

Nearly a quarter of Americans met criteria for 'moderate depression' during COVID-19 pandemic years

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The degree of mental health distress among young adults and adults in the United States was a source of urgent concern of public health experts

well before the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic.

But after government lockdowns and social distancing guidelines forced people into isolation, public health research has doubled down on how pandemic-era policies—and the effects of COVID-19 infection itself—factor into rates of depression, anxiety and other mental health problems among young adults and others.

And new data looking at the last three years shows just how much younger Americans, as well as adults, struggled during the pandemic.

Researchers with the [COVID States Project](#), a multi-university consortium of researchers, analyzed [survey data](#) involving more than 400,000 respondents collected between May 2020 to January 2023. They found that, among other things, reported rates of depression among adults were three times higher than [national data](#) collected from 2013 to 2016—and were far higher among [younger people](#).

Researchers deployed the Patient Health Questionnaire-9—a [primary care](#) standard measure of depression severity—to measure the [psychological distress](#) reported by respondents of 19 surveys conducted during that three-year time frame.

Thursday's report, the researchers say, is an accounting of mental health trends among, in particular, American young adults—examining everything from depression and anxiety, to feelings of loneliness and isolation. Researchers surveyed 24,948 respondents between ages 18 and 24, stratified according to a number of socioeconomic factors.

"The size of our surveys allows us to report trends in depression, anxiety, stress, and loneliness by age, employment status, gender, [sexual orientation](#), household income and race," researchers wrote.

Among other key findings, researchers found that 24% of Americans surveyed during the pandemic years met the [diagnostic criteria](#) for at least moderate depression, compared to the 8% of adults the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported as having had depression from 2013 to 2016.

Among [young adults](#) between the ages of 18 and 24 years old, the number sits at a startling 44%, 24% of whom researchers said met criteria for "moderate to severe or severe depression."

These figures are slightly down, researchers said, from the figures reported roughly 12 months earlier.

The persistence and the prevalence of [mental health problems](#) among Americans is concerning, says David Lazer, university distinguished professor of political science and computer sciences, who co-authored the report.

"Younger people have much higher levels of potential depression than older—nearly half," Lazer says.

"These numbers have improved only slightly since the low points during the pandemic, even though people have dramatically reduced their behavioral isolation," Lazer says. "People—including young people—are going out again."

Additionally, researchers found disparities in who among the young adult cohort was most impacted by mental health according to gender and sexuality. Young women, for example, reported higher levels of depression, stress and anxiety than young men, researchers wrote.

Those respondents who identified as gay, lesbian or bisexual, for example, were "significantly more likely" than older and straight or

heterosexual respondents to report symptoms of depression, anxiety and higher levels of stress, researchers wrote. Roughly 63% of 18 to 24-year-olds who identified as gay, lesbian or bisexual met the criteria for at least moderate depression, they wrote.

"There are certain subsets of young people that are at significantly higher risk, including women, and individuals identifying as gay, lesbian or bisexual," Lazer says.

Researchers observed changes in respondents' behavior. People between the ages 18 to 24 said they aren't "avoiding [public places](#), avoiding contact with others or wearing [face masks](#) outside the home" as often as they did in earlier surveys, the data shows.

Despite the "many claims" that pandemic restrictions had negative effects on the mental health of Americans, the researchers were careful not to make any specific causal claims about those policies and the levels of distress people report feeling.

"It should be noted that we have minimal equivalent pre-pandemic data for comparison so we cannot establish that the COVID-19 pandemic caused these increases," researchers wrote. "However, our surveys reveal that depression rates are not lowering despite young Americans beginning to return to their pre-pandemic behaviors."

Provided by Northeastern University

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