Children's Hospital of Philadelphia
PolicyLab

How a Lack of Rural Mental Health Professionals Affects Youth in 200 Words

Behavioral Health

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Across the U.S., there is a shortage of mental health professionals, and families living in rural areas face even greater challenges accessing appropriate mental health care. Many rural communities don't have local psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers to rely on, and mental health services and other social programs are scarce.

Given this, my colleagues and I investigated what happens when children are hospitalized for mental health conditions (like depression, suicidal thoughts or dangerous behaviors) in rural hospitals, compared to children's and general hospitals in metropolitan areas. What we found is that they have a shorter stay and higher risk of re-admission. This suggests that rural communities may lack the resources to provide as much mental health care during hospitalization and after discharge. Hospitalizations might be shorter if there are no psychiatrists to participate in and advise a patient's hospital care. And if rural children are discharged to communities where there are no psychiatrists, psychologists, or social workers to continue their care, their mental health status might deteriorate, requiring them to be re-hospitalized.

Our findings illustrate how inadequate mental health services can affect children with serious mental health conditions. While there's more to learn about the unique mental health needs of rural communities, telehealth may offer unique solutions to mitigate workforce shortages.

As we continue to face challenging times amid the COVID-19 pandemic, local and national health policies should seek to expand the mental health workforce, particularly for rural areas, if we want to better address children's mental health needs.

This post is part of our "____ in 200 Words" series. In this series, we tackle issues related to children's health policy and explain and connect you to resources to help understand them further, all in 200 words. If you have any suggestions for a topic in this series, please send a note to PolicyLab's Strategic Operations & Communications Director Lauren Walens.

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