

Week of May 24, 2021

COVID-19 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 any organization that is 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 potential for substance use issues among Washingtonians.

Please note this report is based on the most recent available data from various sources. As such, different sections may present information for different reporting periods.

Key Takeaways

- **For the most recent reporting period for which data are available ([CDC Week¹ 18](#): week of May 2), 5 of 5 syndromic indicators increased from the previous reporting period.**
 - Please note that updated data for the syndromic indicators were not available at the time this report was produced.
 - It should be noted that people in need of both behavioral and physical healthcare may have changed their care-seeking behaviors due to concerns about COVID-19. **Comparisons of one year to another should be interpreted with caution.**
 - According to a survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, the number of Washington **adults reporting frequent symptoms of anxiety (1.3 million) and depression (875,000) increased** from the previous reporting period.

¹ <https://wwwn.cdc.gov/nndss/document/2020.pdf>

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

The Department of Health collects syndromic surveillance data in near real-time from hospitals and clinics across Washington. The data are always subject to updates. Key data elements reported include patient demographic information, chief complaint, and coded diagnoses. This [data collection system](#)² is the only source of emergency department (ED) data for Washington. Statistical warnings and alerts are raised when a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) algorithm detects a weekly count at least three standard deviations³ above a 28-day average count, ending three weeks prior to the week with a warning or alert. While both warnings and alerts indicate more visits than expected, an alert indicates more caution may be warranted.⁴ These warnings or alerts will be mentioned within each respective syndrome section.

Analysis conducted by the Washington State Department of Health and the Northwest Tribal Epidemiology Center found 9,443 misclassified visits in Washington hospitals from May 15 – September 15, 2020. The visits in question should have been classified as American Indian/Alaska Native and represent a 26.8% misclassification rate during that time period.

As of the Week of October 12, 2020 Situation Report (Situation Report 13), **visits of interest per 10,000 ED visits replaced visit count graphs**. This new measure can help provide insights into: behavioral health impacts since the implementation of the “Stay Home, Stay Healthy” order from March 23, 2020 (CDC Week 13), seasonal shifts year-over-year,⁵ new visit trends due to COVID-19 symptoms and diagnosis, perceptions of disease transmission and risk, as well as the relative frequency of these indicators for 2019 and 2020. An additional feature of these graphs is the “average weekly difference” in the lower right-hand corner. This feature is a measure of the variation in the weekly volume of visits and allows readers to compare both the year-over-year averages for a particular week, along with the weekly visit fluctuations, to better assess demand for care and care-seeking behaviors.

Because the volume of visits across care settings varied widely during 2020 and to date in 2021, rates presented in this report may not reflect the true magnitude and direction of trends for behavioral health conditions and should be interpreted cautiously.

² <https://www.doh.wa.gov/ForPublicHealthandHealthcareProviders/HealthcareProfessionsandFacilities/PublicHealthMeaningfulUse/RHINO>

³ 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 average value of a data set.

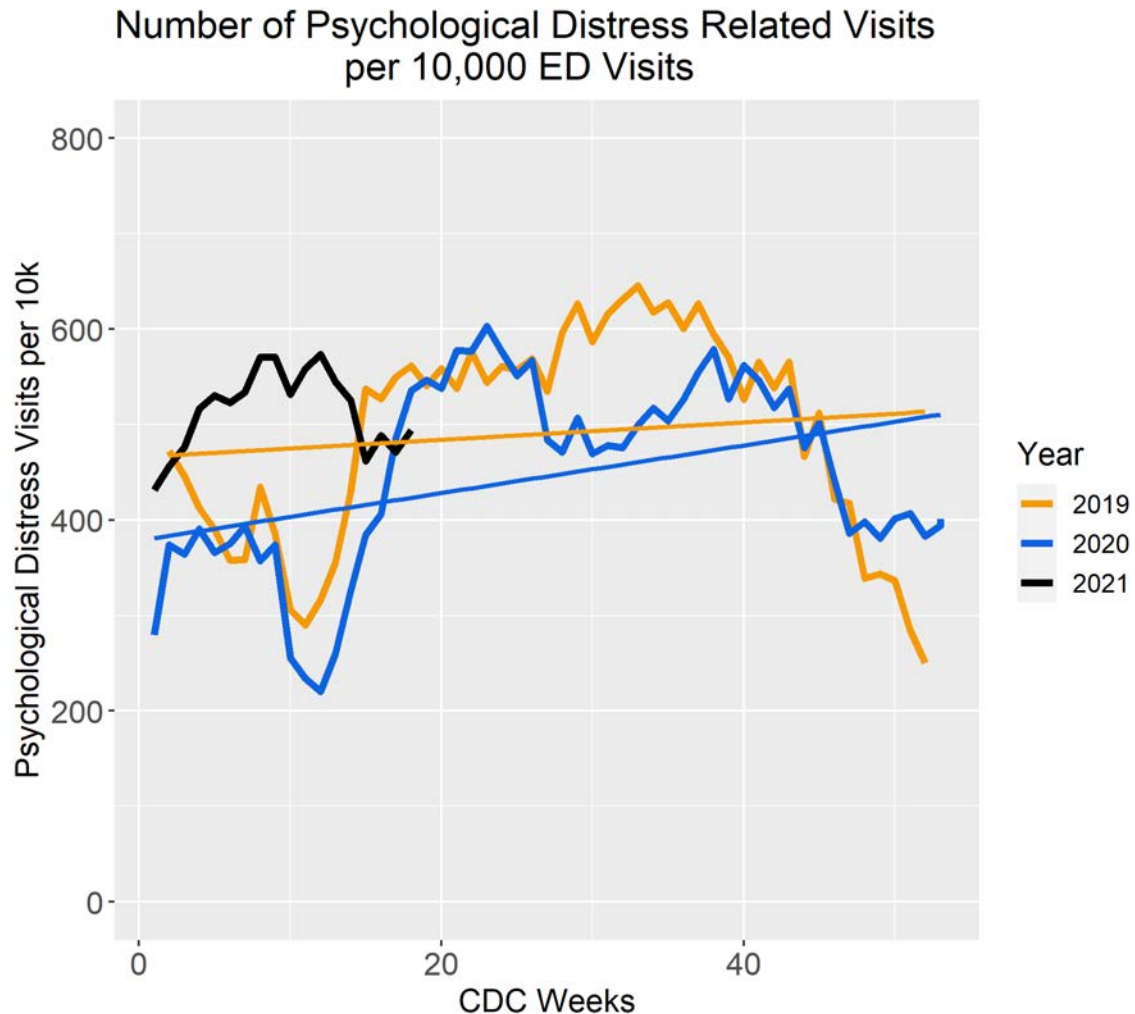
⁴ A warning is determined by statistical analysis using p-values from 0.01 – 0.05, while an alert is determined by statistical analysis using p-values of less than 0.01.

⁵ Year-over-year: The comparison of two or more years, specifically 2021 to 2019 and 2020.

