



# Serious Mental Illness



## GENERAL BACKGROUND

Mental illnesses are among the most common health conditions in the United States. 1 in 5 Americans will experience a mental illness in a given year ([CDC](#)).

Serious Mental Illness (SMI) – SMI is a smaller and more severe subset of mental illnesses; SMI is defined as one or more mental, behavioral, or emotional disorder(s) resulting in serious functional impairment, which substantially interferes with or limits one or more major life activities ([NIMH](#)). SMI includes major depression, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), panic disorder, post traumatic stress (PTSD) and borderline personality disorder ([VA](#)).

**In 2017, there were an estimated 11.2 million adults aged 18 or older (or 4.5% of all U.S. adults) in the United States with SMI ([NIMH](#)).**

- 1 in 25 U.S. adults experience SMI each year ([NAMI](#)).
- 13.4% of U.S. adults with SMI had no insurance coverage in 2018 ([NAMI](#)).
- In 2017, the prevalence of SMI was higher among women (5.7%) than men (3.3%) ([NIMH](#)).
- Around 1 in 4 individuals with a SMI also have a substance use disorder ([drugabuse.gov](#)).

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As of 2014, compared to controls, people with SMI were about 4 times more likely to be heavy alcohol users (four or more drinks per day); 3.5 times more likely to use marijuana regularly (21 times per year); 4.6 times more likely to use other drugs at least 10 times in their lives; and 5.1 times more likely to be daily smokers ([drugabuse.gov](http://drugabuse.gov)).

Suicide rates in the United States have risen nearly 30% since 1999, and mental health conditions are one of several factors contributing to suicide. Examining state-level trends in suicide and the multiple circumstances contributing to it can inform comprehensive state suicide prevention planning ([CDC](http://cdc.gov)).

- In 2017, young adults aged 18-25 years had the highest prevalence of SMI (7.5%) compared to adults aged 26-49 years (5.6%) and aged 50 and older (2.7%) ([NIMH](http://nimh.nih.gov)).
- In 2017, the prevalence of SMI was highest among the adults reporting two or more races (8.1%), followed by White adults (5.2%). The prevalence of SMI was lowest among Asian adults (2.4%) ([NIMH](http://nimh.nih.gov)).
- In 2017, among the 11.2 million adults with SMI, 7.5 million (66.7%) received mental health treatment in the past year ([NIMH](http://nimh.nih.gov)).
- More women with SMI (71.5%) received mental health treatment than men with SMI (57.7%) in 2017 ([NIMH](http://nimh.nih.gov)).
- In 2017, the percentage of young adults aged 18-25 years with SMI who received mental health treatment (57.4%) was lower than adults with SMI aged 26-49 years (66.2%) and aged 50 and older (75.6%) ([NIMH](http://nimh.nih.gov)).
- 20.1% of people experiencing homelessness in the U.S. have a serious mental health condition ([NAMI](http://nami.org)).

Studies have shown that individuals with SMI show higher rates of acute and chronic illnesses, receive lower-quality general medical care, demonstrate worse long-term outcomes, and have a shorter life expectancy than the general population ([VA](http://va.gov)). More than 75% of individuals with SMI have more than one mental illness, or a mental illness and a substance use or misuse condition ([Kessler, Chiu, Demler, & Walters, 2005](http://kessler.chiu.demler.walters.2005)).

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## COVID-19

Recent research suggests that people with SMI may be at an increased risk for contracting COVID-19 ([Healthline](#)). Lifestyle risk factors associated with SMI such as substance misuse, smoking, and homelessness are also risk factors for contracting COVID-19 ([Healthline](#)). Individuals with SMI are also more likely to have underlying health conditions (diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, poor cholesterol) ([Healthline](#)); if individuals with such conditions contract COVID-19, they may experience serious complications ([Healthline](#)).

During a time when many mental health professionals and clinicians have started consulting with their clients remotely, those who don't have a device don't get the care they need ([Healthline](#)). Many people with SMI also have a strong distrust for the healthcare system from previous traumatic experiences cycling in and out of hospitals ([Healthline](#)). Experts believe a crisis is headed for the country's mental healthcare system as state psychiatric hospitals and local clinics gear up for an influx of people with COVID-19 ([Healthline](#)).



## VETERANS AFFAIRS EFFORTS AND SMI

Many Veterans with SMI also have co-occurring conditions, such as homelessness, addiction, and chronic disease, which can make it harder to effectively treat the underlying SMI ([VA](#)). VA has many **[free mental health apps for Veterans](#)**. VA offers VA Telehealth Services to any Veteran who qualifies to receive VA care. There are also additional services such as VA Video Connect ([VA](#)). VA offers both video and phone telemental health options.

**Telehealth connects Veterans with VA care teams and specialists, no matter the distance, through:**

- Real-time, interactive video visits
- In-home and mobile health remote monitoring
- Devices that gather and store health data
- Free mental health apps for Veterans

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## NATURAL DISASTERS INFORMATION

- A study of patients with bipolar disorder living in Boston after the 9/11 terrorist attack found that these individuals experienced a relatively high rate of new-onset post-traumatic stress (20%) approximately 1 year post-attack.
- Researchers found a significant increase in mandatory hospitalizations of people with schizophrenia in the 6 months after the 2011 Great East Japan earthquake in Tokyo. Loss of life in Tokyo was minimal but residents were exposed to extensive media coverage of the disasters ([\*SAMHSA study\*](#)).
- A study of survivors of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing found that at 6 months after the bombing, 38% of their sample was experiencing new-episode major depression, while 7 years after the disaster, nearly three-quarters (73%) of people with this mental disorder were in full remission ([\*SAMHSA study\*](#)).
- The prevalence of probable SMI doubled, and nearly half of the respondents exhibited probable post-traumatic stress in a study documenting changes in mental and physical health among 392 low-income parents exposed to Hurricane Katrina ([\*Rhodes, et al. 2010\*](#)).



## RESOURCES

### NAMI

[Coronavirus: Mental health coping strategies](#)

[COVID-19 Resource and Information Guide](#)

### CRISIS TEXT LINE

Text “HELLO” to 741741

### DISASTER DISTRESS HELPLINE

Call 1-800-985-5990 or text “TalkWithUs” to 66746)

### NATIONAL SUICIDE PREVENTION LIFELINE

Call 1-800-273-TALK

### SMIADVISER

SAMSHA-funded initiative on SMI with [Guidance for Individuals, Families, and Communities](#)

### TREATMENT ADVOCACY CENTER

[COVID-19 Resources for SMI Families](#)

### ASSOCIATION OF BEHAVIORAL AND COGNITIVE THERAPIES

[Find a CBT Therapist](#)

### ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

[ADAA Telemental Health Providers](#)

### AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

[A Growing Wave of Online Therapy](#)

### POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

[16 Telemental Health Resources for Practitioners and Patients](#)



## RESOURCES

### *For Clinicians*

SMIAdviser SAMSHA-funded initiative on SMI to help support the mental health community during the COVID-19 crisis, SMI Adviser provides timely and authoritative resources, education, consultation, tools and more. This page offers guidance on how to support your patients and practice.

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