
Variation in Telemental Health Service Delivery at Federally Qualified Health Centers

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Introduction

COVID-19 accelerated Federally Qualified Health Centers' use of telemental health, but factors associated with the increase in remote care remain unclear. This study examined telemental health delivery by multiple behavioral health clinician types to understand how staffing composition is related to telemental health service delivery at these federally qualified community health centers (CHCs).

Methods

Using 2021 data from the Uniform Data System (UDS), we characterized telemental health delivery at CHCs and conducted multivariate regression analyses to evaluate the proportion of telemental health delivery by provider type while controlling for CHC size, patient panel/caseload, and FTE status of providers. We then evaluated the extent of state differences in these models.

Findings

CHCs delivered an average of 11,368 mental health service visits in 2021 (12.1% of total encounters). An average of 43% of the 1,270 CHCs in the sample reported these visits were delivered via telehealth. Different clinician groups had varied rates of telemental health delivery, with psychiatrists delivering 61% of services virtually, psychologists 49%, and social workers 44%. There were also state variations in telemental health delivery by clinician type. CHCs with larger grant dollars per the number of patients served were also a significant predictor of telemental health delivery.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

Telemental health care was higher in CHCs with more psychiatrists, suggesting that virtual care is disproportionately delivered in places with different staffing compositions. Although tele-mental health delivery remains high, not all behavioral health workforces may be equally using this model to provide care. Future efforts to educate and expand clinicians' training for telemental health are necessary as health settings continue to provide this type of treatment modality for mental health.