

EMERGENCY ROOM BOARDING OF KIDS IN MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS

2023

What is boarding?

After arriving at the hospital, kids experiencing a mental health crisis are often kept in emergency department (ED) or inpatient beds not designed for mental health treatment, “boarded,” until they can be admitted into a psychiatric treatment program or transferred to another facility. While boarding keeps vulnerable patients physically safe from injury, waiting in an ED does not provide the specialized mental health treatment kids need to help them recover.

In addition to delaying treatment and recovery, prolonged boarding also means extended absences from schools and communities, and puts undue stress on both kids and their caregivers. For providers, boarding that lasts weeks or even months drains resources and staff in overtaxed environments, making timely treatment challenging.

A worsening problem

“We’ve never had an adequate mental health system in the United States for kids - never - and so you take an inadequate system to begin with, and then all of a sudden, you put kids who are at elevated risk...in a very difficult living and life situation. And you now have a crisis of access.”

- Dr. John Walkup, chair of the Pritzker Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Health at Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children’s Hospital of Chicago

Opens beds in hospitals – including children’s hospitals – have become even harder to come by, leaving more kids in crisis languishing in ED’s for an extended amount of time:

- Kids at [Connecticut Children’s](#) are waiting in the emergency department for an average of just over two days (52 hours) for their next level of care.
- Children’s Hospital Colorado saw a 57% increase in patients coming to the ED for mental health in [2022 compared to 2019](#). After the dramatic increase in kids entering the ED’s for behavioral health concerns over the last two years, the number of patients appears to have plateaued, but unfortunately not gone back down to pre-pandemic levels.
- Seattle Children’s reported in 2022, on average there were 24 visits for mental health to their ED each day. As of [April 2023](#), it is not uncommon for 10 or more children to be boarding each day in the ED awaiting inpatient psychiatric admission.
- At Wolfson Children’s Hospital in Florida, up to [16 patients](#) have been held in the ED daily while waiting for a spot to open in the inpatient psychiatric unit.

“[Due to the mismatch of supply and demand for additional inpatient psychiatric beds,] we end up boarding kids in our emergency department or in our inpatient unit, not because that’s what’s best for them, but because there’s literally nowhere else for them to go.”

- Zach Zaslow, vice president of advocacy and community health at Children’s Hospital Colorado

ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

To reduce the ED boarding of kids in mental health crisis, solutions must be multi-faceted and address the urgent need to:

- Strengthen and incentivize a robust and diverse pediatric clinical and non-clinical workforce
- Increase community-based services and access to tele-health for care
- Build pediatric mental health infrastructure to ensure sufficient capacity
- Support inclusive and integrated systems that enable equitable access to mental health care
- Ensure proper payment models and reimbursement support

With the right mental health services and supports, kids can recover from mental health crises and learn the skills they need to manage mental and behavioral health conditions.