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How does Rural Access to Mental Health Services compare with Urban areas?

July 23, 2025

I. Introduction

A. Importance of topic

1. Mental health is essential but not equally accessible.
2. Personal connection to rural healthcare limitations.

B. Thesis: Rural Americans face greater barriers to mental health care than urban residents due to fewer providers, longer distances, and financial/tech limitations.

II. Background

A. Historical lack of rural services (Ziller; Stewart)

B. Urbanization's mental health effects (Halbreich)

C. Rural disparities gaining national attention (Morales)

III. Core Research Content

A. Rural Barriers

B. Possible Solutions

IV. Findings and Conclusion

A. Clear rural-urban gap in access and quality

B. Solutions exist but need investment and planning

C. Everyone deserves access to mental healthcare, regardless of location

Mental health is essential for sustaining a person's well-being because of its ability to influence relationships, retain educational knowledge, and stay in prime physical health. Millions of adults in the U.S. go through the effects of mental illness, leading to greater difficulty in completing daily tasks. But even with such high numbers, which continue to climb every day, access to mental health care remains uneven, especially between rural and urban areas. For a very long time, mental health services have mainly been established in cities, where larger populations and higher demand make starting a business more practical. Rural communities, on the other hand, were left out of major health expansions, resulting in ongoing gaps in both access and quality of care (Stewart). In many parts of the country, this has created a mental health crisis in rural areas that now draws increasing national attention. Rural Americans often face tough challenges in looking after their mental health, as sudden crises and ongoing problems demand attention that leaves little room for personal care. From the decreasing number of healthcare professionals to the high prices for treatment, rural residents face more challenges than ever. The elevated risk of suicide among people residing in rural areas is nearly twice that of their urban counterparts, underscoring the dire need to recognize and address rural mental health disparities before the situation further worsens (Morales et al.). Living in a rural area can be difficult as people often struggle with a lack of mental health professionals, underinsurance, and stigma that discourages individuals from accessing the care they need. Even though federal laws have been passed like the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act in 2008 to improve access, people in rural areas still don't get adequate mental health care, and the excessive prices still deter many from getting treatment (Ziller et al.). This paper examines historical trends in rural mental health service availability and explores current barriers to ensure that all Americans, regardless of residence or status, can exercise their inherent right to mental health care.

Since the mid-20th century, rural America has undergone chronic underinvestment in mental health infrastructure. At first, public health mostly prioritized cleaning up cities and fighting diseases, and didn't pay much attention to mental health in rural areas. It wasn't until chronic illnesses became more common in the 1970s that people started to notice the problem. Today, 60% of rural residents live in designated Mental Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSAs), and 65% of counties lack a psychiatrist (Stewart). Recent events have shown that the majority of the rural workforce remains concentrated in urban areas. Approximately 80% of psychiatrists and psychologists spend their time working in metropolitan areas due to their high demand, leaving vast rural regions devoid of specialized care. As more people move to cities, rural areas continue to lose the much-needed healthcare professionals, which makes it harder for the folks who are left behind. Because of the abundance of younger people moving away for jobs and other opportunities, rural populations continue to stay dormant for the most part, resulting in higher rates of loneliness, mental health struggles, and long-term health issues clearly point out the need for care. At the same time, stereotypes that show rural people as tough and independent compared to others who need help can lead to extraneous solutions that may not be what most people need (Halbreich).

The COVID-19 pandemic is one example of a clear distinction in rural health inequities. Between 2000 and 2018, suicide rates in rural areas jumped by 48%, which was substantially higher than the 34% increase seen in cities. During the 2020–2021 surveys, anxiety and depression affected 42% of people living in rural communities. More communities are starting to recognize that rural mental health isn't just a personal problem—it's a bigger issue for both public health and the healthcare system. Because of this growing problem, there has been more

focus on collecting updated data, giving out federal grants, and passing laws to ensure the growth of the rural health workforce and make sure telehealth gets paid for fairly. As noted earlier, rural communities across the U.S. have often been overlooked when it comes to receiving proper care, not only in mental health, but in many other parts of daily life. Because of this history, mental health care in rural communities was never fully built up. Services were developed where populations were larger and doctors were easier to find, while rural areas were left out of major expansions. Today, the lack of providers and resources continues to hold people back, especially when they are already burdened with social and financial limitations. With limited support nearby and fewer specialists to turn to, rural residents often find themselves stuck without the help they need. The suicide rate in these communities is one of the clearest signs of a need for desperate change. (Morales et al., 2020).

