

Introduction

- Inadequate healthcare access in rural health communities has been a persistent and worsening problem.
- Telehealth has the potential to limit these disparities.
- Telehealth utilization significantly increased nationwide in response to the COVID-19 pandemic across different health care settings, such as Federally Qualified Health Centers, but disparities in rural areas persist.
- There is limited data that explores telehealth usage in Rural Health Clinics (RHCs) during the pandemic.
- Our objective was to describe the use of telehealth in RHCs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methods

- A survey of RHCs was developed to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on cancer prevention, control activities, and telehealth usage.
- A systematic, stratified random sample of 1,900 RHCs were surveyed. Data come from a preliminary assessment of survey responses of 110 RHCs collected from April 1st to July 9th, 2021.
- Frequencies and percentages were calculated from these responses.

Results

- Of the RHCs surveyed, 66.97% were hospital-owned, 25.69% provider-owned, and 7.34% had unknown or other ownership structures (Chart 1).
- Before March 2020, 21.65% of RHCs reported having telehealth capabilities. There was a sizable increase in current capabilities, with 92.66% of RHCs now having telehealth capabilities (Chart 2).
- Of these clinics, 68.81% offered telehealth with video and phone capabilities, 11.93% solely offered via phone, and 9.17% offered telehealth by video only. For services offered via telehealth, 81.25% of the surveyed RHCs offered office or outpatient evaluation and management services, 17.86% offered mental health counseling, 35.77% offered preventative health screening, and <1% offered substance use treatment.

