

Mental Health Providers' Perspectives of Telehealth in Puerto Rico
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Introduction

The world is currently undergoing an unprecedented global pandemic (COVID-19) that has highlighted the importance of telehealth technology as a tool to deliver mental and physical health care services. In an effort to protect the public, governments around the world (including Puerto Rico), have recommended that mental health providers deliver their services via telehealth. It is imperative to understand mental health providers' views of the use of telehealth to deliver mental health services in Puerto Rico.

Objectives

This report summarizes: 1) Puerto Rican mental health professionals' views and opinions about telehealth; 2) perceived barriers and facilitators for them as providers; 3) and perceived barriers and facilitators for their patients regarding telehealth. The data presented here is intended to help inform public policy makers and stakeholders currently enacting laws and regulations about telehealth in Puerto Rico. Key "take-home" messages and recommendations are summarized at the end of this report.

Methods

A total of 214 mental health providers completed a self-report, online survey, in Spanish, distributed via social media and email blasts to mental health providers in Puerto Rico during March 2020. The majority of respondents were psychologists (75.2%) and roughly half reported having between 5-15 years of professional experience (49.1%). The majority of providers (82%) reported not having used telehealth to provide mental health services to their patients at the time of survey completion. Of the 18% of providers who reported having used telehealth to provide mental health services, 16.4% reported using it with children and youth (3-20 years old), 3.3% with adults (21-59 years old), and 0% with 60+ year-old adults.

Sample Characteristics

Providers were primarily female (88.3%) and had a mean age of 43.24 years (*SD* = 10.25). Over half were between the ages of 30-49 (69.2%), while almost a quarter were between 50-64 years old. Most providers reported living in the island of Puerto Rico (95.8%), with a small proportion living in the mainland United States (3.7%) and 1 provider reported living in Argentina. **Table 1** shows the demographic characteristics of the providers who completed the survey. **Figure 1** shows providers' municipalities in Puerto Rico (47/78 represented).

Table 1.
Sample Characteristics (N = 214)

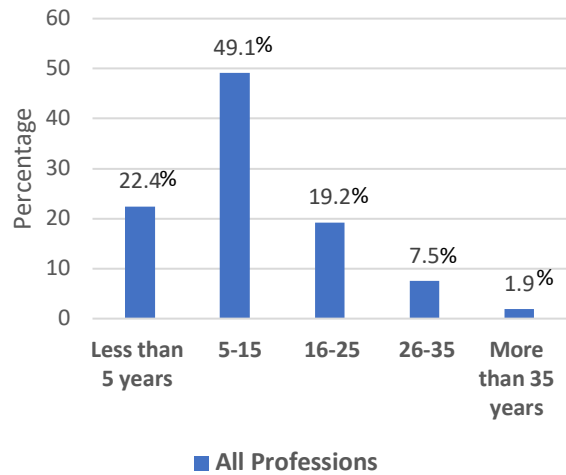
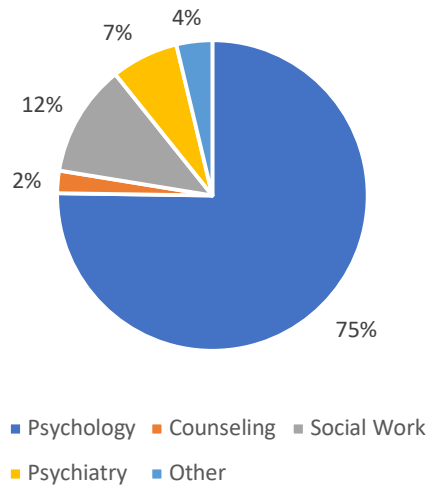
<i>Variable</i>	<i>n (%)</i>
Age	
Mean (SD)	43.24 (10.25)
Range	22-70
18-29	11 (5.1)
30-49	148 (69.2)
50-64	47 (22.0)
65+	8 (3.7)
Gender	
Female	189 (88.3)
Male	25 (11.7)
Location	
Puerto Rico	205 (95.8)
United States	8 (3.7)
Other (Argentina)	1 (.5)