Psychological Distress

During **CDC Week 18 (week of May 2)**, the relative reported rate of ED visits for psychological distress⁶ **increased from the previous reporting period** and is lower than the rates in the corresponding weeks of 2019 and 2020 (Graph 1). **No statistical warnings or alerts were issued.**

Graph 1: Relative count of ED visits for psychological distress in Washington, by week: 2019, 2020, and 2021 to date (Source: CDC ESSENCE)



Average Weekly Difference between 2020 and 2019 Visit Counts: -322.5 per 10,000

Source: CDC National Syndromic Surveillance Program

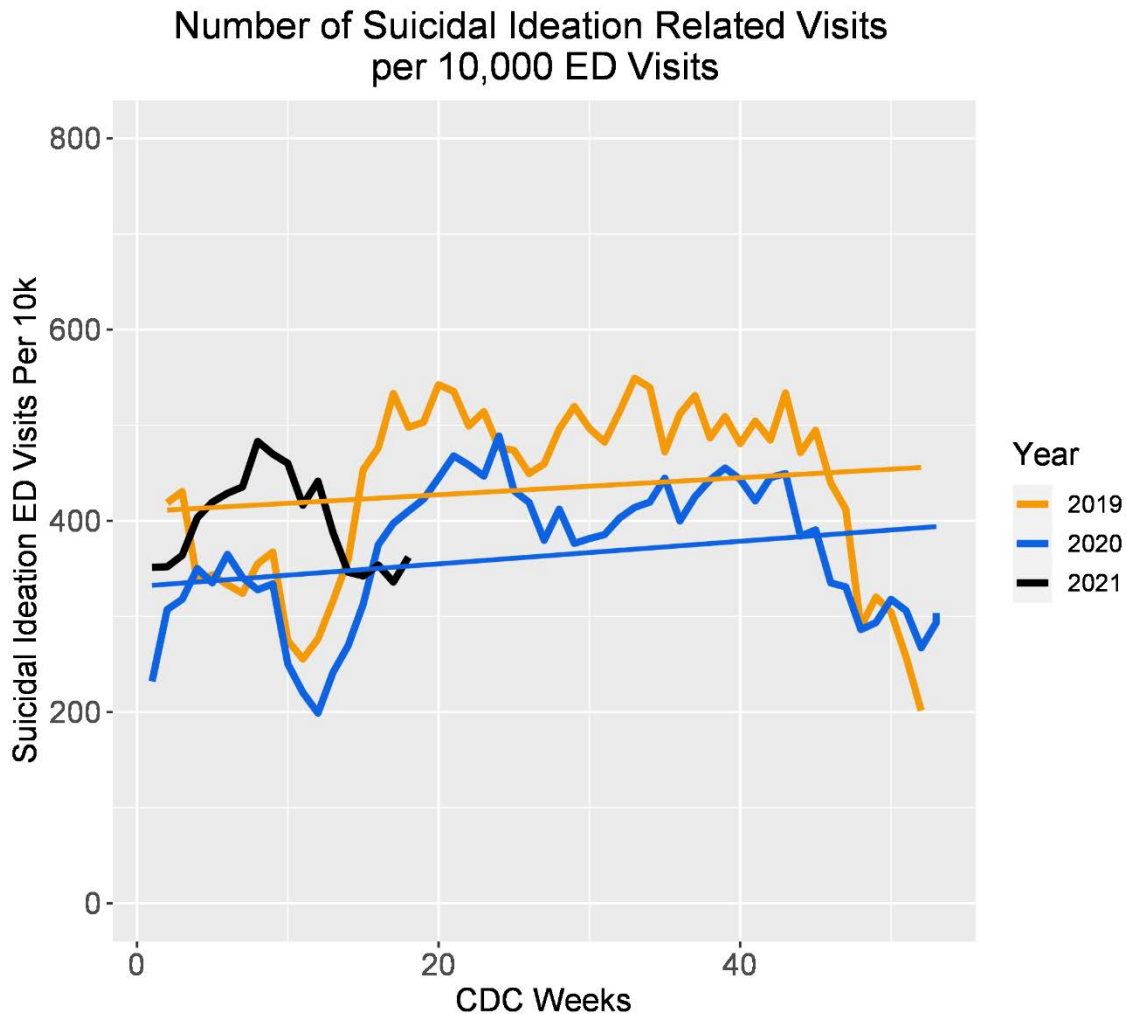
Note: While 2021 is displayed, more data points are needed to showcase average weekly differences among all three years.

⁶ 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-subcommittee>.

Suicidal Ideation and Suspected Suicide Attempts

During **CDC Week 18 (week of May 2)**, the relative reported rate of ED visits for suicidal ideation **increased from the previous reporting period** and is lower than the rates in the corresponding weeks of 2019 and 2020 (Graph 2). **No statistical warnings or alerts were issued.**

Graph 2: Relative count of ED visits for suicidal ideation in Washington, by week: 2019, 2020, and 2021 to date (Source: CDC ESSENCE)



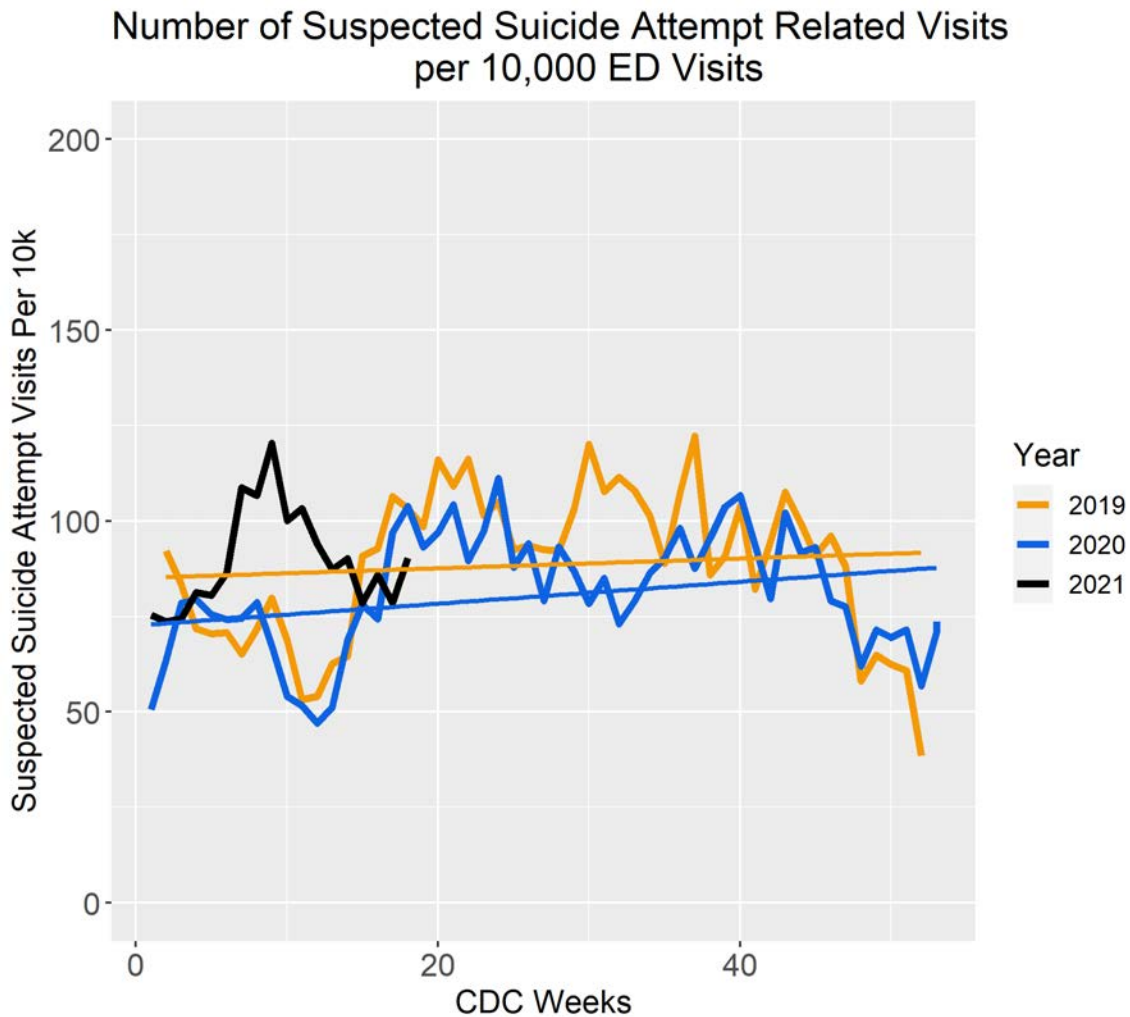
Average Weekly Difference between 2020 and 2019 Visit Counts: -303.8 per 10,000

Source: CDC National Syndromic Surveillance Program

Note: While 2021 is displayed, more data points are needed to showcase average weekly differences among all three years.

