



Policy brief

3 Access to mental health care for Ohio children and youth

Executive summary

For young Ohioans with mental health needs, early treatment can prevent conditions from worsening, decrease financial costs and keep youth on a path to realizing their full potential.

However, many Ohio children and youth experiencing mental health challenges have difficulty getting the treatment they need. The youth mental health system can be difficult to navigate. Critical provider shortages, high cost-sharing and gaps in insurance coverage are among the barriers to accessing care. At the same time, Ohio lacks comprehensive data to demonstrate system capacity needs across the state.

3 Key findings for policymakers

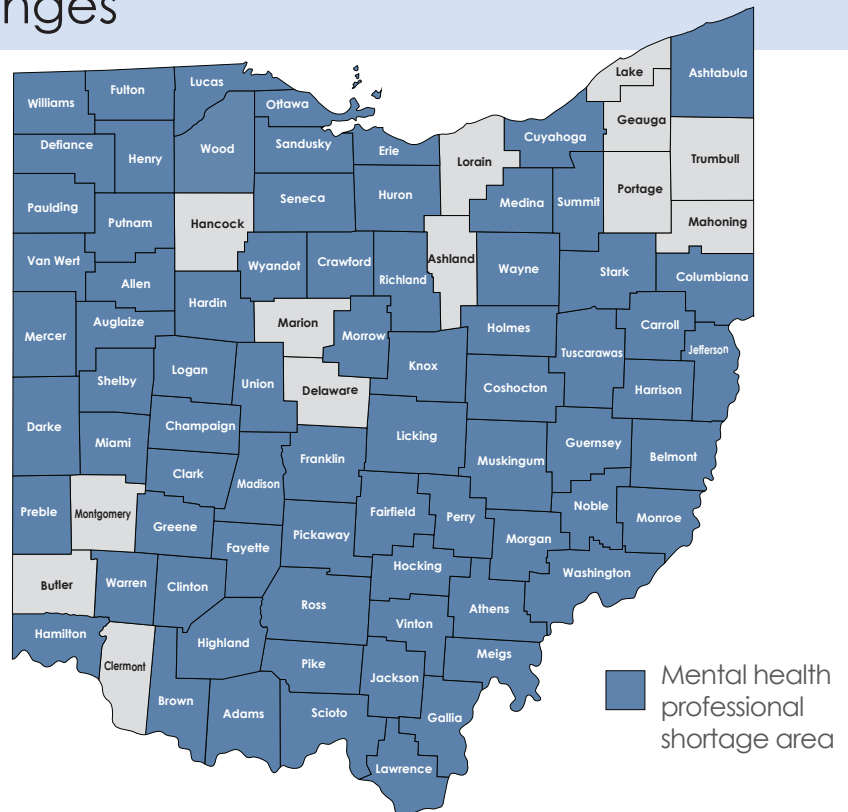
- 1 Workforce challenges.** The continuum of mental health care services is broad, and there are workforce shortages at all levels, especially among clinicians trained to care for children with the most intensive needs.
- 2 Difficulties with access to care.** Ohio families with young children and/or with private (i.e., commercial) health insurance can face considerable difficulty accessing mental health care for their children.
- 3 Lack of data.** There is a significant lack of data on mental healthcare access in Ohio. Increased data collection and analysis would allow Ohio policymakers to better understand gaps in access and more strategically direct attention and resources.

Workforce challenges

Figure ES 1. Ohio counties designated as mental health professional shortage areas as of July 2025

75 out of 88 Ohio counties were designated as mental health professional shortage areas in July 2025.

Note: Treating children and youth is a specialty in the mental health field, which means that workforce shortages are even more common for this population.
Source: U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration, as analyzed by the Rural Health Information Hub



► Difficulties with access to care

According to experts interviewed for this brief, there are serious access challenges at all levels of care, but challenges can be particularly notable for children with higher levels of need (e.g., inpatient or residential treatment). As services needed become more specialized, there are generally fewer clinicians available, especially in rural areas. However, experts noted the positive impact school-based mental health services are having on access.

Groups with the most difficulty accessing care

Mental health access data indicates:

- Ohio families seeking mental health services for **young children, ages 6-11**, report more difficulty than for older children
- **Families with private (e.g., commercial) insurance** frequently experience greater difficulty finding treatment for their children than families with public insurance (e.g., Medicaid)
- At the same time, there is a higher percentage of **children with Medicaid** who do not receive needed care than children with commercial insurance

Experts commonly mentioned other groups that face particular difficulties accessing mental health care, including children with eating disorders, externalizing disorders (e.g., oppositional defiant disorder, conduct disorder), co-existing mental health conditions and intellectual or developmental disabilities, as well as those living in rural areas and children with the most complex needs.

► Lack of data

There are considerable gaps in publicly available data related to mental health care access in Ohio, including the length of time families wait to receive care; at which levels of care families have the most difficulty accessing services; and how access varies geographically. Without this information, policymakers cannot make informed, data-driven decisions on where to allocate resources within the mental health care system.

► Policy options

Children and family well-being and mental health have been priorities of the DeWine administration and other Ohio policymakers in recent years. Two state initiatives aimed at improving access to mental health care include OhioRISE (Resilience through Integrated Systems and Excellence) and the statewide expansion of mobile response and stabilization services. However, more can be done. The full brief includes a variety of policy options, informed by expert opinions, to improve policymakers' understanding of Ohio's mental healthcare access challenges and get more youth the services and supports they need.

Areas for potential policy action

- Improve and utilize data collection and analysis
- Enhance coverage and accessibility of services
- Grow and strengthen the behavioral health workforce



Specific policy options can be found in the full report.

Ohio Child Mental Health Project

Led by the Health Policy Institute of Ohio and informed by a **multi-sector advisory group**, this project includes a series of policy briefs exploring child and youth mental health in Ohio.

<https://bit.ly/3MdgVQx>



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