



Enhancing Access to Mental Health Care: The Contributions of Physician Assistants/Associates in the Provision of Mental Health Services

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Background/Objective

- The U.S. is currently facing a mental health crisis, with 23.1% of adults experiencing a mental health disorder
- A shortage of psychiatrists further intensifies this substantial demand for mental health services
- Research using 2015 data indicated that many physician assistants/associates (PAs) regularly assessed and managed mental health conditions and behavioral disorders on a weekly basis
- Since then, the PA profession has expanded by 55%, highlighting the need for updated research to better understand the role of PAs in delivering mental health services in the U.S.

Methods

- Utilizing 2024 (N=120,140) PA workforce data from the National Commission on Certification of PAs (NCCPA), we examined how often PAs screen, refer, diagnose, initiate treatment, and implement treatment maintenance for patients with mental disorders in their practice
- Additionally, we investigated potential variations in these services based on geographic distribution, PA demographics, and practice attributes, including specialty types and practice settings

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Results

		Screen			Refer			Diagnose			Initiate Treatment			Treatment Maintenance		
		Less than weekly N=61,241 (51.0%)	At least weekly N=58,899 (49.0%)	p-value	Less than weekly N=77,359 (65.0%)	At least weekly N=41,719 (35.0%)	p-value	Less than weekly N=83,222 (69.5%)	At least weekly N=36,595 (30.5%)	p-value	Less than weekly N=86,342 (72.2%)	At least weekly N=33,260 (27.8%)	p-value	Less than weekly N=83,053 (69.9%)	At least weekly N=35,681 (30.1%)	p-value
Age	Less than 35	21372 (53.2%)	18824 (46.8%)	<0.001	25589 (64.1%)	14361 (35.9%)	<0.001	28752 (71.7%)	11367 (28.3%)	<0.001	29186 (72.9%)	10839 (27.1%)	<0.001	27808 (69.9%)	11968 (30.1%)	0.976
	35-54	32233 (50.4%)	31733 (49.6%)		41345 (65.2%)	22086 (34.8%)		43884 (68.8%)	19906 (31.2%)		45849 (72.0%)	17862 (28.0%)		44199 (70.0%)	18979 (30.0%)	
	55+	7636 (47.8%)	8342 (52.2%)		10425 (66.4%)	5272 (33.6%)		10586 (66.5%)	5322 (33.5%)		11307 (71.3%)	4559 (28.7%)		11046 (70.0%)	4734 (30.0%)	
Gender	Female	42971 (50.7%)	41741 (49.3%)	0.009	53875 (64.1%)	30141 (35.9%)	<0.001	58819 (69.6%)	25693 (30.4%)	0.098	60944 (72.2%)	23410 (27.8%)	0.492	58225 (69.6%)	25486 (30.4%)	<0.001
	Male	18229 (51.6%)	17131 (48.4%)		23439 (67.0%)	11556 (33.0%)		24354 (69.1%)	10883 (30.9%)		25348 (72.1%)	9832 (27.9%)		24782 (70.9%)	10173 (29.1%)	
