis lines because they are referred by AI chatbots.
- Most of these texters are not in mental health treatment. They cite barriers including uncertainty about where to access care, costs, and fear about nonconsensual interventions.
- Texters increasingly describe using AI for emotional support.
- The crisis response system must adapt to handle this influx of expressed need, including in under-resourced contexts.
- There are opportunities for partnerships to effectively meet this changing landscape.

Acknowledgments & References

Referral Sources: Texters Under 25

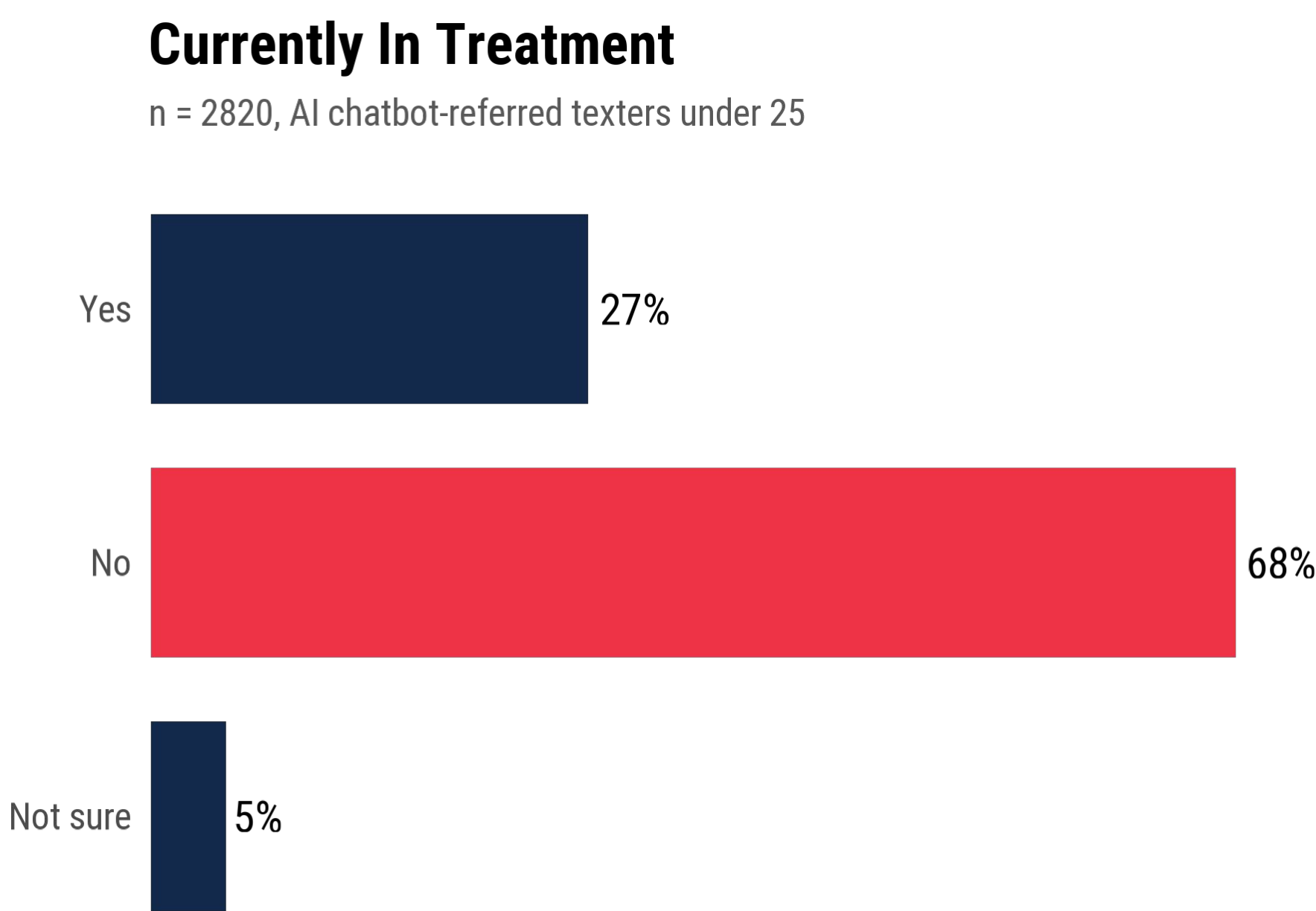


In 18% of conversations with texters under age 25, they indicated hearing about Crisis Text Line from an AI chatbot (e.g. ChatGPT, Character.AI, Snapchat's My AI)