During **CDC Week 18 (week of May 2)**, the relative reported rate of ED visits for suspected suicide attempts **increased from the previous reporting period** and is lower than the rates in the corresponding weeks of 2019 and 2020 (Graph 3). Data regarding suspected suicide attempt should be interpreted with caution. The current CDC definition for suspected suicide attempt, due to its broad inclusion of intentional self-harm behaviors that may or may not be interpreted as a suicidal act, could artificially inflate both the count and rate of such visits. **No statistical warnings or alerts were issued.**

Graph 3: Relative count of ED visits for suspected suicide attempts in Washington, by week: 2019, 2020, and 2021 to date (Source: CDC ESSENCE)

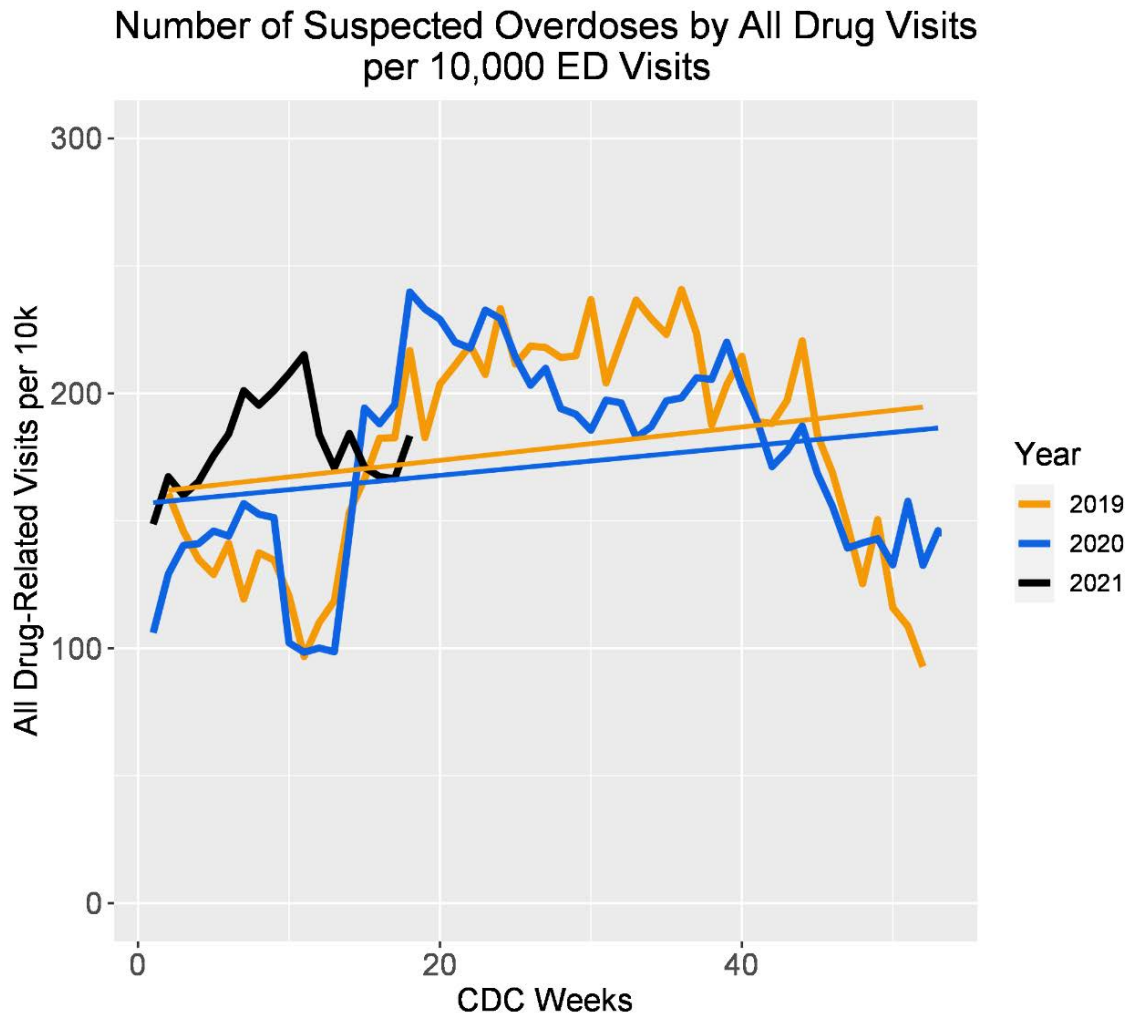


Average Weekly Difference amongst 2020 and 2019 Visit Counts: -60.4 per 10,000
 Source: CDC National Syndromic Surveillance Program
 Note: While 2021 is displayed, more data points are needed to showcase average weekly differences among all three years.

Substance Use – Drug Overdose and Alcohol-Related Emergency Visits

During **CDC Week 18 (week of May 2)**, the relative reported rate of all drug⁷-related ED visits **increased from the previous reporting period reporting** and is lower than the rates in the corresponding weeks of 2019 and 2020 (Graph 4). **No statistical warnings or alerts were issued.**

Graph 4: Relative count of all drug-related ED visits in Washington, by week: 2019, 2020, and 2021 to date (Source: CDC ESSENCE)



Average Weekly Difference between 2020 and 2019 Visit Counts: -129.6 per 10,000

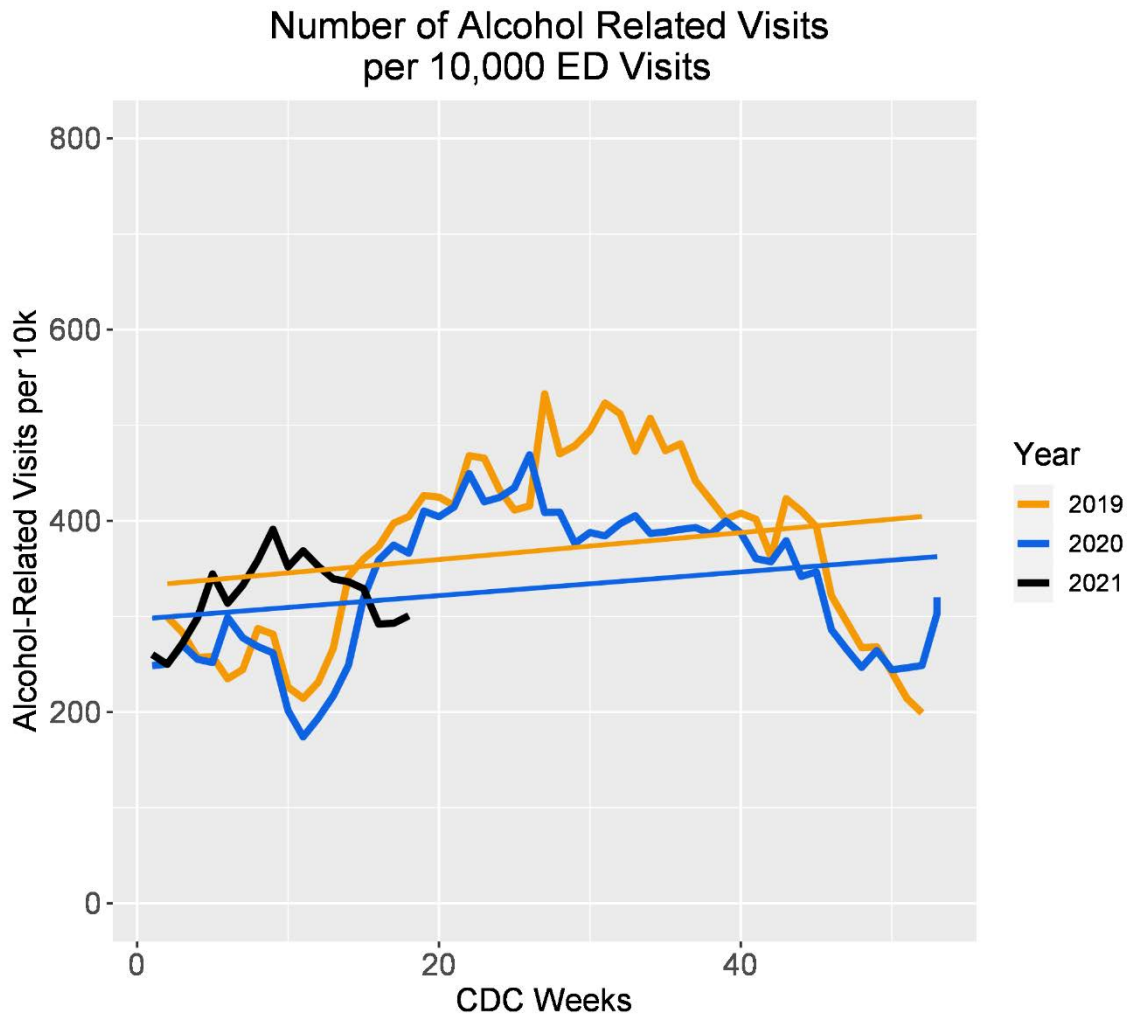
Source: CDC National Syndromic Surveillance Program

Note: While 2021 is displayed, more data points are needed to showcase average weekly differences among all three years.