Race	White	49480 (51.2%)	47232 (48.8%)	<0.001	62758 (65.5%)	33128 (34.5%)	<0.001	67036 (69.5%)	29443 (30.5%)	<0.001	69442 (72.1%)	26872 (27.9%)	<0.001	66953 (70.0%)	28645 (30.0%)	<0.001
	Asian	4303 (54.2%)	3633 (45.8%)		5156 (65.7%)	2694 (34.3%)		5671 (71.6%)	2245 (28.4%)		5894 (74.6%)	2002 (25.4%)		5582 (71.2%)	2261 (28.8%)	
	Black/African American	1817 (46.9%)	2059 (53.1%)		2298 (60.2%)	1517 (39.8%)		2717 (70.6%)	1130 (29.4%)		2848 (74.3%)	987 (25.7%)		2643 (69.5%)	1161 (30.5%)	
	Other	3258 (47.9%)	3539 (52.1%)		4105 (60.7%)	2653 (39.3%)		4503 (66.4%)	2279 (33.6%)		4742 (70.1%)	2026 (30.0%)		4556 (67.7%)	2173 (32.3%)	
Ethnicity	Non-Hispanic/Latino/a/x	55182 (51.2%)	52496 (48.8%)	<0.001	69681 (65.3%)	37057 (34.7%)	<0.001	74883 (69.7%)	32514 (30.3%)	<0.001	77593 (72.4%)	29609 (27.6%)	<0.001	74617 (70.1%)	31804 (29.9%)	<0.001
	Hispanic/Latino/a/x	3967 (47.9%)	4307 (52.1%)		5019 (61.1%)	3189 (38.9%)		5458 (66.1%)	2794 (33.9%)		5758 (69.9%)	2476 (30.1%)		5541 (67.8%)	2635 (32.2%)	
Speaks another language	No	47860 (52.5%)	43244 (47.5%)	<0.001	60182 (66.6%)	30163 (33.4%)	<0.001	64373 (70.8%)	26505 (29.2%)	<0.001	66375 (73.2%)	24344 (26.8%)	<0.001	63851 (70.9%)	26181 (29.1%)	<0.001
	Yes	11771 (45.6%)	14062 (54.4%)		15130 (59.2%)	10437 (40.8%)		16614 (64.5%)	9140 (35.5%)		17638 (68.6%)	8061 (31.4%)		16965 (66.4%)	8581 (33.6%)	
Urban-rural setting	Urban	57688 (52.1%)	53101 (47.9%)	<0.001	71793 (65.5%)	37833 (34.5%)	<0.001	78016 (70.6%)	32471 (29.4%)	<0.001	80805 (73.3%)	29478 (26.7%)	<0.001	77747 (71.0%)	31730 (29.0%)	<0.001
	Rural/Isolated	3298 (38.0%)	5375 (62.0%)		4995 (58.1%)	3603 (41.9%)		4779 (55.2%)	3873 (44.8%)		5078 (58.8%)	3565 (41.2%)		4882 (56.9%)	3701 (43.1%)	
Highest degree obtained	Master's degree	51292 (51.3%)	48728 (48.7%)	<0.001	64308 (64.8%)	34918 (35.2%)	<0.001	69682 (69.8%)	30089 (30.2%)	<0.001	72050 (72.3%)	27540 (27.7%)	<0.001	69111 (69.9%)	29754 (30.1%)	<0.001
	Doctorate degree	1333 (42.8%)	1778 (57.2%)		1798 (58.3%)	1284 (41.7%)		1917 (61.7%)	1191 (38.3%)		2060 (66.6%)	1033 (33.4%)		2000 (64.9%)	1081 (35.1%)	
	Other	8604 (50.7%)	8377 (49.3%)		11236 (67.1%)	5506 (32.9%)		11606 (68.6%)	5304 (31.4%)		12215 (72.3%)	4676 (27.7%)		11926 (71.2%)	4834 (28.8%)	
Principal practice area	Psychiatry	39 (1.3%)	2854 (98.7%)	<0.001	685 (24.0%)	2173 (76.0%)	<0.001	54 (1.9%)	2832 (98.1%)	<0.001	50 (1.7%)	2830 (98.3%)	<0.001	54 (1.9%)	2822 (98.1%)	<0.001
	Addiction medicine	59 (9.0%)	600 (91.0%)		142 (21.6%)	515 (78.4%)		161 (24.5%)	497 (75.5%)		183 (27.8%)	476 (72.2%)		161 (24.5%)	496 (75.5%)	
	Primary care	3525 (13.4%)	22879 (86.6%)		9353 (35.7%)	16860 (64.3%)		7321 (27.8%)	19030 (72.2%)		8645 (32.9%)	17660 (67.1%)		7354 (28.0%)	18866 (72.0%)	
	OB/GYN and Gynecology	495 (25.7%)	1428 (74.3%)		936 (49.2%)	967 (50.8%)		1139 (59.5%)	776 (40.5%)		1270 (66.4%)	643 (33.6%)		1211 (63.6%)	694 (36.4%)	
