

## **When Communities Speak: Utilizing the Delphi-Method to Determine Rural Mental Health Needs**

**Kristopher Garza, PhD, LPC-S, NCC**

**Associate Professor**

**Clinical Mental Health Counseling Program**

**Practicum and Internship Coordinator**

**CACREP Liaison**

Department of Educational Leadership and Counseling

College of Education and Human Performance

Texas A&M University-Kingsville

**Steve F. Bain, D.Min., LPC-S, NBCC**

**Professor of Counseling**

**Professor and Past Founding Director of the**

**Institute of Rural Mental Health Initiatives**

Department of Educational Leadership and Counseling

College of Education and Human Performance

Texas A&M University-Kingsville

**Martha J. Rose, MS**

**Independent Consultant**

---

### **Abstract**

Rural communities consistently struggle with unmet mental health care needs due to limited access to experts and associated stigma. The Delphi Method offers a structured research approach to engage community members and identify solutions to these challenges. The researchers of this study highlight the method's ability to achieve consensus among community stakeholders. This study revolves around a rural community needs assessment in five South Texas counties to prioritize and identify mental health needs.

---

Rural communities' mental health care needs are often unheard of and, therefore, go unmet. The task of finding experts to treat mental health issues in rural and isolated areas is challenging, along with establishing how accessible these services are, how much they will cost, and how the community may connect specific stigma with obtaining specialized mental health care (DuBois & Farquhar, 2020). A comprehensive Mental Health-Related Community Needs Assessment (CNA), called the Delphi Method, offers a means to engage community members to identify potential solutions to community-identified needs. According to Bain et al. (2022), the Delphi method is a process that takes a structured communication and decision-making process to identify a consensus using a select group of experts and their insights are revealed within the discussion. The researchers

submitted a proposal to TAMU-System Health Science (Coastal Bend Health Education Center), the Institute for Rural Mental Health Initiatives (IRMHI) at Texas A&M University-Kingsville that sought to identify and prioritize the mental health needs of rural communities in South Texas. Five communities participated in this community needs assessment (CNA) and were identified as part of the Healthy South Texas service area and as Health Provider Shortage Areas (HPSAs).

### **Purpose of the Research**

The justification for entering this contractual arrangement with Healthy South Texas and the IRMHI was to identify and prioritize the mental health needs of rural communities in South Texas, which are served by the Coastal Bend Health Education Center. These communities and their counties are listed as Mental Health Provider Shortage Areas (HPSA) according to the Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS) Health Professional Shortage Area (HPSA) Dashboard (2024). Research shows that barriers to community mental health care exist and are much more prevalent in rural and underserved areas (Palomin et al., 2023). The importance of this research is that it can help identify common barriers and critical challenges that exist within rural mental health care delivery that could include staff shortages, access difficulties, stigma, mental health primary care and suicide prevention.

