Mental healthcare workers

Mental healthcare workers comprise a unique category of the health workforce, including psychologists, psychiatrists, and nurses working in the sector of mental healthcare. In the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health needs have emerged as a growing health burden requiring complex and specialised care and remains a major challenge as persistent workforce capacity constraints limit the resilience of health systems in Latin America and the Caribbean. The sustainability of the mental healthcare workforce remains at risk: a recent study of mental health workers in 17 countries of the region during the first 100 days of the pandemic noted that the mental health of workers themselves was under severe strain (Agrest et al., 2022[1]).

Across professions in mental healthcare, wide variations in density by population were observed among countries in the Latin American and Caribbean region. With particular regard to rates of psychologists adjusted for population, this variation is significant. While OECD member states averaged approximately 40 psychologists per 100 000 population, this measure was surpassed by four countries in the region: Argentina, Costa Rica, Colombia, and Antigua and Barbuda. Of note, the former three countries surpassed this average several times over: Argentina reported a rate of over 286 psychologists per 100 000 people, with Costa Rica (135 psychologists per 100 000 people) and Colombia (128 psychologists per 100 000 people) following behind. At approximately 0.26 psychologists per 100 000 people, Belize features the lowest observed rate of psychologists in the region. Overall, of the 31 countries in the region reporting data on psychologists, an average of 23.9 psychologists per 100 000 people was observed (Figure 8.9).

Regarding psychiatrists, countries in the region generally perform below the average in OECD member states when adjusted for population, set above 18.0 psychiatrists per 100 000 people. Uruguay, noting an observed rate of 15.7 psychiatrists per 100 000 people, is the highest in the Latin American and Caribbean region, while Haiti reported a rate just above 0.1 psychiatrists per 100 000 people –the lowest observed rate. Among countries in the region reporting data, an average of approximately 3.4 psychiatrists per 100 000 people was observed (Figure 8.10).

The rate of nurses working in mental healthcare provide an indicator for workforce capacity in the primary and tertiary sectors. While the Latin American and Caribbean regional average was observed at just above 17.2 nurses per 100 000 people, several countries performed well above this measure. Colombia reported the highest rate in the region, with just under 147.2 nurses per 100 000 people. Of the 23 countries in the region reporting data, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines reported the lowest figure of 0.0 nurses working in the mental health sector per 100 000 people due to its low total population, with Haiti reporting 0.02 nurses in the sector at the next-lowest positive reported figure (Figure 8.11).

Definition and comparability

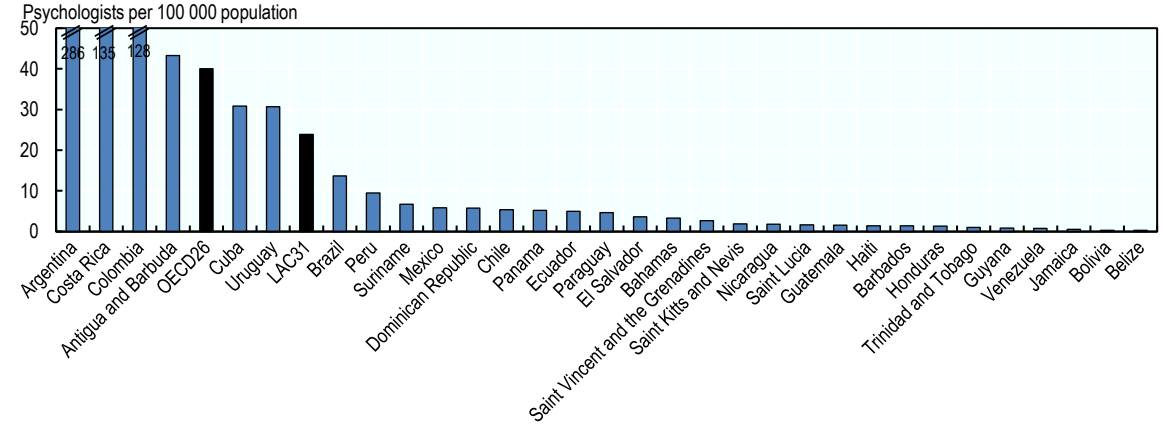
Mental healthcare professions are defined uniquely in the World Health Organization Mental Health Atlas 2020. Psychologists are defined as professionals with completed formal training in psychology at a recognised post-secondary school for a diploma or degree in psychology, with reported data including only those working in mental healthcare. Psychiatrists are defined as medical doctors with at least two years of postgraduate training in psychiatry at a recognised teaching institution, including training in subspecialities of psychiatry. Nurses working in the mental healthcare sector includes health professionals with formal training for a diploma or degree in nursing, working in mental healthcare settings, comprising mental hospitals, psychiatric units in general hospitals, mental health community residential facilities, mental health day treatment facilities, mental health outpatient facilities, or other residential facilities not specifically defined as mental health facilities with most residents having diagnosable mental health conditions.

Population figures for the calculation of rates were sourced from the United Nations World Population Prospects (WPP) for the year of the latest data reported in each country.

