

Week of July 13, 2020

Behavioral Health Impact Situation Report

This situation report presents the potential behavioral health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic for Washington to inform planning efforts. The intended audience for this report includes response planners and organizations or individuals who are responding to or helping to mitigate the behavioral health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Purpose

This report summarizes data analyses conducted by the COVID-19 Behavioral Health Group's Impact & Capacity Assessment Task Force. These analyses assess the likely current and future impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health and the potential for substance use issues among Washingtonians.

Key Takeaways

- Survey data suggest that over 1.7 million and 1.2 million Washington adults are experiencing symptoms of anxiety and depression, respectively, on at least most days.
- Alcohol-related emergency department (ED) visits were statistically elevated for the past three weeks. There was an alert for drug overdose ED visits for the week ending on July 4.
- For the week of July 5, there were statistical alerts for Yakima County across all five ED visit indicators.
- The latest call volume data available for the Suicide Prevention Lifeline, Washington State Tobacco Quitline, and Washington Recovery Helpline show month-over-month increases.

Impact Assessment

This section summarizes data analyses that show the likely current and future impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health and potential for substance use issues among Washingtonians.

Syndromic Surveillance

Syndromic surveillance data are collected in near real-time from hospitals and clinics across Washington. Key data elements reported include patient demographic information, chief complaint, and coded diagnoses. This system is the only source of emergency department (ED) data for Washington. Statistical warnings (yellow dots) and alerts (red dots) are displayed when a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) algorithm detects a weekly count at least

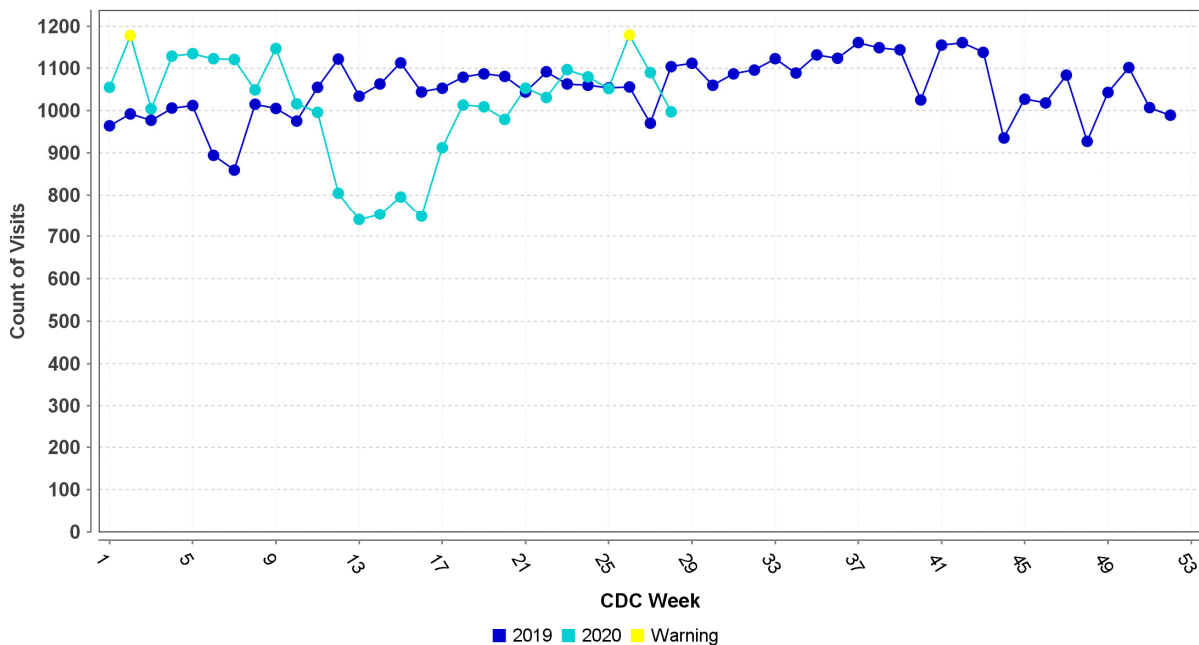
three standard deviations¹ above a 28-week average count, ending three weeks prior to the week with a warning ($p < 0.05$) or alert ($p < 0.01$).

Relative to 2019, there was a 40–50% decline in volume of visits across care settings that corresponds to the “Stay Home, Stay Healthy” order implemented on March 23 (CDC Week 13 in graphs below).² For this reason, indicators are presented as a total number of ED visits, rather than a percentage of ED visits for 2019 and 2020. Many counts for CDC Week 24 and Week 25 in 2020 are higher than previously reported due to recent data updates.

