Behavioral Telehealth Visits in Colorado Pre and Post COVID-19 Pandemic

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Telehealth

- Telehealth is a form of health services that allow patients to connect with professionals regardless of distance.
- It was not widely spread before the pandemic because of federal policies surrounding interstate licensure, prescriptions, reimbursements of doctors, and privacy (Shaver, 2022).
- Prior to the pandemic, telehealth accounted for less than 1% of all outpatient visits but at the peak, it represented nearly 13% (Lo et al., 2022).
- In Colorado, mental health visits were the highest, amassing 31% of all telehealth visits. (CIVHC APCD)
Objective

Identify the effects of increased telehealth usage on rural and urban counties in Colorado to identify areas of high need and resource shortages.

Rural vs Urban?

Rural areas are defined as having less than 500 people per square mile or places with less than 2,500 people.
- U.S. Census Bureau
Research Question

How did the increased usage of telehealth affect rural communities in Colorado?
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Hypothesis

There will be a greater per capita increase of telehealth visits for rural communities compared to urban areas.
Datasets

CIVHC APCD
December 2017 - July 2020

Includes: payer, provider types, diagnoses, and geographic variations.

*Taken from all payer claims
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**CDPHE**
*2019*

*Includes:* types of behavioural health providers, and geographic locations.

*Taken from surveys*
Quantitative Methods

- **Payer Type**
  - Commercial
  - Medicaid
  - Medicare

- **Age**
  - 0-17
  - 18+

- **Diagnosis**
  - Mental Illness
  - Non-mental illness

- **Provider Type**
  - Primary Care
  - Behavioural Health
Interviews

- Conducted with two licensed professional counselors to learn more about personal experiences with telehealth.
Results

292,287
Total number of **urban** mental health telehealth visits

14,708
Total number of **rural** mental health telehealth visits
Results

6,223
Per capita number of **urban** mental health telehealth visits

4,446
Per capita number of **rural** mental health telehealth visits
“Chronic health issues are best treated by telehealth because it takes longer to build rapport.

— Participant 1
Results

Map of Behavioural Health Providers by County (2019)
Results

Top 10 Counties with Highest Telehealth Services (Per Capita)
“While most clinical services can be conducted normally, play therapy can’t be effectively conducted through telehealth.”

— Participant 2
Discussion

- While the number of rural services did not increase as much as urban services, they increased significantly in proportion to population.
- Important takeaways from qualitative interviews:
  - Telehealth is still beneficial post pandemic.
  - The main barriers to telehealth are still there.
  - Adolescents and older benefit more from telehealth services than young children.
Limitations

**All Payer Claims Data**
Does not include out of pocket payers

**Limited Timeline**
Little data, didn’t capture whole pandemic

**Number of Interviewees**
Only 2 behavioural health providers due to time constraints
Future Directions

Repeated Visits

Ethnic Backgrounds

Outpatient Referrals

Specific Diagnosis
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References

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Questions?