	Emergency medicine	3201 (25.7%)	9245 (74.3%)		4694 (38.1%)	7624 (61.9%)		7200 (58.0%)	5205 (42.0%)		8104 (65.4%)	4284 (34.6%)		8578 (69.6%)	3739 (30.4%)	
	Neurology	430 (32.2%)	907 (67.8%)		573 (43.4%)	746 (56.6%)		733 (55.2%)	596 (44.8%)		795 (60.1%)	527 (39.9%)		802 (61.3%)	507 (38.7%)	
	Hospital medicine	1894 (45.0%)	2319 (55.0%)		2214 (52.9%)	1970 (47.1%)		2944 (70.2%)	1250 (29.8%)		2897 (69.2%)	1289 (30.8%)		2353 (56.5%)	1814 (43.5%)	
	Pain medicine	913 (53.2%)	802 (46.8%)		1145 (67.4%)	555 (32.6%)		1399 (81.8%)	312 (18.2%)		1455 (85.0%)	256 (15.0%)		1399 (83.1%)	284 (16.9%)	
	Critical care medicine	1420 (58.9%)	991 (41.1%)		1697 (71.2%)	688 (28.8%)		1896 (79.0%)	504 (21.0%)		1689 (70.8%)	696 (29.2%)		1637 (68.9%)	738 (31.1%)	
	Pediatric – subspecialties	1046 (60.8%)	673 (39.2%)		1219 (71.7%)	480 (28.3%)		1447 (84.3%)	270 (15.7%)		1485 (86.7%)	228 (13.3%)		1462 (86.5%)	228 (13.5%)	
	Internal medicine – subspecialties	7930 (66.0%)	4082 (34.0%)		9382 (78.7%)	2541 (21.3%)		10293 (85.9%)	1689 (14.1%)		10603 (88.6%)	1360 (11.4%)		10158 (85.9%)	1666 (14.1%)	
	Surgery – general	2862 (78.7%)	776 (21.3%)		3073 (85.4%)	526 (14.6%)		3431 (94.6%)	197 (5.4%)		3428 (94.7%)	190 (5.3%)		3190 (89.3%)	384 (10.7%)	
	Dermatology	4394 (82.8%)	914 (17.2%)		5009 (95.3%)	247 (4.7%)		5129 (97.0%)	161 (3.0%)		5185 (98.2%)	96 (1.8%)		5131 (98.1%)	98 (1.9%)	
	Surgery – subspecialties	19182 (85.7%)	3193 (14.3%)		20747 (93.6%)	1415 (6.4%)		21720 (97.3%)	594 (2.7%)		21709 (97.5%)	568 (2.5%)		21141 (95.7%)	945 (4.3%)	
	Other	13846 (65.7%)	7234 (34.3%)		16486 (78.9%)	4409 (21.1%)		18367 (87.3%)	2681 (12.7%)		18839 (89.7%)	2155 (10.3%)		18417 (88.5%)	2398 (11.5%)	
Patients seen each week	Median (IQR)	50 (35-80)	60 (40-85)	<0.001	55 (35-80)	64 (45-90)	<0.001	55 (35-80)	68 (50-90)	<0.001	55 (35-80)	65 (50-90)	<0.001	60 (35-80)	64 (45-85)	<0.001
Prescriptions written weekly	Median (IQR)	20 (10-50)	50 (20-100)	<0.001	25 (10-50)	50 (25-100)	<0.001	25 (10-50)	60 (30-100)	<0.001	25 (10-50)	60 (30-100)	<0.001	25 (10-50)	60 (30-100)	<0.001
Principal practice setting	Behavioral/mental health facility	42 (5.6%)	711 (94.4%)	<0.001	222 (29.6%)	527 (70.4%)	<0.001	85 (11.2%)	671 (88.8%)	<0.001	97 (12.9%)	657 (87.1%)	<0.001	80 (10.6%)	676 (89.4%)	<0.001
	Community health center	408 (12.2%)	2943 (87.8%)		907 (27.3%)	2415 (72.7%)		884 (26.5%)	2458 (73.5%)		1089 (32.6%)	2249 (67.4%)		962 (28.9%)	2371 (71.1%)	
	Rural health clinic	191 (12.2%)	1379 (87.8%)		635 (40.5%)	932 (59.5%)		386 (24.5%)	1190 (75.5%)		462 (29.5%)	1105 (70.5%)		390 (24.9%)	1176 (75.1%)	
