**Title:** Mental Health Disparities and Service Utilization Patterns in Medicaid-Enrolled Autistic Adults: A National Analysis

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**Introduction:** Autistic adults face a multitude of mental health challenges that significantly impact their quality of life. Despite increasing awareness, there remains a gap in understanding the full spectrum of mental health conditions prevalent in this population, including anxiety, depression, PTSD, suicidality, and other psychiatric disorders. This study aims to provide a comprehensive national landscape of mental health conditions among Medicaid-enrolled adults with autism (ASD), those with autism and intellectual disabilities (ID), individuals with only ID, and a control group without either condition, while also examining their service utilization patterns.

**Methods:** We analyzed 2019 Medicaid claims data to identify mental health conditions among adults aged 30-64 in four groups: those with ASD, those with ASD and ID, individuals with only ID, and a control group. We calculated the prevalence of specific mental health diagnoses—including anxiety, depression, schizophrenia, suicidal ideation, suicidal attempts, bipolar disorder, and personality disorders—while stratifying the data by sex and age groups (30-39, 40-49, and 50-64). Additionally, we investigated service utilization patterns for mental health services across various settings, such as inpatient, long-term care, emergency department, and outpatient services.

**Results:** The analysis revealed that anxiety and depression were the most prevalent mental health diagnoses across all groups, with particularly high rates among autistic adults. Among 18,190 autistic adults, 58.61% of men and 64.55% of women had claims for anxiety, while 32.47% of men and 39.9% of women had claims for depression. Overall autistic women exhibited higher rates of depression than men, particularly in the 30-39 age group. Autistic adults, both with and without ID, primarily accessed care through outpatient services, accounting on average for 58% of psychiatric claims, followed by emergency departments (10%).

**Discussion:** This study highlights notable mental health disparities among Medicaid-enrolled adults with autism, especially the high prevalence of anxiety and depression, particularly among women in the 30-39 age group. These findings underscore the need for gender-sensitive mental health interventions tailored to autistic adults. Service utilization patterns show that most care occurs in outpatient settings (58%), but the significant use of emergency departments (10%) points to gaps in continuous care. While outpatient services are frequently used, the reliance on emergency care suggests barriers to ongoing, preventative mental health care. Improving care continuity and expanding outpatient services, especially trauma-informed care, could reduce emergency department usage. Future research should explore how trauma, particularly PTSD, affects service use to better inform policy and enhance mental health support for autistic adults.

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