

'Alarming' COVID-19 study shows 80% of respondents report significant symptoms of depression

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Credit: Taylor & Francis

A new national survey, looking at how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted young US adults' loneliness, reveals "significant depressive symptoms" in 80% of participants.

Over 1,000 Americans aged 18-35 took part in the online anonymous questionnaire, which also asked the subjects to report on their [anxiety](#) and substance use.

The analyzed findings, published in the peer-reviewed *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs*, show that "alarming" levels of loneliness are associated with significant mental health issues, as approximately 61% of respondents reporting moderate (45%) to severe (17%) anxiety.

Meanwhile, 30% of interviewees disclosed harmful levels of drinking. And, although only 22% of the respondents reported using drugs, 38% of these reported severe drug use.

Therefore, a response with mental health care provision is "imperative", lead author Professor Viviana Horigian, from the University of Miami, states.

"The convergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the loneliness and addiction epidemics in the US is here to stay," she said.

"These [young adults](#) are the future of our nation's social fabric. They need to be given access to psychological help, coupled with the development and dissemination of brief online contact-based interventions that encourage healthy lifestyles.

"Addressing mental health and substance use problems in young adults, both during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, is an imperative."

And co-author Renae Schmidt adds: "As we invest in developing the sense of cohesion and [social connectedness](#) in these generations, we can address social and physical resiliency in our communities at large.

"Students need sustaining online delivery of [relevant] coursework, increasing counseling services, and deploying outreach through telehealth services. For young adults not engaged in school, aggressive patient outreach by primary care physicians should be used to ensure screening and intervention, also via telehealth. Access to [psychological help](#) coupled with the development and dissemination of brief online contact-based interventions that encourage healthy lifestyles."

The online, 126-item, survey was carried out between April 22 and May 11. 1,008 participants took part, with the average age 28 and 86% being over 23.

Each symptom (loneliness, anxiety, depression, alcohol use, drug use) was measured against internationally recognized scoring systems.

To examine the associations between loneliness and the mental health conditions highlighted, the researchers used a model which looked at the direct effects of both loneliness and social connectedness on depression, anxiety, alcohol use, and drug use. They also looked at the indirect effects of loneliness and social connectedness on alcohol and drug use working through anxiety and depression. In addition, they characterized relationships in pre-COVID and post-COVID behaviors and psychosocial symptomatology.

The results show that most participants who reported an increase in feelings of loneliness also indicated an increase in drinking (58%), drug use (56%), anxiety (76%), and depression (78%), and a decrease in feelings of connectedness (58%).

Looking at general increases of mental health issues or [substance use](#) due to the pandemic, most issues were recorded by participants as rising, with their feelings of loneliness going up by 65%, lack of connectedness 53%, alcohol use 48%, [drug](#) use 44%, anxiety 62%, and depression 64%.

Overall, an "alarming" 49% of respondents reported a great degree of loneliness.

Most respondents (80%) reported drinking alcohol, with 30% revealing harmful and dependent levels of drinking. 19% of respondents reported binge drinking at least weekly and 44% reported bingeing at least monthly.

The team hopes that the results will now be used to guide intervention efforts.

"Social prescribing, which draws from and promotes usage of community resources, also shows promise of improving social and psychological wellbeing," Professor Horigian adds.

"This could be positioned to then encourage service to others, bringing social comfort and reward as a result of connecting with others in need.

"These efforts, and others, can help to alleviate the problems of [loneliness](#) and its manifestations; yet it may take an integrated, multi-faceted, and concerted approach, rooted, and supported by [mental health](#) prevention and wellbeing promotion boosted by workforce development and research on intervention development, to readdress these trajectories."

More information: Viviana E. Horigian et al, Loneliness, Mental Health, and Substance Use among US Young Adults during COVID-19, *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs* (2020). [DOI: 10.1080/02791072.2020.1836435](https://doi.org/10.1080/02791072.2020.1836435)

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