



**AMERICAN
PSYCHOLOGICAL
ASSOCIATION**

APA Population Health Science Summit Executive Summary

Following decades of insufficient funding for mental health research and services, a chronic shortage in mental health care providers, a false bifurcation of mental versus physical health as independent domains of functioning, and reports over decades indicating that at least half of those in need of mental health services receive no treatment, a mental health crisis has been declared. The current approach to mental health has helped millions of children, adolescents, and adults; yet, significant limitations have become clear. Our disproportionate focus on assessment and treatment for those who pursue, and can access mental health services has yielded significant health disparities. A focus on treatment at the individual (sometimes family) level, to the exclusion of prevention, early intervention, and tools to maintain or improve well-being, is remarkably inefficient. It is unnecessarily costly to focus almost solely on those already experiencing severe psychological symptoms, rather than providing services earlier that can promote health and reduce risks. The exclusive reliance on trained mental health care providers when there are severe gaps in support for training of a mental health workforce has left millions untreated. It is time for a significant investment in our mental health approach and infrastructure.

Summit Organization and Goals

In September 2023, the American Psychological Association organized a Population Health Science Summit to discuss an expanded approach to better ensure the psychological well being of all. Led by a Steering Committee (including Drs. Rinad Beidas, Pim Cujipers, Kenneth Dodge, Alan E. Kazdin, Isha Metzger, and Jessica Schleider), the summit included outstanding scientists in psychology as well as many related fields (e.g., epidemiology, pediatrics, psychiatry, public health) as well as senior leadership representing federal agencies (e.g., NIMH, CDC, DHHS, NASMHPD, SAMHSA), non-profits (e.g., Mental Health America, The National Academies, the Rand Corporation), the technology industry (e.g., Google), and many more. Summit goals were to come to a consensus on elements of a unified Population Health framework, assess the extant, and needed science to support the application of this framework, and generate collaborative action steps that could propel this approach forward. Discussions were organized to revisit the overarching goals of behavioral health efforts, including who receives or provides health care services, when to intervene with people who may need help, where services may be provided, and how to intervene, all using the full breadth of strategies supported by the empirical literature.

A strong consensus was established at the Summit indicating that there is a sufficient and compelling scientific basis to support a move to a Population Health approach to mental health care and prevention. Moreover, without adopting such an approach, the gap and disparities among those needing versus accessing mental health services will almost certainly widen, exacerbating the current mental health crisis and jeopardizing the well-being of generations of the population.

Action Plan

Preliminary components of an action plan included the mobilization of the science workforce, the identification of critical next steps among policy-makers, a consideration of the implications

of a population health approach for the training of the mental health workforce, opportunities for funding and reimbursement of a broader range of mental health services, and the development of sustained, cross-sector collaborations to move towards action. Many suggested APA is an ideal group to help facilitate a coalition of federal offices, federal and state health departments/agencies, non-profit associations, private foundations, and community-based organizations with interests in psychological well-being to ensure that this work is guided by the most rigorous science available on approaches to behavioral health.

Defining Approach and Outcomes

An initial step involves the development of a consensus definition of population health to guide future work. Attendees suggested that a population health approach should ultimately enhance the well-being and quality of life of all community members. The outcomes should be multi-dimensional in nature, developed with members of the community, and emphasize a shift in allocation of funding to prioritize the creation of healthier and safer environments (physically, socially, and psychologically). Outcomes should be equitable, accessible, and culturally responsive. Scientists, in collaboration with federal agencies and the other funders, should partner to create, fund, implement, and report measures of population health and wellbeing that can be used as a population surveillance instrument, and to measure the effectiveness of a population health approach.

Research and Funding

Attendees also highlighted the need for more actuarial analyses that clearly determine the cost-savings and reductions in health disparities that are likely to emerge from a population health approach as compared to the current behavioral health care system. It was suggested that partnerships with public and private insurance payers will offer an important opportunity to share data and partner on more cost-efficient and flexible ways to address the nations' psychological well-being.

Funding for scientific research on population health approaches and outcomes is a high priority; for decades this work has been disproportionately underfunded when considering the disease burden incurred by mental health conditions. Future science could better address the breadth of approaches that would promote population health, including interventions beyond the individual, outside of typical clinical care, addressing social determinants, employing unique methods, and using population-level outcomes. Additional priorities include the development of a scientific workforce and academic incentives to advance greater inquiry into innovative and novel prevention and intervention approaches. The tensions between methodological traditions (e.g., quantitative, qualitative, emphasis on randomized clinical trials) and between generalizable knowledge versus community-based perspectives that are necessary for population health were noted as a critical issue that will require discussion within the scientific community to ensure that science progresses in the directions most necessary. A focus on technology-delivered interventions, primary prevention, the risks and preventive factors for social correlates/determinants of health, and a need to conduct research on reducing disparities for marginalized groups and to address biases within the scientific literature that limit diversity approaches to research will be necessary. Partnerships that allow scientists to make best use of large extant datasets also will significantly advance empirical work on a population health approach.

Partnerships and Collaborations

Numerous partnerships were discussed as critical collaborations to advance a population health approach. Partnerships with community leaders, community-based providers, and home care providers also offer a critical opportunity to assess and address psychological well-being, to promote thriving among those functioning well, to mitigate risk factors among those not yet experiencing diagnoses, and to help not only reduce the severity of symptoms among those with impairment, but also to address wellness more holistically. Collaboration among health professionals to ensure the infusion of mental health services into primary care, and to dispel myths about bifurcated physical versus mental health care symptoms also was identified as urgent. Work with the tech industry will be needed to leverage the power and reach of technology as well as to reduce embedded harms in online content and platforms. Built-in systems can help monitor and intervene when risk factors to psychological well-being first emerge through online and gaming behavior.

Moving Forward

The population health summit concluded with enthusiasm and optimism for all that is possible to move the county toward an approach that will better meet mental health needs and promote psychological well-being for society. There was also a clear sense of urgency to address the large-scale and unprecedented need. Psychological science will be key in determining what is required, developing and carrying out prevention and interventions, as well as monitoring progress. Psychologists alongside a multitude of other professionals are needed for efforts in education, training, communications, and advocacy. The challenge is great and will take collective effort. There are roles for APA, other organizations, industry, scientists, clinicians, policy makers at all levels of government, public and private funders, a host of community members and organizations, and many more. APA is poised to serve in a leadership role as it determines next steps in the coming weeks and months and will enthusiastically welcome partners in one of the most critical efforts of our time.
