

COVID-19-fueled anxiety and depression peaked in early April, then declined

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Since mid-March, researchers with the USC Dornsife Center for Economic and Social Research have surveyed U.S. adults regarding their perceptions and attitudes about coronavirus and its impact on their lives. Credit: Pixabay

The anxiety and depression experienced by U.S. residents since the start

of the COVID-19 pandemic peaked in early April, according to a USC national tracking survey measuring the impact of the coronavirus on the lives of Americans.

As Americans nationwide hunkered down during stay-at-home orders and tens of millions of workers lost their jobs, 40% of U.S. residents reported feeling anxious and 29% felt depressed in early April. By late May, that percentage had dropped to 27% who felt anxious and 25% who felt depressed.

The survey found that one in three people said they felt lonely, up from one in five who reported feeling lonely prior to COVID-19.

"Early April was a tumultuous time for many, many people. Not only were we worried about the threat of COVID-19 but millions of people had just lost their jobs and families were being forced to adjust rapidly to school closures and new routines," said Daniel Bennett, assistant professor (research) of economics at the Center for Economic and Social Research, part of the USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences. "Since then, the pandemic caused a lot of destruction, but the changes to the daily lives of many Americans have been less extreme."

Since mid-March, CESR's researchers have surveyed a panel of around 7,000 U.S. adults regarding their perceptions and attitudes about coronavirus and the impact of coronavirus on their lives. Data from the study, supported mainly by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and USC, is updated daily and available to researchers and the public.

Rising, falling anxiety and depression during COVID-19

People who have lost their jobs since the start of the COVID-19

pandemic had an even greater increase in anxiety and depression. In early April, 45% of those who lost their jobs were at least mildly distressed—meaning anxious or depressed—and 8% were severely distressed. However, as of the end of May, distress levels for Americans had returned to levels similar to mid-March, regardless of employment status.

"I think these results point towards what is part of the natural human condition: there is a tendency towards survival, coping and more resiliency so that people can move forward," said T. Em Arpawong, an assistant professor of research at the USC Leonard Davis School of Gerontology and faculty member of the Resilience Lab at the Keck School of Medicine of USC.

"Even if people continue to have these same contextual stressors around them, the majority are not going to sustain an overwhelmed stress response," she added. "People are able to bounce back by drawing on the resources available to them, including friends and family, [financial resources](#), and their own inner strength."

While fear of contracting COVID-19 contributed to an increase in mental distress, financial impacts such as job loss and concern about running out of money appear to have been even bigger drivers. Three out of five Americans believe they're at high risk—more than 20%—of running out of money or contracting COVID-19; one in five respondents believe they're at high risk of both outcomes.

The study also found women experienced more mental distress than men. Based on prior survey analysis, this too is associated with more job loss and financial insecurity, as well as shouldering more of the childcare burden under stay-at-home orders.

Loneliness is significantly higher during the

pandemic

The survey found one in three now report feeling lonely at least one day per week, compared to one in five who reported feeling lonely prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. That's significant because lonely people are four to five times more likely to experience at least mild distress and nine times more likely to experience severe distress.

Loneliness is highest among young adults (18-30), a majority of whom say they feel lonely at least one day each week, but all age groups have experienced more loneliness since the [coronavirus](#) outbreak.

"The findings support existing research indicating that [negative emotions](#) and loneliness decrease as adults grow older," said Wändi Bruine de Bruin, Provost Professor of Public Policy, Psychology and Behavioral Science at the USC Price School of Public Policy and USC Dornsife's Department of Psychology. "Contrary to negative stereotypes regarding aging, it's younger adults who are more likely to be sad and lonely. They also have a more difficult time managing emotions during stressful events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic."

While lonely and non-lonely people have similar amounts of social interaction with friends and family, the survey found that [lonely people](#) spend more time on social media and less time interacting in person.

Nearly half of those who live by themselves reported feeling lonely, compared to 30% who live with one other person. People who have lost their jobs during this period were also significantly lonelier than people who had not lost their jobs (43% versus 30%). Among those still employed, people who work from home at least once per week were lonelier than those who did not. There was not a significant relationship between loneliness and complying with social distancing orders.

L.A. County reports higher rates of distress

L.A. County residents report substantially higher rates of distress than the rest of the country. By early April, the percentage of Angelenos who reported distress had climbed to 46%, eight points higher than the entire country. In late May, the percentage of Angelenos experiencing distress had dropped to 38%—still 11 points higher than the nation as a whole.

"We see elevated levels of distress in urban areas in general, but when we compare L.A. to other cities, we still find higher rates of distress in Los Angeles," Bennett said.

Heightened economic concerns in L.A. County may be responsible for this disparity. Angelenos believe they're at greater risk of running out of money than the national average (26% versus 18%) and since early April, employment in L.A. County has fallen by 6-8 points more than in the rest of the country. L.A. County residents don't perceive any greater risk of contracting COVID-19 than the rest of the country, despite the ongoing local epidemic.

A total of 6,912 adult U.S. residents who are members of the Understanding Coronavirus in America tracking survey participated from March 10 to May 26, 2020. Margin of sampling error (MOSE) is +/-1 percentage point for the full sample. The sample includes 1,368 residents of Los Angeles County (MOSE +/-3); 6,138 people who did not lose jobs since March (including people who were not previously employed) (MOSE +/-1), and 1,493 people who had lost their job since surveyed in mid-March (MOSE +/-3). Results for loneliness are based on responses from 6,755 respondents who participated from May 1-26 and in prior UAS surveys assessing loneliness. Margin of sampling error is +/- one percentage point. Margins of sampling error for age groups range from +/-2 to +/-4 percentage points.

The survey questions, topline data, and data files, and a press room featuring this release and other information are [available](#). The analysis of L.A. County data is supported by USC Dornsife's Public Exchange.

Provided by University of Southern California

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