



# MENTAL HEALTH & TELEHEALTH

A WHITE PAPER FOR PUTNAM COUNTY

**DANIEL SCHMIDT**

**ST. JOHNS RIVER RURAL HEALTH NETWORK &  
PUTNAM COUNTY BEHAVIORAL HEALTH CONSORTIUM**

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# INTRODUCTION

## MENTAL HEALTH & TELEHEALTH

The purpose of this paper is to educate community members and organizations in Putnam County of the mental health and telehealth status in the county. The following sections discuss the issue of mental health, telehealth use, and how the community issues can be addressed.

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI, 2022), about **21 percent** of U.S. adults experienced some type of mental illness in 2020. Mental illness could be described as **a condition that affects emotions, thoughts, behaviors, relationships, and disrupts daily activities** (NAMI, 2023), but the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) defines any mental illness (AMI) as a mental, behavioral, or emotional disorder (2022). Individuals in rural areas are more likely to experience a serious mental illness than urban populations (Rural Health Information Hub [RHIH], 2019).

About **53 percent** of U.S. adults in 2020 in rural areas expressed that the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively affected their mental health, including a staggering 71 percent of young adults aged 18 to 34 (NAMI, 2022). Only **46.2 percent** of U.S. adults with a mental illness received some type of treatment in 2020, and on average there is **a gap of about 11 years from the onset of the mental illness to when the first treatment starts** (NAMI, 2022). Undiagnosed and untreated mental health conditions are not only a disruption to an individual's quality of life, but they can also impact social and economic factors, and lead to physical health deterioration and other chronic health conditions (NAMI, 2022; RHIH, 2019).

Rural areas are often labeled Medically Underserved Areas (MUAs) or Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSAs) due to **a lack of available services and adequate healthcare staffing**, which leaves many rural populations without proper care for health concerns (RHIH, 2021a). An estimated **155 million people in the U.S. live in a Mental Health Professional Shortage Area (MHPSA)**, including more than 25 million people in rural areas (NAMI, 2022). In addition to lack of access to care, rural areas can have other factors that prevent or dissuade individuals from seeking care such as **stigma, cultural beliefs, attitudes toward health services or treatments, or barriers like a lack of transportation and affordability** of health services.

Technology such as **telehealth, telemedicine**, and other forms of virtual care have **created opportunity for rural areas** and specific populations that lack access to appropriate care. Telehealth service delivery options have been used in public health settings to **address provider availability or MHPSAs and barriers to care like transportation and affordability** (Kisicki et al., 2022; NHRA, 2015; RHIH, 2021b).

# Mental Health in Putnam County

Putnam County, Florida had a population of 73,987 people in 2021 (Florida Department of Health [FDOH], 2023a) and was ranked as one of Florida's least healthy counties in 2022, scoring **66<sup>th</sup> out of 67 counties for health outcomes and 67<sup>th</sup> out of 67 counties for health factors** (County Health Rankings & Roadmaps [CHRR], 2023). About **20 percent** of Putnam County residents reported being in **frequent mental distress**, compared to 14 percent for the state of Florida (CHRR, 2023).

In 2019, **17.1 percent** of Putnam County adults reported having poor mental health on 14 or more of the past 30 days and **23.5 percent** of Putnam County adults reported **having a depressive disorder diagnosis** (FDOH, 2023b). 82.9 percent of Putnam County's population has health insurance coverage, however, only 44.1 percent of the population has private health insurance and **52.4 percent have public coverage**, compared to the State of Florida average with 63.1 percent have private coverage and 36.7 percent have public coverage (FDOH, 2023c). In 2019, almost **22 percent of Putnam County adults reported not being able to see a doctor at least once in the past year due to cost** (FDOH, 2023a).

Putnam County is designated as a health professional shortage area for primary care, dental health, and mental health (Health Resources & Services Administration [HRSA], 2023). In 2021, there were **32 total behavioral/mental health professionals for Putnam County**, a rate of 43.3 per 100,000 population, compared the State of Florida average rate of 115.2 behavioral/mental health professionals per 100,000 population (FDOH, 2023d). According to CHRR data (2023), residents of Putnam County were also more likely to experience barriers like transportation, social and economic factors, lack of insurance or healthcare affordability, education, and food insecurity than the state of Florida as a whole.