References

Agrest, M. et al. (2022), ""About Navigating Chaos": Latin American and Caribbean Mental Health Workers' Personal Impact Due to SARS-CoV-2 in the First Hundred Days", *International Journal of Public Health*, Vol. 67, https://doi.org/10.3389/ijph.2022.1604359. [1]

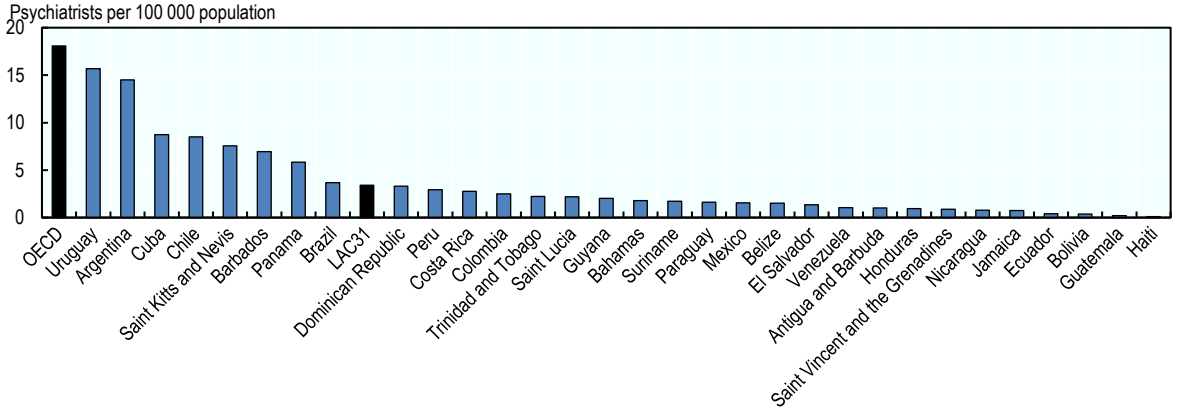
Figure 8.9. Psychologists per 100 000 population, latest year available



Source: WHO Mental Health Atlas 2020.

StatLink https://stat.link/in06ge

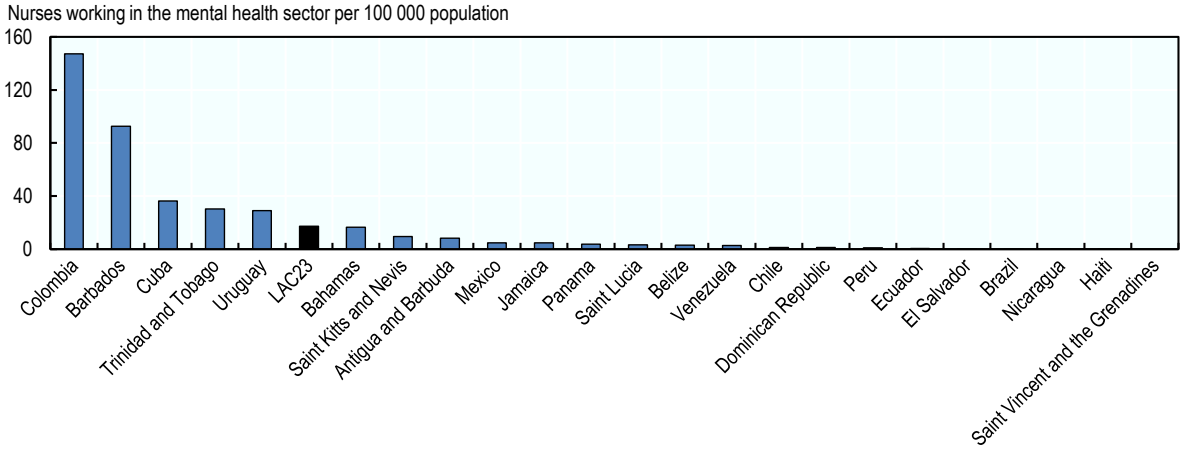
Figure 8.10. Psychiatrists per 100 000 population, 2020 or latest year available



Sources: WHO Mental Health Atlas 2020; OECD Health Statistics 2022 for OECD member countries.

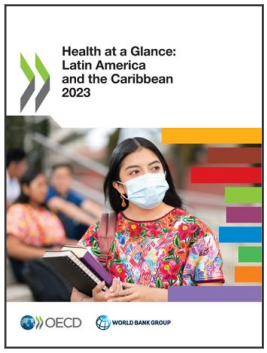
StatLink https://stat.link/87fsp6

Figure 8.11. Nurses working in the mental health sector per 100 000 population, latest year available



Source: WHO Mental Health Atlas 2020.

StatLink https://stat.link/n3qm1u



From:

Health at a Glance: Latin America and the Caribbean 2023

Access the complete publication at:
https://doi.org/10.1787/532b0e2d-en

Please cite this chapter as:

OECD/The World Bank (2023), "Mental healthcare workers", in *Health at a Glance: Latin America and the Caribbean 2023*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1787/73bd6530-en

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