Note. Age (*n* = 211)



Type of Profession and Years of Professional Experience

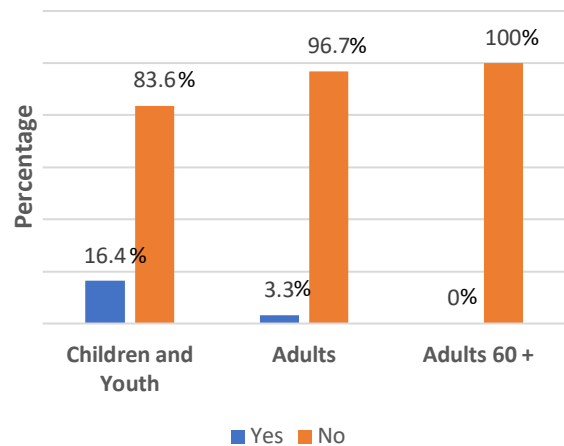
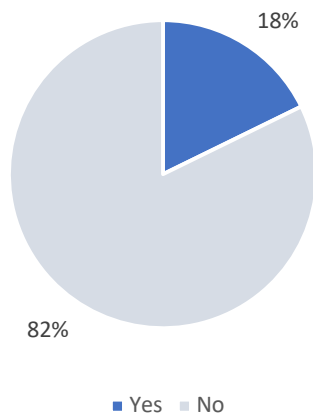
% of providers by profession and years practicing their profession



Overall, most providers were psychologists (75.2%), while the rest were social workers (11.7%), psychiatrists (7.0%), counselors (2.3%) and other related health or mental health professions (3.7%) (e.g., nurse, speech therapist). Roughly half of the providers (49.1%) had 5-15 years of experience in their profession, while the other half had less than 4 years (22.4%), between 16-25 (19.2%), between 26-35 (7.5%) or more than 35 years of experience (1.9%).

Providers' Use of Telehealth

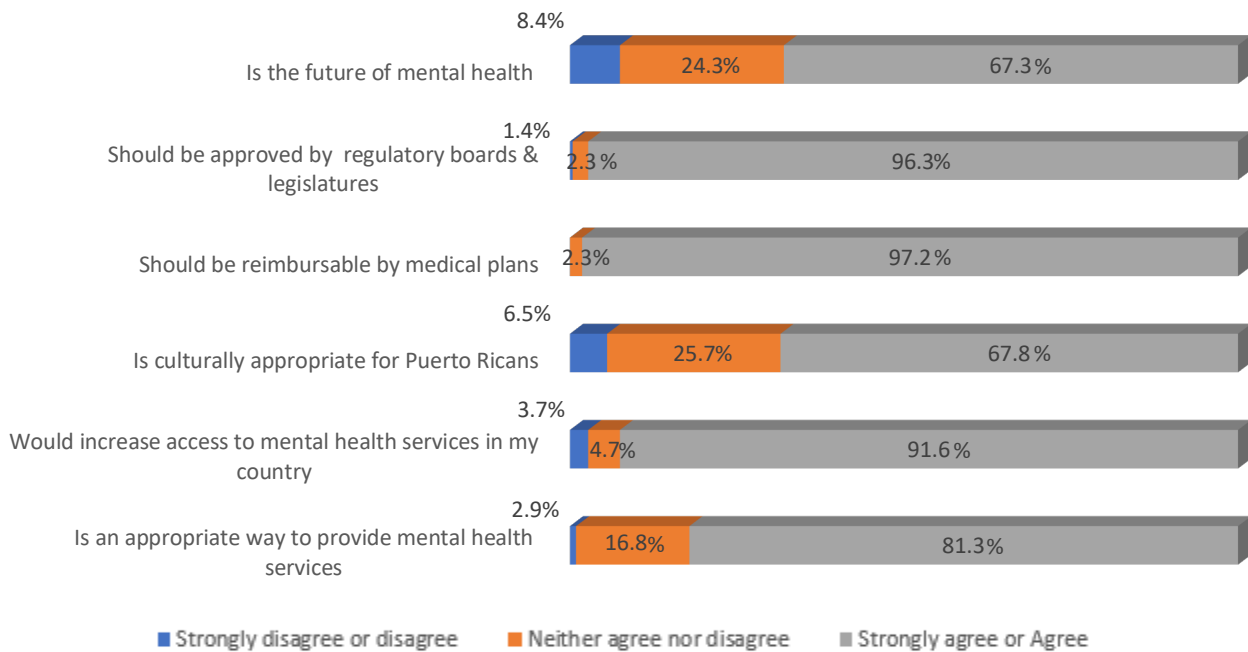
% of providers that have used telehealth and populations they have served



