

Pharmacy Barriers to Receiving Buprenorphine Among Patients Receiving Addiction Treatment Through Telehealth

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BACKGROUND

- Approximately 5 million adults in the United States met diagnostic criteria for opioid use disorder (OUD) in 2023 (1).
- Buprenorphine is a first-line medication for opioid use disorder, yet **many individuals face barriers to filling buprenorphine prescriptions. Barriers include inadequate medication stocking, stigma from pharmacists, and, for telehealth patients, concerns about diversion risk due to the geographic distance between patients and providers** (2, 3).
- Patients living in rural areas may be disproportionately impacted by pharmacy issues because they have limited local pharmacies available.
- The objective of this study was **to compare experiences of pharmacy barriers filling buprenorphine for telehealth OUD patients living in rural and non-rural areas.**

METHODS

Survey Design

- **Cross-sectional, online survey of adult patients in telemedicine treatment for OUD residing in 5 US states**
- Inclusion criteria:
 - At least 18 years old with a clinical diagnosis of OUD
 - Had a valid zip code
 - Completed an initial evaluation and follow-up group medical appointment
- Patients were randomly selected and sampled in rural/urban strata determined by zip code

Measures and Analysis

- Self-reported health and demographic information
- We assessed buprenorphine fill problems with an adapted questionnaire from Winstanley et al (4) including days without buprenorphine, frequency of fill problem, type of fill problem, and frequency of fill problem resolution.
- We calculated means and frequencies and used t-tests and chi-squared tests to compare experiences between rural and non-rural patients.

RESULTS

- About a third of respondents (n=192) reported having to go without buprenorphine due to a pharmacy issue in the previous 12 months, with 47 respondents affected for 7 days or more. Approximately a quarter of all respondents (n=165) reported having problems filling their buprenorphine prescription in the previous 12 months.
- There were no significant differences in the experience of buprenorphine fill problems among respondents by rurality.

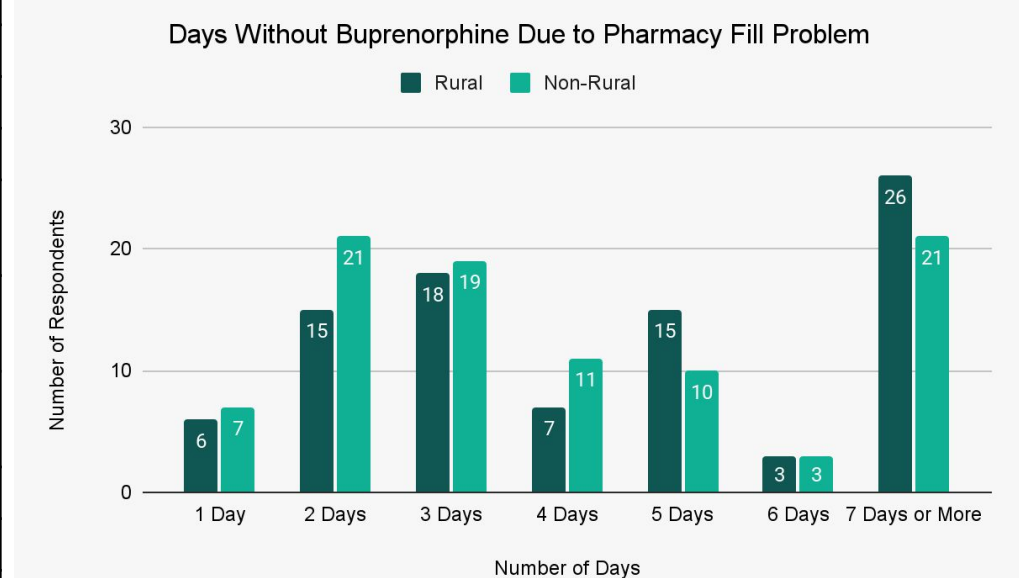
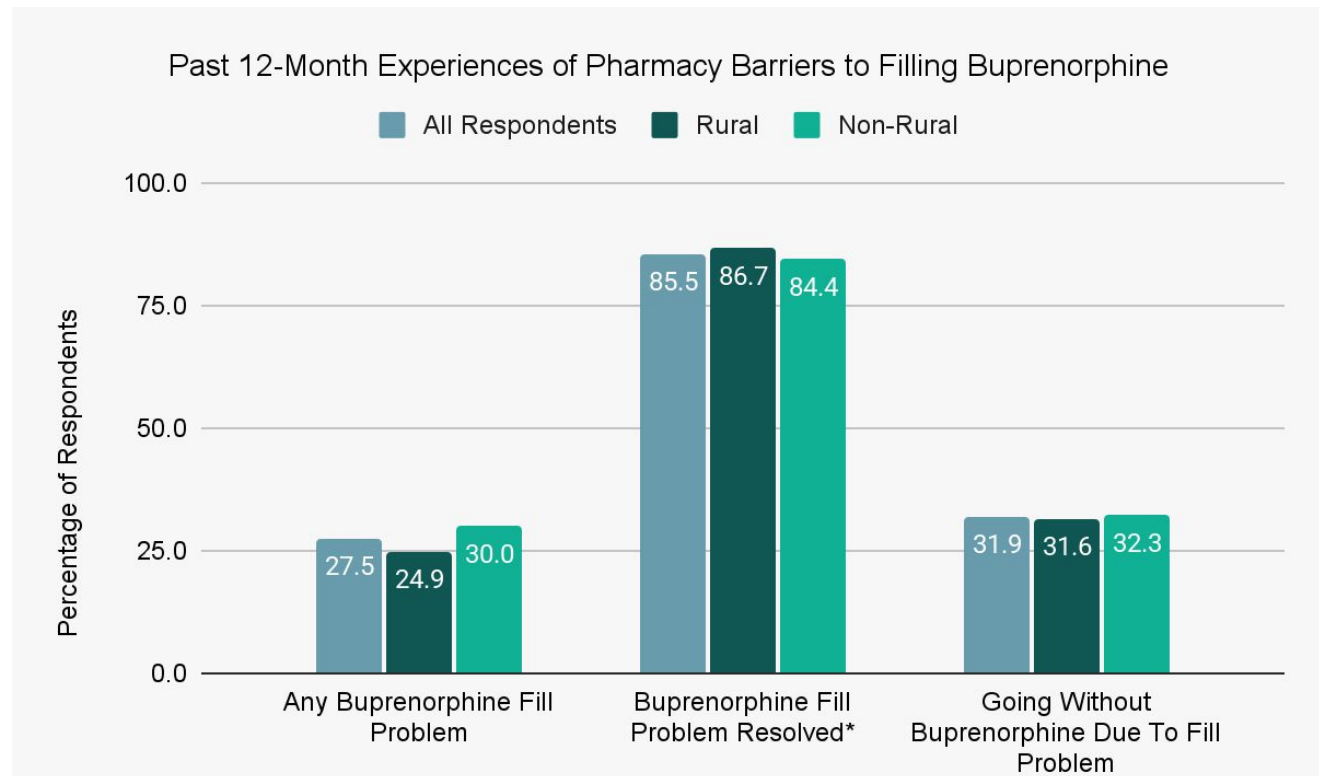
Table 1: Demographic and Health Characteristics of Patients Receiving Telemedicine Treatment for Opioid Use Disorder (n=599)

