

Depression and anxiety among first-year college students worsen during pandemic

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First-year college students are reporting symptoms of depression and anxiety significantly more often than they were before the coronavirus pandemic, according to a study by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

The study, published in the journal *PLOS ONE*, is based on surveys of 419 Carolina students, and reflects the challenge of colleges nationwide to support [student](#) well-being.

The study is unique among the growing reports of COVID-19's toll on [mental health](#): researchers followed the same group of first-year [college](#) students before and after the pandemic began. Plus students were asked about a broad range of issues to reveal remote instruction as a main stressor.

"First-year college students seem to be particularly struggling with social isolation and adapting to distanced learning," said lead study author Jane Cooley Fruehwirth, an associate professor in the UNC-Chapel Hill Department of Economics and a faculty fellow at the Carolina Population Center.

Using survey data, researchers found the prevalence of moderate to severe anxiety in first-year college students increased 40%, from 18.1% before the pandemic to 25.3% within four months after the pandemic began; and the prevalence of moderate to [severe depression](#) in first years increased by 48%, from 21.5% to 31.7%.

Hardest hit by depression were Black students, whose incidence of depression grew by 89%. Depression and anxiety increased dramatically among sexual and gender minority students.

For Hispanics and first-generation college students, feelings of social isolation declined from 24.2% to 17.1% and 35.3% to 27.4%, respectively as these students left the university and returned to their homes.

Addressing pandemic pressures

Fruehwirth collaborated with Siddhartha Biswas, a doctoral candidate in economics and Krista Perreira, a professor of social medicine at the UNC School of Medicine and a faculty fellow at the Carolina Population Center on the study conducted October 2019 to July 2020.

Their findings showed students' mental health struggles were associated with distanced learning and [social isolation](#) more so than other COVID-19 stressors such as work reduction or worries about coronavirus infecting them or their family and friends.

Fruehwirth said the results speak to the difficulties colleges face as they determine how to best help students who are relying on remote instruction during the pandemic.

One way colleges can help first-year students is by developing creative solutions to help them feel less socially isolated. Another is helping them succeed as remote learners.

"Here at Carolina, I've been encouraged to see all the initiatives from the Learning Center at UNC-Chapel Hill that offer coaching to students to adapt to the online learning environment," Fruehwirth said.

"The study underscores the importance of instructors to understand the toll this is taking on students and to know how important their efforts can be in finding ways to support those who are struggling."

Universities are providing services to address these needs. For example, at UNC-Chapel Hill where the study took place, on-campus services such as the UNC-Chapel Hill Counseling and Psychological Services offer therapy and mental health workshops, peer support and crisis services. The CAPS Multicultural Health Program is designed to meet the mental health needs of Black, indigenous and students of color.

"Even prior to the pandemic, colleges were struggling to find ways to deal with a growing mental health crisis on their campuses," Fruehwirth said. "Now with all the pressures of the [pandemic](#), resources are even tighter yet the mental health needs of students are growing. This problem isn't going to just go away, and it is important that we address this before students reach a crisis stage."

Provided by University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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