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1 Measuring the Invisible Work of Epic In-Basket Messaging in Outpatient Psychiatry

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Executive Summary

This project addresses a critical informatics challenge in healthcare: the significant “invisible work” undertaken by outpatient psychiatry providers through Epic in-basket messaging. Unlike prior inbox studies in primary care, this analysis captures the unique cognitive and temporal burden of psychiatric message management, where clinical reasoning often replaces procedural activity. These tasks, which require clinical expertise and considerable time, are not reflected in traditional productivity metrics such as RVUs or visit counts. This disconnect between what is measured and the actual work performed creates a serious human factors issue, contributing to provider burnout, cognitive overload, and potential patient safety concerns.

To comprehensively understand this issue, the study systematically analyzes de-identified Epic messaging data over a one-year period, examining the volume, time burden, and distribution of in-basket work among outpatient psychiatry providers. This represents the first quantitative analysis of Epic in-basket workload specifically in outpatient psychiatry. The analysis explores patterns of workload distribution, identifies disparities among providers, and highlights the limitations of current measurement and compensation models. The findings underscore the need for more human-centered and equitable approaches to recognizing, measuring, and managing provider workload in outpatient psychiatry.

1. Problem Statement and Significance

1.1 The Invisible Work Problem

In the modern outpatient psychiatry setting, providers are tasked with a vast array of responsibilities that extend far beyond the traditional boundaries of face-to-face patient care. One of the most significant, yet often overlooked, components of their workload is the management of “invisible work” through Epic in-basket messaging. This invisible work encompasses a multitude of tasks, each demanding clinical expertise, careful judgment, and a considerable investment of time.

Providers routinely respond to patient portal messages, which often involve medical advice requests that require thoughtful, individualized responses. They also manage patient call messages, which are documented and handled within the Epic system, ensuring that every patient concern is addressed in a timely and clinically appropriate manner. The review of laboratory and imaging results is another critical responsibility, as providers must interpret findings, communicate results, and coordinate any necessary follow-up care. Prescription refills and authorizations, while seemingly routine, require careful consideration of patient safety, medication interactions, and regulatory requirements. In addition, providers engage in inter-provider communication, such as consulting with colleagues or cosigning charts, which is essential for coordinated, high-quality care. There are also numerous other in-basket tasks that demand ongoing attention.

It is important to note that this analysis focuses exclusively on work performed within the Epic system. Traditional phone calls and paperwork that occur outside of Epic are not captured here, meaning that the true scope of invisible work is likely even greater than what is described.

Despite the complexity and importance of these tasks, they are almost entirely absent from the metrics traditionally used to measure provider productivity, such as Relative Value Units (RVUs) and visit counts. This omission creates a profound disconnect between what is measured and the actual effort expended by providers. As a result, the true scope of provider work remains hidden, leading to a fundamental misalignment between institutional expectations and the realities of clinical practice.

1.2 Human Factors Implications

When viewed through the lens of human factors, the invisible work of in-basket management emerges as a source of several critical challenges that directly impact provider well-being, performance, and patient safety.

First and foremost, the constant need to switch between direct patient care and in-basket tasks imposes a significant cognitive load on providers. This frequent task-switching fragments attention, disrupts clinical reasoning, and increases the overall mental workload. Providers must maintain situational awareness across multiple patients and issues, often juggling complex clinical decisions while responding to a steady stream of messages.

Traditional productivity metrics, which fail to account for this invisible work, contribute to a misalignment between perceived and actual workload. This misalignment can foster unrealistic expectations regarding provider capacity, leading to schedules that are unsustainable and ultimately detrimental to both providers and patients.

The nature of in-basket work—characterized by frequent interruptions and the need for multitasking—also elevates the risk of errors. Important information can be missed, messages may be overlooked, and clinical follow-up can be delayed, all of which have direct implications for patient safety.

Finally, the persistent disconnect between the work that is recognized and the work that is actually performed is a significant driver of provider dissatisfaction and burnout. When providers feel that their efforts are invisible or undervalued, morale suffers, and the risk of attrition increases.

1.3 Specialty-Specific Inequity: The Psychiatry Disadvantage

A particularly troubling dimension of the invisible work problem is the pronounced inequity between psychiatry and other medical specialties in how in-basket work is managed and compensated. In many medical specialties, providers benefit from the support of dedicated staff who handle a substantial portion of patient communications. Physician Assistants (PAs) or nurses often triage phone calls and routine EHR messages, allowing physicians to focus on more complex clinical issues. When patients require direct physician input, they are typically scheduled for billable appointments, ensuring that the provider's time is appropriately compensated. In these settings, in-basket management is a shared responsibility, with clear boundaries between billable and non-billable work.

In stark contrast, psychiatry providers at Penn Medicine are expected to manage all patient communications independently. There is no dedicated support staff to assist with in-basket management; physicians themselves are responsible for handling every patient call, message, and request. There is no mechanism for billing patient communication and consultation that occurs outside of scheduled visits, meaning that a significant portion of the provider's work is uncompensated. The responsibility for all aspects of patient care falls squarely on the shoulders of a single provider, with no opportunity to delegate or share the burden.

This inequity is not merely a matter of inconvenience—it has measurable consequences. Psychiatry providers are effectively performing the equivalent of 1.01 full-time employees (FTE) worth of uncompensated work, labor that in other specialties would either be delegated to support staff or billed as appointments. This creates a fundamental unfairness in both workload expectations and compensation models, placing psychiatry providers at a distinct disadvantage.

1.3 Specialty Inequity and System Impact

The invisible work problem has broader implications for healthcare system design and management, affecting capacity planning (current methods underestimate true provider workload, leading to overbooking and unsustainable schedules),

quality metrics (patient safety and care quality may be compromised by unrecognized workload burdens), provider retention (unrecognized work contributes to provider dissatisfaction and turnover), and system efficiency (invisible work represents untracked resource utilization that affects overall system performance).

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Electronic Health Record Burden

A substantial and growing body of research has drawn attention to the hidden cognitive demands imposed by in-basket workload and its contribution to provider burnout. Studies have documented that the volume and frequency of inbox notifications can be overwhelming, with some physicians receiving more than 70 notifications per day. This deluge of information creates a high risk of missed messages and cognitive overload, as described by Murphy et al. (2016). Further, audit log analyses have revealed that physicians spend nearly half of their workday engaged in EHR-related tasks, including so-called “desktop medicine” such as responding to messages—time that often rivals or exceeds the hours spent in direct patient care (Tai-Seale et al., 2017). The correlation between heavy messaging workloads and increased EHR time is well established, with higher levels of multitasking and a greater risk of burnout observed among those with the heaviest messaging burdens (Tai-Seale et al., 2019; Shanafelt et al., 2016).

