

Source: Kataoka, S. H., Zang, L., & Wells, K. B. (2002). Unmet need for mental health care among U.S. children: Variation by ethnicity and insurance status. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 159, 1549-1555.

Based on data from a large national survey, these researchers report that about 79% of children from 6-17 years of age who are in need of mental health services do not receive any services. These findings highlight the urgent need to identify strategies for improving access to care.

Kataoka et al. analyzed data from the 1997 National Survey of American Families (NSAF), which sampled 44,000 households and almost 29,000 children. Data are also examined from two other large national surveys, the 1998 National Health Interview Survey (NHIS), and the 1996-97 Community Tracking Study.

The authors identified need for service in the NSAF sample based on responses by parents to the "Mental Health Indicator," a scale that used selected items from the Child Behavior Checklist. Parents were asked whether in the last 12 months their child had received services from a doctor, mental health counselor, or therapist.

Overall, it was found that 20.8% of 6-17 year olds in the NSAF had a mental health problem requiring at least an assessment. This figure is consistent with the results of diagnosis-based community epidemiological studies. Of this group, only 21% received services. The degree of unmet need was greater for Hispanic children (88%) than it was for either Caucasian or African-American children (about 76% for both groups). Data from the NHIS identified the rate of unmet need as being 82% for Hispanic children, 80% for African-American children, and 72% for Caucasian children.

The relationship between unmet need and insurance coverage was also studied. In the NSAF sample, the rate of unmet need was 87% for children with no insurance, 79% for children with private insurance, and 73% for children with public insurance.

Since the question about use of services in the NSAF study did not specifically ask about services received through the schools, and because schools are a large provider of mental health services, it is likely that the rate of unmet need may be slightly less than reported here. Nonetheless, however, the rate is extremely high, and particularly so for Hispanic children and children with no insurance.