⁷ All drug: 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>.

During **CDC Week 18 (week of May 2)**, the relative reported rate of alcohol-related ED visits **increased slightly from the previous reporting period** and is lower than the rates in the corresponding weeks of 2019 and 2020 (Graph 5). **No statistical warnings or alerts were issued.** It should be noted that ED visits per 10,000 for alcohol remained somewhat stable in 2020, while there was a several week period of sustained decreases in visits in 2019. This has resulted in a slight convergence in visit counts between 2019 and 2020 data.

Graph 5: Relative count of alcohol-related ED visits in Washington, by week: 2019, 2020, and 2021 to date (Source: CDC ESSENCE)



Average Weekly Difference between 2020 and 2019 Visit Counts: -283.4 per 10,000

Source: CDC National Syndromic Surveillance Program

Note: While 2021 is displayed, more data points are needed to showcase average weekly differences among all three years.

General Surveillance

Symptoms of Anxiety and Depression

[Survey data](#) collected by the U.S. Census Bureau for April 28 – May 10, 2021 show **an increase in both anxiety (14%) and depression (9%)** among adults in Washington, compared to the previous reporting period of April 14 – 26, 2021 (Graph 6).⁸ In the most recent reporting period represented below, **approximately 1.3 million adults in Washington reported symptoms of anxiety** on all or most days of the previous week, while **approximately 875,000 reported the same frequency of symptoms of depression**. Please note that the same respondent may have reported frequent symptoms of both anxiety and depression, and these numbers are not cumulative. For these measures, the standard error suggests that the inaccuracy of estimates may be around 7.4% above or below the numbers previously mentioned. This survey data is not in any way related to the data presented in previous sections.

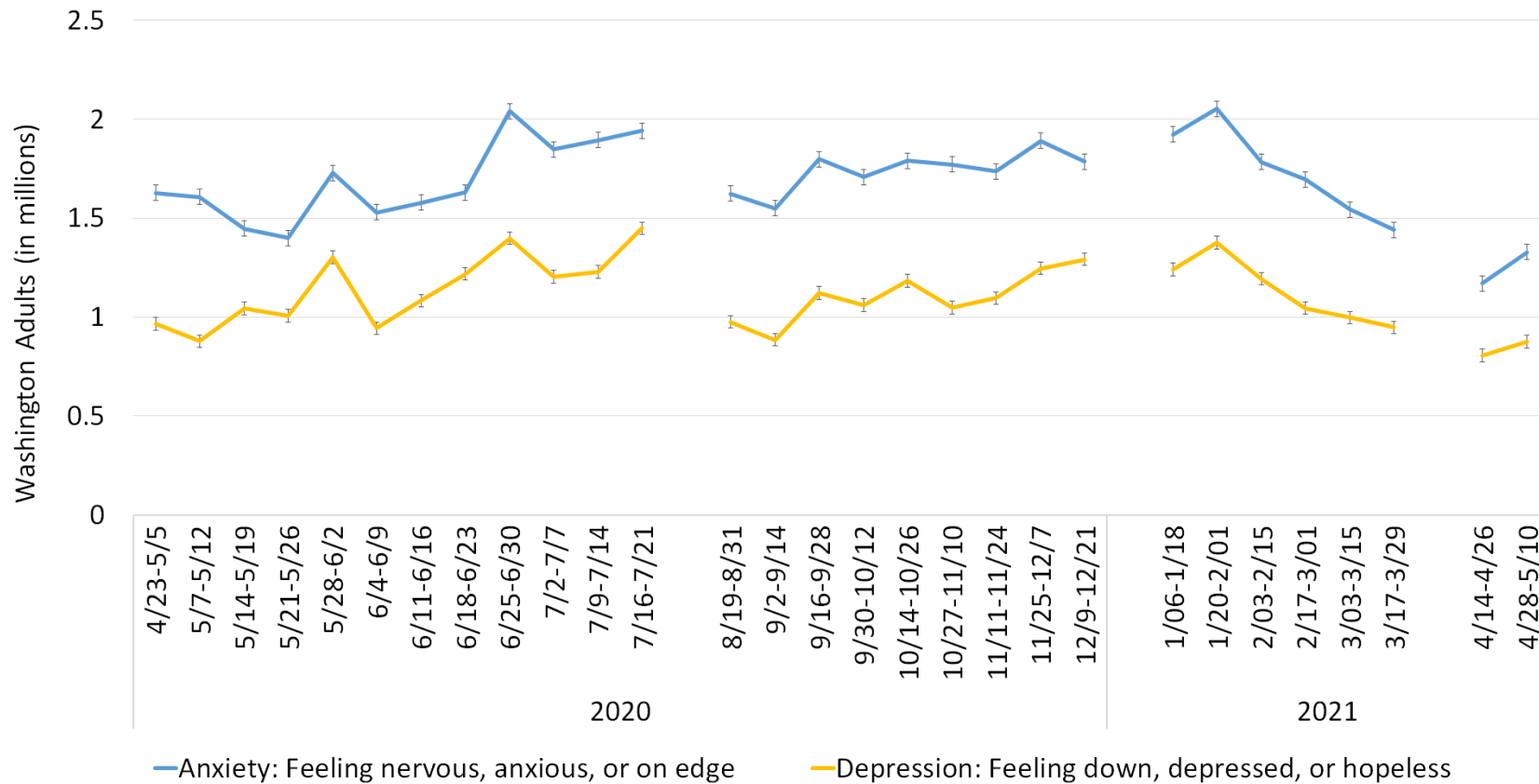
Additionally, the April 28 – May 10 survey data on anxiety and depression measures continue to indicate an inverse relationship between age and frequency of symptoms. **In other words, the younger someone is, the greater their frequency of reporting anxiety and depression symptoms.** Respondents ages 18 – 29 reported the highest rate of frequent symptoms of anxiety (40%) and depression (31%).

Those who live in households earning \$25,000 to \$35,000 per year, as well as those in households earning \$35,000 to \$50,000 per year, reported the highest rate of frequent symptoms of anxiety (39%), while those in households earning less than \$25,000 per year reported the second highest rate (33%). A similar pattern emerged for frequent symptoms of depression, with those in households earning \$35,000 to \$50,000 per year reporting the highest rate (35%), and those in households earning less than \$25,000 per year reporting the second highest rate (33%).

Those who identified as female have an increased symptom reporting rate for anxiety (29% for females, compared to 25% for males) and depression (22% for females, compared to 19% for males).

⁸ In May, the U.S. Census Bureau began measuring the social and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic with a weekly Household Pulse survey of adults across the country. The survey asks questions related to various topics, such as how often survey respondents have experienced specific symptoms associated with diagnoses of generalized anxiety disorder or major depressive disorder over the past week, as well as services sought. Additional details about the survey can be found at <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/covid19/pulse/mental-health.htm>.