The majority of providers (82.2%) reported not having used telehealth to provide services to their patients prior to survey completion. Those who had used telehealth (18%) had delivered services to children and youth (16.4%) and adults (3.3%), but none to the elderly population (60+ years).

Providers' Perception of Telehealth Services

% of providers reporting that they consider that telehealth...

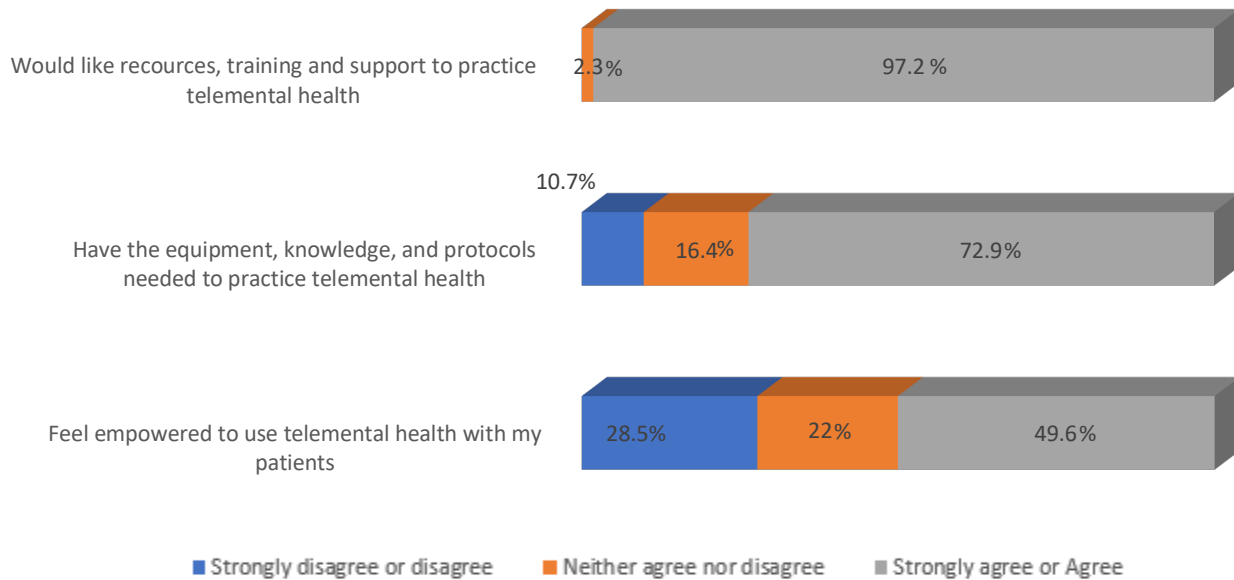


Provider responses to each statement about telehealth services ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The majority of providers agreed with the statements and rated their responses as either 4 (agree) or 5 (strongly agree).