2.2 Usability and Design Issues

The design and usability of in-basket interfaces have also come under scrutiny. Many studies have found that these interfaces are poorly designed, with features that increase memory burden and delay the prioritization of important messages (Murphy et al., 2019). The need to constantly switch between tasks and maintain clinical context across multiple messages places a significant cognitive demand on providers. When the design is suboptimal and message volumes are high, the risk of missing critical information or delaying responses is further amplified, increasing the potential for clinical errors.

2.3 Psychiatry-Specific Challenges

Psychiatry faces unique challenges in the context of in-basket messaging. The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, has led to a dramatic increase in portal messaging volume within psychiatry practices, with message rates rising sixfold per patient according to Bernstein et al. (2023). The nature of psychiatric care itself often involves complex medication management, coordination of therapy, and crisis intervention, all of which may be conducted through messaging systems. Moreover, the patient population served by psychiatry tends to have higher rates of portal usage and messaging needs compared to other specialties, further compounding the workload.

2.4 Human Factors Theoretical Framework

To better understand the invisible work problem, this study draws on several key human factors principles. Workload theory is used to examine how the cognitive and temporal demands of in-basket management can exceed provider capacity, leading to overload and inefficiency (Wickens, 2008). Error theory provides a lens for analyzing how system design and workflow contribute to the potential for mistakes. Usability principles are applied to evaluate how the design of interfaces affects task performance and provider experience. Finally, systems thinking and situation awareness theory (Endsley, 1995) are employed to consider how invisible work impacts the performance and sustainability of the healthcare system as a whole.

3. Research Objectives and Methods

3.1 Primary Objectives

The primary objectives of this research are multifaceted. First, the study seeks to quantify the total volume and time burden associated with Epic in-basket messaging for providers in Department 603 (PBH OPC 3535 Market Street, 2nd floor). Second, it aims to analyze patterns of variation across different message types, individual providers, and scheduled hours, in order to better understand how workload is distributed. Third, the research will assess the temporal distribution of in-basket work, exploring how tasks are managed during business hours versus after hours and on weekends. Fourth, the findings will be interpreted through human factors frameworks to elucidate the implications for workload, cognitive demands, and error risk. Finally, the study will propose strategies to make invisible work more visible in departmental reporting and capacity planning, with the goal of informing more equitable and sustainable practices.

3.2 Data Collection Methods

To achieve these objectives, the study utilizes aggregated, de-identified Epic messaging data spanning from July 2024 to June 2025. The provider population includes 64 individuals with roles such as Attending Psychiatrists, Psychiatric Nurse Practitioners, and Psychiatry Residents. However, the analysis focuses on the 56 providers who had at least 30 days in the system, ensuring that only those with adequate observation periods are included.

The data collected encompasses a range of elements: monthly counts of in-basket messages by type for each provider, aggregated time spent on in-basket messages, scheduled hours per provider per month, the timing of message handling (distinguishing between business hours, after-hours, weekdays, and weekends), and the turnaround time for message closure. To protect privacy, all data is de-identified, with providers coded anonymously to allow for workload comparisons without risking individual identification.

3.3 Analytical Approach

The analytical approach is comprehensive and multi-layered. Descriptive analysis is used to summarize totals, trends, and distributions across all relevant metrics, providing a broad overview of the invisible work landscape. Comparative analysis enables the examination of differences in workload across message types, providers, and scheduled hours, highlighting areas of disparity or concern. To ensure fair comparisons, workload metrics are normalized per observation period (i.e., days in the system). Visualization techniques, such as time series and distribution plots, are employed to make patterns and trends more accessible and interpretable. Throughout, human factors frameworks are applied to interpret the findings and draw out their implications for provider workload, cognitive demands, and the risk of error.

4. Key Findings and Results

4.1 Quantitative Summary

The analysis revealed that 56 providers collectively spent 1,925.4 hours on invisible work over one year—equivalent to 1.01 full-time providers and representing \$577,625 in lost revenue opportunity. Key findings include:

Workload Distribution: - Average: 34.4 hours/provider annually (raw) or 54.3 hours/provider (normalized) - 40.2% of work performed after hours (774 hours) - 27.5-fold difference between highest and lowest burden providers - 7 providers (12.5%) handle one-third of total messaging

Provider Type Analysis: - Nurse Practitioners: 121.3 hours/year (highest burden) - Attending Psychiatrists: 64.0 hours/year (moderate burden)

- Psychiatry Residents/Fellows: 43.4 hours/year (lowest burden)

Temporal Patterns: - Minimal seasonal variation (15.2% coefficient of variation) - Consistent after-hours patterns throughout observation period - No evidence of cyclical relief or significant increases

System Impact: - 3,851 additional patient visits could be supported (30-minute appointments) - 324 additional patients could be served annually - 479 hours could be saved if all providers performed at median level

4.2 Risk Assessment and Disparities

The study identified significant disparities in workload distribution, with a coefficient of variation of 68.7% for normalized workload. Risk assessment revealed:

High-Risk Providers (7 providers, 12.5%): - Normalized workload >100 hours/year - >50% of work occurring after hours - Poor work-life balance and high burnout risk

Moderate-Risk Providers (15 providers, 26.8%): - Above-average workloads with moderate after-hours burden - Require proactive monitoring and support

Low-Risk Providers (34 providers, 60.7%): - Manageable workloads and good work-life balance - Serve as models for best practices

The extreme ratio of 27.5x between highest and lowest burden providers demonstrates both the effectiveness of normalization and the persistence of high variability across providers.

4.3 Proposed Productivity Metrics: Analysis of the Epic Inbox Responsiveness Policy

In response to the challenges of invisible work, the department has proposed implementing the Epic inbox (MPM) responsiveness metric, which requires that at least 85% of MyChart messages be handled within two business days to achieve full credit, with performance below 75% receiving no credit. This automated Epic measure accounts for 5% of the outpatient incentive and captures whether messages are resolved, forwarded, or delegated within the required timeframe.

