

Telehealth Research Recap: Health Equity



Sociodemographic Disparities in Telehealth Use

Studies have looked at disparities in access to telehealth, use of telehealth, and telehealth modality, considering age, race and ethnicity, geographic location, and socioeconomic status.^{1,2} Older adults often face barriers to using audio-video telehealth.^{3,4} Research relates racial and ethnic disparities with lower use of overall telehealth but higher use of audio-only telehealth.⁵ Figure 1 shows the breakdown of video and audio telehealth use by race.⁶ Another study found telehealth use is lower among patients with limited English proficiency. Overall, telehealth patients are younger, female, White, have higher socioeconomic status, and live in urban areas.⁷

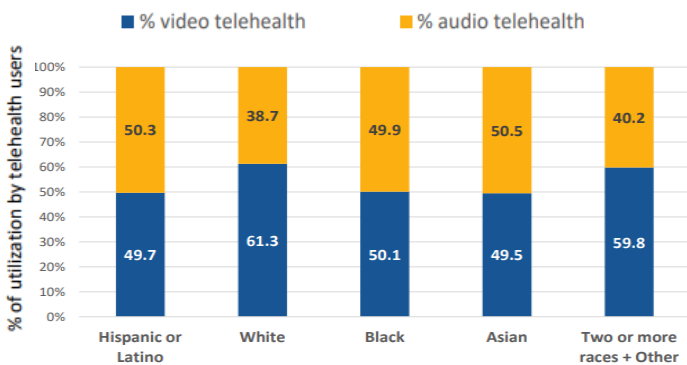


Figure 1. Telehealth Modality Among Telehealth Users, by Race/Ethnicity 2021-2022⁸

Barriers to Equitable Telehealth Access

Various factors contribute to inequitable telemedicine access across different populations, including technical, structural, and socioeconomic challenges.^{9,10} Specific barriers include inadequate broadband infrastructure, lack of technology devices, and limited digital literacy.¹¹ Additionally, concerns about data privacy may affect telehealth use among certain populations.¹² Variations in insurance coverage and state laws contribute to geographical

variations in telehealth use.¹³ Additionally, telehealth technology functionality and limitations may impact access for individuals with disabilities, including those with visual or hearing impairments.¹⁴ Telehealth practice improvements can begin to mitigate the digital divide, ensuring patients' access to and use of telehealth.^{15,16,17}

Telehealth Accessibility for Older Adults

The association between telemedicine use and age reflects broader challenges that inhibit the accessibility and acceptability of health-related technology within older populations. Older adults often face multiple barriers that reduce their access to telehealth services.^{18,19,20} Unfamiliarity can make navigating telehealth platforms, scheduling online appointments, and using digital communication tools challenging. Cognitive challenges, such as memory issues, also play a role.²¹ Additionally, older adults who live in rural or underserved areas may be unable to access audio-video telehealth due to inadequate broadband internet.²²

Geographic Variations in Telehealth Access

Rural regions often face a digital divide that impacts telehealth accessibility due to limited broadband availability, which is essential for high-quality video consultations.²³ As illustrated in Figure 2, telehealth use was higher in urban areas compared to rural areas in 2020-2021.²⁴ Additionally, telehealth use rates were lowest in the Midwest.²⁵ Regulatory and licensing constraints may prevent health care providers from offering services across state lines, limiting access for patients.²⁶

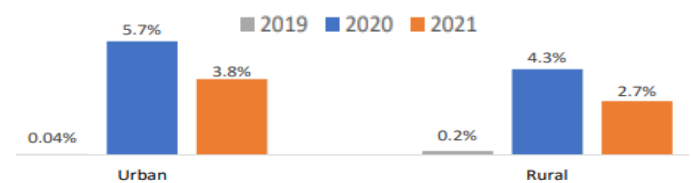


Figure 2. Telehealth by Rural/Urban 2019-2021²⁷

Resources

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- ⁸ Lee, E.C., Grigorescu, V., Enogieru, I., et al. Updated National Survey Trends in Telehealth Utilization and Modality: 2021-2022 (Issue Brief No. HP-2023-09). Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services April 2023.
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