

Rural America suffering severe shortage of mental health professionals

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Rural America has a severe shortage of qualified mental health professionals because agencies and governmental units are unable to pay competitive wages commonly offered in larger communities, says a new

report from Ball State University presented at the Annual Society for Public Health Education Conference in April.

"Rural Mental Health Professionals' Perspectives on Workforce Issues" found that 95 percent of [mental health professionals](#) in rural communities who were surveyed reported that they are not able to meet mental health needs of people in their communities, while 90 percent said was difficult to recruit and retain qualified professionals.

The study found the main reasons why rural counties were not able to hire qualified mental health professionals were an inability to pay competitive wages or to provide professional development opportunities.

The majority of the responding mental health professionals also reported that mental health issues in their communities are not well researched and known, nor was there an accurate assessment of the number of mentally ill in their area of practice.

"The nature and extent of mental illnesses in rural America is not well known or researched, but what we know for sure is that there is a shortage of mental health professionals in rural America," said the study's lead author, Cathy D. Whaley, director of the Northeast Indiana Area Health Education Center, which is based at Ball State.

"As we deal with mental health professional shortage areas across America, we have to look to other ways to improve mental and behavioral health care in our rural communities," she said. "Integrating behavioral health with primary care is one of the best and most effective ways to make this happen"

The study also found:

- Sixty-three percent of respondents believe that government

should play a major role in recruitment and retention of mental health care professionals.

- More than a third of respondents reported that the cost of care is high and access is low for mental health care in their rural county compared to state average for cost and access.
- The median number of drug related deaths reported by location of practice was 20.
- Professionals reported that to get specialty care or a qualified psychiatrist, people in their practice area have to travel more than 25 miles on average.
- An average rural mental health professional sees nine clients per day and Medicaid remains the primary source of payment for most patients
- Ninety-five percent of respondents reported that local health departments are not adequately involved in providing [mental health care](#) services.
- More than a third of the respondents identified opioid and drug problems as the top concern in their communities.

"While the shortage of mental health professionals affects communities across the nation, rural America has unique needs due to unemployment, lower education, drug use, poor general health of people, and reluctance of health professionals to serve rural America," said study data analyst Jagdish Khubchandani, a health science professor at Ball State.

"Government should have the primary responsibility in building infrastructure and providing resources for greater access to [mental health care](#) in rural America."

Provided by Ball State University

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