



Mental Health Needs of Low-Income Children With Special Health Care Needs

Children with special health care needs (CSHCN) comprise 13.9 percent of all children in the United States. Nearly 22 percent of households with children include at least one child with a special health care need. Low-income and minority CSHCN have higher rates of mental health problems yet are less likely than their counterparts to receive mental health services.

Early intervention has been shown to minimize the impact of mental health problems in children and significantly reduce the need for more costly interventions. Early identification of mental health needs in children, particularly CSHCN, is critical to obtaining mental health services. Families play a crucial role in obtaining and coordinating care for CSHCN, including mental health screening, diagnosis, and treatment.

This Issue Brief summarizes a Child Health Insurance Research Initiative (CHIRI™) study that compared the prevalence of mental health problems among CSHCN to family perceptions of mental health needs. Researchers found:

- Mental health issues (e.g., attention and behavior disorders) were second only to asthma as the top health problems in CSHCN, as reported by their families.
- More than one-third of CSHCN had a mental health problem, but only one-quarter of caregivers recognized the need for mental health services.
- Families underestimated the need for mental health services in young children with special health care needs but slightly overestimated this need in adolescents with special health care needs.
- White families of CSHCN were more than twice as likely as their black counterparts to perceive a need for mental health services, although there was no difference in the prevalence of mental health problems.



The David and Lucile Packard Foundation



Mental health problems were one of the most common health care problems reported by families of CSHCN.

WHAT WAS LEARNED

Researchers surveyed families of CSHCN enrolled in Medicaid who were receiving services in six primary health care clinics in an urban midwestern city. Children were identified as having a special health care need using the CSHCN Screener, a nationally recognized and validated screening instrument. Researchers then compared family perceptions of their child's mental health needs with the results of the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL), a standardized tool that uses parent report to assess emotional, behavioral, and social problems in children.

Definition of CSHCN

CSHCN are defined by the Federal Maternal and Child Health Bureau as those children who have or are at increased risk for a chronic, physical, developmental, behavioral, or emotional condition and who also require health and related services of a type or amount beyond that required by children generally.

More Than One-Third of CSHCN Experienced a Mental Health Problem

Approximately 30 percent of children surveyed were identified as having a special health care need by the CSHCN Screener. Of CSHCN, more than one-third (38 percent) had a mental health problem in need of treatment based on the results of the CBCL.

There were no significant differences in the overall prevalence of mental health problems in CSHCN by race, gender, age, or other demographic characteristic (e.g., parental marital, educational, and employment status). When asked about their child's top health problems, parents of CSHCN rated attention and behavioral health problems second only to asthma (47 percent and 42 percent versus 58 percent, respectively) (see Figure 1).

Families Were Less Likely To Recognize a Need for Mental Health Services in Young Children Than in Adolescents

Even though more than one-third of CSHCN had a mental health need, only one-quarter of families perceived a need for mental health services in their

Figure 1. Percentage of Health and Mental Health Problems in Medicaid CSHCN