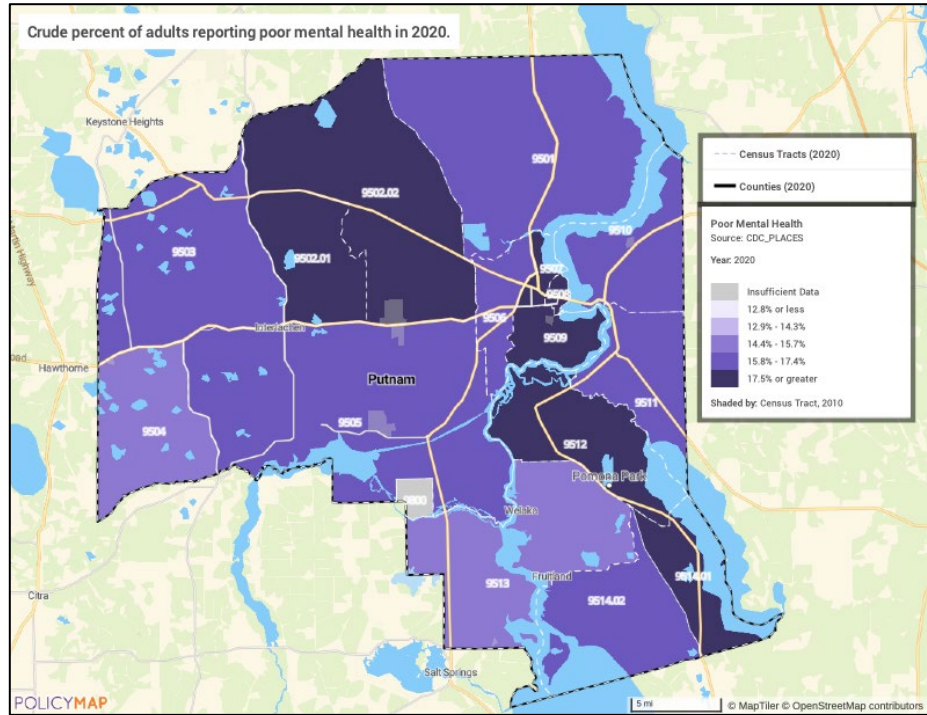
SMA Healthcare hosts a monthly Putnam County Behavioral Health Forum (Consortium) that aims to build partnerships and get input from the community and external organizations on improving behavioral health and substance use in Putnam County. Attending the PCBHF are representatives from Putnam County government offices, Putnam County businesses, Putnam County Sheriff's Office, faith-based organizations, social service organizations, Florida Department of Health in Putnam County, opioid response and prevention programs, healthcare organizations such as Flagler Health+, Putnam County School District (PCSD), and the St. Johns River Rural Health Network.

For telehealth to be a viable option for Putnam County, there needs to be adequate internet access. In 2021, **78.4 percent of Putnam residents had internet access** (FDOH, 2023c), and **28.3 percent** of Putnam County residents **have internet speeds less than 25 mbps** (Federal Communications Commission, 2023), the recommended internet speed for telehealth use by the FCC. The Florida Department of Economic Opportunity under Governor Ron DeSantis has launched the Broadband Opportunity Program that has awarded more than \$144 million for projects to increase broadband internet access for Florida communities in need (Office of Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, 2023). Putnam County has been **awarded almost \$1.2 million "to add 60 miles of fiber optic cable** to their existing network to provide FTTH [fiber to the home] services to 1,192 unserved locations" (Office of Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, 2023).