Characteristic	Rural N = 301 (50.1%)	Non-Rural N = 300 (49.9%)	p-value
Age* (mean (SD))	40.98 (8.47)	41.90 (8.71)	0.189
Woman	188 (62.5%)	172 (57.3%)	0.088
Race*			0.027
Black	3 (1.0%)	14 (4.8%)	
Native American/Alaska Native	2 (0.7%)	0 (0.0%)	
Asian	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.3%)	
White	272 (91.3%)	262 (89.4%)	
Two or more races	21 (7.0%)	16 (5.5%)	
Hispanic/Latino*	17 (5.8%)	23 (8.1%)	0.288
Partnered*	187 (62.3%)	160 (53.7%)	0.032
High school diploma or less	163 (54.2%)	145 (48.7%)	0.178
Nicotine Use	267 (88.7%)	254 (84.7%)	0.145
Stimulant use disorder	60 (19.9%)	37 (12.3%)	0.011
Anxiety diagnosis	226 (75.1%)	213 (71.0%)	0.259
Depression diagnosis	222 (73.8%)	189 (63.0%)	0.005
At least 6 months in care*	245 (83.3%)	223 (77.4%)	0.073

Table 2: Prevalence of Buprenorphine Fill Problems Among Patients in Telehealth OUD Treatment*

Issue	Rural	Non-Rural	p-value
Any Fill Problem	75 (24.9%)	90 (30.0%)	0.163
The pharmacy needed to order buprenorphine.	43 (57.3%)	47 (52.2%)	0.511
The pharmacy was hesitant to fill a prescription from a telehealth provider.	18 (24.0%)	14 (15.6%)	0.172
There were insurance problems (prior authorization, medication not covered, etc.)	14 (18.7%)	23 (25.6%)	0.291
The pharmacy was hesitant to fill my prescription because my provider wasn't located close to me.	9 (12.0%)	6 (6.7%)	0.235
The pharmacy stated they could not order buprenorphine (reached order limit, backorder, etc).	7 (9.3%)	8 (8.9%)	0.921
The pharmacy did/does not carry buprenorphine.	5 (6.7%)	6 (6.7%)	1.000
The pharmacy refused to fill the prescription or wasn't accepting new patients.	3 (4.0%)	3 (3.3%)	0.820

*Percentages for specific fill problems represent the share of respondents who reported the specific type of fill problem among all respondents who reported any fill problem



CONCLUSIONS

- Challenges filling buprenorphine prescriptions are prevalent among patients residing in rural and non-rural areas receiving treatment for OUD through telehealth. In future research, adjusted models could be used to examine patient factors associated with pharmacy issues filling buprenorphine.
- Policy and practice changes are needed to expand buprenorphine access, including improving buprenorphine ordering processes, setting minimum stock requirements, and educating pharmacists about telehealth OUD care.

(1) Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Key Substance Use and Mental Health Indicators in the United States: Results from the 2023 National Survey on Drug Use and Health; 2024. (2) Weiner SG et al. Pharmacy Availability of Buprenorphine for Opioid Use Disorder Treatment in the US. JAMA Network Open. 2023; (3) Textor L, et al. "Red Flags" and "Red Tape": Telehealth and pharmacy-level barriers to buprenorphine in the United States. Int J Drug Policy. 2022. (4) Winstanley EL et al. Patient-reported problems filling buprenorphine prescriptions and motivations for illicit use. Drug Alcohol Depend Rep. 2022.

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