Psychological Distress

Updated data triggered a **warning for ED visits for psychological distress³ in CDC Week 26**. If similar updates occur to CDC Week 27 and Week 28 data, ED visit counts for psychological distress may be increasing.

Graph 1: Count of emergency department visits for psychological distress³ in Washington, by week: 2020 vs. 2019 (Source: CDC)



¹ Standard deviation: A measure of the amount of variation or dispersion of a set of values. Standard deviation is often used to measure the distance of a given value from the mean, or average, value of a data set.

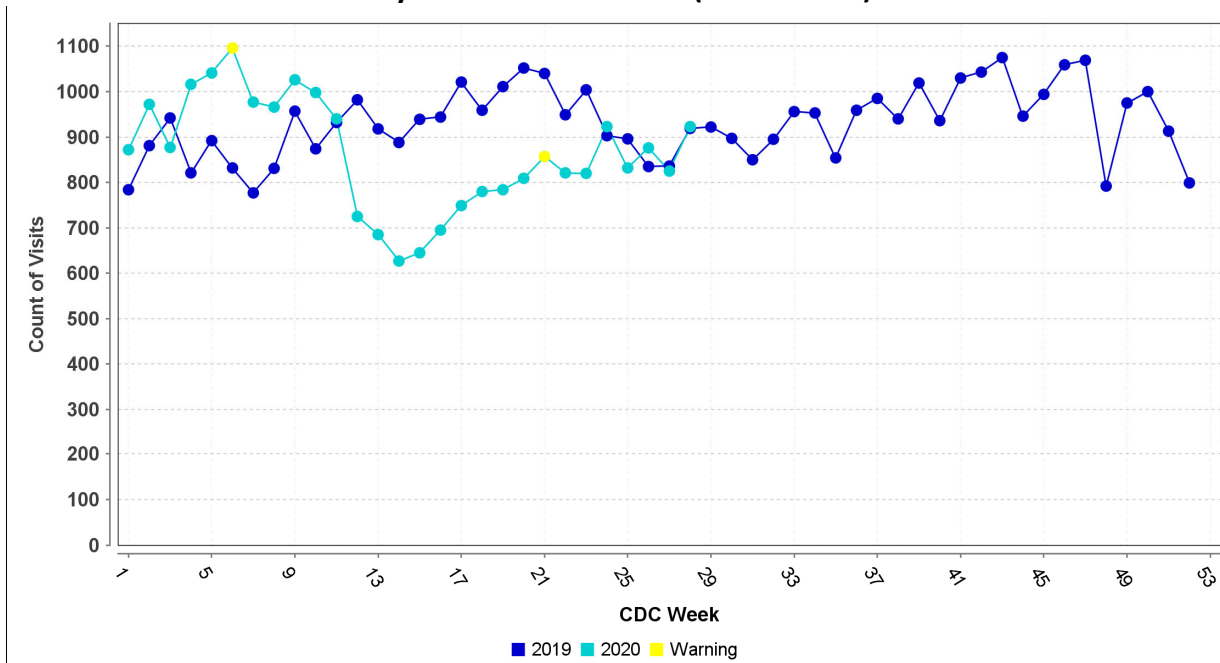
² Hartnett K. P., Kite-Powell A., DeVies J., et al. Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Emergency Department Visits — United States, January 1, 2019–May 30, 2020. MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep 2020;69:699–704. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6923e1>

³ Psychological distress in this context is considered a disaster-related syndrome comprised of panic, stress, and anxiety. It is indexed in the Electronic Surveillance System for the Early Notification of Community-based Epidemics (ESSENCE) platform as Disaster-related Mental Health v1. Full details are available at <https://knowledgerepository.syndromicsurveillance.org/disaster-related-mental-health-v1-syndrome-definition-committee>.