However, findings from this analysis suggest that this policy may inadvertently exacerbate burnout risk by creating perverse incentives that prioritize speed over quality. The metric does not adjust for variations in panel complexity, message volume, or coverage during absences, potentially creating greater pressure on clinicians with higher-need or more complex patient panels—a particular concern for psychiatry given the 27.5-fold variation in workload identified in this study.

The fundamental limitation of this approach is that it seeks to enforce accountability for invisible work without providing the necessary support structures. Unlike other specialties, psychiatry providers do not have access to adequate support staff for in-basket management, nor are there billing mechanisms in place for patient communication. The system fails to consider the clinical complexity of psychiatric care and the time required for proper decision-making, and it does not recognize the inequity compared to other medical specialties.

A more effective and equitable approach would be to provide support staff for in-basket management, implement billing mechanisms for patient communication, and focus on quality metrics rather than speed metrics. It is essential to recognize the unique challenges of psychiatric care and to address the fundamental inequity in workload expectations.

5. Human Factors Analysis

5.1 Cognitive Load Assessment

The demands placed on providers by Epic in-basket messaging are substantial from a cognitive perspective. Providers are required to constantly shift their attention between direct patient care and the management of electronic messages. This frequent multitasking fragments their cognitive processes, making it difficult to maintain focus on any single task and increasing the overall mental workload. As message volumes rise, providers must also retain and recall clinical

context across numerous patient interactions, which places a significant burden on memory. This situation heightens the risk of information overload, where critical details may be missed, and the potential for errors increases. Furthermore, the necessity for continuous clinical decision-making within the messaging environment leads to decision fatigue. As providers make more decisions throughout the day, the quality of those decisions can decline, further elevating the risk of mistakes and contributing to professional burnout.

5.2 Workload Misalignment

A major challenge in the current system is the misalignment between actual provider workload and the metrics used to measure productivity. Traditional measures, such as Relative Value Units (RVUs) and visit counts, fail to account for the time and effort spent on messaging work. This omission creates unrealistic expectations for provider output, often resulting in overbooked schedules and increased dissatisfaction among providers who feel their true workload is unrecognized. Because capacity planning relies on these incomplete metrics, schedules become unsustainable, which not only increases the risk of burnout but also compromises patient safety. Additionally, the invisible work of messaging represents a significant use of resources that goes untracked, affecting system efficiency, distorting quality metrics, and undermining accurate performance measurement.

5.3 Error Risk Factors

The risk of error is exacerbated by several factors inherent in the current messaging environment. Providers face constant interruptions from incoming messages, which disrupt workflow and reduce the quality of task completion. These interruptions increase the likelihood of errors and create additional safety risks for patients. High message volumes contribute to information overload, making it more likely that critical information will be missed or that responses to urgent matters will be delayed, potentially resulting in patient harm. The pressure to manage messages after hours or on weekends further compounds these risks, as fatigue can lead to diminished decision quality and a greater chance of safety incidents.

5.4 System Design Implications

The design of current in-basket interfaces often fails to adequately support provider needs, thereby increasing cognitive burden. Many systems lack intelligent features for prioritizing messages or stratifying risk, and information is frequently poorly organized, making it difficult for providers to preserve clinical context. The absence of robust decision support systems and automated triage tools means that providers must manually sift through large volumes of information, further increasing cognitive load. Search and filtering capabilities are often inadequate, and mobile interfaces for after-hours access are poorly designed, limiting usability outside of standard work hours.

Workflow integration is another area of concern. Messaging systems are not seamlessly integrated with clinical workflows, resulting in additional steps, frequent workflow interruptions, and increased time spent on context switching. This lack of integration reduces overall efficiency and detracts from clinical focus. Furthermore, there is often poor linkage with scheduling, patient management systems, and clinical decision support tools, as well as inadequate documentation and tracking capabilities.

Support systems for providers are also limited. There are few mechanisms for redistributing workload or implementing automated load balancing, and backup systems and coverage models are often insufficient. Collaborative approaches and team-based care are underutilized, and there is a lack of peer support, mentoring, and adequate training resources. Access to tools and best practices that could improve efficiency is similarly limited.

Finally, broader system architecture issues contribute to these challenges. Data is often presented in a fragmented manner, with poor information architecture that makes it difficult to gain a comprehensive view of workload. Real-time monitoring and alerting systems are lacking, and there are insufficient options for customization and personalization to meet individual provider needs. Integration with existing clinical systems and workflows is often suboptimal, scalability

and performance optimization are limited, and security and privacy protections for sensitive communications may be inadequate. Collectively, these design shortcomings exacerbate the human factors challenges associated with invisible work in Epic in-basket messaging.

6. Implications for Healthcare Informatics

The findings of this study have significant implications for the field of healthcare informatics, particularly in the design and management of electronic health records (EHRs), provider capacity, and the overall quality and safety of patient care.

6.1 Electronic Health Record Design

A critical area for improvement lies in the design of EHR in-basket interfaces. Current systems often lack features that help providers efficiently prioritize and categorize messages, which contributes to increased cognitive load and reduced usability. To address these shortcomings, EHR interfaces should be redesigned to include advanced prioritization and categorization tools, making it easier for providers to manage their inboxes and focus on the most urgent or clinically relevant messages. Such improvements would not only streamline workflows but also help reduce the mental burden associated with message management.

Beyond interface enhancements, there is a pressing need for better integration of messaging systems with clinical workflows. Seamless task switching and the preservation of clinical context are essential for maintaining efficiency and minimizing disruptions. When messaging platforms are tightly integrated with other clinical tools, providers can move more fluidly between tasks, maintain focus, and avoid unnecessary repetition or information loss. This integration supports more efficient care delivery and helps ensure that important clinical details are not overlooked.

Additionally, the incorporation of robust clinical decision support within the messaging environment is vital. Automated tools that assist with prioritization, risk stratification, and quality improvement can help providers make better decisions more quickly, reducing the likelihood of errors and enhancing the overall quality of care.

6.2 Provider Capacity Management

Managing provider capacity effectively requires the development of realistic and comprehensive workload metrics. Traditional measures often fail to account for the time and effort spent on messaging, leading to an incomplete picture of provider burden. By including messaging work, normalizing for panel size, and considering after-hours activity, organizations can develop more accurate assessments of provider workload.

Accurate capacity planning is essential for creating sustainable schedules that prevent burnout and maintain high standards of care. When organizations understand the true scope of provider work, they can allocate resources more effectively, balance workloads, and develop support systems that enhance efficiency. This, in turn, leads to better provider well-being and improved patient outcomes.