**Graph 6: Estimated Washington adults with feelings of anxiety and depression at least most days, by week:
April 23, 2020 – May 10, 2021 (Source: U.S. Census Bureau)**



Note: For the period of July 21 – August 19, 2020, census data was not available and thus, any trends during this point are an artifact of analysis. Additionally, the U.S. Census Bureau briefly paused data collection for the periods of December 23, 2020 – January 3, 2021 and March 30 – April 14, 2021.

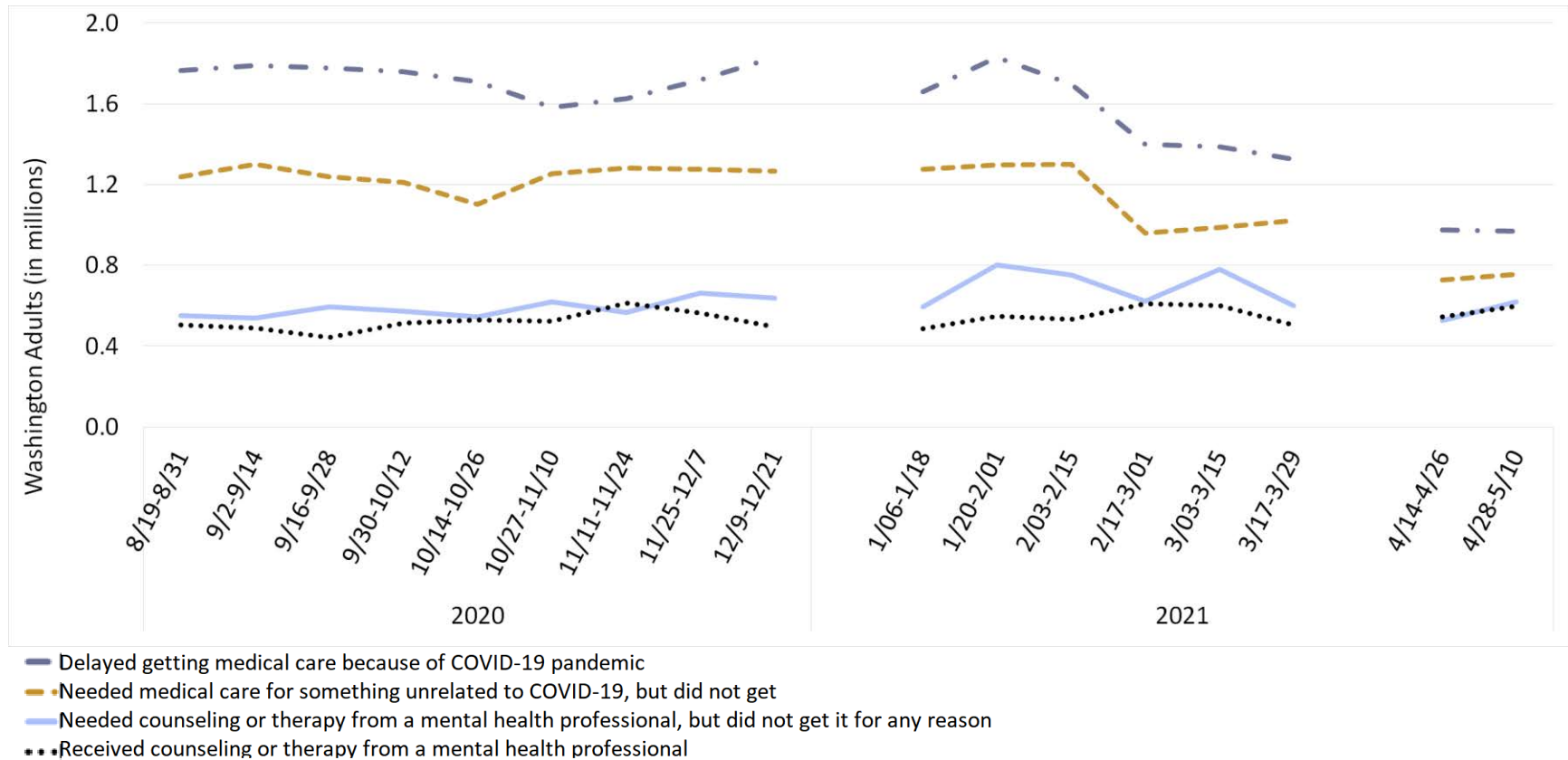
Care-Seeking Behavior

[Survey data](#)⁹ collected by the U.S. Census Bureau for August 19, 2020 – May 10, 2021 show the number of adults in Washington who received medical care and counseling, as well as the number who delayed or did not receive care (Graph 7). Compared to the previous reporting period of April 14 – 26, 2021, **more people reported needing therapy or counseling but not receiving it for any reason (13%)**.

For these measures, the standard error suggests that the inaccuracy of estimates may be around 5.6% above or below the numbers previously mentioned.

⁹ <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/covid19/pulse/mental-health-care.htm>

**Graph 7: Estimated Washington adults who received or delayed medical care or counseling, by week:
August 19, 2020 – May 10, 2021 (Source: U.S. Census Bureau)**

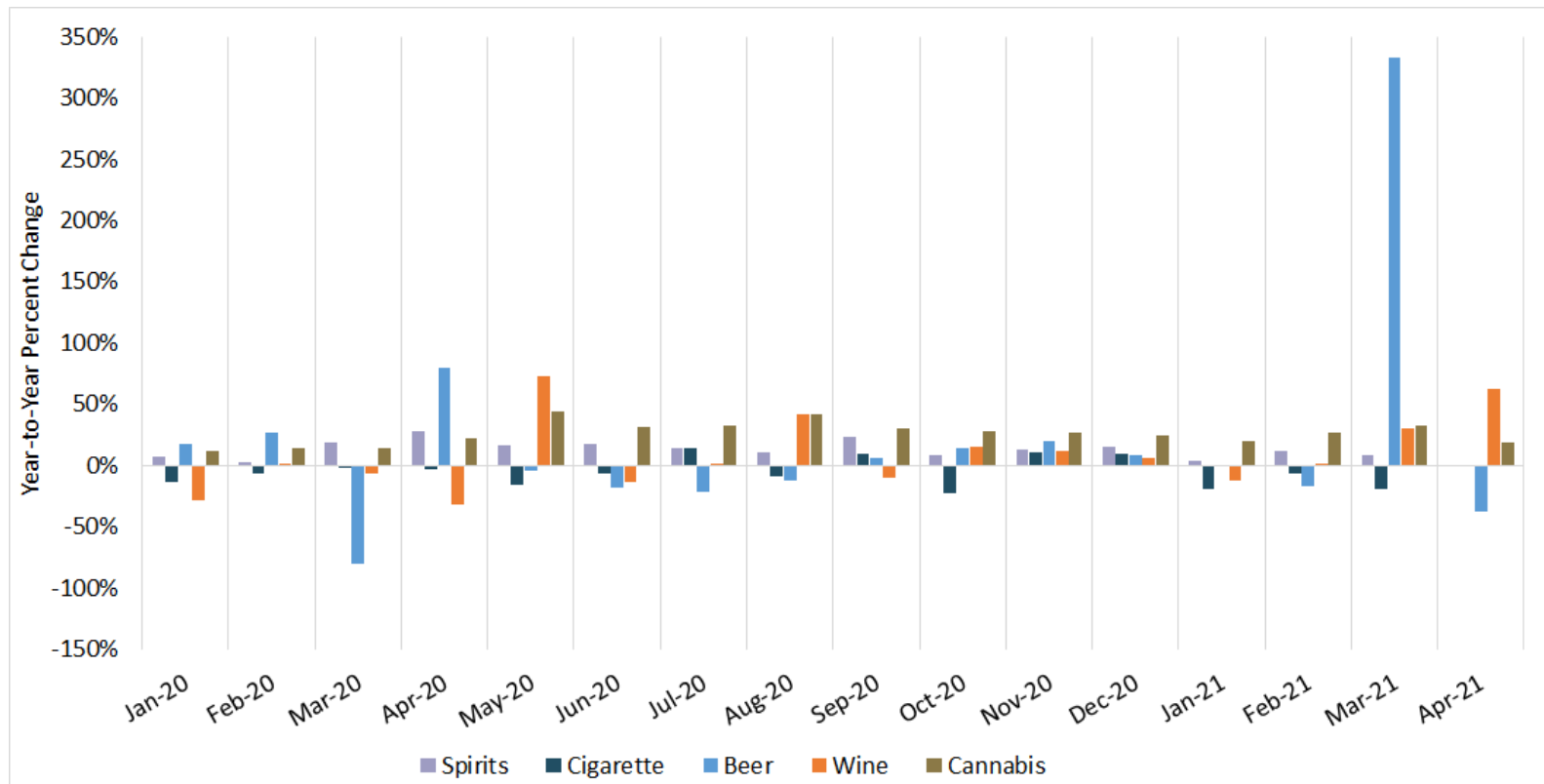


Note: The U.S. Census Bureau began this data collection in August 2020 and paused briefly for the periods of December 23, 2020 – January 3, 2021 and March 30 – April 14, 2021.

