Why GAO Did This Study

Behavioral health conditions affect tens of millions of Americans. When these conditions go untreated, they can lead to other health care costs, some of which may be borne by publicly-funded health care programs. For example, those with untreated behavioral health conditions may also require treatment for other medical conditions, such as diabetes or heart disease, which may be exacerbated by the untreated behavioral health condition.

GAO was asked to describe what is known about adults with untreated behavioral health conditions. This report examines (1) reasons why some adults with behavioral health conditions do not receive treatment for their condition, and (2) what is known about the health care costs associated with untreated behavioral health conditions in adults.

GAO reviewed SAMHSA’s most recent survey data from its annual National Survey on Drug Use and Health. GAO also conducted literature searches and reviewed articles on 1) reasons why adults do not receive treatment for their behavioral health conditions and 2) the health care costs associated with untreated behavioral health conditions. In addition, GAO moderated a meeting with behavioral health experts—selected with assistance from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine—to discuss behavioral health conditions and health care costs associated with them. GAO also interviewed federal officials and other relevant stakeholders. The Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Defense provided technical comments on a draft of this report, which we incorporated as appropriate.

View GAO-19-274. For more information, contact Mary Denigan-Macauley at (202) 512-7114 or deniganmacauleym@gao.gov.