

UNDERSTANDING CARE · ONE PAGE EXPLAINER

Mental health shortage areas: why care is hard to reach

What a federal mental health shortage designation means, how it's scored, and your options when psychiatrists are scarce.

A mental health professional shortage area is a place, a group of people, or a facility that the federal government has formally designated as having too few mental health professionals for the people who need them. The designation comes from the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. It's a measure of supply against need. It won't tell you how long you'll wait for an appointment, but it does explain why finding a psychiatrist can be so hard in some places.

HOW A SHORTAGE DESIGNATION WORKS

Who decides

State primary care offices apply to HRSA for designations. HRSA reviews each application, and once it designates an area, it calculates a score. Mental health is one of three kinds of shortage area, alongside primary care and dental care.

Geographic designations

The whole population of a defined area has too few providers. Everyone who lives there is covered by the designation.

Population designations

A specific group within an area is short of providers, even if the area as a whole isn't. HRSA's examples include low-income residents, people experiencing homelessness, and migrant farmworkers.

Facility designations

Some facilities are designated on their own, including state and county mental hospitals, certain correctional facilities, and community health centers that qualify automatically.

The score, from 0 to 25

Higher means a greater shortage. HRSA weighs the population-to-provider ratio (up to 7 points), the share of residents below the federal poverty level (5), the share of older adults (3) and of children (3), alcohol use (1) and substance use (1), and travel time to the nearest care outside the area (5).

What it doesn't measure

A designation compares provider supply with need. It doesn't measure wait times, the quality of care, or whether a clinician near you takes your insurance. Designations are reviewed and change over time.

HOW TO USE THIS PAGE

- Look up your own area with HRSA's free Find Shortage Areas tool.
- If a psychiatrist isn't available soon, start with your primary care clinician, a therapist, or a telepsychiatry service licensed in your state.
- In a crisis, don't wait for an appointment. Call or text 988 in the US, or call 911.

Definitions and scoring follow HRSA's Bureau of Health Workforce. Treatment options draw on a Cochrane review of collaborative care and a published review of telemental health.

This resource is for general education only. It is not medical, psychological, or legal advice, it does not create a clinician and patient relationship, and it is not a substitute for evaluation or treatment by a licensed professional. Laws, standards, and best practices vary by jurisdiction, and it is your responsibility to confirm what applies where you live or practice. If you use this material in clinical, educational, or workplace settings, have it reviewed for fit with your local requirements first. In a crisis in the US, call or text 988, or call 911 in an emergency.