Product Sales – Alcohol, Cannabis, and Cigarette Taxes

The Washington State Liquor and Cannabis Board (LCB) and the Washington State Department of Revenue (DOR) summarize monthly tax collections, which may be used as a representation of sales of legal recreational substances and by extension, potential for substance use issues. Monthly cannabis tax collections were consistently higher in 2020 than in 2019, as well as in early 2021 compared to 2020 (Graph 8). Similarly, sales of spirits were consistently higher in 2020 than in 2019, while cigarette sales fluctuated. Note that on January 1, 2021, the legal age to purchase cigarettes in Washington increased from 18 to 21.

Graph 8: Year-over-year percent change in select product sales indicators, by month: 2020 and 2021 to date (Source: LCB, DOR)



Note: Timing of LCB revenue collection can impact LCB data.

NICS Background Checks – Firearms and Handguns

The National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS), operated by the FBI, requires a national namecheck system for federal firearms licensees (FFL). Federal background checks for gun sales may represent access to firearms, which is a risk factor for suicide and other gun violence.^{10,11,12,13} Nationally and in Washington, the year-over-year percent change of **firearm background checks** fluctuated in the first half of 2020 but maintained an increase from July 2020 to February 2021. In the same time period, Washington showed a higher percent change of firearm background checks compared to the rest of the United States in all but one month. In April 2021, Washington showed a year-over-year increase in the number of background checks, similar to the rest of the United States (Graph 9).

Overall, the year-over-year percent change of **handgun background checks** has been higher in 2020 than in 2019, with June and July showing the greatest year-over-year monthly increases. Similar to firearms, Washington showed a higher percent change of handgun background checks from July to December 2020 as compared to the rest of the United States, and again showed a greater percent change in February 2021. While this does not account for a higher absolute number of handgun background checks, this finding reveals an increase of background checks from 2019 to early 2021. In April 2021, similar to March 2021, there was a year-over-year decrease at both the state and national level (Graph 10).

Potential social and political impacts, such as protests in the spring and summer of 2020 and contentious federal elections and subsequent election-related events (November 2020 through January 2021), could be affecting the number of firearm and handgun background checks. Specific to Washington, July 2020 introduced legislative updates on firearm regulations, such as new limitations on where firearms may be carried or stored.

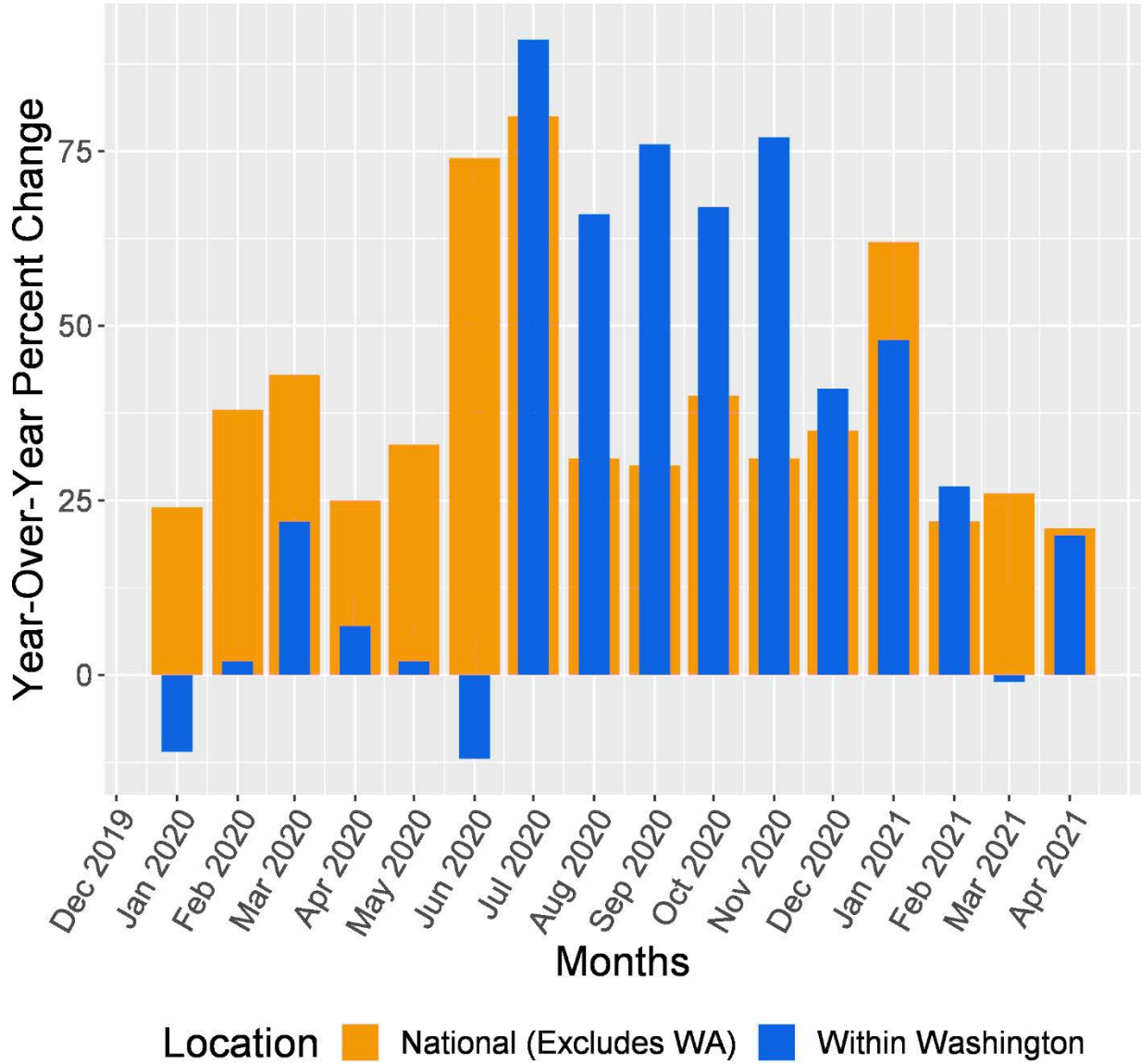
¹⁰ From the Federal Bureau of Investigation: “It is important to note that the statistics within this chart represent the number of firearm background checks initiated through the NICS [National Instant Criminal Background Check System]. They do not represent the number of firearms sold. Based on varying state laws and purchase scenarios, a one-to-one correlation cannot be made between a firearm background check and a firearm sale.”