Overall, providers' opinion about telehealth was favorable. Most providers strongly agreed or agreed that telehealth is appropriate (81.3%) and would increase access to mental health services (91.6%). Additionally, a more than half agreed with telehealth being culturally appropriate for Puerto Ricans (67.8%) and that it represents the future of mental health service delivery (67.3%). In terms of reimbursement and regulations, most providers agreed that telehealth should be reimbursable by insurance plans (97.2%) and approved by professional regulatory boards and state and national legislatures (96.3%).

Providers' Perception of their Capacity and Readiness for Telehealth

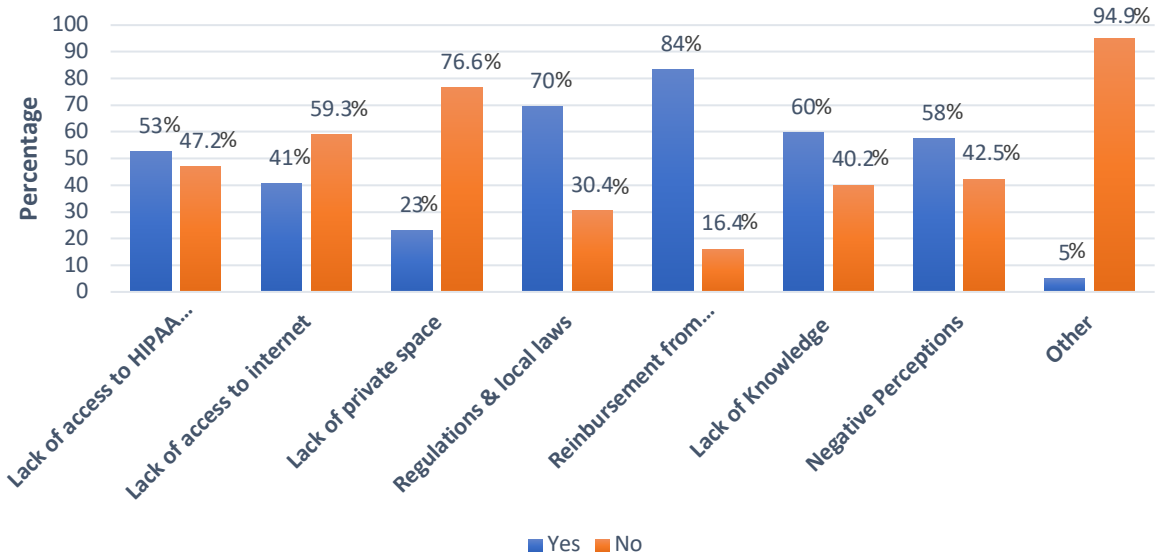
% of providers reporting that they...



Providers' agreement on their capacity, readiness, and need for training or resources was diverse. Almost all providers (97.2%) strongly agreed or agreed that they would like resources, training and support to practice telehealth. About three-quarters (72.9%) strongly agreed or agreed with having the equipment, knowledge, and protocols needed to practice telehealth. However, there were differences in the perception of how empowered they feel to provide telehealth to patients. That is, roughly half (49.6%) strongly agree or agree, while the other half was divided between those who were neutral (22%) and those who strongly disagree or disagree (28.5%).

Providers' Perception of Their Own Barriers to Using Telehealth

% of providers reporting that it would be difficult to use telehealth due to...