	Public or community health clinic (non-federally qualified)	217 (26.8%)	593 (73.2%)		339 (42.2%)	464 (57.8%)		377 (46.5%)	434 (53.5%)		414 (51.4%)	391 (48.6%)		380 (47.6%)	419 (52.4%)	
	School-based or college-based health center or school clinic	250 (29.5%)	597 (70.5%)		432 (51.6%)	405 (48.4%)		440 (52.1%)	404 (47.9%)		520 (61.8%)	321 (38.2%)		466 (55.9%)	367 (44.1%)	
	Federal government	1659 (30.5%)	3787 (69.5%)		2741 (50.9%)	2647 (49.1%)		3269 (60.1%)	2167 (39.9%)		4342 (63.5%)	1979 (36.5%)		3215 (59.7%)	2174 (40.3%)	
	Extended care facility/Nursing home	290 (36.4%)	506 (63.6%)		410 (51.8%)	382 (48.2%)		422 (53.2%)	371 (46.8%)		426 (53.7%)	368 (46.3%)		330 (42.0%)	456 (58.0%)	
	Office-based private practice	23030 (52.4%)	20895 (47.6%)		29511 (67.8%)	14030 (32.2%)		28744 (65.6%)	15064 (34.4%)		29939 (68.4%)	13817 (31.6%)		28952 (66.7%)	14482 (33.3%)	
	Hospital	28307 (55.9%)	22358 (44.1%)		33632 (67.0%)	16594 (33.0%)		39083 (77.4%)	11413 (22.6%)		39888 (79.1%)	10512 (20.9%)		38540 (77.1%)	11467 (22.9%)	
	Urgent care	4158 (61.9%)	2554 (38.1%)		4949 (74.4%)	1700 (25.6%)		5637 (84.1%)	1063 (15.9%)		5959 (89.1%)	726 (10.9%)		5828 (88.0%)	791 (12.0%)	
Other	2682 (51.1%)	2565 (48.9%)	3571 (68.8%)	1616 (31.2%)	3886 (74.2%)	1352 (25.8%)	4098 (78.4%)	1126 (21.6%)	3902 (75.1%)	1293 (24.9%)						
Participate in telemedicine	No	39190 (58.0%)	28384 (42.0%)	<0.001	46716 (69.8%)	20184 (30.2%)	<0.001	52131 (77.4%)	15227 (22.6%)	<0.001	53616 (79.7%)	13633 (20.3%)	<0.001	51770 (77.6%)	14974 (22.4%)	<0.001
	Yes	22048 (41.9%)	30512 (58.1%)		30639 (58.7%)	21533 (41.3%)		31085 (59.3%)	21368 (40.7%)		32721 (62.5%)	19626 (37.5%)		31279 (60.2%)	20705 (39.8%)	
Provides care to underserved populations	No/Not sure	49832 (55.3%)	40266 (44.7%)	<0.001	61674 (69.0%)	27678 (31.0%)	<0.001	66099 (73.6%)	23766 (26.4%)	<0.001	68079 (75.9%)	21624 (24.1%)	<0.001	65727 (73.8%)	23315 (26.2%)	<0.001
	Yes	11105 (37.7%)	18345 (62.3%)		15347 (52.6%)	13840 (47.4%)		16717 (56.9%)	12657 (43.1%)		17873 (60.9%)	11466 (39.1%)		16968 (58.2%)	12179 (41.8%)	
Private Insurance	Median proportion (IQR)	35 (20-50)	30 (20-50)	<0.001	35 (20-50)	30 (20-50)	<0.001	35 (20-50)	31 (20-50)	<0.001	35 (20-50)	32 (20-50)	0.006	35 (20-50)	33 (20-50)	0.025
Medicare	Median proportion (IQR)	30 (20-45)	28 (20-40)	<0.001	30 (20-45)	25 (20-40)	<0.001	30 (20-43)	25 (18-40)	<0.001	30 (20-40)	25 (19-40)	<0.001	30 (20-40)	25 (20-40)	<0.001
Medicaid	Median proportion (IQR)	20 (10-30)	25 (10-40)	<0.001	20 (10-30)	25 (15-40)	<0.001	20 (10-30)	25 (10-40)	<0.001	20 (10-30)	25 (10-40)	<0.001	20 (10-30)	25 (10-40)	<0.001
Uncompensated care	Median proportion (IQR)	5 (1-10)	5 (1-12)	<0.001	5 (1-10)	5 (1-15)	<0.001	5 (1-10)	5 (1-10)	0.488	5 (1-10)	5 (1-10)	0.950	5 (1-10)	5 (0-10)	0.03