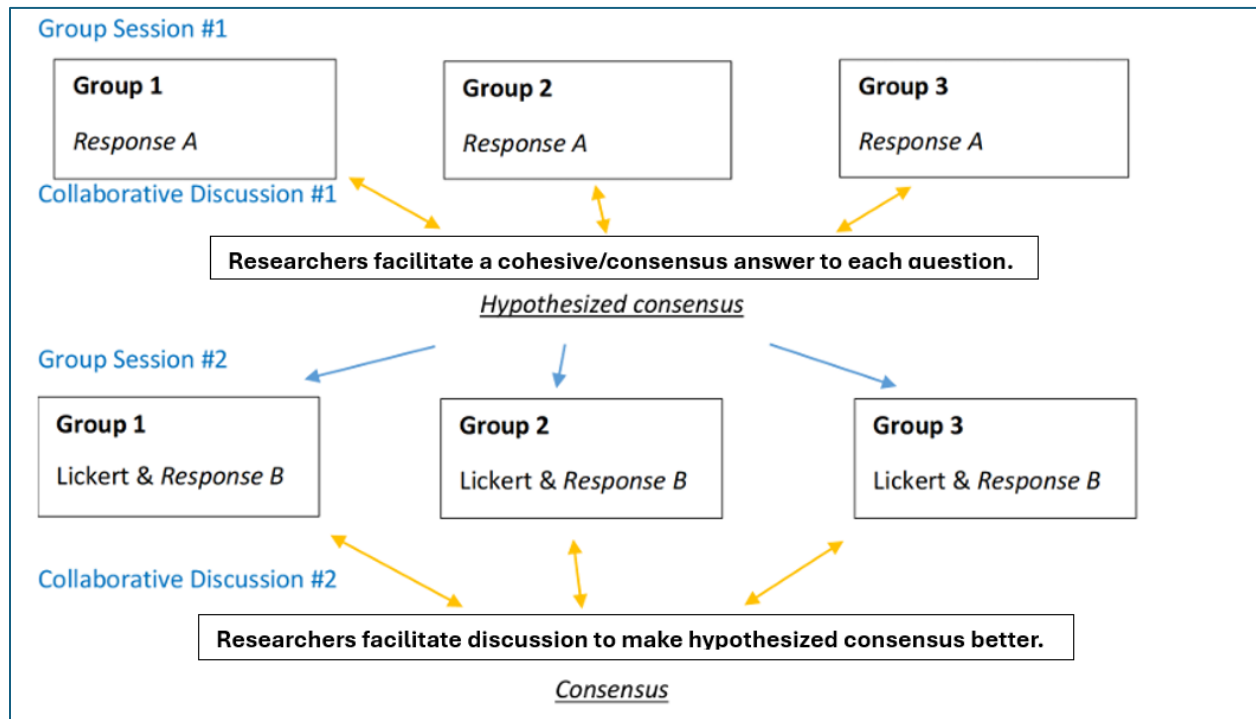
The research also has the potential to help provide an analytical framework for further research to help answer the same research questions with other expert panels. The findings may guide local communities, county three agencies, and state legislatures to improve mental health care in the communities where the research was conducted.

### **Methodology**

The process by which the Community Needs Assessment was implemented followed the Delphi Method Research protocol. As stated by Bain et al. (2022),

The Delphi method is structured for decision-making and utilizes input from a small group of local people who make up the panel of experts. The Delphi method is a research technique that, through structured communication or structured decision-making technique, seeks to identify a consensus within a selected panel of experts to determine what the insights of these experts may reveal (pp. 1-2). The 'traditional' Delphi method involves the repeated questioning of a panel of experts, usually through a questionnaire-type format; this is interspersed with opportunities for feedback and the revision of views, working towards a consensus view (de Meyrick, 2003).

One of the attractive qualities of the Delphi method is that it can be conducted in a face-to-face session or a virtual setting as a modified or mini-Delphi. The questions are provided to the participants in a circulating manner, and with each subsequent round, the feedback eventually results in a collective agreement of responses. This process creates positive, constructive interaction that provides participants with feelings of being heard and respected. Figure 1 describes the process utilizing three small groups within the community representatives.

**Figure 1***Delphi Method Process***Service Agreement Requirement**

The agreement between Healthy South Texas and the IRMHI called for a comprehensive Mental Health-related Community Needs Assessment (CNA) of three to four Healthy South Texas counties utilizing the Delphi Method. The Delphi method involves surveying a selected and representative group of people from the rural community. The selected and representative group were asked four basic questions:

1. What does mental health mean to you?
2. What are the most prominent factors that impact mental health in your community?
3. What are the perceived barriers to receiving mental health treatment in your community?
4. What are suggested solutions that could meet the mental health needs of your community?

The communities have been de-identified to protect confidentiality and anonymity. Again, they were selected as part of the Healthy South Texas service area and identified as Health Provider Shortage Areas (HPSAs). Participants were randomly chosen by considering each community's demographic makeup. The summary demographics were typically determined from the "Texas Demographics" website (Carney, 2024). These CNAs were held at an identified school location where access to facilities, audio/visual, and parking was readily available.

### Process

The data collection process was followed as outlined in Weiss et al. (2023, p. 13) which stated:

- Round one consisted of in-person, open-ended brainstorming sessions with individual participants in their respective groups.
- Round two consisted of the panel of experts presenting the list of statements to the participant groups, the participants' narrative comments on the statements, the researcher's compilation of adjustments to the statements, and the production of revised or new statements.
- Round three included a presentation of the final statements to the expert panel for approval.
- Round four involved forming the standards for the results and the last version of the findings, which contained a list of assertions moderately or strongly approved by the participants.