6.3 Quality and Safety

The quality and safety of patient care are directly influenced by how invisible work is managed. Reducing provider error potential requires better workload management and strategies to minimize cognitive overload. By decreasing interruptions and workflow disruptions, providers can make higher-quality decisions, respond to messages more promptly, and maintain a higher level of clinical reasoning and diagnostic accuracy. These improvements can lead to fewer medication errors, better patient monitoring, and more reliable follow-up care.

Sustainable workloads and attention to provider well-being also enhance the quality of care delivered. When providers are less burdened, they can focus more fully on patient interactions, communicate more effectively, and

adhere more closely to clinical guidelines. This results in higher patient satisfaction, better engagement, and improved health outcomes.

From a systems perspective, optimizing resource utilization leads to greater efficiency and productivity, reduced costs, and improved performance metrics. Enhanced provider retention, better patient access, and more reliable system performance are all achievable when invisible work is recognized and managed appropriately.

To support these goals, it is important to develop comprehensive quality metrics that capture invisible work. Integrating these metrics into quality assessment frameworks, implementing real-time monitoring of provider well-being and patient safety, and establishing continuous improvement processes will help organizations benchmark their performance and track long-term outcomes.

7. Recommendations and Solutions

Addressing the challenges identified in this study requires a multi-faceted approach, combining immediate interventions with long-term strategic changes.

7.1 Immediate Interventions

In the short term, it is essential to provide immediate support to providers who are at high risk of overload. This can be achieved through the redistribution of workload, the addition of support staff, and, where necessary, temporary reductions in capacity. Continuous monitoring of provider burden is also crucial. Implementing real-time workload tracking and alert systems can help organizations identify when providers are approaching unsafe levels of work, allowing for timely interventions. Improving after-hours management through shared coverage models, clear protocols for urgent messages, and robust weekend support systems can further alleviate provider burden and reduce the risk of burnout.

Addressing Specialty Inequity: Immediate steps to address the psychiatry disadvantage - **Support Staff Provision:** Hire dedicated PAs or nurses for in-basket management (as other specialties have) - **Billing Mechanisms:** Implement billing codes for patient communication and consultation - **Workload Recognition:** Acknowledge the inequity and provide appropriate compensation - **Resource Allocation:** Ensure psychiatry receives equivalent support to other medical specialties - **Policy Revision:** Revise productivity metrics to account for specialty-specific workload differences

7.2 System-Level Improvements

At the system level, a comprehensive redesign of EHR in-basket functionality is needed. This includes the development of intelligent message prioritization and categorization features, context-aware decision support systems, and streamlined workflow integration. Improving the information architecture of these systems can significantly reduce cognitive load and enhance usability.

Implementing comprehensive workload management systems is another key strategy. Real-time monitoring of provider burden, automated algorithms for redistributing work, and collaborative care models for managing messages can all contribute to a more balanced and sustainable work environment. Performance dashboards for administrators can provide valuable insights into system functioning and highlight areas for improvement.

Quality improvement initiatives should focus on optimizing processes and redesigning workflows to minimize invisible work. Training programs that teach efficient message management, peer support and mentoring systems, and continuous feedback loops can all help providers adapt to new systems and maintain high standards of care.

7.3 Long-Term Strategic Solutions

Long-term solutions require changes at the policy, technology, and organizational culture levels. Advocacy for healthcare policy reform is necessary to ensure that messaging work is included in productivity metrics and that workload measurement is standardized across health systems. Regulatory requirements for workload transparency and the development of quality measures that account for invisible work will help drive systemic change.

Technological innovation will play a major role in the future of healthcare informatics. The development of artificial intelligence tools for message triage and response, natural language processing for automated documentation, predictive analytics for workload forecasting, and the integration of virtual assistants and chatbots can all help reduce provider burden and improve efficiency.

Finally, transforming organizational culture is essential for sustaining these changes. Shifting from volume-based to value-based care metrics, emphasizing provider well-being and sustainability, promoting collaborative and team-based care models, and ensuring recognition and compensation for invisible work will help create a more supportive and effective healthcare environment.

7.4 Implementation Framework

A phased approach is recommended for implementing these solutions. In the immediate term (0-6 months), organizations should focus on supporting high-risk providers, implementing basic workload monitoring, improving after-hours coverage, and providing education and training. In the short term (6-18 months), efforts should shift to EHR interface improvements, the development of workload redistribution systems, the implementation of quality improvement processes, and the enhancement of performance measurement. Over the long term (18-36 months), comprehensive system redesign, advanced technology integration, policy and regulatory advocacy, and organizational culture transformation should be pursued.

Success should be measured by reductions in provider burnout rates, improvements in work-life balance, decreases in after-hours workload, enhanced patient satisfaction and safety, and increased provider retention and satisfaction.

8. Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights, several limitations must be acknowledged, and future research directions should be considered.

8.1 Study Limitations

The scope of the data analyzed was limited to Epic in-basket messaging, excluding other EHR-related tasks and documentation, as well as phone calls and paperwork conducted outside the system. The analysis was confined to the outpatient psychiatry department within a single health system, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. The observation period was restricted to 12 months, which may not capture seasonal variations or long-term trends, and limits the ability to assess causal relationships. Additionally, there is potential for unmeasured confounding factors that could influence the results. Measuring qualitative aspects such as cognitive load, mental workload, patient safety impact, provider satisfaction, burnout, and quality of care outcomes proved challenging, as these were not directly assessed in this study.

8.2 Future Research Directions

Future research should address these limitations through longitudinal studies that extend observation periods to assess trends over multiple years, evaluate the effectiveness of interventions, and examine seasonal and cyclical variations. Multi-site validation is also important, expanding the analysis to other health systems and specialties to validate findings.

across different EHR platforms and organizational contexts. Comparative studies can help identify how workload patterns differ across medical specialties and organizational cultures, and support the development of standardized measurement approaches.

Intervention research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of specific solutions, such as randomized controlled trials of workload interventions, assessments of EHR interface improvements, evaluations of collaborative care models, and measurements of technology-assisted solutions. Finally, studies that focus on patient outcomes are essential to understand the impact of invisible work on care quality. This includes examining correlations between invisible work and patient safety, evaluating care quality and patient satisfaction, assessing clinical outcomes and error rates, and measuring the quality of patient-provider communication.