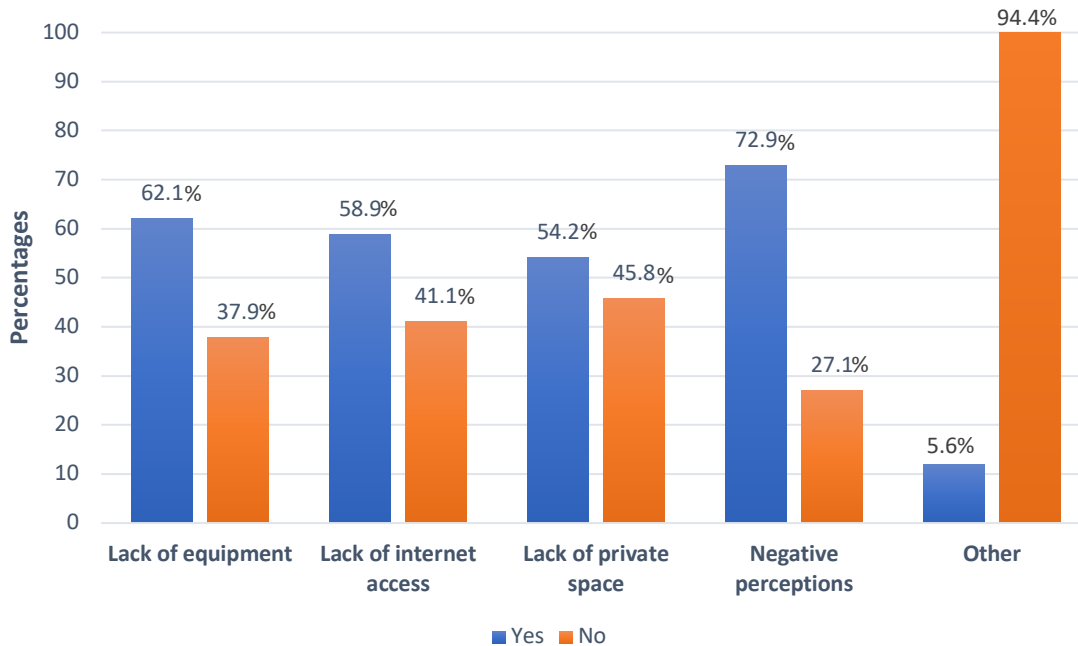
Providers identified a number of perceived barriers to using telehealth. The key barriers were the lack of reimbursement from insurance plans (84%) and local regulations and laws for the use of telehealth (70%). Other barriers identified were the lack of knowledge (60%), negative perceptions (58%), and lack of access to HIPAA compliant virtual platforms (53%). Additional barriers included unreliable internet access (41%) and lack of availability of a private space (23%) to provide telehealth. Table 2 shows additional barriers that 5% of providers identified when using telehealth.

Table 2.

Other Barriers for Telemental Health

Type of Barriers	Frequency
Cultural barriers	1
Patient's age	2
Patient's disability or preexisting mental health illnesses	2
Potential issues with confidentiality	2
Management of clinical crises via a virtual platform	1
Lack of financial resources to use telehealth	1

Providers' Perceptions of Barriers Patients may Encounter with Telehealth
% of providers reporting that it would be difficult for patients to use telehealth due to...



Providers also identified a number of barriers that they would imagine their patients would encounter with the use of telehealth. The most frequent barrier identified was negative perceptions (72.9%) about telehealth, followed by a lack of appropriate equipment (62.1%) (e.g., computer, smartphone). Other barriers identified were lacking internet access (58.9%) or a private location (54.2%) to receive telehealth services. Table 3 shows additional barriers that 5.6% of providers reported patients may encounter when using telehealth.

Table 3.

