Issues Addressed

There is national concern about whether children with special health care needs (CSHCN) experience access problems with mental health services. As our health care system continues its rapid evolution, the extent of access problems encountered by families of CSHCN with mental health service needs is of great importance for parents, service providers, school systems, regulators and administrators of health plans, as well as for health policy analysts. This fact sheet addresses three questions:

♦ Amongst a diverse sample of CSHCN, what percentage of children needed mental health services in the preceding year?

♦ To what extent did parents of CSHCN report problems obtaining mental health services when their children needed this care?

♦ Were particular characteristics of these parents or children associated with lower or higher rates of access problems with mental health services?

Study Methods

The information presented here is based on data from a survey conducted in 1998-1999 of 2,220 parents of CSHCN in 20 states. Brandeis University and Family Voices partnered to design and conduct the survey project. In this fact sheet, we focus on problems reported by parents of CSHCN in obtaining needed care from mental health service providers. A series of questions was posed in the survey regarding whether the responding parent (or guardian) experienced problems in a variety of possible areas, such as the amount the family had to pay for services, obtaining the number of visits needed, or coordination between the provider and others involved in the child’s care. For those parents whose children needed or used mental health services, the percentage experiencing such problems was calculated. In addition, analyses were conducted to examine whether specific characteristics of these families and children were associated with mental health access problems.

Findings

♦ About one out of five respondents in the survey (21%) reported that their child needed mental health services in the preceding year.

♦ Almost one half (45%) of the respondents whose children needed mental health services reported one or more of the access problems inquired about in the survey. The rates of any one access problem ranged from eleven to twenty-seven percent as shown in the graph.

♦ Three characteristics were associated with an increased chance of reporting at least one

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<tr>
<th>PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS REPORTING ACCESS PROBLEMS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Health plan would not pay</td>
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<td>Getting number of visits required</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coordination of services</td>
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<td>Amount family had to pay</td>
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<td>Getting appointments</td>
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<td>Getting referrals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Finding therapists with skill/experience</td>
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<td>One or more of these access problems</td>
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0 10 20 30 40 50
of these access problems (after also accounting for the respondent's education, marital status, employment status and overall health, family income, and the child's race/ethnicity, age, severity of medical conditions, Medicaid status and public secondary coverage status):

- **Unstable health care needs.** Respondents who indicated that their child's health care needs were unstable ("changing all the time") were about one and a half times more likely to report one or more access problems compared to respondents whose children had more stable health care needs.

- **Behavior, mental health problems, or autism.** Respondents who indicated their child had behavior problems, mental health problems and/or autism were over one and a half times as likely to report any access problems when compared to respondents whose children did not have these conditions.

- **More than one child with special health care needs.** Respondents who had multiple CSHCN in the family were about one and a half times more likely to report any of these access problems compared to families with only one CSHCN.

- **One characteristic was associated with a decreased chance of reporting any of these access problems:**
  - **Middle family income.** Respondents who reported their annual family income to be between $20,000 and $39,999 reported access problems less frequently than either families with “high” income ($40,000 and over) or “low” income ($20,000 or less).

**Summary**

- About one in five parents in this study reported that their child needed mental health services in the preceding year.

- Almost half (45%) of the parents in this study whose children needed mental health care reported one or more access problems when obtaining the services needed. The most frequently reported access problem was finding therapists with the needed skill and experience (27%). The remaining six access problems inquired about were reported at similar rates, from about eleven to fifteen percent.

- Parents in the study who reported their children to have unstable health care needs and/or a behavioral health condition were at a higher risk of reporting access problems when seeking mental health services for their children. In addition, parents who had more than one CSHCN were more likely to report access problems than parents with only one such child.

- Parents who reported a middle family income reported fewer access problems than parents from either low or high-income families.

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