At the center of the problems with limited mental healthcare access are major barriers to availability, cost, and cultural understanding. In many rural communities, mental health services are simply too far away. Nearly 40% of isolated ZIP codes are located more than 30 minutes from a mental health facility, while only 10% of urban ones face that issue (Hung et al.). Long drives and no public transportation make going to a doctor a huge effort, especially for families already burdened with low income. Even if someone does make the trip, there's no guarantee a provider will be available. Despite having many healthcare professionals in cities, some places still have long wait times to see a specialist, often ranging from several days to a few weeks. Most specialists live and work in cities, and states like Wyoming have more than 96% of their population living in shortage areas (Hung et al.). Most training programs focus on city-based careers, and rural jobs don't come with the same pay or support. As a result, not so many

professionals choose to work in those areas. In the end, it all comes down to income and convenience for the healthcare provider. Federal programs like the Rural Residence Planning and Development (RRPD) have started funding psychiatry residencies in underserved places, but unfortunately, these efforts may have started too late.

Then there's the issue of affordability. Even with laws like the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act passed in 2008, care remains expensive for many rural residents (Ziller et al.). Astronomically high costs and underinsurance make treatment feel out of reach for a majority of low-income workers living in less populated regions. Some people opt out entirely, relying on home remedies or just hoping their symptoms will pass. This problem can cause more issues to spark due to the fact that many are forced to stay at home and hope for the best. Others desire help but don't have the internet or devices needed for telehealth visits. Although rural adults used tele-mental health services more than urban ones during the pandemic, about 28% of rural households still lack online access (Morales et al.), making virtual care less reliable and accessible.

Even when care is available and affordable, stigma is another obstacle that often stands in the way. In small towns, privacy is hard to protect, and cultural expectations encourage people to keep their conditions hidden instead of asking for support. This fear of being judged or misunderstood is enough to keep many silent and for good reason. In a lightly populated area, word gets around quickly, and it is easy to be shunned for even the slightest confusion about a person's condition. Some residents aren't sure what mental illness really means or what help even looks like. Many have spent their entire lives not knowing if they really need treatment or not because of a lack of exposure to the outside world. Young people also struggle with similar

symptoms. Without programs in schools or trusted adults to talk to, symptoms can go unnoticed and untreated. Thankfully, school-based behavioral health centers are helping bridge that gap, offering early support that keeps kids on track (Stewart).

When mental health challenges go untreated, they affect more than just the individual with the condition. People may encounter problems with relationships, jobs, school, or even substance use. Communities suffer the consequences of high rates of mental illness because of its contributions to poverty and higher suicide rates. To make matters worse, rural clinics often rely on general doctors to handle mental health needs, which isn't effective in many circumstances. Medication becomes the normal for many, even when therapy or more specialized support would work better (Hung et al.). Follow-up care is equally hard to get, and patients may go months without checking in or adjusting their treatment. On top of not being able to access healthcare facilities easily, rural residents struggle to schedule normal checkups that could be the difference between life or death. On the other hand, urban facilities often offer more consistent support and healthcare options that are more obtainable.

Despite the setbacks, many rural clinics are finding ways to raise the quality of care. By partnering with broader networks and enhancing system capabilities, these clinics run more efficiently and care improves for those receiving it. Digital tools and team models help providers offer better service, even with limited resources.

While the struggles of living in a rural environment may be imminent, new technology such as Telehealth continues to be one of the more promising solutions. It reduces travel time, allowing many to comfortably receive guidance they may not have had before. It also brings care into people's homes and makes scheduling easier. Federal grants have helped build out programs,

and more states are recognizing the need to cover virtual visits. As awareness spreads throughout the nation, support for these areas will only continue to grow. Along with it, the importance of recognizing the value of these places will also be widespread. Audio-only sessions and cross-state practice licenses make it possible to reach patients who would otherwise go without care for months. If internet access continues to improve, telehealth could play an even bigger role in rural care.

