NIHCM DATA INSIGHTS

The Behavioral Health Care Workforce: Shortages, Barriers, & Solutions

Approximately **1.3 million** providers offer behavioral health services and prescribe behavioral health medications in the U.S.



Behavioral health specialists include:
- Psychiatrists
- Psychologists
- Social workers
- Counselors
- Marriage and family therapists

The state of behavioral health care:

- There is a **shortage** of providers and **demand** for services is increasing
- The provider workforce **lacks diversity**
- It is difficult for many individuals to **access care**

Provider Shortages & Increasing Demand

Shortage of behavioral health providers:

49% of the U.S. population lives in a mental health workforce shortage area

8,200 - **current** shortage of **psychiatrists**

Two-thirds of shortage areas are in **rural** or partially rural parts of the country.

The Health Resources and Services Administration primarily relies on the availability of psychiatrists to define areas experiencing mental health workforce shortages.

Additionally, shortages have been projected for:
- Psychologists
- Social workers
- Counselors
- Marriage and family therapists

The demand is increasing:

The **COVID-19 pandemic** increased the demand for mental health services

The percentage of psychologists reporting patient increases in:

Anxiety disorders: **79%**

Depressive disorders: **66%**

Trauma-related and stressor-related disorders: **64%**

6 in 10 psychologists report not having openings for new patients

Of psychologists with waitlists, **72%** have longer ones than before the pandemic

Telehealth's adoption during the pandemic has expanded the reach of mental health professionals

Challenges in Recruiting & Retaining Providers

Financial
Limited resources, reimbursement rates, & student debt

Educational
Lack of training to serve diverse populations & barriers to enter the workforce

Workplace
Shortages in rural areas & high workloads that lead to burnout

Workforce Diversity in Behavioral Health Care

Diversity of behavioral health providers:

Psychologists



81% of psychologists are **White**

Psychiatrists

Only **10.4%** of psychiatrists are Black, Hispanic, or Native American

Compared to the entire U.S. population, which is:
- 60% White
- 14% Black
- 19% Hispanic*
- 6% Asian

Mental Health Counselors

82% White
15% Black
11% Hispanic*
1% Asian

Social Workers

~65% White
~25% Black
~15% Hispanic*
~1% Asian

The percentages of social workers were estimated across the categories

** Persons whose ethnicity is identified as Hispanic may be of any race*

Barriers to Accessing Behavioral Health Services

Hispanic and Black Americans are less likely to receive routine treatment for mental health disorders

2x Black Americans are nearly twice as likely as White Americans to go to hospital emergency departments for mental health care.

It is difficult to find providers of more specialized care

Limited Availability

particularly LGBTQ+-specific mental health & substance abuse treatments

There is a lack of culturally appropriate and linguistically congruent care

There is still stigma around mental health, particularly for immigrant communities & communities of color

Strategies to Expand the Behavioral Health Care Workforce

Address barriers in education

Scholarship programs are more effective for recruitment than loan repayment programs. They are also more effective for recruiting students from **diverse backgrounds**.

Early outreach & developing mentorships promotes awareness of opportunities and encourage more students to consider careers in the behavioral health field.

Loan repayment or forgiveness & stipends address some of the financial barriers to behavioral health education.

Improve diversity in the workforce

Involve *communities of color in equity initiatives*

Develop *meaningful outreach for recruitment*

Use data *to understand workforce needs*

Create *more culturally inclusive workplaces*

Leverage *funding opportunities to invest in a diverse workforce*

Leverage the existing workforce to increase access

Telehealth
can expand access to patients from underserved communities

Interstate licensure simplification
allows counselors to easily practice across state lines

Integrate behavioral health care
with physical health care, where a team works together

Expand the paraprofessional workforce

Includes:
- Community health workers
- Peer supports
- Recovery specialists

*Over **30,000** peer supporters work around the U.S.*

Who they are:
- Individuals with lived experiences & caregivers
- People who have ties to the community
- Workers with the skills to deliver behavioral health care

What they do:
- Reach hard-to-engage populations
- Promote community engagement
- Translate information and build trust
- Connect the patient to community-based resources
- Bridge between clinician and patient
- Help navigate care systems

Support providers



- Address burnout
- Support educators and trainees
- Invest in the workforce's social, mental, & wellness needs
- Financial investment in the workforce pipeline
- Reduce administrative burden
- Improve payment

Provide trainings on topics such as:
- **LGBTQ+**-affirmative mental health care
- Addressing behavioral health **disparities**
- **Cultural** competence
- **Trauma**-informed care