



# The Growth of Telepsychiatry during the COVID-19 Pandemic

June 17, 2021

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Connecting people to care is vitally important for preventing further engagement in the justice system. That's why it's among the [key measures](#) that the Stepping Up initiative encourages counties to understand. But during the COVID-19 pandemic, connections to treatment for this population have become even more difficult, as many behavioral health agencies are unable to provide in-person care.

In response to the limitations of the pandemic, counties across the country have begun to use telepsychiatry to treat individuals in the justice system with serious mental illnesses. With the expansion of telepsychiatry also came the need for providers to better understand its delivery.

The American Psychiatric Association (APA) published a [COVID-19 response page](#), designed to help psychiatrists better respond to the changing demands of their patients. At the onset of the pandemic, there was a massive increase in outreach to the APA helplines, prompting the APA to survey their members on telehealth and how it is changing the landscape of mental health service delivery. Dr. Saul Levin, CEO and medical director of the APA, provided [insights on the survey results](#). The APA also has an extensive [telehealth toolkit](#) where counties can learn more about its use and how other providers are delivering it.

However, access to the internet and technology are real barriers to telehealth that many communities still face. The National Association of Counties has partnered with the Local Initiatives Support Corporation, the Rural Community Assistance Partnership, the National Association of Development Organizations, and Farm Credit to [develop an app](#) to help us better understand connectivity issues.

Any new advancement in the field of medicine can come with challenges. In the case of telehealth, that might mean having difficult discussions on access to telehealth services, how best to serve various populations through telehealth, and disparities that exist within these services. Already, we are seeing a growing number of studies that are bringing attention to the lessons we still need to learn from this [rapid expansion](#).

Overall, telehealth expansion should not be viewed as a temporary fix for the current pandemic, but rather a vital solution to connection to care, especially for individuals involved with the justice system. Telehealth provides an avenue to treatment for people who may find it difficult to engage in traditional in-person treatment for various reasons, such as lack of transportation, time to travel to an appointment, and childcare. Including telehealth as a permanent option within a system of care can potentially help expand access to care in the long term.

*Outside of telehealth and telepsychiatry, mental health apps have proliferated during the pandemic, some of which may be useful in helping to provide the services clients need. APA has relaunched their [APP ADVISOR](#). While APP ADVISOR does not provide clinical recommendations, it does give clinicians a framework to evaluate apps on their own to better serve their clients. We encourage county leaders to share APP ADVISOR with mental health professionals to make sure they are providing the best care possible.*