Other Barriers Providers Identified for Patients When Using Telehealth

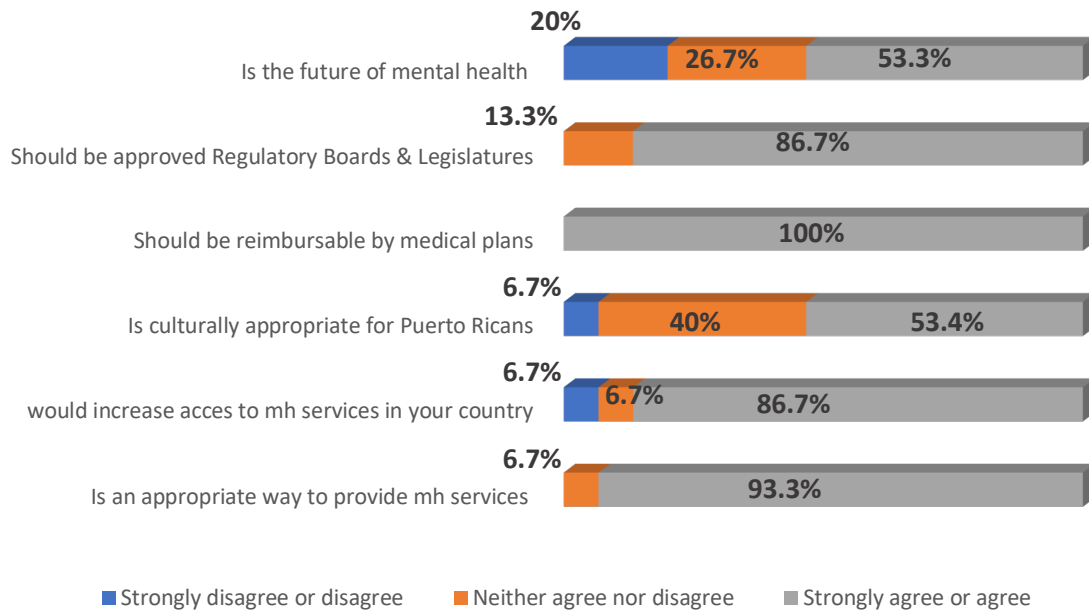
Type of Barrier	Frequency
Lack of knowledge of how to use technological devices	5
Age	1
Lack of confidentiality	1
Patient's disability or preexisting mental health illnesses	2
Not being appropriate for telehealth services	1

Use of Telehealth by Psychiatrists

All psychiatrists ($n = 15$) that completed the survey had previously used telehealth in their practice, with the majority reporting using telehealth with children and adolescents (86.7%) and the minority with adults (6.7%).

Psychiatrists' Perceptions of Telehealth

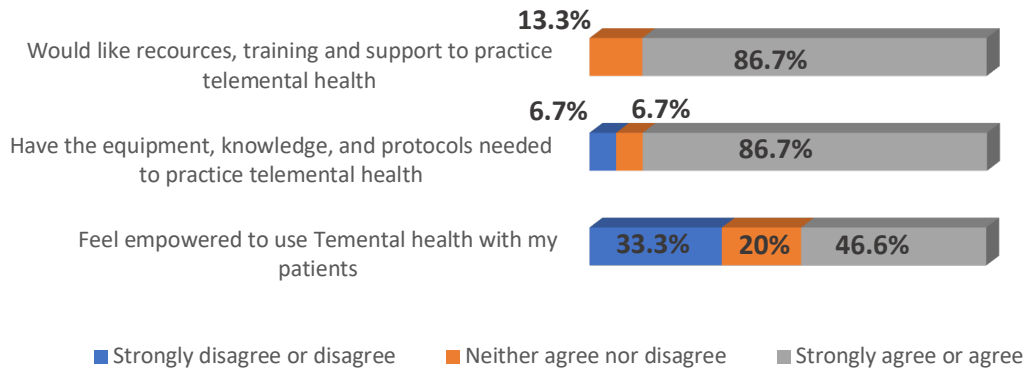
% of psychiatrists reporting that they consider that telehealth...



Overall, psychiatrists' opinion about telehealth was favorable. Half strongly agreed or agreed that telehealth is the future of mental health (53.3%), most (86.7%) that telehealth should be approved by local regulatory boards and the legislature, and 86.7% that telehealth would help increase access to mental health services in the island. All (100%) strongly agreed or agreed that telehealth should be reimbursed by health insurance and 93.3% that telehealth is an appropriate modality to delivery psychiatric services. Half of psychiatrists (53.4%) believe that telehealth is culturally appropriate for Puerto Ricans, with 40% neither agreeing or disagreeing, and 6.7% strongly disagreeing.

