

The Impact of COVID-19 on Oklahoma Mental Health

Behavioral health trends since the onset of the pandemic

RESEARCH OVERVIEW

As the pandemic spread in early 2020, Healthy Minds Policy Initiative projected elevated levels of anxiety and depression and up to 260 extra adult deaths in Oklahoma based on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health and substance use. Projections stemmed from Oklahomans' concerns about infection, loss of loved ones to the disease, unemployment and social isolation. Over a year after the onset of COVID-19, information is now becoming available detailing how the pandemic has impacted the behavioral health of Oklahomans.

KEY FINDINGS



Both anxiety and depression increased dramatically, with Oklahoma rates nearly four times higher than in 2019 during some periods of the pandemic.



Oklahoma suicides increased 8% to 10% in 2020, and rural areas had a 27% increase.



Overdoses are back to 2017 levels and rising, as more than 2 years of improvements in the death rate have been erased so far. Fentanyl and substance use under age 25 are among the drivers.



Telehealth increasingly has been used to help ensure access to behavioral health services, and for people with commercial insurance, it has become the top method for accessing mental health services. Around 50% of telehealth encounters in Oklahoma are related to mental health and substance use disorders.



Access remains challenging for many, and just as many people with a perceived need for therapy do not receive it as receive it. Workforce challenges will continue to pose a barrier to meeting behavioral health needs.

RECOMMENDATIONS



Boost the behavioral health workforce to meet increased demand for services, including by incentivizing new providers.



Integrate behavioral health into primary care, including through universal screening and appropriate referral practices.



Ensure compliance with mental health parity laws, such as SB 1718 from the 2020 Oklahoma State Legislative Session, to avoid discrimination for Oklahomans seeking mental health and addiction care.



Expand crisis services as part of the implementation of 988, the new national number for mental health crisis calls.



Work to improve the stigma around mental health and addiction issues, helping more Oklahomans access available care.