Suicidal Ideation and Suicide Attempts

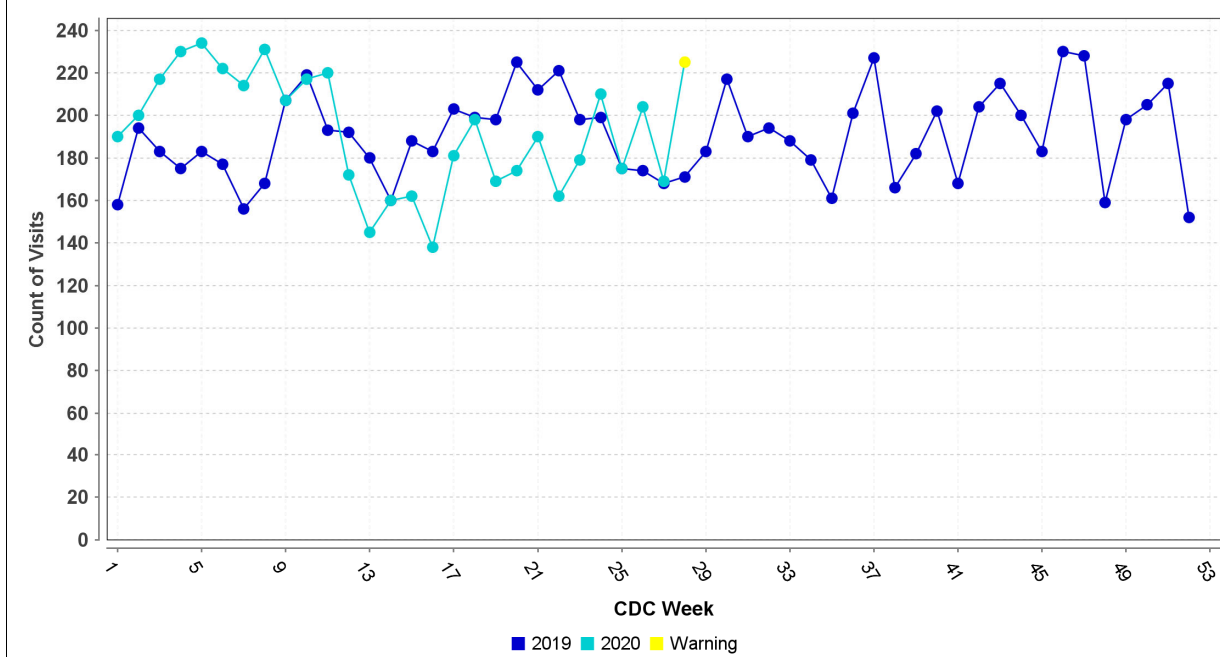
Although having steadily increased since March, ED visits for suicidal ideation have been comparable to 2019 levels in recent weeks (Graph 2). However, for the week of July 5 (CDC Week 28), there were **statistical alerts for ED visits for suicidal ideation among men and people identifying as Hispanic or Latino**. Alerts were also present for Ferry, Kittitas, and Yakima counties. In the previous week of June 28–July 4 (CDC Week 27), alerts were present for Lewis, Mason, Pacific, and Yakima counties.

Graph 2: Count of emergency department visits for suicidal ideation in Washington, by week: 2020 vs. 2019 (Source: CDC)



CDC Week 28 saw a **statistical warning for suicide attempts (Graph 3)**. Additionally, there were alerts for 10–19 and 70–79 year-olds and people identifying as Hispanic or Latino.

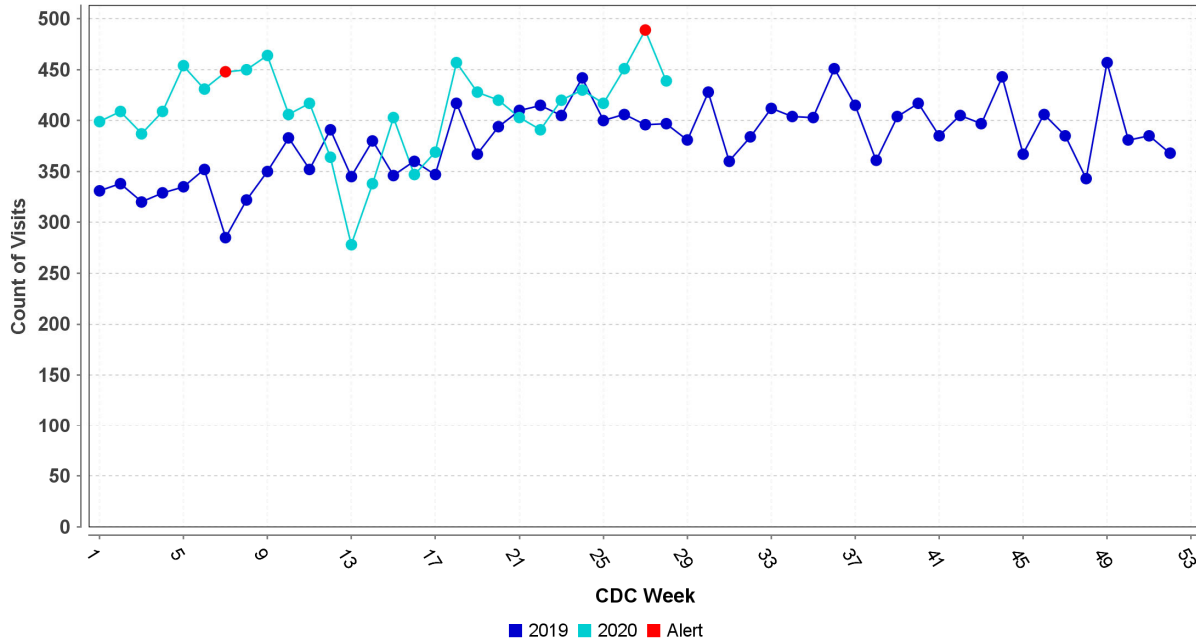
Graph 3: Count of emergency department visits for suicide attempts in Washington, by week: 2020 vs. 2019 (Source: CDC)



