No State Adopted a Comprehensive Policy Package to Expand Access to Opioid Use Disorder Treatment during COVID

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THE ISSUE

During the COVID pandemic, many federal and state policies were implemented to increase access to opioid use disorder (OUD) treatment. Because these policies had the potential to expand access, many advocates hoped they would become permanent, and researchers are eager to assess their effectiveness.

STUDY FOCUS

This study examined the ways in which federal and state policies might have expanded access to OUD treatment. The team gathered data from September 2020 through January 2021 in four interrelated policy domains that influence the effectiveness of specific COVID-19 policies: coverage, delivery, and payment for telehealth; consent, privacy, and security requirements; licensing; and medication for opioid use disorder.

KEY FINDINGS

States took important steps to increase access to OUD treatment, but no state implemented a comprehensive policy package.

- All states and Washington, DC implemented at least one policy related to telehealth, but in only 17 states did the policy improve access to OUD treatment for new patients.
- Only 9 states relaxed privacy laws, which affect use of telehealth visits.
- All states adopted at least one policy related to health care licensing permissions, but only 35 states expanded scope of practice laws for physician assistants and nurse practitioners.
- Forty-four states and Washington, DC expanded access to initiation and delivery of medication treatment for OUD.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

To appropriately assess the effectiveness of any specific state policy, researchers will need to examine how the policy interacts with other state policies that were in effect at the same time.

Pessar, S.C., Boustead, A., Ge, Y., Smart, R., & Pacula, R.L. (2021). Assessment of State and Federal Health Policies for Opioid Use Disorder Treatment During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond. *JAMA Health Forum*, 2(11):e213833.

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