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Qualitative Public Health and Health Services Research: By the "Numbers"

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BACKGROUND
Over the past five years, top public health and health services research journals have increased publications of public health services and systems research (PHSSR). Given the rapidly evolving nature of PHSSR, an increasing number of qualitative studies would be expected; however, there seems to be a relative dearth of published qualitative studies.

OBJECTIVES
The purpose of this study is to determine the prevalence of qualitative studies published in PHSSR-related journals.

METHODS
A systematic literature review of twelve top public health and health systems and services research journals was conducted. Abstracts for original research articles published between January 1, 2011, and December 31, 2015, were reviewed to identify study methodology. Where necessary, articles were reviewed to confirm the identified methods.

RESULTS
Of 3,724 original research articles identified, 442 (12%) used mixed-methods, and 149 (4%) used qualitative methods. The percent of published studies using quantitative methods increased from 84% in 2011 to 89% in 2015.

CONCLUSION
Qualitative and mixed-method studies comprise a fraction of the published PHSSR over the past five years. Whether this is a reflection of the types of studies submitted to the journals and a scientific bias against qualitative studies are conclusions that cannot be drawn from this study. Regardless, the results suggest efforts need to be taken to increase the prevalence and publication of rigorous qualitative and mixed-method studies.