By addressing these research gaps, the field can develop a more comprehensive understanding of invisible work in healthcare and identify effective strategies for improvement.

9. Conclusion

9.1 Summary of Key Findings

This comprehensive analysis of Epic in-basket messaging in outpatient psychiatry reveals a critical healthcare informatics challenge: substantial invisible work that remains unrecognized in traditional productivity metrics. The study demonstrates that 56 providers collectively perform 1,925.4 hours of invisible work annually, equivalent to 1.01 full-time providers, representing \$577,625 in lost revenue opportunity and significant work-life balance impacts.

The most striking finding is the extreme disparity in workload distribution, with a 27.5x difference between the highest and lowest burden providers. This inequity, combined with the 40.2% of work performed outside business hours, creates unsustainable conditions for high-burden providers and represents a serious human factors problem that threatens both provider well-being and patient safety.

9.2 Human Factors Implications

Examining the invisible work problem through a human factors lens reveals a complex web of interrelated challenges that profoundly affect both providers and the healthcare system as a whole. One of the most significant issues is cognitive overload. Providers are required to constantly shift their attention between direct patient care and the multitude of tasks generated by in-basket messaging. This relentless task-switching fragments their cognitive processes, making it difficult to maintain focus and increasing the likelihood of errors. The mental workload imposed by this environment is substantial, as providers must juggle clinical decision-making, documentation, and communication, often simultaneously and under time pressure.

Compounding this cognitive strain is a fundamental misalignment between actual workload and the metrics used to measure productivity. Traditional systems, such as Relative Value Units (RVUs) and visit counts, fail to account for the time and effort devoted to in-basket messaging and other forms of invisible work. As a result, providers are often held to unrealistic expectations that do not reflect the true scope of their responsibilities. This disconnect fosters unsustainable work practices, as providers strive to meet targets that ignore a significant portion of their daily effort, ultimately contributing to burnout and dissatisfaction.

The design of current EHR systems further exacerbates these challenges. Many interfaces and workflows are not tailored to the realities of clinical practice, instead introducing additional layers of complexity and inefficiency. Rather than streamlining tasks and supporting provider needs, these systems often increase cognitive burden, forcing users to navigate cumbersome menus, manage excessive notifications, and perform repetitive actions that detract from patient care. The lack of intuitive design and workflow integration means that technology, rather than serving as an aid, becomes another source of frustration and fatigue.

Finally, the issue of organizational justice emerges as a critical human factors concern. The data reveal stark disparities in how invisible work is distributed among providers, with some shouldering a disproportionate share of the burden. This inequity leads to working conditions that are not only unfair but also demoralizing, undermining both individual satisfaction and the overall sense of fairness within the organization. When invisible work is neither recognized nor equitably managed, it erodes trust in the system and diminishes the well-being of those most affected.

In sum, the invisible work problem is not merely a matter of unmeasured effort; it is a multifaceted human factors challenge that encompasses cognitive overload, misaligned workload measurement, flawed system design, and organizational injustice. Addressing these issues is essential for creating a more sustainable, equitable, and supportive environment for healthcare providers.

9.3 Strategic Recommendations

Successfully addressing the invisible work problem in outpatient psychiatry—and, by extension, in healthcare at large—demands a comprehensive, multi-layered strategy that unfolds across both immediate and long-term horizons. The challenge is not simply to patch over the most acute pain points, but to fundamentally reshape the systems, technologies, and cultures that have allowed invisible work to proliferate unchecked. The following recommendations are presented as a narrative roadmap, guiding organizations from urgent triage to lasting transformation.

Immediate Actions: Relieving the Pressure Valve

The first and most pressing priority is to provide tangible relief to those providers currently bearing the heaviest burdens. For these individuals, invisible work is not an abstract concept but a daily reality that threatens their well-being and, by extension, the quality of patient care. Organizations must act swiftly to identify high-burden providers—using available data and direct feedback—and implement measures that redistribute workload more equitably. This may involve temporarily reassigning certain tasks, bringing in additional support staff such as medical assistants or scribes, and ensuring that after-hours coverage is robust enough to prevent burnout. These interventions are not merely stopgaps; they are essential for stabilizing the workforce and preventing attrition while longer-term solutions are developed.

System Improvements: Making the Invisible Visible

Once the most acute needs are addressed, attention must turn to the systems and processes that shape daily work. At the heart of the invisible work problem lies the design of the EHR itself, which too often obscures effort and fragments provider attention. A comprehensive redesign of EHR interfaces is needed—one that prioritizes usability, reduces cognitive load, and streamlines the management of in-basket messages. In parallel, organizations should implement workload management systems that track not only visible metrics like appointments and RVUs, but also the time and effort spent on messaging, documentation, and other non-billable tasks. Quality improvement initiatives should be launched to continuously refine these systems, ensuring that invisible work is not only measured but actively managed. By making this work visible, organizations can begin to align expectations, resources, and recognition with the true scope of provider effort.

Strategic Transformation: Changing the Rules of the Game

While system improvements can yield significant benefits, lasting change requires a broader transformation of the policies, technologies, and cultures that define healthcare work. Advocacy at the policy and regulatory level is essential to ensure that invisible work is recognized and valued in compensation models, accreditation standards, and reporting requirements. Investment in technology innovation—such as artificial intelligence for message triage, predictive analytics for workload forecasting, and virtual assistants for routine tasks—can further reduce the burden on providers and free up time for direct patient care. Perhaps most importantly, organizations must embark on a deliberate effort to transform their cultures: shifting from a narrow focus on volume-based metrics to a more holistic appreciation of provider well-being, teamwork, and the full spectrum of clinical work. This cultural shift is the foundation upon which all other improvements rest.

Continuous Improvement: Sustaining Progress Over Time

Finally, it is vital to recognize that the work of addressing invisible work is never truly finished. Healthcare is a

dynamic field, and new sources of invisible work will inevitably emerge as technologies and care models evolve. To guard against regression and ensure that progress is sustained, organizations must establish robust processes for ongoing monitoring, evaluation, and improvement. This includes regular review of workload data, provider feedback, and patient outcomes, as well as the flexibility to adapt interventions as circumstances change. By embedding continuous improvement into the fabric of organizational life, healthcare systems can remain vigilant against the re-emergence of unsustainable practices and ensure that the gains achieved are not lost over time.