The ratings were measured by each participant within the smaller groups using a Likert Scale as follows:

- 1-Strongly Disagree
- 2-Disagree
- 3-Neutral
- 4-Agree
- 5-Strongly Agree

Once the scores were tallied and averaged, the 5.0 scale was converted into a percentage where an answer was acceptable ONLY if the average scores were equal to or greater than 75% ( $\geq 3.75$ ).

### Findings

#### What does mental health mean to you?

**Insights.** The communities' definitions of mental health emphasize the holistic nature of well-being, considering various aspects of an individual's life. These definitions underscore the dynamic interplay between internal and external factors in shaping mental well-being and stress the importance of a comprehensive approach to achieving and maintaining mental health.

**Thematic Correlations.** The correlations of themes in the definitions for mental health provided by the communities are:

- emphasis on emotional well-being and resilience,
- focus on psychological functioning and cognitive health,
- understanding that mental health is a comprehensive field, including social and environmental factors, and
- stress the importance of mental health for overall well-being and quality of life.

---

**What are the most prominent factors that impact mental health in your community?**

**Insights.** These lists created by the community needs assessment expert panel focus on various socioeconomic challenges and their impact on mental health. They highlight issues such as economic challenges, poverty, lack of access to resources, unmet basic human and social needs, absence of support systems, and deficiencies in law enforcement, medical, and first responder services. Additionally, they address various mental health-related needs, including access to facilities, recreational support, mentorship, emergency mental health services, mental health education, advocacy, and community safety concerns. Furthermore, they touch upon factors such as trauma, grief, substance abuse, parenting challenges, and the negative impact of social media abuse, all of which can contribute to mental health difficulties within a community. These commonalities underscore the interconnectedness of socioeconomic factors and mental health outcomes.

**Thematic Correlations.** The repeated themes in the list developed by the expert panels from all communities are as follows:

- lack of resources and socioeconomic issues,
- mental health challenges,
- social support systems, and
- safety and security.

Poverty, basic human, and social needs not being met, lack of support systems and recreational support all correlate to the theme of socioeconomic challenges and lack of resources. Emergency mental health, grief and loss, and substance abuse correlate to mental health challenges and trauma-based stress. Lack of law enforcement and parenting challenges correlate to social support systems, safety, and security.

**What are the perceived barriers to receiving mental health treatment in your community?**

**Insights.** According to the community needs assessment expert panel, these lists all revolved around challenges and barriers to mental health care and resources. They highlighted issues such as stigma and shame attached to mental health, lack of resources (financial, transportation, knowledge), demographics (such as being in a small town), and difficulties in identifying and accessing appropriate support systems. They also emphasize connecting and collaborating with existing mental health resources. Overall, these commonalities point to systemic issues that hinder individuals from receiving the mental health support they need.

**Thematic Correlations.** The repeated themes in the list developed by the expert panels from all communities are as follows:

- mental health services,
- community support and involvement,
- funding and resources, and
- advocacy and awareness.

Counseling services, partnerships within the community, meetings/training, availability, and affordability, based on income, correlate with the theme of community support and involvement. Seeking external funding for mental health services or support, funding, community awareness, and providing resources correlate with the theme of funding and resources. Raising awareness and level of acceptance regarding mental health, vigorous advocacy, integration of mental health services into existing medical services, and cultural mind shifts correlate with the theme of advocacy and awareness.

### **What are suggested solutions that could meet the mental health needs of your community?**

**Insights.** The community needs assessment expert panel's suggested solutions revolve around improving access to mental health services and support within the community. These solutions prioritize making mental health services more accessible, affordable, and accepted through collaboration, education, advocacy, and resource provision.

**Thematic Correlations.** The repeated themes within the list developed by the panels are as follows:

- counseling services,
- community awareness,
- funding, and
- education.

The list developed by the community panels correlates with the themes of mental health awareness and support, community involvement, funding, and education. Counseling services and community awareness align with raising awareness and acceptance of mental health. Funding and education correspond to seeking external funding for mental health services, as well as the need to provide resources and integrate mental health services into existing medical services.

