

**Executive Summary**

**BEHAVIORAL HEALTH  
CONDITIONS REACH  
CRISIS LEVELS:**

**Counties Urge Stronger Intergovernmental  
Partnerships and Outcomes**

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## Our nation's counties are facing an acute escalation of the mental and behavioral health crisis.

A recent NACo survey revealed that behavioral health conditions increased:

- **75 percent** of counties reported an increase in the last year.
- **89 percent** of counties reported an increase compared to five years ago.

### COUNTY POLICY PRIORITIES:

*Invest and align local crisis response systems.*



**Tulare County, Calif.:** Clinicians are carrying 100+ caseloads, making it impossible to see individuals as often as needed.

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## Youth behavioral health needs are at the forefront of the crisis.

**Two-thirds** (67 percent) of survey respondents report that youth behavioral health conditions are **“definitely a problem”** or **“very prevalent and/or severe.”**



**Pierce County, Wash.** reported increased violence among youth, including murders, suicides and substance use. A survey of 10th graders showed that 18 percent did not feel safe at school.

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## Limited access to services inhibits county residents from receiving the help they need.

In identifying the primary barriers to providing or expanding access to behavioral health services:

- **74 percent** of counties cited financial costs.
- **71 percent** cited lack of direct service providers.

### COUNTY POLICY PRIORITIES:

*Enforce mental health parity to ensure equal health care coverage of treatment for mental illness and addiction.*



**Roscommon County, Mich.:** Current providers are overloaded, so it takes 2-3 months for a mental health care appointment, and there is a waitlist for beds.

## The crisis is exacerbated by a lack of behavioral health workers throughout counties.

- Nearly **three-quarters (72 percent)** of survey respondents consider the shortage of behavioral health workers in their county to be **“definitely a problem”** or **“a severe problem.”**
- **Eighty-nine (89) percent** of counties are designated as wholly within a mental health professional shortage area according to the Rural Health Information Hub.

### COUNTY POLICY PRIORITIES:

*Strengthen the mental health workforce.*



**Macon County, N.C.** faces high burnout and turnover rates for behavioral health workers due to low pay, a high cost of living and high patient loads, so few workers stay in the field for very long.

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## While counties work to respond, the financial and human cost of behavioral health is compounding across all county systems.

- **80 percent** of counties indicated that they incurred associated costs in the legal system (courts and jails).
- **77 percent** of counties indicated associated costs in law enforcement.
- **54 percent** of counties indicated associated costs in the health system and hospitals.

### COUNTY POLICY PRIORITIES:

*Amend exclusionary policies under Medicaid for improved access to care for individuals living with mental illness and/or substance use disorder in the most appropriate setting.*



**Barry County, Mo.** has no place other than the county jail to place residents in need of behavioral health services.

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Counties are integral to the local behavioral health system of care, investing **\$163 billion** each year in community health, hospitals and social services, as well as **\$107 billion** in justice and public safety systems. In at least 33 states, counties may provide traditional behavioral health services, but county leaders in every state are confronting the need to innovate when it comes to mental health, whether in county courts, jails, juvenile justice systems, hospitals, parks, libraries, housing and homelessness services or other service areas – from services for youth, to elderly and veterans.

Despite the severity of the crisis and its strain on our resources, counties across the nation are:

- 1. Expanding direct or indirect behavioral health service systems to care for our residents, and**
- 2. Advocating for federal and intergovernmental policies that support our goal of serving residents and addressing the mental and behavioral health crisis.**



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*Scan the QR code to access the full report and survey methodology.*

## About NACo's Commission on Mental Health and Wellbeing

Launched in February 2023, the NACo Commission on Mental Health and Wellbeing brings together county leaders from across the nation to take action to address the ever-growing mental health crisis from the county government perspective.

Through this commission, NACo will elevate the critical role that counties play in providing high-quality, accessible mental health services, showcase county innovations and solutions and outline the intergovernmental and public-private partnerships required to reimagine and strengthen our nation's mental health policies, programs and practices.

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