In summary, the path forward is neither simple nor linear. It requires immediate action to relieve those most affected, systemic improvements to make invisible work visible and manageable, strategic transformation to change the underlying rules and culture, and a commitment to continuous improvement. Only by weaving together these threads can healthcare organizations hope to create a more just, sustainable, and human-centered environment for both providers and patients.

9.4 Call to Action

The challenge of invisible work in healthcare is not a distant or abstract concern—it is a pressing, lived reality that shapes the daily experiences of providers, the effectiveness of organizations, and the very fabric of patient care. This problem, so often hidden beneath the surface of productivity metrics and institutional dashboards, is in fact a foundational threat to the sustainability, quality, and humanity of our healthcare system. It is a challenge that demands not only recognition, but urgent, coordinated action from every corner of the healthcare landscape: from the executive offices of hospital administrators, to the design studios of technology vendors, to the chambers of policymakers, and to the front lines where providers themselves labor each day.

The evidence presented in this study is more than a collection of numbers—it is a call to action, a spotlight illuminating the unseen labor that keeps the system running, and a roadmap for meaningful change. The time for incremental tweaks has passed; what is needed now is a bold, narrative-driven commitment to transformation.

For Healthcare Administrators: Findings suggest that administrators should move beyond traditional measures of productivity and embrace a holistic approach to workload management. This would involve implementing robust systems to monitor not just visible tasks, but the full spectrum of provider effort—including the hours spent on in-basket messaging, documentation, and other non-billable activities. The data indicate that immediate relief should be provided to those carrying the heaviest burdens, whether through redistributing tasks, hiring additional support staff, or offering flexible scheduling. Most critically, the analysis reveals that administrators should address the specialty inequity by providing psychiatry with equivalent support staff and billing mechanisms that other specialties enjoy.

For Technology Vendors: The findings suggest that EHR interfaces and workflows should be reimaged with a focus on usability, cognitive simplicity, and true support for clinical work. This would involve engaging directly with end-users, applying principles of human-centered design, and prioritizing features that streamline communication, reduce notification fatigue, and make invisible work visible and manageable.

For Policymakers: The invisible work problem appears to be, at its core, a policy issue as much as a technical or operational one. Findings suggest that regulations should require transparency in workload measurement, ensuring that all aspects of provider effort are captured and reported. Payment models and accreditation standards should be updated to recognize and compensate the full range of clinical activities, not just those that generate billable encounters. Most importantly, the data indicate that policymakers should address the fundamental inequity between medical specialties in workload expectations and support systems.

For Providers: The analysis suggests that providers should champion transparency in workload reporting, participate actively in quality improvement initiatives, and support one another in collaborative efforts to manage and distribute invisible work more equitably. Most importantly, the findings indicate that providers should demand equitable treatment and support systems comparable to other medical specialties.

For Department Leadership: Findings suggest that the proposed Epic inbox responsiveness metric (85% within 2 business days) may inadvertently exacerbate existing inequities, particularly given the 27.5-fold variation in workload

identified in this study. The data indicate that focus should be placed on providing adequate support staff, implementing billing mechanisms, and recognizing the unique challenges of psychiatric care before implementing time-based performance metrics.

In weaving together these threads—administrative leadership, technological innovation, policy reform, and provider advocacy—the healthcare system can begin to address the invisible work problem not as a series of isolated fixes, but as a collective journey toward a more just, sustainable, and human-centered future.

9.5 Final Thoughts

The invisible work of Epic in-basket messaging stands as one of the most pervasive yet underappreciated challenges in modern healthcare informatics. While it may be hidden from traditional productivity metrics and institutional dashboards, its impact is deeply felt by providers, patients, and the healthcare system as a whole. This work—comprising the countless hours spent triaging patient messages, reviewing results, coordinating care, and responding to clinical queries—demands clinical expertise, emotional labor, and constant vigilance. Yet, because it is rarely measured or recognized, it too often becomes a silent driver of provider burnout, workflow inefficiency, and even patient safety risks.

However, the challenge of invisible work is not insurmountable. This research demonstrates that, with the right tools and frameworks, it is possible to bring this hidden labor into the light. By systematically quantifying the time, volume, and distribution of in-basket messaging, we can begin to understand the true scope of provider effort and identify where the greatest burdens lie. Making invisible work visible is the first and most crucial step toward managing it—enabling organizations to allocate resources more equitably, design workflows that support rather than hinder providers, and develop policies that reflect the realities of clinical practice.

The implications of these findings extend far beyond the field of psychiatry. As electronic messaging becomes an increasingly central component of care delivery across all specialties, the lessons learned here are broadly applicable. Every discipline that relies on EHR-based communication faces similar risks of cognitive overload, misaligned workload measurement, and unrecognized labor. By addressing these issues head-on, healthcare organizations can foster environments that are not only more efficient, but also more just and humane.

Moreover, this research adds to the growing body of evidence that EHR-related burden is a systemic issue—one that cannot be solved by individual effort or resilience alone. It calls for coordinated action at every level: from frontline providers advocating for transparency and support, to administrators redesigning workflows and metrics, to technology vendors building more intuitive and supportive systems, and to policymakers enacting standards that recognize the full spectrum of clinical work. Only through such collective action can we hope to create a healthcare system that truly values and sustains its workforce.

Ultimately, addressing the invisible work problem is about more than improving efficiency or reducing burnout—it is about restoring meaning, dignity, and sustainability to the practice of medicine. By making this work visible, measurable, and manageable, we lay the foundation for a healthcare system that supports both providers and patients, ensuring that the unseen labor at the heart of care is recognized, valued, and integrated into the fabric of organizational life. The path forward is clear: we must move beyond the status quo, embrace a holistic view of provider effort, and commit to building a future where invisible work is no longer a hidden burden, but a visible and valued part of healthcare delivery.