Chart 1: Ownership structure of participating RHCs

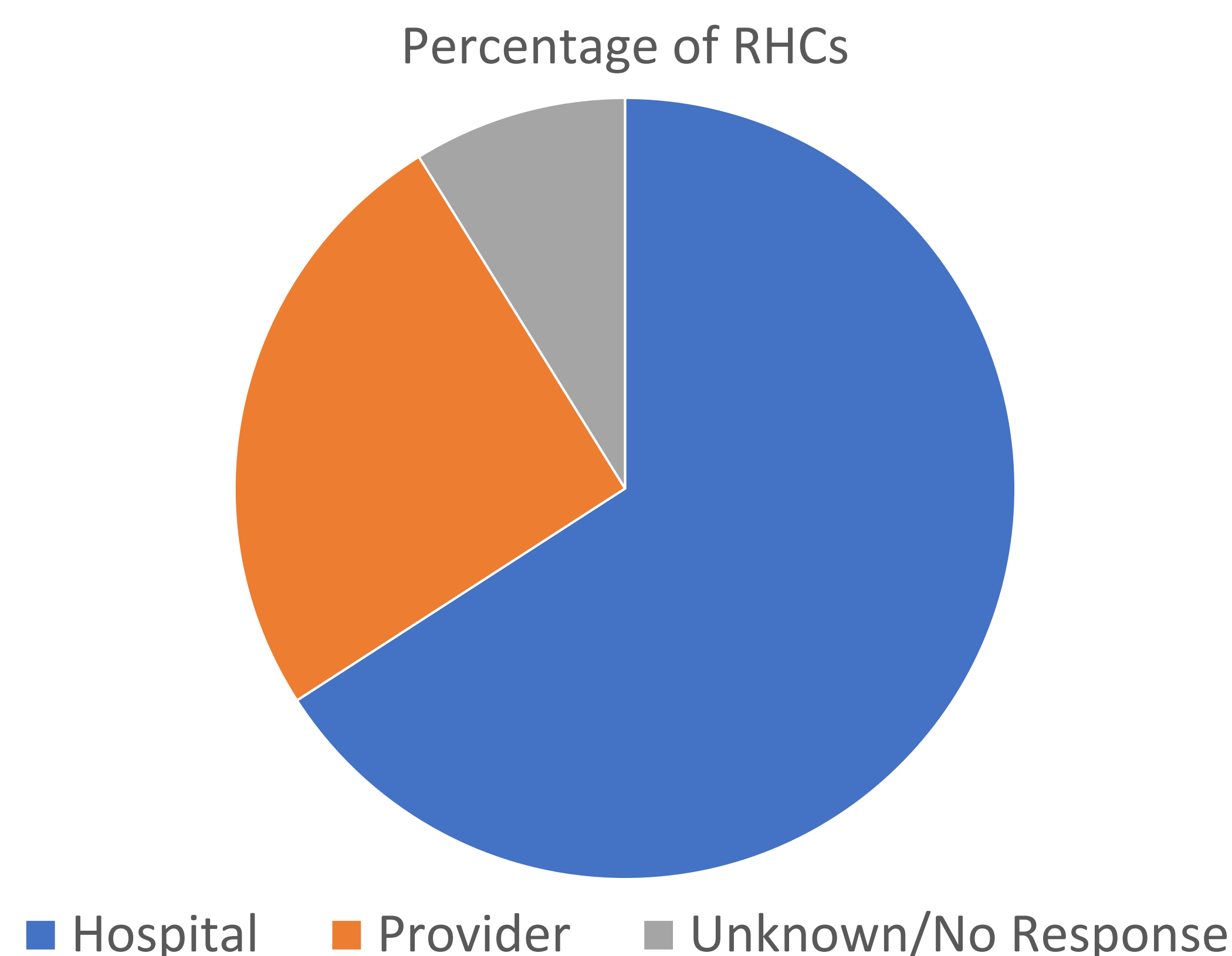


Chart 2: RHC Telehealth Capabilities prior to March 2020 compared to July 2021

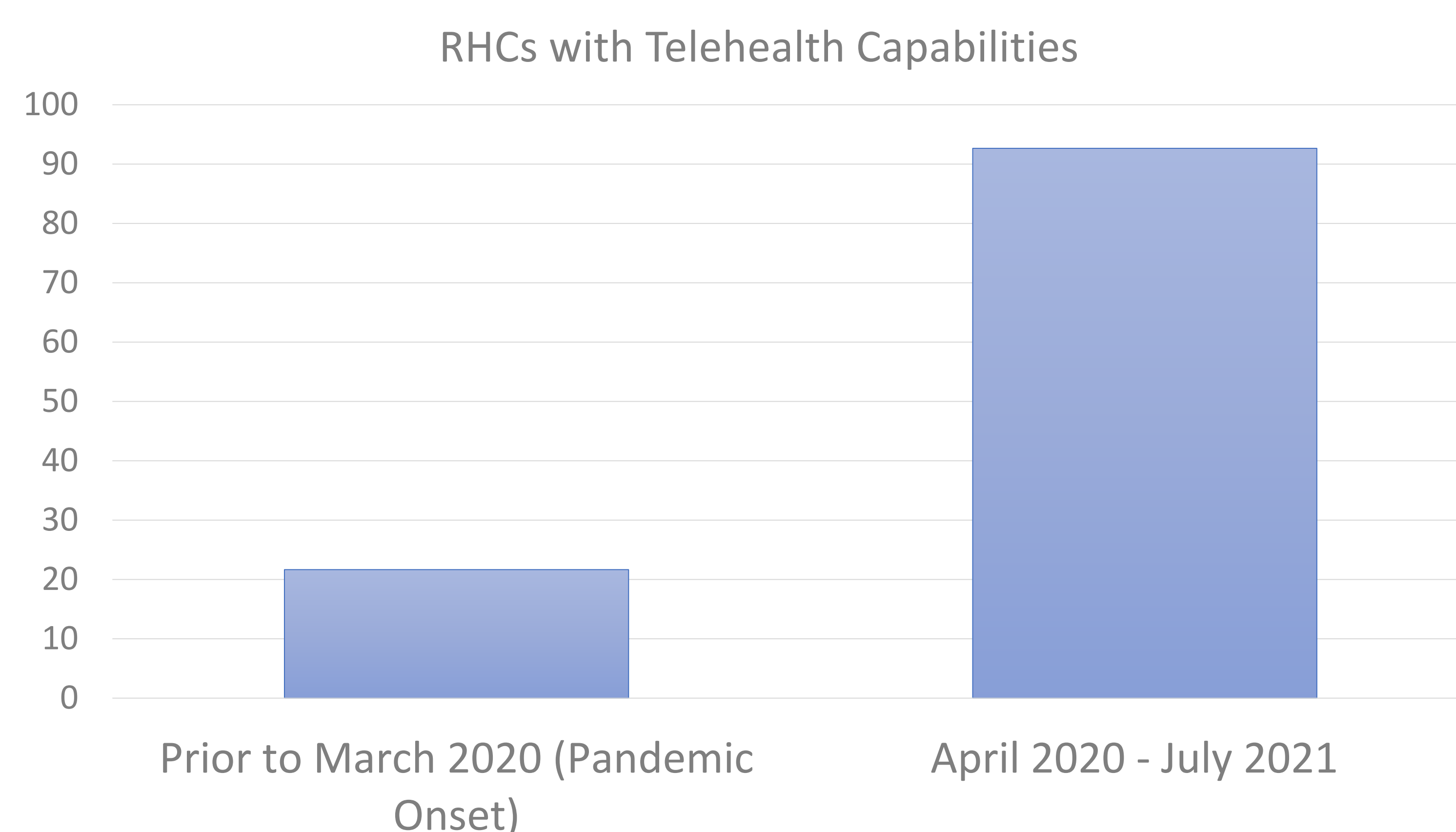
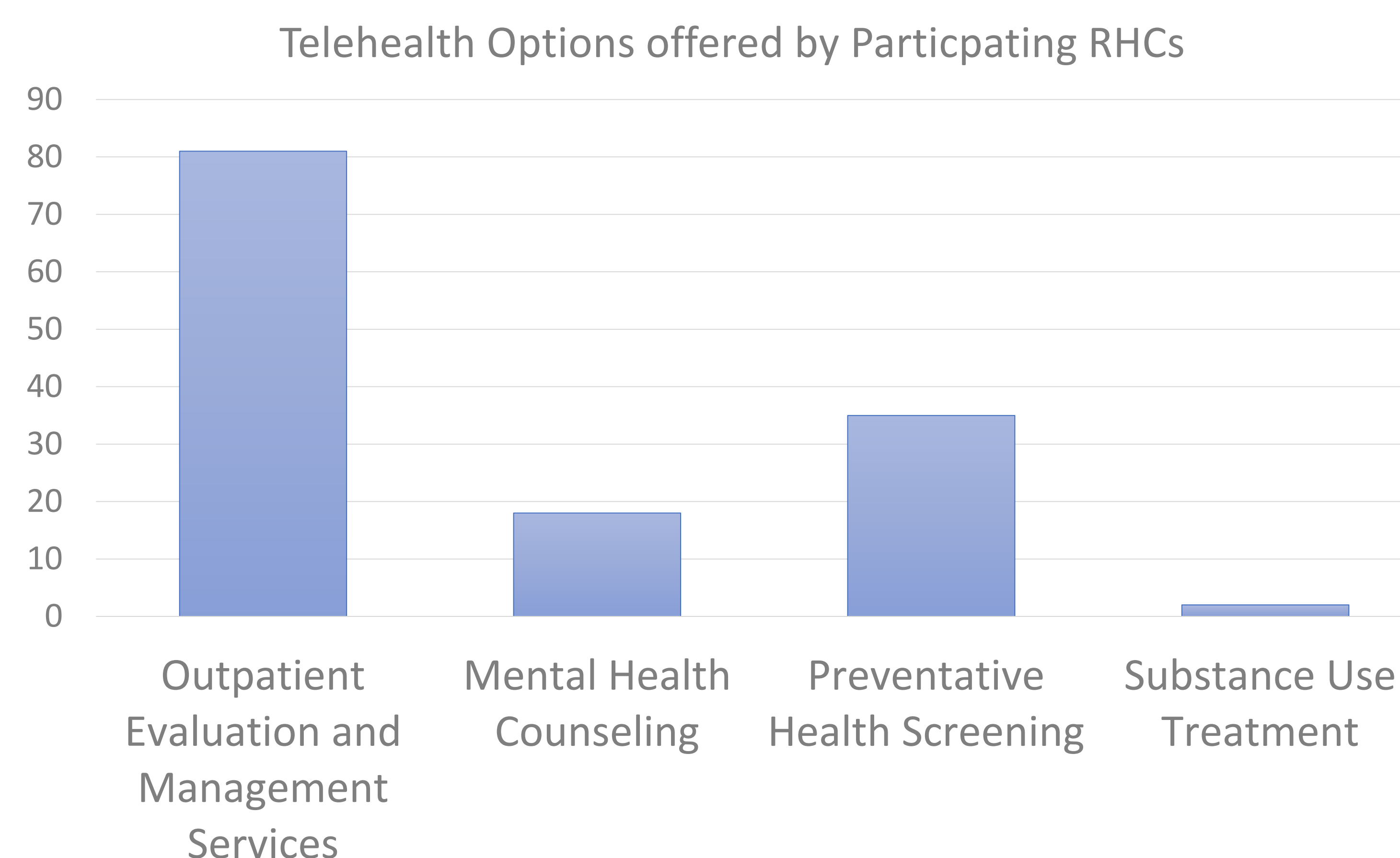


Chart 3: Telehealth services offered by participating RHCs



Conclusion

- Telehealth adoption among RHCs has more than quadrupled since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Mental health and substance use counseling/treatment offerings via Telehealth were limited.
- Significant increases in telehealth usage is encouraging, and it underscores the importance of continued regulations, reimbursement policies, technical assistance, and funding that facilitate telehealth services in RHCs.

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