

MENTAL HEALTH INDICATORS COMPARED IN CALIFORNIA COUNTIES

In the first attempt to compare measures of mental health and general well-being among California's general population on a county-level basis, health policy researchers at the School of Public Health found significant differences.

A number of counties, including Sacramento and San Diego, scored higher than expected—with fewer reports of mental health problems—based upon their population's socioeconomic and demographic characteristics. At the same time, Alameda and San Francisco counties were among those that scored lower than expected.

The report, “Measuring Mental Health in California's Counties: What Can We Learn?” was released January 19, 2004, by the Nicholas C. Petris Center on Health Care Markets & Consumer Welfare at UC Berkeley's School of Public Health.

“We expected that factors such as gender, income level, and amount of education would explain a certain amount of variation in mental health indicators across counties,” says [Timothy Brown, Ph.D. '99](#), associate director of the Petris Center and coauthor of the report. “The fact that variations across the state were found even after we adjusted for socioeconomic and demographic factors suggests that other factors are at play.”

The analysis includes data from 55,428 adults who participated in the 2001 California Health Interview Survey (CHIS), conducted by the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research. The researchers compared responses to standard questions used to indicate mental health and general well-being, such as limitations on general activity or work due to emotional problems, sadness, anxiety, lack of energy, binge drinking, and perceived need for mental health care. “The questions were not meant to make



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a clinical diagnosis for the respondents, but were used to construct a comparative picture of mental health indicators in California counties,” says [Daniel Eisenberg, Ph.D.](#), formerly a research associate at the Petris Center and lead author of the report.

Among the many other factors the researchers compared was state funding for mental health services. They report that statewide in fiscal year 2000–2001, the per capita average for mental health funding was \$66. The highest ratio of dollars per population was in Santa Cruz at \$140 per capita. Sacramento, which ranked high on mental health measures, had the lowest ratio of mental health spending at \$16 per capita.

“This report raises more questions than it answers, but the questions are really important,” says [Richard Scheffler, Ph.D.](#), professor of health economics and public policy, director of the Petris Center, and coauthor of the report. “Why do the self-reported indicators of mental health differ so widely among the California counties even when you adjust for socioeconomic differences? Do the counties that scored higher have better-organized mental health systems? How are they spending their money? Are their treatment programs different? Finding the answers to these questions requires us to dig down and understand the mental health systems—both public and private—available in these counties.” 🔄

— Sarah Yang