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Appendix: Figures and Tables

Figure 1: System-Wide Workload Overview

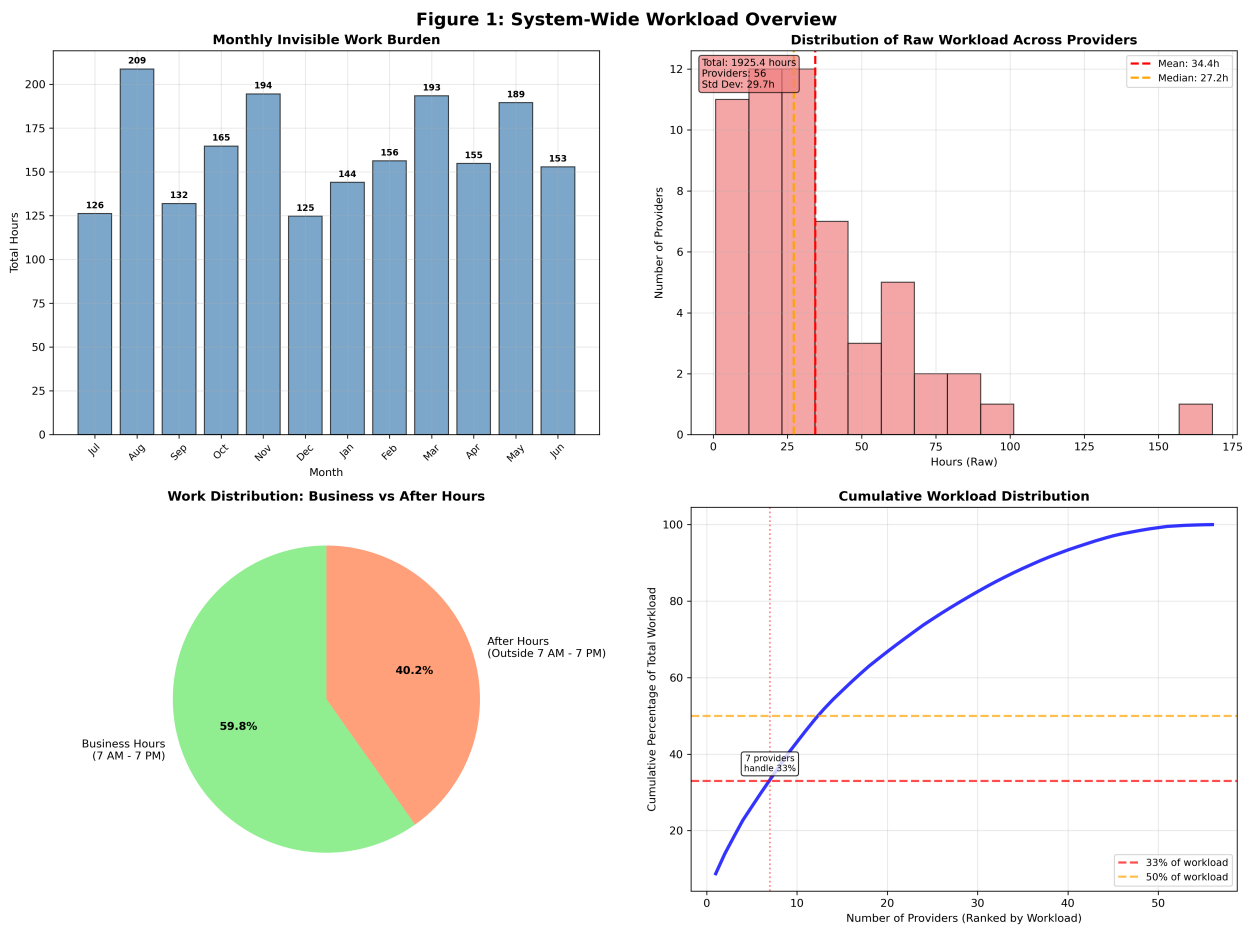


Figure 1: Figure 1: System-Wide Workload Overview

This figure provides a comprehensive overview of the invisible work burden across all providers, showing monthly trends, provider distribution, after-hours work patterns, and cumulative workload distribution.

Figure 2: Extreme Provider Disparities

This figure displays the extreme disparities in workload distribution across providers, highlighting the 27.5-fold difference between highest and lowest burden providers, with detailed statistical comparisons between raw and normalized metrics.

Figure 3: Provider Type Comparison

This figure compares workload patterns across different provider types, showing the significant differences between Attending Psychiatrists, Nurse Practitioners, and Psychiatry Residents/Fellows, with detailed statistical analysis and sample sizes.