### **Limitations**

When conducting research involving focus groups, it is crucial to consider potential limitations. Krueger and Casey (2000) highlight that smaller focus groups, typically comprising 6 to 10 participants, are often more effective in fostering in-depth discussions. In contrast, larger groups, particularly those exceeding 12 participants, can create challenges in managing group dynamics and ensuring that all voices are adequately heard. In the needs assessments conducted across five different communities, the size of the focus groups varied from six to twelve participants. While this relatively small sample size constrains the ability to generalize findings more effectively, it still provides valuable insights. The data collected indicates that rural communities exhibit two significant characteristics: 1) they are dynamically diverse, and 2) they face challenges related to the availability and accessibility of mental health resources. Furthermore, Bain (2021) corroborates these findings by referencing both national and international research that consistently supports the issues of diversity and the lack of access to mental health resources.

## Discussions and Conclusions

The findings highlight the critical themes identified in the definitions provided by these rural communities and the lists developed by the expert panels from all communities. These themes encompass mental health, socioeconomic challenges, resource constraints, social support systems, safety and security, funding and resources, community support and involvement, and advocacy and awareness. These findings underscore the diverse factors influencing mental health and emphasize the significance of addressing these issues within communities.

The definitions of mental health in communities emphasize emotional well-being, psychological functioning, cognitive health, and the comprehensive nature of mental health. Expert panels identified critical themes of socioeconomic issues, mental health challenges, social support systems, and safety and security. These issues include poverty, basic human and social needs not being met, lack of support systems, emergency mental health, grief and loss, substance abuse, lack of law enforcement, and parenting challenges. Community support and involvement, seeking external funding for mental health services, raising awareness, and integrating mental health services into medical services are also crucial.

The findings of this assessment have the potential to influence positive changes in mental health care delivery and address the unique challenges faced by rural populations. Moving forward, the results of this study can serve as a foundation for future initiatives aimed at improving mental health services in rural communities.

## References

- Bain, S. F. (2021). The global impact of rural mental health advocacy. *National FORUM Journal of Counseling and Addiction*, 10(1), 1-15. <http://www.nationalforum.com/Electronic%20Journal%20Volumes/Bain,%20Steve%20Global%20Impact%20of%20Rural%20Mental%20Health%20Advocacy%20NFJCA%20V10%20N1%202021.pdf>
- Bain, S. F., Weiss, R. E., & Munoz, S. A. (2022). Giving voice to rural communities' mental health needs through the Delphi method. *National FORUM Journal of Counseling and Addiction*, 11(1), 1-6. <http://www.nationalrabieeforum.com/Electronic%20Journal%20Volumes/Bain,%20Steve%20Giving%20Voice%20to%20Rural%20Communities%20V11%20N1%202022%20NFJCA.pdf>
- Carney, K. (2024). *Texas demographics: Texas counties by population*. Retrieved on October 28, 2024, from [https://www.texas-demographics.com/counties\\_by\\_population](https://www.texas-demographics.com/counties_by_population)
- de Meyrick, J. (2003). The Delphi method and health research. *Health Education*, 103(1), 7-16. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09654280310459112>
- DuBois, G., & Farquhar, D. (2020). *Challenges facing rural communities*. <https://www.ncsl.org/research/agriculture-and-rural-development/challenges-facing-ruralcommunities.aspx>
- Palomin, A., Takishima-Lacasa, J., Selby-Nelson, E., & Mercado, A. (2023). Challenges and ethical implications in rural community mental health: The role of mental health providers. *Community Mental Health Journal*, 59(8), 1442-1451. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10597-023-01151-9>
- Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2000). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications. ISBN 0-7619-2071-4 paperback
- Texas Health & Human Services. (2024, February 26). *Health professional shortage area (HPSA) application*. Retrieved on October 28, 2024, from <https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/323d93aa45fd43e88515cdf65365bf78/page/Page-1/?views=Mental-HPSA>

Weiss, R., Varela, D. G., Hall, K. S., Bain, S., & Jones, D. (2023). A multi-site Delphi study to identify and prioritize mental health needs of rural communities in Texas Public Health Region 11. *Journal of Research in Higher Education*, 44(1), 1-24.  
<https://www.aabri.com/manuscripts/233649.pdf>