Psychiatrists' Perceptions of their Capacity and Readiness for Telehealth

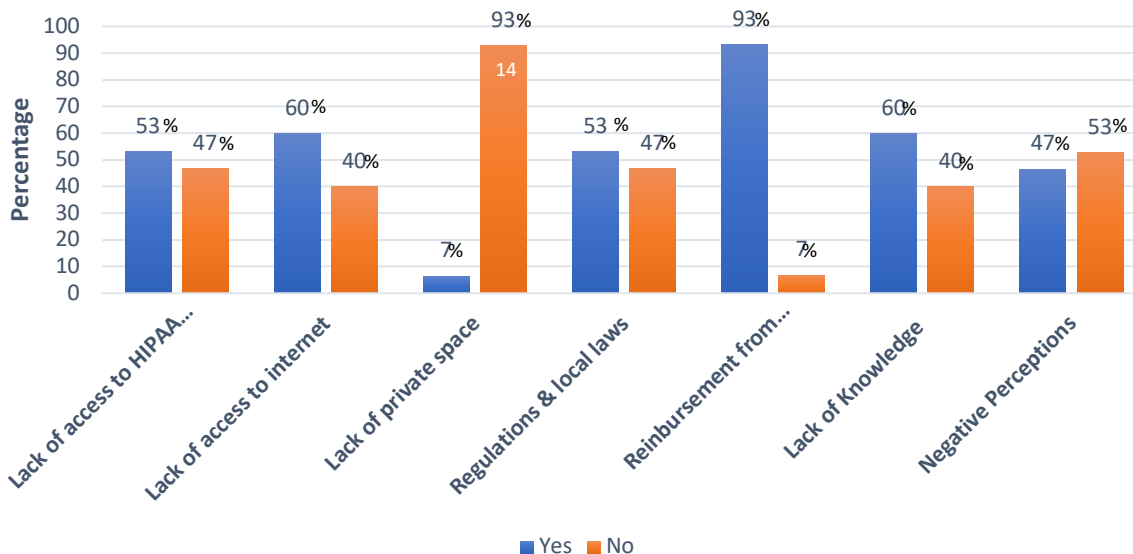
% of psychiatrists reporting that they...



Almost all psychiatrists (86.7%) strongly agreed or agreed that they would like resources, training and support to practice telehealth and 86.7% reported having the equipment, knowledge, and protocols needed to practice telehealth. However, there were differences in the perception of how empowered they feel to provide telehealth to patients. That is, roughly half (46.6%) strongly agree or agree, while the other half was divided between those who were neutral (20%) and those who strongly disagree or disagree (33.3%).