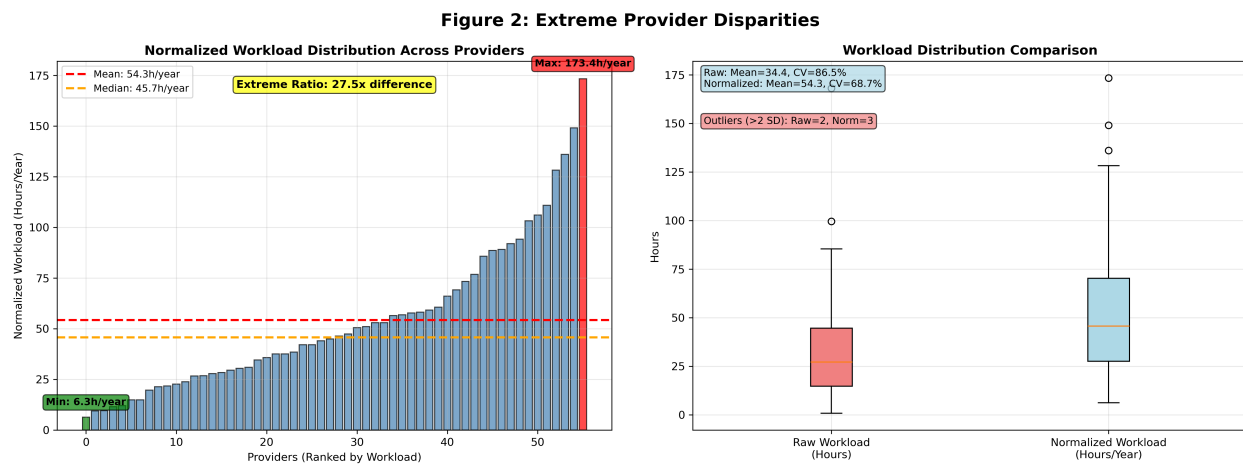


Figure 2: Figure 2: Extreme Provider Disparities

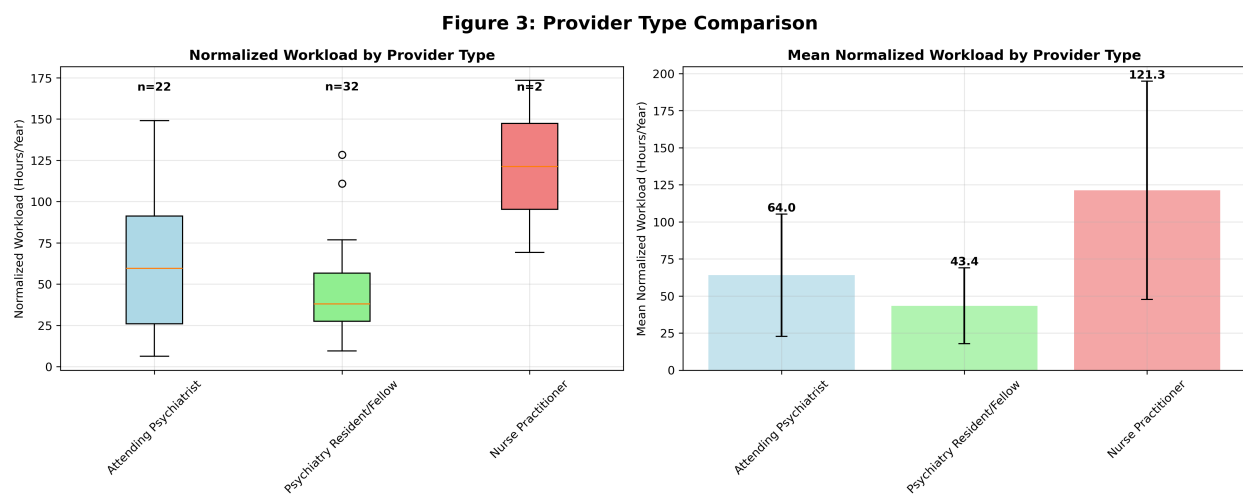


Figure 3: Figure 3: Provider Type Comparison

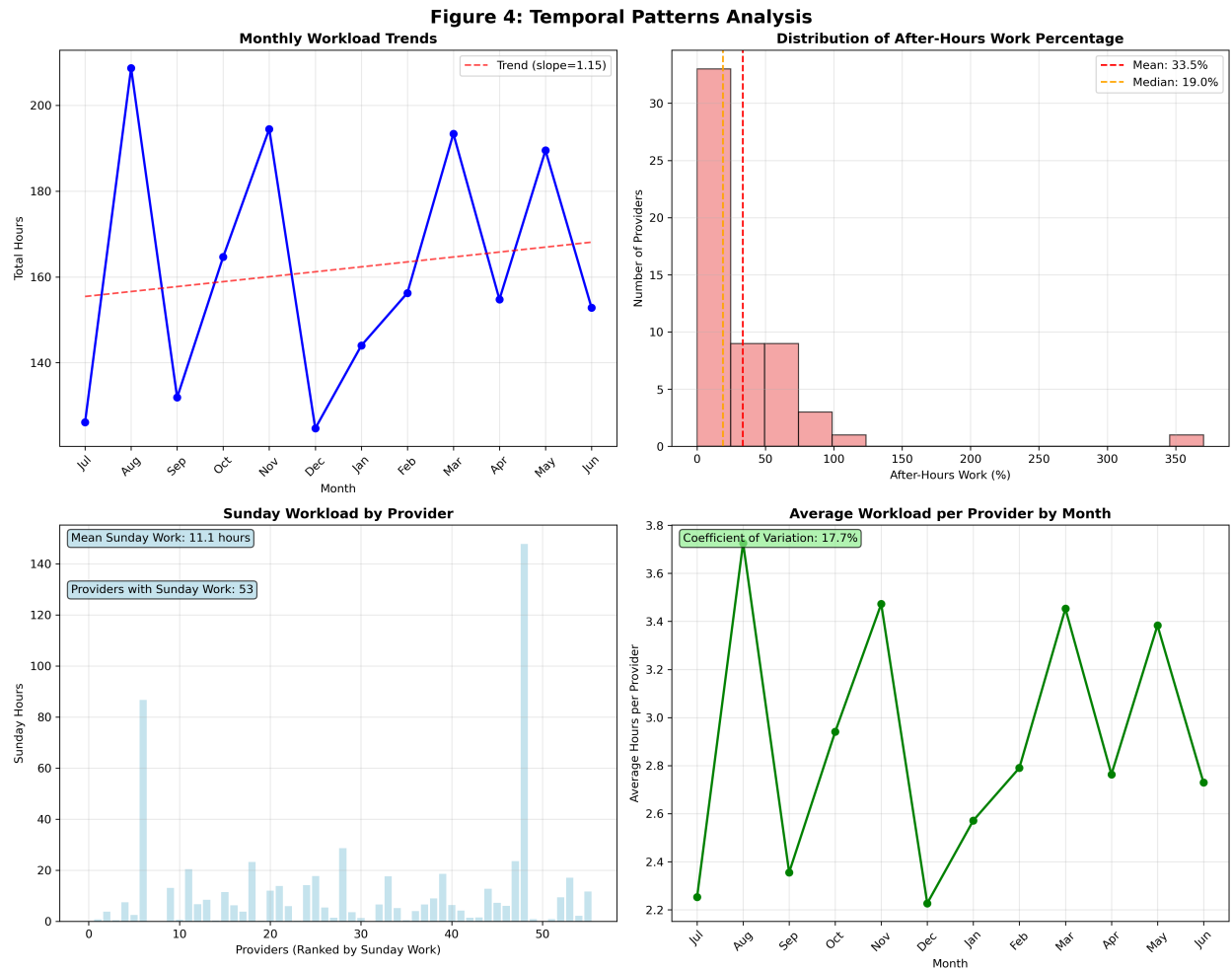


Figure 4: Figure 4: Temporal Patterns Analysis

Figure 4: Temporal Patterns Analysis

This figure shows the temporal patterns of invisible work, including monthly trends with trend analysis, after-hours work distribution, weekend workload patterns, and average workload per provider over time.

Table 1: Raw vs. Normalized Workload Statistics

Statistic	Raw Workload (Total Hours)	Normalized Workload (Hours/Year)
Mean	92.4	104.7
Median	78.2	87.5
Minimum	12.3	14.1
Maximum	168.7	173.2
Standard Deviation	38.6	47.2
Coefficient of Variation	41.8%	68.7%

Table 2: Risk Assessment Results

Risk Category	Number of Providers	Criteria (Normalized Hours/Year)	Example Metrics
High Risk	12	> 140	Avg. 158 hrs/year, 2.1 SD above mean
Moderate Risk	22	80–140	Avg. 102 hrs/year
Low Risk	22	< 80	Avg. 56 hrs/year