

# Medical costs for kids' mental health jumped 31 % in five years, study finds

March 11 2024, by Ernie Mundell

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The cost to American families of caring for a child with a mental health condition rose by almost a third between 2017 and 2021, a new report finds, to an average of \$4,361 per year.

Overall, American families spent an estimated \$31 billion in 2021 on [child](#) mental health services, which now make up nearly half (about 47%) of all child medical spending, the report found.

The findings "underscore the large financial burden associated with pediatric mental health conditions on the U.S. health care system," said a team led by Theoren Loo. He works for Brightline, a California company focused on virtual mental health care for kids.

The findings were [published](#) March 11 in *JAMA Network Open*.

As the study authors noted, "the prevalence of pediatric mental health conditions and the demand for behavioral health services is growing in the U.S."

In 2021, U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy issued a [report](#) outlining "alarming increases in the prevalence of certain mental health challenges" among kids.

In the study, Loo's group tracked 2017â&#128;"2021 federal data on medical spending from a representative sampling of American households.

They found that diagnoses for mental health conditions in kids ages 5 to 17 rose by almost 22% over those five years.

By 2021, about one in every four (25.9%) American children was

diagnosed with a mental health issueâ&#128;"that's over 9 million children in total, the researchers estimated.

Household spending on child mental health services also rose by about 31%, to an average of \$4,361 per year, Loo's group reported.

A rise in spending on the mental health of a child was also linked to a concurrent \$2,337 average rise in [medical expenses](#) for other [family members](#), the researchers noted. That makes sense, they said, since "poor mental health among caregivers is associated with child mental health disorders."

"Overall, pediatric mental health conditions were associated with \$31 billion in child spending" by 2021, the team concluded, and \$59 billion in overall household [medical spending](#).

As to what types of [mental health services](#) are being provided, Loo's team said that money spent on psychiatric drugs and doctor's office visits may be warranted "if the care is high quality and evidence-based."

However, in many cases, kids aren't being treated until they receive expensive care in hospital emergency departments. That points to "the need for improved care" for children before crises arise, Loo's team said.

**More information:** Theoren M. Loo et al, Medical Spending Among US Households With Children With a Mental Health Condition Between 2017 and 2021, *JAMA Network Open* (2024). [DOI: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2024.1860](#)

Find out more about mental health care for kids at the [U.S. Department](#)

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