Substance Use — Drug Overdose and Alcohol-Related Emergency Visits

There was a statistical alert for ED visits related to overdose of any drug⁴ for the week of June 28–July 4 (CDC Week 27) with statewide counts reaching nearly 500, which is over 20% higher than the same week in 2019 (Graph 4). This increase in visits was associated with 30–39 year-olds, men, people identifying as American Indian/Alaska Native or Hispanic, and individuals in Lewis, San Juan, Walla Walla, and Yakima counties.

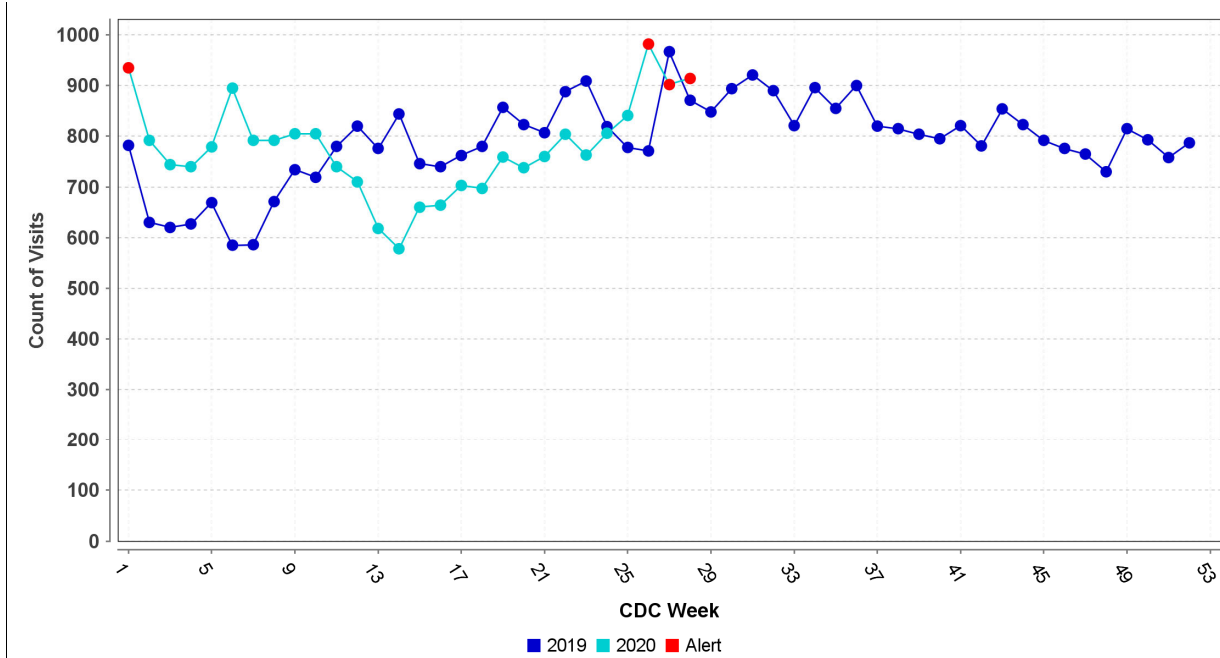
Graph 4: Count of emergency department visits for overdose by any drug⁴ in Washington, by week: 2020 vs. 2019 (Source: CDC)



⁴ This definition specifies overdoses for any drug, including heroin, opioid, and stimulants. It is indexed in the Electronic Surveillance System for the Early Notification of Community-Based Epidemics (ESSENCE) platform as CDC All Drug v1. Full details available at <https://knowledgerepository.syndromicsurveillance.org/cdc-all-drug-v1>.