# Visual Data

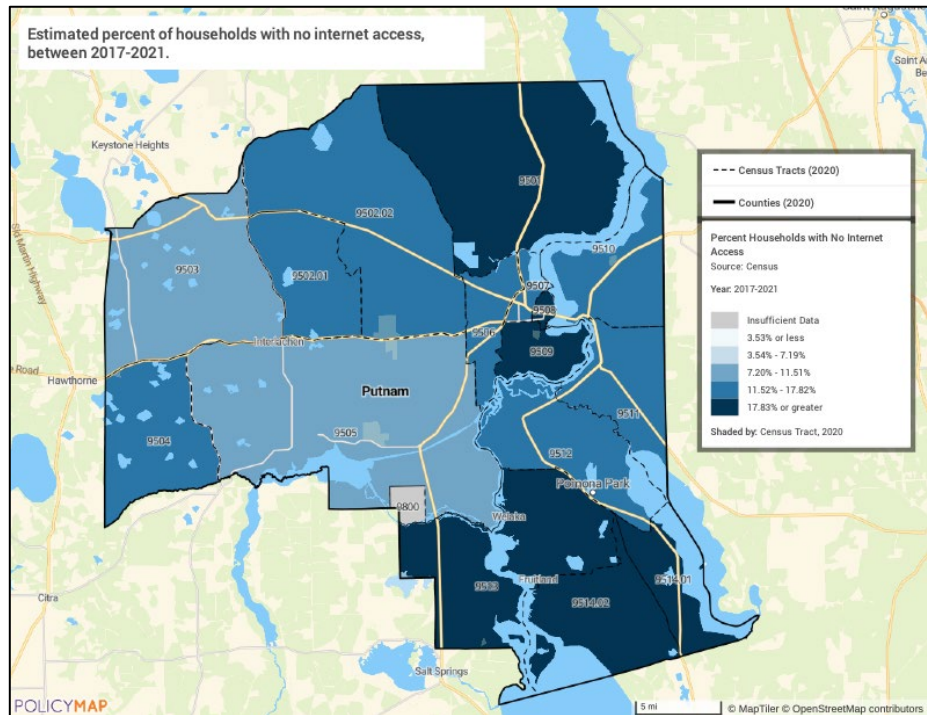
Map of the percentage of adults in Putnam County per U.S. Census tract who reported poor mental health in 2020.

- Darker color means a higher percentage.



Map of the percentage of households in Putnam County with no internet access.

- Darker color means a higher percentage.



\*Maps created by St. Johns River Rural Health Network in Policy Map, 2023.

# Addressing The Issues

As can be seen from the data presented, mental health illnesses are an important issue for rural areas, including Putnam County. Managing mental health illnesses can be challenging, as well as the barriers to accessing care that many people experience. The following text lists some practical steps for community members and organizations to take to address mental health issues and support the individuals who are living with mental illness.

## Mental Health Awareness

- *Education* – Take time to learn about mental health and how it affects your community.
- *Reduce Stigma* – Mental health can come with a lot of “stigma”, or making people with mental health illnesses feel shamed, judged, or experience other negative feelings about their mental illness. Do a “self-check” to see if you have or have had any negative feelings, thoughts, words, or actions towards individuals with mental illness or mental health treatment. Learn how you can take part in reducing stigma and be more supportive of mental health.
- *Ask. Listen. Support.* – Given the data presented earlier, it is likely that someone you know or interact with is dealing with mental health issues or has in the past. Don’t be afraid to help. Start by asking the person how they are doing, let them know you are there to listen (and make sure you take the time to listen), and ask how you can support them in their mental health journey.

## Get Involved

- *Be an Advocate for:*
  - More mental health professionals and providers in your community
  - Better insurance coverage & affordability for mental health services
  - Improved internet access and speed for the expansion of telehealth services
- *How do you Advocate?*
  - Talk to a local mental health professional or provider to see what you can do in your community.
  - Volunteer time or provide other resources for organizations working to improve mental health in your community.
  - Attend city or county meetings and show support for improving mental health.

# Conclusion

Putnam County has many needs to be addressed. There are needs for physical and mental health, social and economic needs, and barriers to accessing proper health care services. These needs tend to influence each other and negatively affect a person's overall health and the community at large. In order to meet the needs of Putnam County residents and remove barriers to care, there needs to be a unified approach from health professionals and health facilities, social services, government officials and agencies, businesses, community-based organizations, and community members. Collaboration, communication, and taking action are critical among these entities if Putnam County residents are to receive better care and better health outcomes.

Education is necessary to help the public become aware of the needs in Putnam County. Advocacy is essential for policy changes and community leader involvement. Support for mental health is important because it can reduce stigma and show people with mental health illnesses that their needs matter.

The greatest needs for mental health in Putnam County are an increase in the number of mental health providers and services, increased internet access and speed for telehealth use, and support from local government to assist with program and policies.

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