¹¹ Nemerov, H. R. (2018). Estimating Guns Sold by State. SSRN: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3100289>

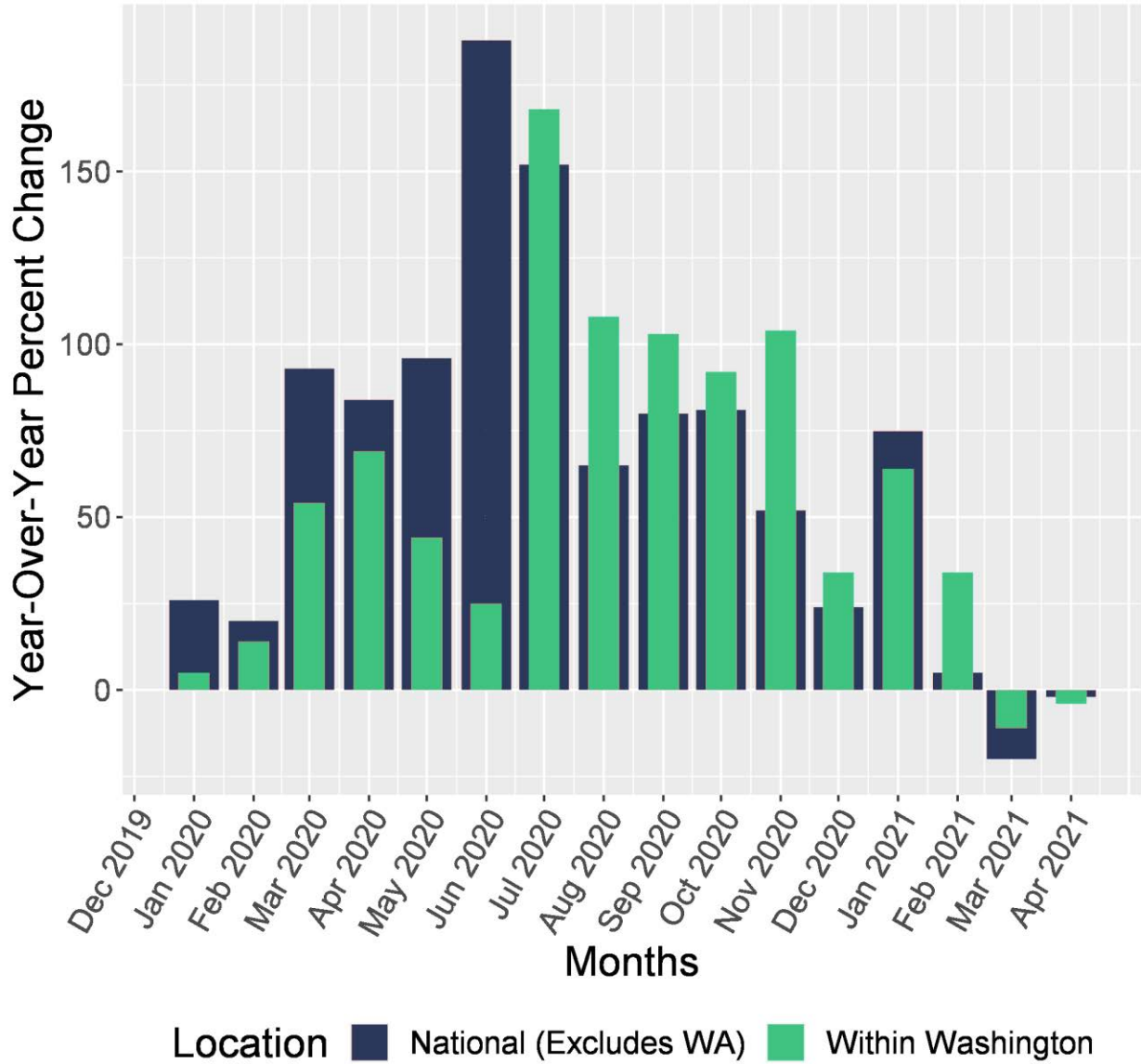
¹² Anglemeyer, A., Horvath, T., & Rutherford, G. (2014). The accessibility of firearms and risk for suicide and homicide victimization among household members: a systematic review and meta-analysis [published correction appears in *Ann Intern Med*. 2014 May 6. 160(9), 658-9]. *Ann Intern Med*, 160(2), 101-110. doi:10.7326/M13-1301

¹³ Saadi, A., Choi, K. R., Takada, S., & Zimmerman, F. J. (2020). The impact of gun violence restraining order laws in the US and firearm suicide among older adults: a longitudinal state-level analysis, 2012–2016. *BMC Public Health*, 20, 1-8.

**Graph 9: Percent change of NICS firearm background checks, by month:
2019, 2020, and 2021 (Source: FBI)**



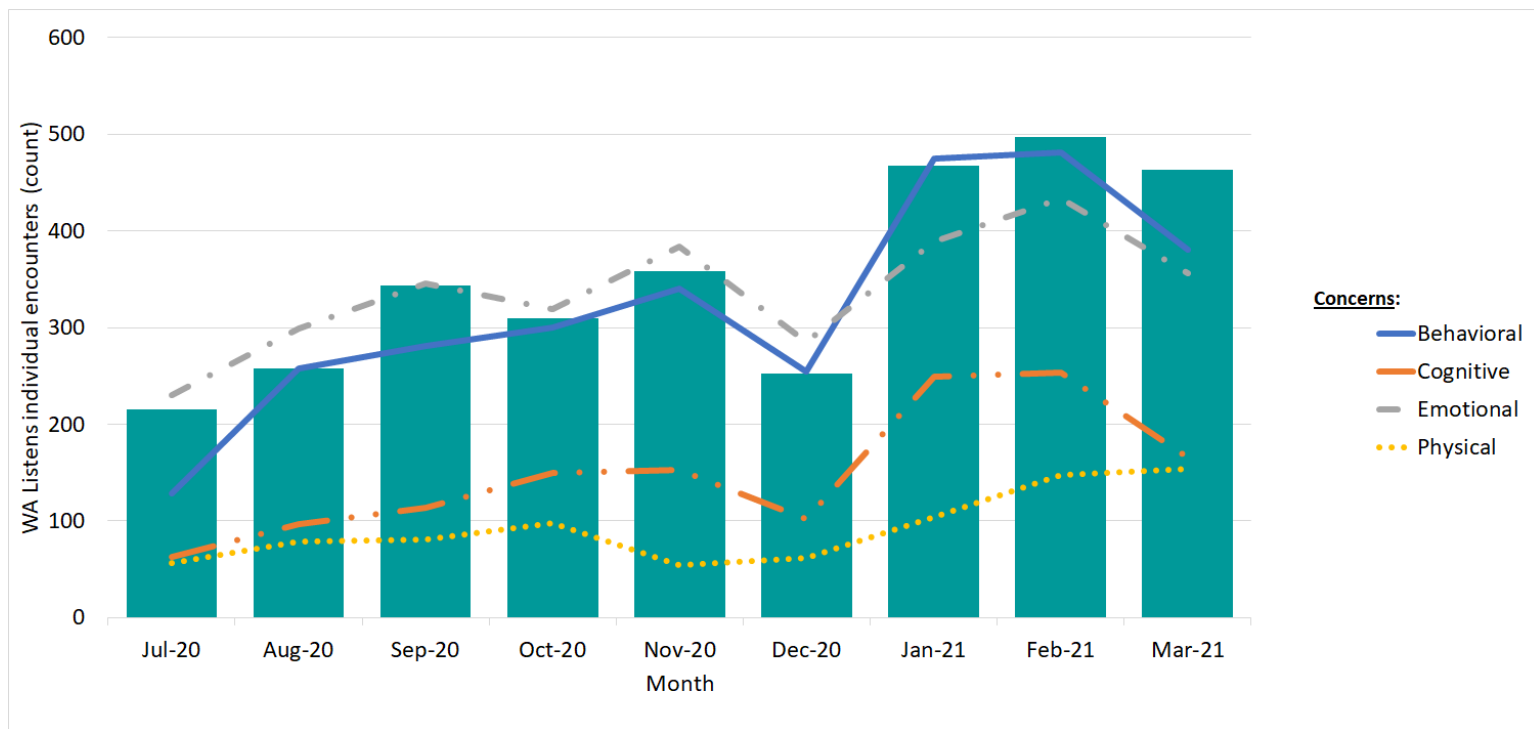
Graph 10: Percent change of NICS handgun background checks, by month: 2019, 2020, and 2021 (Source: FBI)



Telephonic Support Lines – Service Volume

[Washington \(WA\) Listens](https://waportal.org/partners/home/WaListens)¹⁴ is a free, anonymous service that offers non-clinical behavioral health support for both individual and group encounters. Additionally, WA Listens provides referral information to local resources based on the needs expressed. Since its inception in July 2020, a total of 3,164 WA Listens individual encounters have been completed (Graph 11). For **gender, age, and race** information on **individual encounters** in March 2021, see Table 1.