Two weekly statistical alerts for alcohol-related ED visits were triggered since the week of June 21 (CDC Week 26) alert (Graph 5). These recent increases continue to be associated with men. The most recent increase in Week 28 is associated with 10–19 and 50–59 year-olds, people identifying as White, and people identifying as non-Hispanic/Latino.

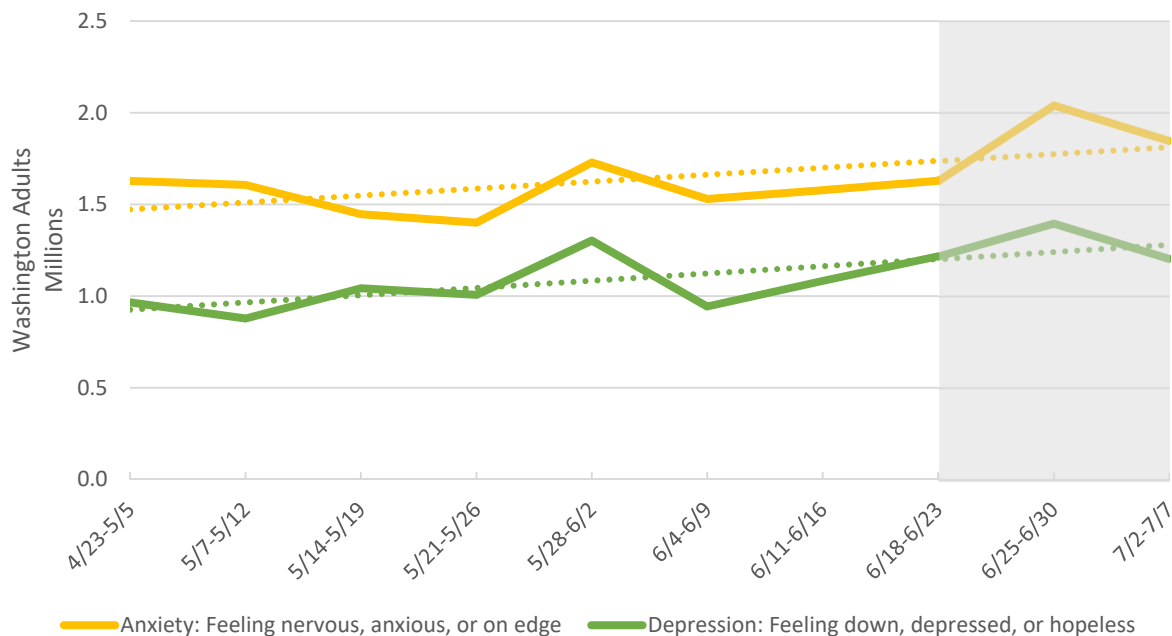
Graph 5: Count of alcohol-related emergency department visits in Washington, by week: 2020 vs. 2019 (Source: CDC)



General Surveillance — Symptoms of Anxiety and Depression

Weekly survey data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau suggest that **over 1.7 million Washington adults are experiencing symptoms of anxiety on at least most days and over 1.2 million are experiencing symptoms of depression on at least most days.** These represent approximate increases of 160,000 and 110,000 adults, respectively, since May. Survey data collection will continue through mid-July.⁵

Graph 6: Estimated Washington adults with feelings of anxiety and depression at least most days, by week: April 23–July 7 (Source: U.S. Census Bureau)

