

Telehealth Research Recap: Behavioral Health



Telehealth Adoption for Behavioral Health Care

Telehealth facilitates remote consultations, therapy sessions, and monitoring for individuals with behavioral health needs using telecommunication technologies. Telehealth can be used for many services, including individual therapy, group sessions, and psychiatric evaluations.¹ Figure 1 shows the types of telehealth services offered at mental health treatment centers between December 2022 and March 2023.² Telehealth technologies for behavioral health care include video conferencing, messaging, and digital monitoring tools. Telehealth has proven particularly effective in managing conditions such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).³ Patients have experienced several benefits associated with the use of telebehavioral health including increased access to care.⁴ Telehealth removes critical barriers such as transportation and the need to find childcare.⁵ Many behavioral health patients have indicated an interest in continuing to use telehealth.⁶

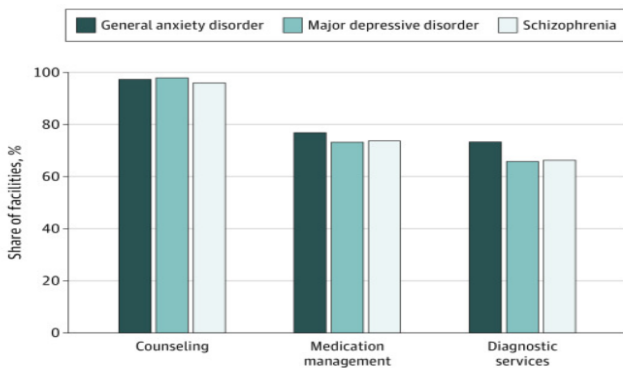


Figure 1. Types of Telehealth Services Offered by Mental Health Treatment Facilities, December 2022 to March 2023⁷

Trends in Utilization of Telehealth for Behavioral Health Services

The trends in behavioral health service use, particularly in the context of telehealth, have seen a significant evolution in recent years. This was driven by the COVID-19 pandemic, policy changes enacted during the COVID-19 public health emergency, and by increasing societal acceptance of telehealth treatment for behavioral health care.^{8,9} Figure 2 shows the use of in-person and telehealth visits for behavioral health services before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁰ Tele-behavioral health use is not limited to individual therapy sessions but extends to group therapy, psychiatric evaluations, and crisis interventions.¹¹ One study looking at Medicare beneficiaries found that telehealth use remained highest for behavioral health.¹² In 2021, telehealth made up 35% of visits to behavioral health specialists.¹³ Another study noted a similar percentage of Medicare beneficiaries with mental health conditions and substance use disorders using tele-behavioral health.¹⁴

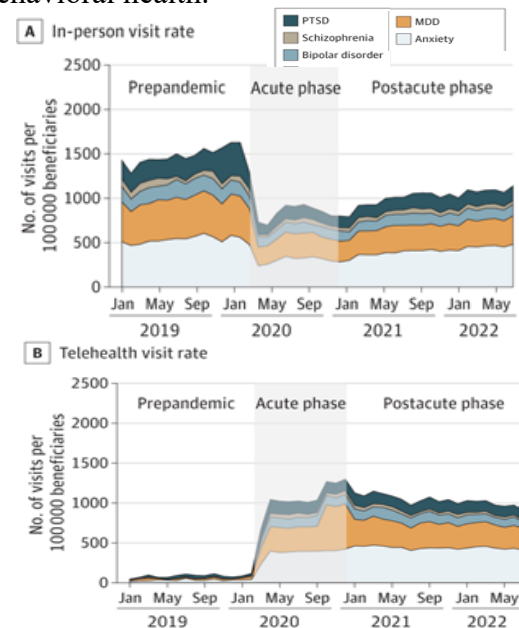


Figure 2. In-Person and Telehealth Visits Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic, January 2019 to August 2022¹⁵

Effectiveness of Tele-Behavioral Health

Telehealth may help providers improve outcomes by providing timely care and increasing coordination.¹⁶ Telehealth allows patients to access a wider variety of specialist providers.¹⁷ Moreover, the stigma traditionally associated with seeking mental health may be reduced by allowing patients to access telehealth from the privacy and comfort of their home.¹⁸ Telehealth also facilitates ongoing, real-time monitoring and intervention. Telehealth is proving to be a viable alternative to in-person care.

