

Travel Distance to Outpatient Treatment for Depression

Steven C. Marcus, M.A.

John C. Fortney, Ph.D.

Mark Olfson, M.D., M.P.H.

Neal D. Ryan, M.D.

Studies of hospital utilization have found an exponential negative relationship between distance and utilization across a wide range of medical diagnoses; the greater the distance from treatment, the lower the utilization (1). In this column, we show the nature of this relationship using patient records from the billing system of Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic (WPIC) in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, during calendar year 1994.

Figure 1 shows a map of the Pittsburgh region with each census tract shaded according to the rate of WPIC-treated outpatient depression. The rate is calculated as the number of treated patients in the tract divided by the tract's total population. Darker colors represent higher rates. The rate of WPIC-treated patients clearly decreases as the distance from WPIC increases.

Figure 2 shows the rate of WPIC-treated outpatient depression in each census tract plotted as a function of the tract's distance from WPIC. The exponential relationship between treatment rate and distance is striking. Of the 4,115 outpatients with depression living within 60 miles of WPIC, 75 percent travel less than 9.5 miles to receive treatment. The average travel distance is 8.3 miles.

This rate-distance relationship illustrates the sharp demarcation in the distance patients are willing to travel to receive mental health services and suggests that mental health clinics must be located relatively close to those they wish to serve. ♦

Reference

1. Mayer JD: The distance behavior of hospital patients: a disaggregated analysis. *Social Science and Medicine* 17:819-827, 1983

Mr. Marcus and Dr. Ryan are with the Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic at the University of Pittsburgh, 3811 O'Hara Street, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15213. Dr. Fortney is with the department of psychiatry at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences and the Little Rock Veterans Affairs Medical Center. Dr. Olfson is with the Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons and the New York State Psychiatric Institute in New York City. Lorrin Koran, M.D., is editor of this column.

Figure 1

Rate of WPIC-treated outpatient depression by census tract

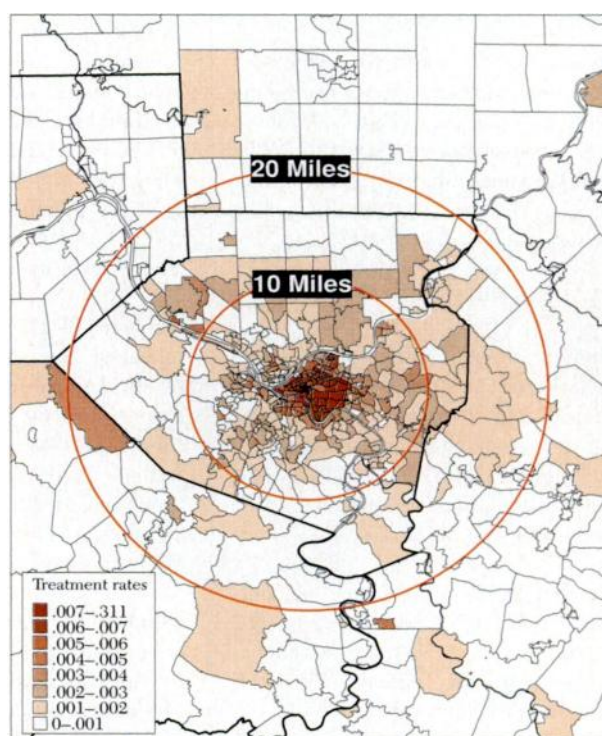


Figure 2

Distance traveled to WPIC by rate of treated outpatient depression within census tract