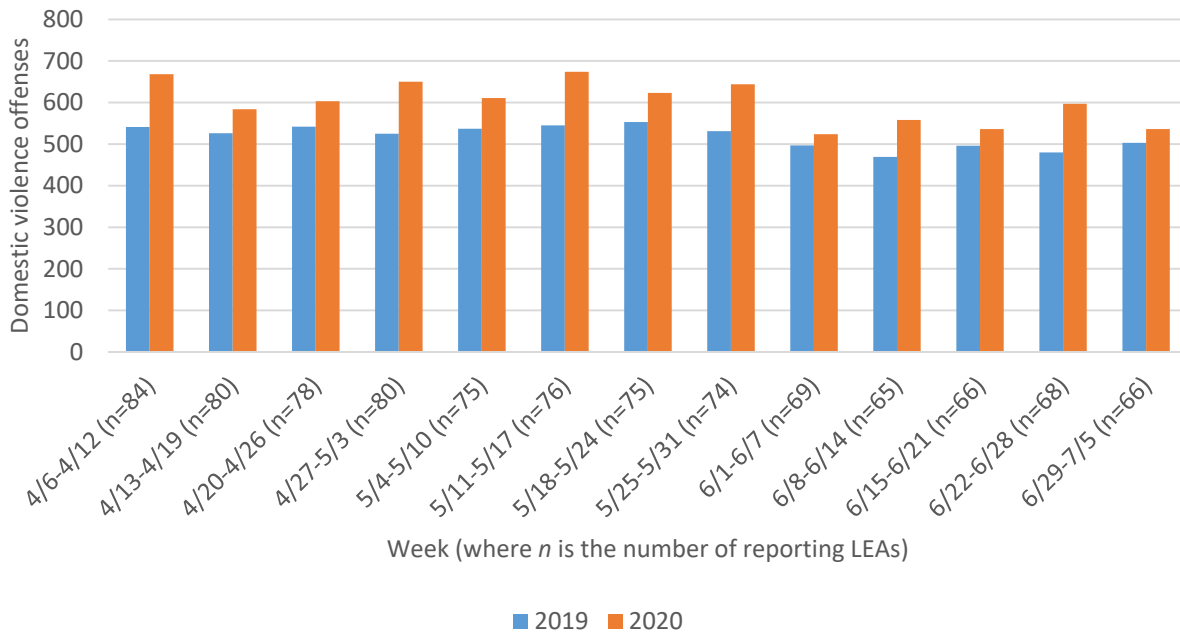


⁵ In May, the U.S. Census Bureau began measuring the social and economic impacts during the COVID-19 pandemic with a weekly Household Pulse survey of adults across the country. Four questions ask survey respondents how often they have experienced specific symptoms associated with anxiety and depression over the past week.

Crime — Domestic Violence

According to data reported by approximately 25% of law enforcement agencies (LEAs) to the Washington Association of Sheriffs and Police Chiefs (WASPC), **weekly domestic violence offenses were up roughly 14% year-over-year, on average, for the month of June.** This is a slight improvement over the April–May average of 18%. Meanwhile, other surveyed offenses – including theft, destruction of property, assault, and burglary – have been consistently lower than the corresponding weeks in 2019 (over 25% lower). However, early data for July suggest that while these other surveyed offenses are still well below 2019 levels, they are increasing. Future reports will describe these trends in greater detail.

Graph 7: Domestic violence offenses reported, by week: 2020 vs. 2019 (Source: WASPC)

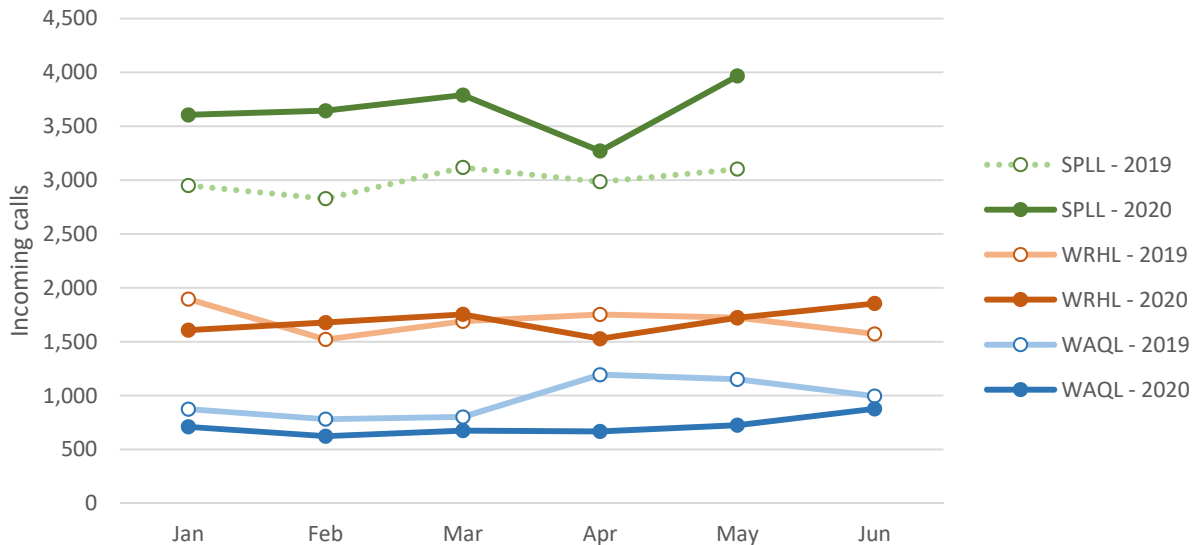


Telephonic Support Line Activity — Suicidality and Substance Use

The latest call volume data available for the Washington State Tobacco Quitline (WAQL), Washington Recovery Help Line (WRHL), and Suicide Prevention Lifeline (SPLL) all show month-over-month increases. Although calls to the WAQL were down 41% year-over-year in April and May combined, June WAQL call volume is comparable to that for 2019. Meanwhile, WRHL calls have steadily increased since April, averaging 10% monthly growth through June. Considered together, the data suggest that Washingtonians struggling with substance use are increasingly seeking support. In May, the SPLL received 21% more calls than in April. Data for January–April have been updated with additional call data⁶, and June SPLL data will be made available in a future report.