Psychiatrists' Perception of Barriers for Using Telehealth

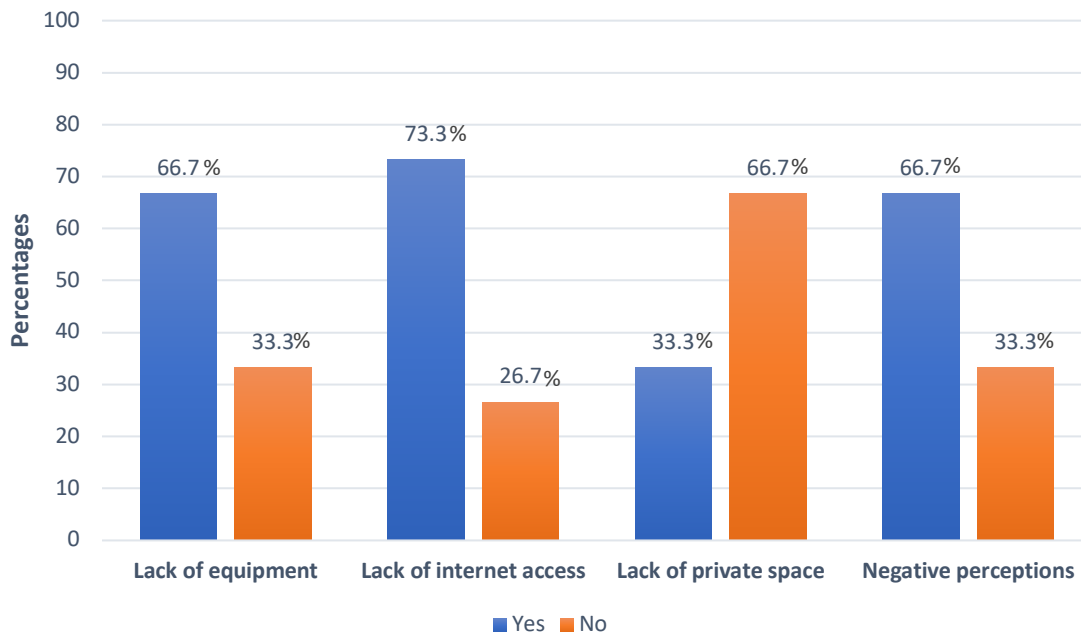
% of psychiatrists reporting that it would be difficult to use telehealth due to...



Psychiatrists identified a number of perceived barriers to using telehealth. The key barriers were the lack of reimbursement from insurance plans (93%), the lack of knowledge (60%), and lack of reliable internet (60%). Other barriers identified were and lack of access to HIPAA compliant virtual platforms (53%), local regulations and laws for the use of telehealth (53%), and negative perceptions of telehealth (47%). Lack of a private location to see patients via telehealth was less of a barrier for psychiatrists (7%).

Psychiatrists' Perceptions of Barriers Patients may Encounter with Telehealth

% of psychiatrists reporting that it would be difficult for patients to use telehealth due to...



Psychiatrists also identified a number of barriers that they would imagine their patients would encounter with the use of telehealth. The most frequent barrier identified was lack of internet access (73.3%), negative perceptions (66.7%) about telehealth, followed by a lack of appropriate equipment (66.7%) (e.g., computer, smartphone). Other barriers identified were patients lacking a private location (33.3%) to receive telehealth services.

Summary and Recommendations

Summary:

- Mental health providers in Puerto Rico who completed this survey strongly agree that telehealth:
 - Is **appropriate** to deliver mental health services (81.3%)
 - Would **increase access** to mental health services (91.6%)
 - Should be **reimbursable** by insurance plans (97.2%)
 - Should be **approved** by professional regulatory boards and state and national legislature (96.3%)
- Providers identified three top barriers to using telehealth:
 - Lack of reimbursement from insurance plans (84%)
 - Local regulations and laws for the use of telehealth (70%)
 - Lack of knowledge (60%) about telehealth
- Providers identified three top barriers for patients to use telehealth:
 - Potential negative perceptions about telehealth (72.9%)
 - Lack of appropriate equipment such as a computer or smartphone (62.1%)
 - Lack of access to reliable internet (58.9%)

Recommendations

1. Legislators and regulatory boards should consider allowing all mental health providers (psychologists, counselors, social workers, psychiatrists, etc.) to use telehealth to deliver services after the COVID-19 crisis in a continued effort to increase access to mental health care services across the island of Puerto Rico.
2. Insurance plans should reimburse telehealth services offered by all mental health providers (psychologists, counselors, social workers, psychiatrists, etc.) even after the COVID-19 crisis in an effort to increase access to mental health care services in Puerto Rico.
3. Mental health care providers in Puerto Rico would benefit from specialized training and support in the use of telehealth.
4. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for telehealth. All Puerto Rican households and schools should have access to reliable and affordable internet. Schools would benefit from having ethernet ports (in addition to WIFI) to support telehealth services in the future.

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