Telehealth for Opioid Use Disorder Treatment

Recent studies investigating the use of telehealth for opioid use disorder treatment have shown promising results.¹⁹ Telehealth has proven effective for screening, treatment (such as medication for opioid use disorder), and counseling, which are essential components of OUD care.^{20,21}

Telehealth Policy and Behavioral Health Care

Federal and state-level policies play a pivotal role in shaping the availability and scope of telehealth services for mental health care.^{22,23} Before the COVID-19 pandemic, telehealth use was often limited by regulations that varied significantly between states, including restrictions on cross-state licensure for providers.²⁴ This hindered providers' ability to offer services to patients in different states.²⁵ However, the COVID-19 pandemic prompted higher levels of participation in licensure compacts, allowing for greater access to telehealth services across state lines.²⁶ Additionally, policies related to reimbursement were expanded; Medicare and many private insurers increased coverage for tele-behavioral health services.^{27,28} This has facilitated wider adoption. Some states implemented emergency measures to enhance telehealth access, which expanded telehealth services for behavioral health care.²⁹ Figure 3 shows the changes in payment parity for behavioral health services from 2019-2022.³⁰ These policy shifts have significantly increased the availability of behavioral health services, making it easier for patients to access care virtually.³¹

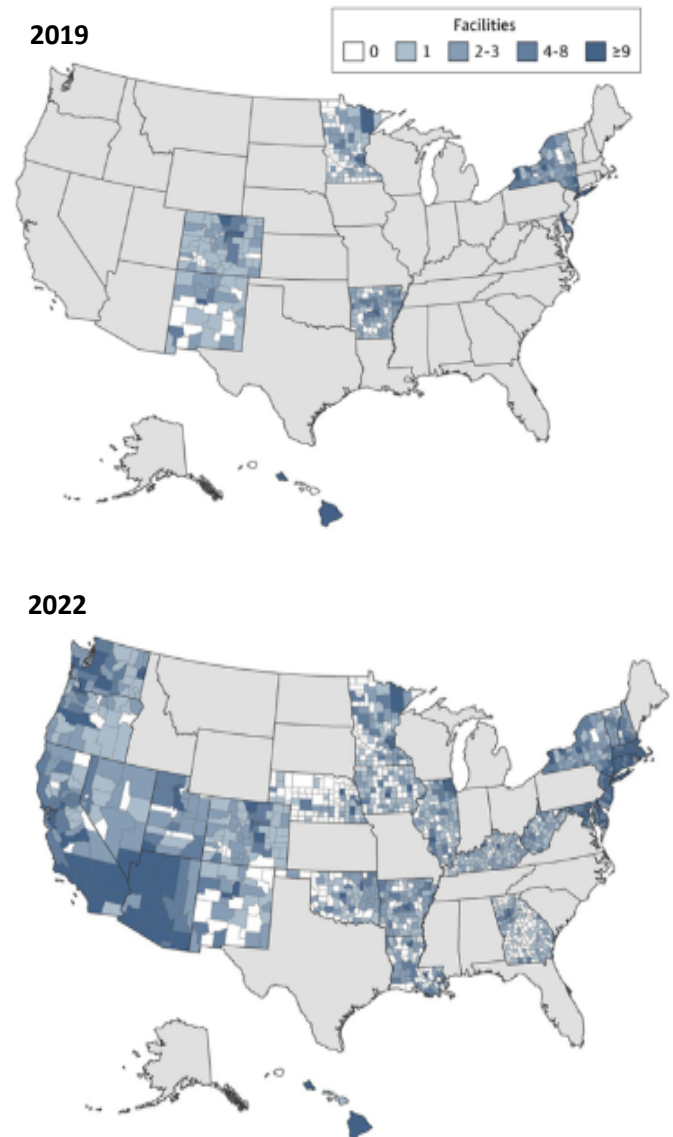


Figure 3. Changes in Payment Parity for Behavioral Health Services Delivered by Telehealth, 2019- 2022³²

Resources

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