COALITION TO STRENGTHEN AMERICA'S HEALTHCARE
PROTECTING 24/7 CARE

24/7 Access Makes the Difference: After-Hours Access to Emergency Departments Is Critical for Supporting Patients and Communities

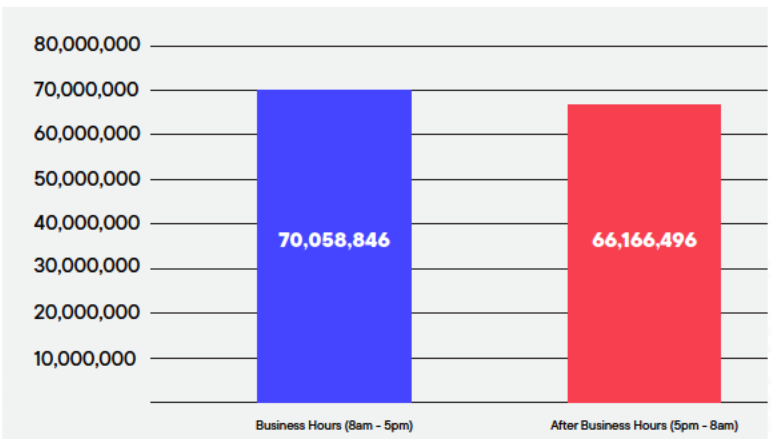
July 29, 2024

Hospitals are the backbone of the healthcare system. Only hospitals and hospital emergency departments (EDs) provide comprehensive care around-the-clock to clinically complex patients and during emergencies, especially after normal business hours and overnight when other providers are closed. As a result, hospital EDs are a critical, indispensable and sometimes only access point to healthcare for patients and communities nationwide.

Nearly half of ED visits each year in the United States occur after normal business hours[1]– when patients often have nowhere else to turn to receive care.

Hospitals in the US treated patients during approximately 136 million ED visits in 2021 (Figure 1). Roughly half of these ED visits (49%) occurred after standard business hours (between 5pm and 8am), when physician offices and other providers are typically closed to in-person visits. Sixty-five percent of these after-hour visits occurred after 8pm,[2] when providers who may be open during evening hours, such as urgent care clinics, are likely to be closed (Figure 1).

Figure 1: ED Visits by Time of Day (2021)



Source: KNG Health analysis. Data: 2021 National Hospital Ambulatory Medical Care Survey.

1) KNG Health Consulting Analysis, 2024
2) Ibid

Hospital EDs are there for around-the-clock pediatric emergencies, and for the parents who know their children can't wait until the next available appointment to receive care.

Hospital EDs, which treat everyone regardless of their ability to pay, are relied upon by pediatric patients. Children (under the age of 18) constituted 21% of all ED visits; 55% or 15.3 million of children's ED visits occurred after standard business hours (Figure 2).

Rural patients rely on hospital EDs to receive care.

Hospital EDs are critical access points for rural patients, who are also more likely to be uninsured, underinsured, or have limited access to other sites of care. Of the 136 million ED visits in 2021, 18.1 million (13%) occurred in rural areas (i.e., non-MSA).[3.]

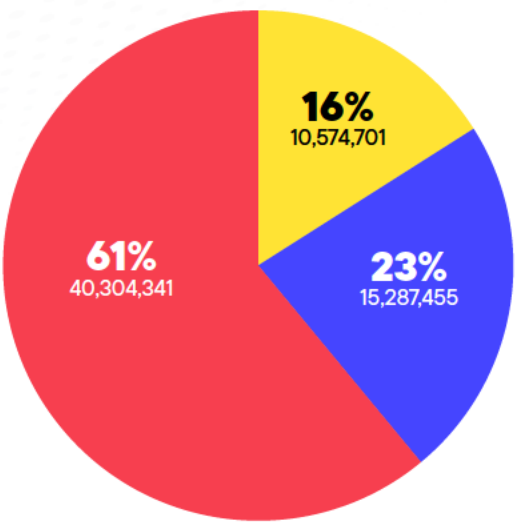


Figure 2: Percentage of All After-Hours ED Visits, by Age (2021)

- Pediatric (<18)
- Adult (18-64)
- Older Adult (65+)

Source: KNG Health analysis. Data: 2021 National Hospital Ambulatory Medical Care Survey.

When each minute counts, after-hours care is critical for injuries, trauma, drug overdoses and poisonings.

Nearly half (49%) of all injury and trauma visits and two-thirds of overdose- and poisoning-related ED visits occur after business hours.[4] Around-the-clock ED availability is a lifesaver for many patients in these often critical situations when care cannot wait until the next day or the next available appointment when other facilities open.

Conclusion

Nearly half of all ED visits (49%) – or over 66 million – occur after normal business hours when physician offices and other providers are typically closed to in-person visits. The findings highlight hospitals' and health systems' critical role in providing lifesaving care when patients have nowhere else to turn, especially for rural and pediatric patients in life-threatening situations. Access to around-the-clock care provides immeasurable benefits to communities, who can trust their local hospital to be there for them when they need it most.

3) Ibid
4) Ibid