

Global Psychology Alliance¹

How does psychology fit within a population health framework?

Global challenges require unified, global responses. As the world faces crises without precedent, more than 60 national, regional and international psychological associations from every continent across the world have joined together and formed the Global Psychology Alliance (GPA: <https://www.apa.org/international/networks/global-psychology-alliance>) to take action to elevate psychological science to address global issues too big for one association to tackle alone. Psychology is critical to every aspect of humanity at the individual and societal levels and psychologists have a crucial role in supporting health and well-being globally within a human rights framework.

One of the initiatives is the White Paper on Population health, which presents a slightly different perspective on population mental health than the traditional one, and proposes solutions. It starts from the premise that in most countries, the framework for physical and mental health is based on the traditional medical model, which focuses on emergency care for individuals. This intensive approach contributes to gaps in treatment resulting from an imbalance between the need for and availability of services. A population health approach can help mitigate treatment gaps and meet population health needs.

The brief of White Paper published below, was prepared by Beata Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz, Polish representative to GPA. Full version is available at: <https://www.apa.org/international/networks/global-psychology-alliance/population-health-framework.pdf>

Situating Mental Health within a Population Health Perspective

Physical and mental disorders often lead to anomalies in thoughts, perceptions, emotions, behaviors and social interactions that reduce an individual's productivity and lifespan (WHO, 2022). Recent global challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the climate crisis, and geopolitical turmoil have increased incidence

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of anxiety, depression, and suicide ultimately leading to an unprecedented need for mental health services worldwide (Cianconi et al., 2020; Persaud et al., 2018; Torales et al., 2020).

To address the ongoing mental health crisis, health care providers need to adopt an inclusive, forward-thinking framework.

What Is a Population Health Framework?

Purtle et al. (2020) define population-based approaches to mental health as “interventions and activities intended to improve mental health outcomes and the determinants of these outcomes among a group of individuals that are defined by shared geography, sociodemographic characteristics, or source of clinical services utilization” (p. 202).

A population health framework is anchored in a broad perspective that strives to improve and protect health and well-being for all members of a community. Thornicroft and Tansella’s (2009) explanation of public vs. individual health approaches is nevertheless instructive (Table 1).

Table 1

Differences between the 2 perspectives “public health” versus “individual health” of Thornicroft and Tansella (2009)

Public Health Approach	Individual Health Approach
(1) Whole population view	(1) Partial population view
(2) Patients seen in socio-economic context	(2) Tends to exclude contextual factors
(3) Interested in primary prevention	(3) Focus on treatment rather than prevention
(4) Individual as well as population-based interventions	(4) Individual level interventions only
(5) Service components seen in context of whole system	(5) Service components seen in isolation
(6) Favours open access to services on the basis of need	(6) Access to services on the basis of eligibility, e.g. by age, diagnosis or insurance cover
(7) Teamwork preferred	(7) Individual therapist preferred
(8) Long-term / life-course perspective	(8) Short-term and episodic perspective
(9) Cost-effectiveness seen in population terms	(9) Cost-effectiveness seen in individual terms

A Population health framework adopts a public health perspective into health services. It focuses not only on care for existing health issues, but also on determinants of health (such as lifestyles and other social factors), the prevention and

tracking of risk factors, and the implementation of interventions to prevent health problems. The success of this approach is determined not so much by the optimal quality of individual care, but by the health condition of the population at large.

How Does Psychology Fit within a Population Health Framework?

Population health centered psychology means that interventions will vary according to the populations they target; they may be preventative, treatment-focused, or ongoing. For example, preventive interventions may typically target large populations long-term treatment, more intense treatment may be targeted to smaller groups.

The impact on mental health is often expressed as changes to the Disability – Adjusted Life Years (DALY's), a measure for the number of life years lost by premature death plus the life years with disability adjusted for the severity of that disability (Wittchen et al., 2011). For example, the health impact for mental health problems is the largest for the age group 14 and 24 years. From a population health perspective, investment in mental health services directly targeting this age groups would be especially effective.

Recommendations

A population health approach requires that psychologists rethink the way they deliver services, provide training, and engage with the community. Utilizing a population health approach psychology can make meaningful contributions consistent with the WHO service-provision:

- Psychology and psychologists must **expand activities out of the clinical consultation room and into the community**, using the full spectrum of interventions described by Mazrek and Haggarty (1994), within and across diverse systems like schools, workplaces, and community centers.
- Psychologists must **develop and apply culturally-appropriate community mental health programs** that are widely applicable for shared needs (for example, stress–reduction group programs) or targeted toward specific vulnerable groups (for example, locally embedded treatment for the seriously mentally ill to training seminars on bullying).
- Psychologists must **consider social determinants of mental health** such as safety, housing, education, economic stability, racism, and stigma. Psychologists can share psychological science relevant to these issues to make recommendations for change to policymakers, community leaders, and others, and can inform their own practices.
- All psychology students and practitioners **must be educated on the definition, implementation, and importance of population health** and community engagement, particularly those studying or trained in clinical

specializations. This means psychology must broaden the content of content incorporated into student coursework as well as continuing education options for professionals.

- Psychologists and students must **develop a deep understanding of the communities, systems and settings in which they work**, including cultural and linguistic competence, in order to understand relevant contextual factors impacting the day-to-day lives of their clients.
- Psychologists **must partner across disciplines and systems** to ensure wraparound care, for example, school-based programs that identify at-risk students and families and provide community, social, and mental/ behavioral health referrals and supports.
- Utilizing the task-sharing model, psychologists may **provide training to generalist health providers and informal caregivers** who can provide simple treatment for everyday mental health problems.
- Psychologists **should create online services** such as e-health, mobile apps, and group programs.
- Psychological science needs to **inform policies and legislation related to population mental health resources, services, and evaluation.**

Focus on population health permits psychologists to serve in spaces beyond clinics, like schools, workplaces, and community hubs, among others, and to do so in a way that makes mental health a possibility for all of us, not just a select few. In this way, psychology can truly serve humanity.

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