

Mental health conditions negatively affect social and economic opportunity

October 18 2013, by Brittaney Jewel Bethea

A recent study revealed that adults in the City of St. Louis spend an average of 4.5 days a month in poor mental health, with St. Louis County not lagging far behind, at an average of 3 days a month.

It's an issue tackled head-on in the latest policy brief of a landmark study. The brief, "How Can We Improve Mental Health in St. Louis? Invest in Our Community and Raise Awareness," finds that mental health limits people's social and economic opportunities and that there are stark racial differences in mental health outcomes and treatment in the St. Louis region.

The brief, written by Darrell L. Hudson, PhD, assistant professor in the Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis, is the third of five from a multidisciplinary study called "For the Sake of All: A Report on the Health and Well-Being of African Americans in St. Louis."

"Mental health affects people's social and economic opportunities, and in turn, social and economic opportunity affects mental health," Hudson said. "For example, people dealing with mental health challenges are less likely to complete school, and low educational achievement is strongly associated with lower earnings.

"Low earnings and unemployment affect people's ability to seek and to afford treatment for mental health," he said.

The brief recommends several areas where mental health in St. Louis

can be improved:

- Improve awareness efforts to tackle stigma and misinformation around mental health.
- Improve screening by encouraging medical providers to identify patients earlier and coordinate these services at homeless shelters and food pantries.
- Invest in community mental health centers in areas where there is the most mental health need.
- Establish a system for tracking patient mental health treatment and rates of new mental [health conditions](#).
- Improve the accessibility of publicly available mental health data.
- Develop a public reporting system with standard definitions of mental health conditions.

Hudson said that a combined effort between the government and the private sector is necessary to invest in community mental health centers.

"There are many mental health foundations that are working to raise awareness of mental health conditions and reduce stigma," Hudson said, "so building collaborations with those types of organizations would be helpful as well."

He also encourages the use of Electronic Medical Records (EMRs), modeled after integrated systems such as Kaiser Permanente and the Veterans Affairs Healthcare System, to help improve the tracking and reporting of mental health conditions in St. Louis.

Nationwide, there is an annual cost of \$193.2 billion in lost earnings due to mental health conditions, not including the many hidden and indirect costs associated with [poor mental health](#).

"Preventing acute [mental health conditions](#) in St. Louis could save

hundreds of millions of dollars a year in hospital charges alone," Hudson said. "Improving the [mental health](#) of African Americans in St. Louis city and county is one important way to improve the health, safety and economy of the entire region."

More information: forthesakeofall.org/

Provided by Washington University in St. Louis

Citation: Mental health conditions negatively affect social and economic opportunity (2013, October 18) retrieved 10 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-10-mental-health-conditions-negatively-affect.html>

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