

Intervenable implementation quality gaps in a large social care integration intervention

Abstract:

Background: Social care integration (SCI) initiatives are growing rapidly in light of upcoming regulatory mandates and increased understandings of the importance of health-related social needs. However, evidence regarding SCI implementation quality is lacking.

Objective: The objective of this study was to describe intervenable implementation quality gaps for a food insecurity screening and response program within a large safety-net setting.

Methods: We collected data at two primary care clinics in a large safety-net system from January to April 2022. These clinics have established workflows through which all primary visits should include food insecurity screens at intake, followed by social work referrals after positive screens. We contacted all patients with food insecurity social work referrals during the study period and a random sample of those without referrals.

Results: We enrolled 231 patients: 159/231 (69%) were Hispanic, 141/231 (61%) had a preferred language other than English, and 99/231 (43%) had a food insecurity social work referral. Of those without a referral, 16 of 49 (33%) re-screened by the research team at enrollment disclosed food insecurity. Of those with a referral contacted through 4-8-week follow-up calls, only 21 of 52 (40%) endorsed having successfully connected with social work. On 6-month follow-up calls, 46 of 58 (79%) patients with referrals reported still having food insecurity (versus 100% at enrollment), whereas 29 of 86 (34%) without referrals reported food insecurity (matching the level at enrollment). The study team was able to diagram the failure points within the workflow and provide feedback to the health system for quality improvement.

Conclusion: Despite successful implementation of universal food insecurity screening and a standardized workflow, some patients did not receive the intervention as planned and some remained food insecure despite the intervention. Health systems should build evaluation into their social care integration plans to ensure patients receive the intended benefits.