

Expansion of Telehealth Can Address Unmet Treatment Needs Among People on Probation in Arkansas

WHY WE DID THIS STUDY

Individuals involved in the criminal justice system have higher rates of mental illness and substance use disorders. Often, these illnesses are not adequately treated while individuals are incarcerated. Additionally, many individuals released from correctional facilities are required to be supervised in the community (e.g., probation or parole supervision) for significant periods of time. During community supervision, community corrections staff provide treatment services to individuals with behavioral health disorders. However, because many individuals under community supervision live in rural areas, treatment services may not be available to them [Figure 2]. The use of telehealth to expand the reach of substance use and mental health services could greatly improve treatment access in rural areas in Arkansas. The purpose of our project was to understand the experiences of individuals providing and receiving telehealth services through the Arkansas Division of Community Corrections during the COVID-19 pandemic.

HOW WE DID THIS STUDY

We conducted in-depth interviews with 14 individuals on probation who had experience receiving telehealth services and 20 stakeholders who work as administrators or treatment staff at the Arkansas Division of Community Corrections. Our interviews asked participants about their experiences using telehealth for substance use counseling, their perceptions of the benefits and challenges associated with using telehealth, and opportunities to expand telehealth services throughout the state. Interviews were conducted in 2020 and 2021, and were completed over the phone. We recorded the interviews, transcribed them, and analyzed them to determine specific themes from interview content.

WHAT WE FOUND

Most participants found telehealth services to be very convenient. In addition, many participants described how telehealth services can address barriers to accessing treatment, such as lack of transportation and stigma. Participants did not have to travel long distances for services provided through telehealth, and both the counselors and participants agreed that participants reported more frequently for appointments and spoke more freely about their conditions. Staff appreciated that telehealth lowered the barriers of transportation and distance, enabling people previously unable to receive counseling to do so. However, Arkansas is primarily a rural state, and poor internet access posed one challenge to telehealth [Figure 1].

KEY FINDINGS

- Telehealth provides an important opportunity to expand behavioral health treatment services in rural areas.
- However, telehealth services may not be appropriate for all individuals, especially those with more severe illness.
- An important limitation to expanding telehealth services is the lack of uniform access to broadband.

Figure 1: Households with Broadband Access, by County

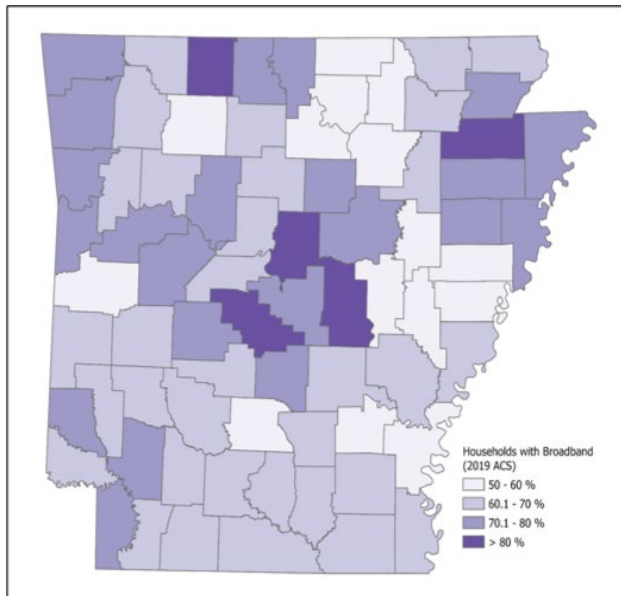
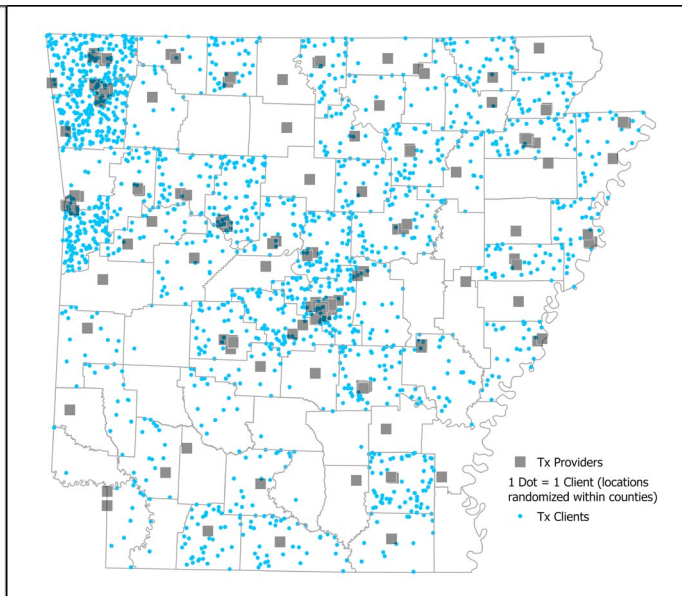


Figure 2: Distribution of Treatment Clients and Treatment Providers, by County



Additionally, not all clients under supervision had a phone that allowed for video conferencing, nor was everyone able to afford the costs of a data plan. Participants in our study also noted that while telehealth services can greatly benefit many probation clients who have substance use disorders, some clients who have more severe illness require more intensive, in-person treatment services. Despite these challenges, staff indicated that the administration is supportive of telehealth services for clients under supervision. Therefore, addressing these challenges offers opportunities to expand the use of telehealth services to probation clients across the state.

WHAT THESE FINDINGS MEAN

Findings suggest that telehealth can be effectively used for this population. We recommend telehealth use be expanded to address other behavioral health needs, including help for employment and mental health care. We recommend that funding be set aside for more trained counselors to provide telehealth services. In addition, we recommend funding to overcome barriers in internet access, phone service, and equipment. This is particularly important given the limitations to broadband access in specific areas of Arkansas. The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act provides \$200 million through the COVID-19 Telehealth Program to expand the use of telehealth. This is an important opportunity for Arkansas to improve its

telehealth infrastructure so that telehealth substance use treatment services can be expanded to include more individuals across our state.

PARTICIPANT QUOTES

My counseling came through. It's like the same—in many cases, actually it was an improvement for them to be able to relate to me because I wasn't right there in their small town. They didn't feel as on the spot. It actually put them more at ease. That was a nice revelation for me.—DCC Counselor

It's been really good. Of course, the first time, I couldn't get my phone to work, so I was panicking, but other than that, I always have service. She's always on time, and I'm always on time, and we don't have a problem. We talk about our stuff—I talk about my stuff, and she tries to help me. I think it's good.—DCC Client

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