There is no update since the Week of June 22 Situation Report for data related to the Washington Poison Center. According to the Washington Poison Center, suspected suicide cases among 13–17 year-olds are up 4% from 2019 to 2020 for the period of January 1–June 10, which is greater than the 2% increase across all ages.

Graph 8: Incoming calls to telephonic support lines, by month: 2020 vs. 2019
(Source: Washington State Department of Health)



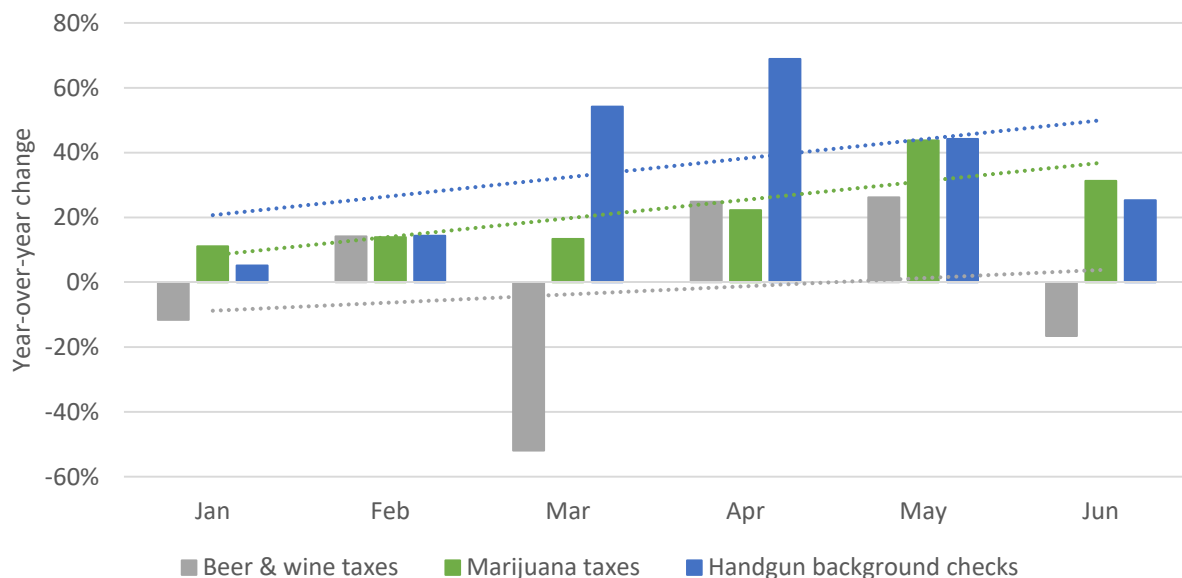
⁶ Additional SPLL call data were obtained for January–April 2020 since the previous report. Additionally, a modest call volume increase was anticipated beginning in January 2020 (i.e., before the COVID-19 outbreak) due to an increase in SPLL service area so, comparisons between 2020 and 2019 call volume should be made with caution.

Product Sales⁷ — Alcohol⁸ and Marijuana Taxes & Handgun Background Checks

The Liquor and Cannabis Board (LCB) summarizes monthly beer, wine, and marijuana tax collections, which may be used as a representation for sales of legal recreational substances and, by extension, potential for substance use issues. Additionally, federal background checks for handgun sales⁹ may represent access to firearms,¹⁰ which is a risk factor for suicide and other gun violence.¹¹

Monthly marijuana tax collections in the first half of 2020 were consistently higher than in 2019, while changes in year-over-year monthly beer and wine tax collections (combined) have fluctuated, but are generally increasing. Additionally, **federal background checks for handgun sales in Washington were 45% (roughly 39,000) higher for the period of March–June 2020 compared to the corresponding period in 2019**. However, the state’s increase is less than half of the overall United States increase (+109%).