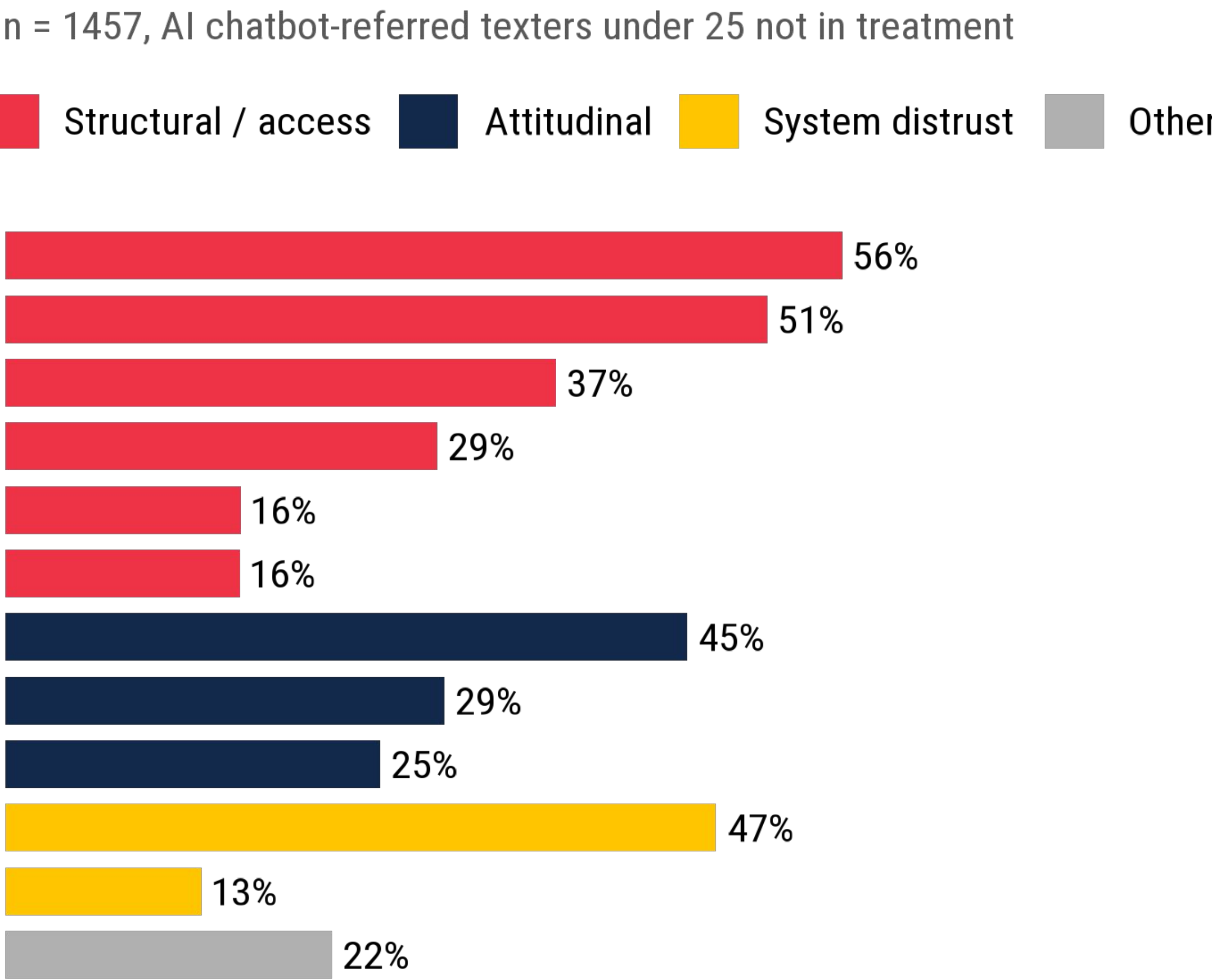
Young Chatbot-Referred Texters

Conversations with chatbot-referred texters under age 25 (N = 2967):