Another quickly growing solution are community-based programs, which are making a major impact in the social aspect of mental health. In Tennessee, Cherokee Health Systems brings physical and mental health together in one clinic, letting patients get help without feeling judged or exposed. In schools, behavioral centers are doing the same for students. Peer support networks like Mental Health First Aid, teenMHFA, and AgriSafe's FarmResponse teach everyday people how to help others in crisis. Medical degrees aren't required to make a difference—just compassion, friendship, and a genuine desire to help others. By building on local strengths, communities are becoming more resilient and prepared to support each other.

To keep this progress going, policies and funding need to be strong. The Rural Communities Opioid Response Program (RCORP) and Medicare rural residency programs are already making moves by training doctors and building care systems in rural areas (Hung et al.). But to truly close the gap, lawmakers must continue investing in internet access, affordable treatment, and workforce development.

All of these solutions—telehealth, school-based services, integrated clinics, and peer support—make a real difference. Overall, they improve the quality of life by not only lowering costs, but bringing care in a closer proximity and helping people feel more comfortable receiving

aid. However, their success is highly dependent on substantial financial backing and earnest involvement from local communities.

The differences between rural and urban mental health care aren't just inconvenient—they're unfair. No matter how much people try to close the gap, there will always be an advantage given to those living in urban spaces. People living in rural areas deal with more challenges when it comes to getting help, even though mental health affects everyone no matter their living situation. With pressing issues such as fewer providers, longer wait times, higher costs, and more stigma, care feels out of reach for most. As a result of this, the emotional impact can be devastating.

Still, change is not far out of reach. Telehealth continues to show up where in-person clinics fall short, making mental health care reachable in places that used to go unnoticed. These virtual services offer flexibility, giving patients a chance to talk to someone without long drives or difficult scheduling. At the same time, local programs are stepping in to make sure people feel seen, not forgotten. Community-led efforts are rebuilding trust and creating space where asking for help doesn't feel like a risk. Schools are also stepping up, catching issues early and building support systems before the bias is learned at and young age. Students who might have stayed silent now get access to counseling and screenings in familiar environments, and joint care models allow medical and mental health support to work together without judgment. When solutions are built around what real people need, they tend to work better than usual. These programs are showing that change doesn't have to be massive to matter. It just has to meet people where they are.

To make rural mental health care fair, the first step the country must take is to stop

treating location like a barrier to getting better. Where someone lives shouldn't decide how much help they're able to receive—or whether they receive it at all. Real change takes action beyond promises. It requires serious funding, strong leadership, and trust in the people most affected. But more than anything, it takes the belief that mental health is a basic right, not something extra. When rural communities gain access to real care—care that fits their lives—the old way of surviving starts to fade out. Instead of waiting for things to get worse, people can finally take steps toward feeling better. The future becomes less about coping and more about living. Each step forward builds resilience, strengthens connection, and makes recovery feel not only possible—but lasting.

For those who stay in small towns while others move away, life can feel more isolated over time. The easy way to escape is by following the crowd and leaving to find a better place. This mindset is what makes more people feel the need to provide not only themselves, but their families with a better future. With fewer young professionals coming in and older adults facing more health issues, emotional struggles like anxiety and depression reach a new high. When people feel like they can't talk about what they're going through, they turn to things that are reliable to them such as drugs or alcohol. For many, this is the easy and cheap way to escape your conditions and feelings. As a result of this, on top of mental health issues, an abundance of people suffer from drug abuse and drunkenness which takes a huge toll on their lives. That's why the need for strong mental health care in rural areas isn't just important—it's urgent.

In the end, everyone deserves mental health care that works for them, no matter where they live. Location shouldn't decide how healthy someone gets to be. A basic quality of life should be the minimum for every citizen who needs it, not only in mental health, but physical as

well. It has been understood for a long time that only the rich can fully take care of themselves. The goal should be to fix that thinking and make sure everyone gets the care they deserve. Fixing rural mental health gaps will take massive amounts of effort, but it'll be worth it in the end knowing that people will not be discriminated based on where they choose to live. Because with access to the care many have missed out on, people will be able to live their lives with the opportunity to grow.

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