Graph 9: Year-over-year change in select product sales indicators, by month: 2020 vs. 2019
(Sources: LCB, Federal Bureau of Investigation)



⁷ Previous reports presented these data as absolute counts of tax dollars and background checks. To ensure better comparability across products, this has been revised to an analysis of year-over-year change in counts, by month.

⁸ Additionally, data for Department of Revenue tax collections for liquor (spirits) are excluded from this week’s report because June data are not yet available.

⁹ From the Federal Bureau of Investigation: “It is important to note that the statistics within this chart represent the number of firearm background checks initiated through the NICS [National Instant Criminal Background Check System]. They do not represent the number of firearms sold. Based on varying state laws and purchase scenarios, a one-to-one correlation cannot be made between a firearm background check and a firearm sale.”

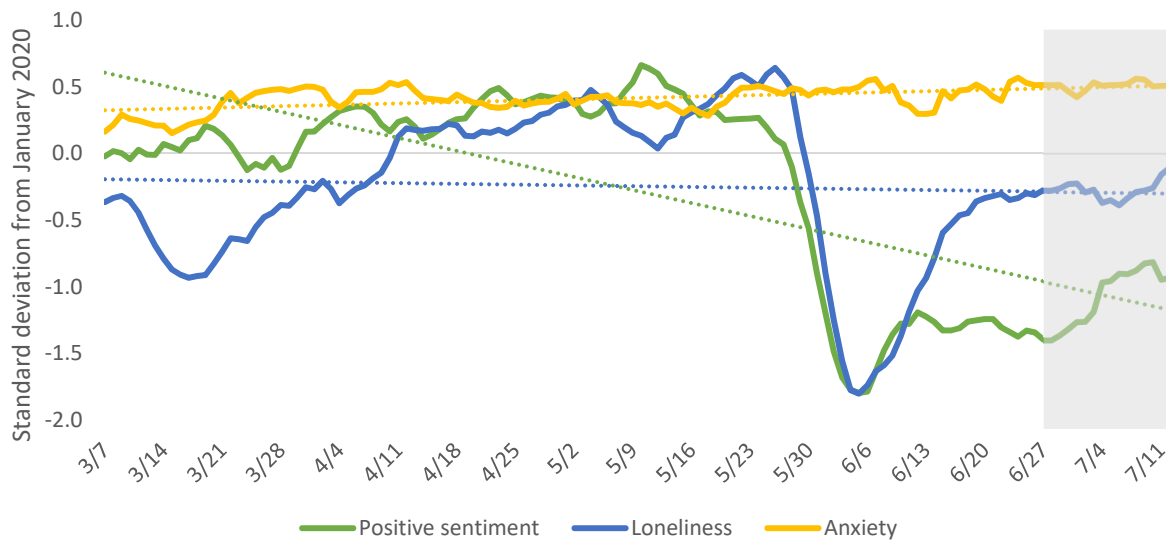
¹⁰ Nemerov, Howard Ross, Estimating Guns Sold by State (January 11, 2018). Available at SSRN: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3100289>

¹¹ Anglemyer, A., Horvath, T., Rutherford, G. The accessibility of firearms and risk for suicide and homicide victimization among household members: a systematic review and meta-analysis [published correction appears in *Ann Intern Med.* 2014 May 6;160(9):658-9]. *Ann Intern Med.* 2014;160(2):101-110. doi:10.7326/M13-1301

Social Media — Expressions of Positive Sentiment, Loneliness, and Anxiety

Since June 27, tweets^{12,13} geo-tagged to Washington suggest that **positive sentiment has generally increased, but remains nearly one standard deviation below pre-pandemic levels.** Meanwhile, loneliness is approaching pre-pandemic levels and anxiety appears stable at approximately half of one standard deviation above pre-pandemic levels (contrary to the surveillance data from the U.S. Census Bureau on p. 7).

Graph 8: 7-day moving averages of deviations in select expression measures^{12,13} relative to January 2020 baseline, by day: March 7, 2020–July 12, 2020 (Source: Penn Center for Digital Health)



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¹² Since January 2020, researchers at the Penn Center for Digital Health have been tracking “tweets” about the COVID-19 pandemic, analyzing language used by Twitter users to quantify the extent to which they reflect expressions of positive sentiment, loneliness, and anxiety. Although these measures have been made publicly available, the researchers included a disclaimer, stating that “the data are still being validated and are not ready for public policy decision making.”

¹³ Guntuku, S.C., Sherman, G., Stokes, D.C., et al. Tracking Mental Health and Symptom Mentions on Twitter During COVID-19. *J GEN INTERN MED* (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11606-020-05988-8>