The number of adults with mental illness has been continuously increasing with estimates showing that over 46 million Americans suffer from mental health disorders. Physician assistants (PAs) are utilized in a myriad of healthcare settings and have historically played a key role in helping to alleviate physician shortages. Given the significant projected psychiatrist deficits to occur by 2024, it is critical to better understand the evolving role of PAs in psychiatric care. However, few studies have explored the role of PAs in mental healthcare.

**Objective & Method**

- To address the limited literature, a descriptive study of PAs in psychiatry was conducted.
- Data were derived from National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants (NCCPA) PA Professional Profile, My Practice Module.
- We describe the growth of PAs in psychiatry from 2014 to 2019, geographic distribution and demographic as well as practice characteristics.
- By the end of 2019, 1,684 certified PAs had self-identified as working in psychiatry, representing 1.6% of certified PAs.
- Analysis of the data consisted primarily of descriptive statistics conducted using SPSS.

**Findings**

The proportion of PAs working in psychiatry has grown from 1.2% in 2014, to 1.6% by the end of 2019. Of note, the proportion of PAs working in psychiatry has grown by over 30% since 2014, while the absolute number of PAs working in psychiatry has increased by 127.6%.

The PA psychiatry workforce is composed of 70.2% females. Over 30% of PAs in psychiatry are older than 49 years old, with a median age of 41 years and a mean of 43.2 years. Most (81.1%) are white, 5.9% are African American, 5.2% are Asian, 5.4% are multiple race, and 4.4% other. 7.7% identify as Hispanic. The median number of hours worked, and patients seen each week is 40 and 60, respectively. 7.8% plan to retire in the next five years. 19.7% communicate with patients in a language other than English.

**Geographic Distribution of Certified PAs in Psychiatry**

Over 30% of PAs in psychiatry are older than 49 years old, with a median age of 41 years and a mean of 43.2 years.

**Practice Characteristics of Certified PAs in Psychiatry**

Most (81.1%) are white, 5.5% are African American, 5.2% are Asian, 5.4% are multiple race and 4.4% other. 7.7% identify as Hispanic. The median number of hours worked, and patients seen each week is 40 and 60, respectively. 7.8% plan to retire in the next five years. 19.7% communicate with patients in a language other than English. 68.8% of PAs in psychiatry participate in telemedicine, do so less than 10 hours per week. 35.7% of PAs who work in psychiatry identify their primary location of employment as office-based private practice. 21.8% are employed at behavioral/mental health facilities and 16.2% work in hospitals.

**References**


**Conclusions**

- The US faces an urgent need to address mental illness by improving access to high quality and affordable care.
- Understanding the PA characteristics and employment settings is an important foundation in how this profession is contributing to medical labor supply and demand forces.
- The workforce of PAs in psychiatry is growing at a steady rate and represents a needed resource in American mental healthcare.
- The majority of PAs working in psychiatry are in office-based private practice and behavioral/mental health facilities.
- Because of the broad-based medical training, PAs are ideally situated to help with the increasing shortage of psychiatrists.
- As the shortage of psychiatrists continues, the relative growth of PAs in psychiatric medicine may be an overlooked strategy for continued access to mental healthcare for the US population.