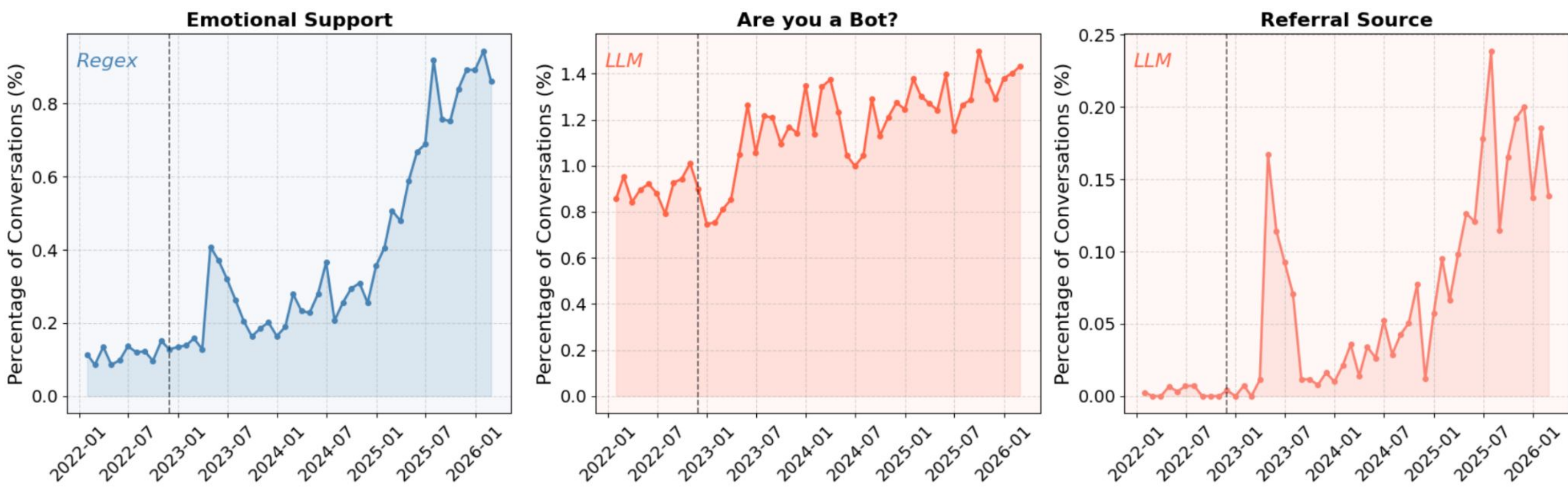
- Over two thirds indicated that they are not currently receiving any form of mental health treatment
- Of those not receiving treatment who indicated that they think they need treatment (N = 1457 conversations), common barriers cited included uncertainty about where to access care, fear about hospitalization, and concern about cost.



Reasons for not seeking treatment



Content Analysis: Chatbot Conversations



- Natural language processing (NLP) analysis: texters increasingly describe using AI tools for emotional support.
- Examples (deidentified and paraphrased):
 - "I used chatgpt because I didn't have a therapist"
 - "chatgpt was providing support, for an AI it was calming"
 - "I'm only completely honest with ChatGPT"
 - "been talking to an AI bot for weeks which has been helpful"
 - "chatGPT made me feel like someone was listening"

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IRB: Sterling IRB (exempt determination). ¹UNICEF. ²Zuromski et al., 2026