Graph 11: Total count of WA Listens individual calls and concerns, by month
(Source: Washington State Health Care Authority [HCA])



Note: Individuals can call about more than one concern, including multiple of the same type.

¹⁴ <https://waportal.org/partners/home/WaListens>

Table 1: Gender, age, and race of March 2021 WA Listens survivors (Source: HCA)

Gender	Count (%)
Female	252 (51.2%)
Male	237 (54.4%)

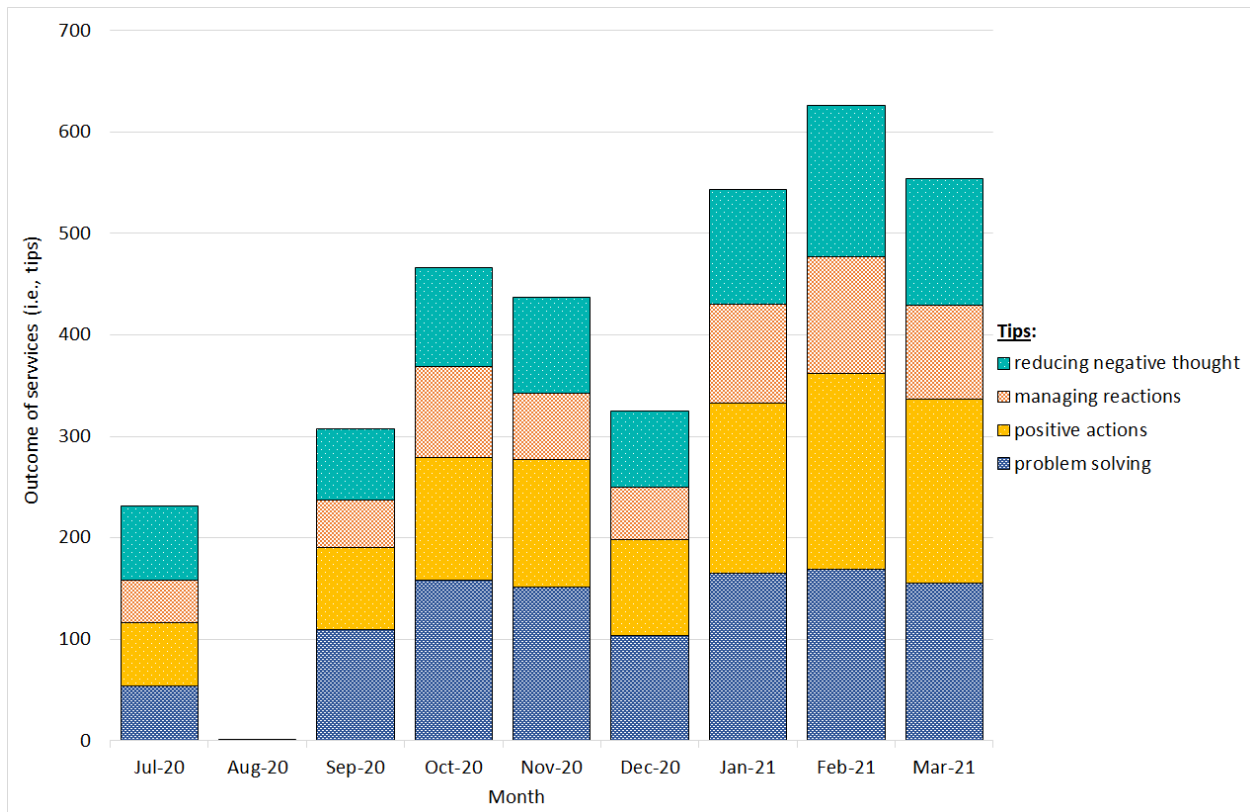
Age	Count (%)
< = 17	10 (1.7%)
18 – 39	152 (32.8%)
40 – 64	193 (41.7%)
> = 65	136 (29.4%)

Race	Count (%)
Other	9 (1.9%)
White	260 (56.2%)
Did not report	210 (45.4%)

Note: Gender, age, and race are not mutually exclusive (individuals can report more than one gender, age, and race).

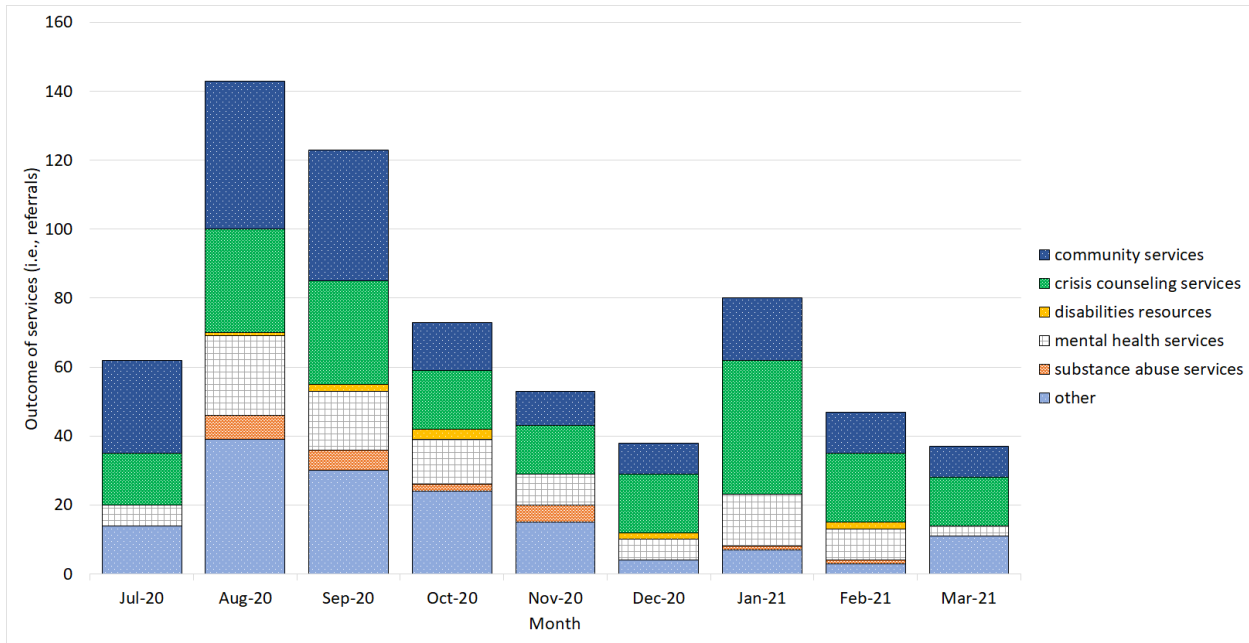
In March 2021, calls for **physical concerns** increased by 4.1%, **emotional concerns** decreased by 18.0%, **cognitive concerns** decreased by 34.4%, and **behavioral concerns** decreased by 20.8% (Graph 11). For **risk factors**, 28.1% focused on past substance use/mental health problem, 22.0% on past trauma, and 17.0% on pre-existing physical disabilities. For **outcomes from services** (e.g., tip and referrals), see Graphs 12 and 13.

Graph 12: Outcome of services (i.e., tips) for WA Listens (Source: HCA)



Note: Tips are not mutually exclusive (i.e., individuals can receive more than one tip).

Graph 13: Outcome of services (i.e., referrals) for WA Listens (Source: HCA)

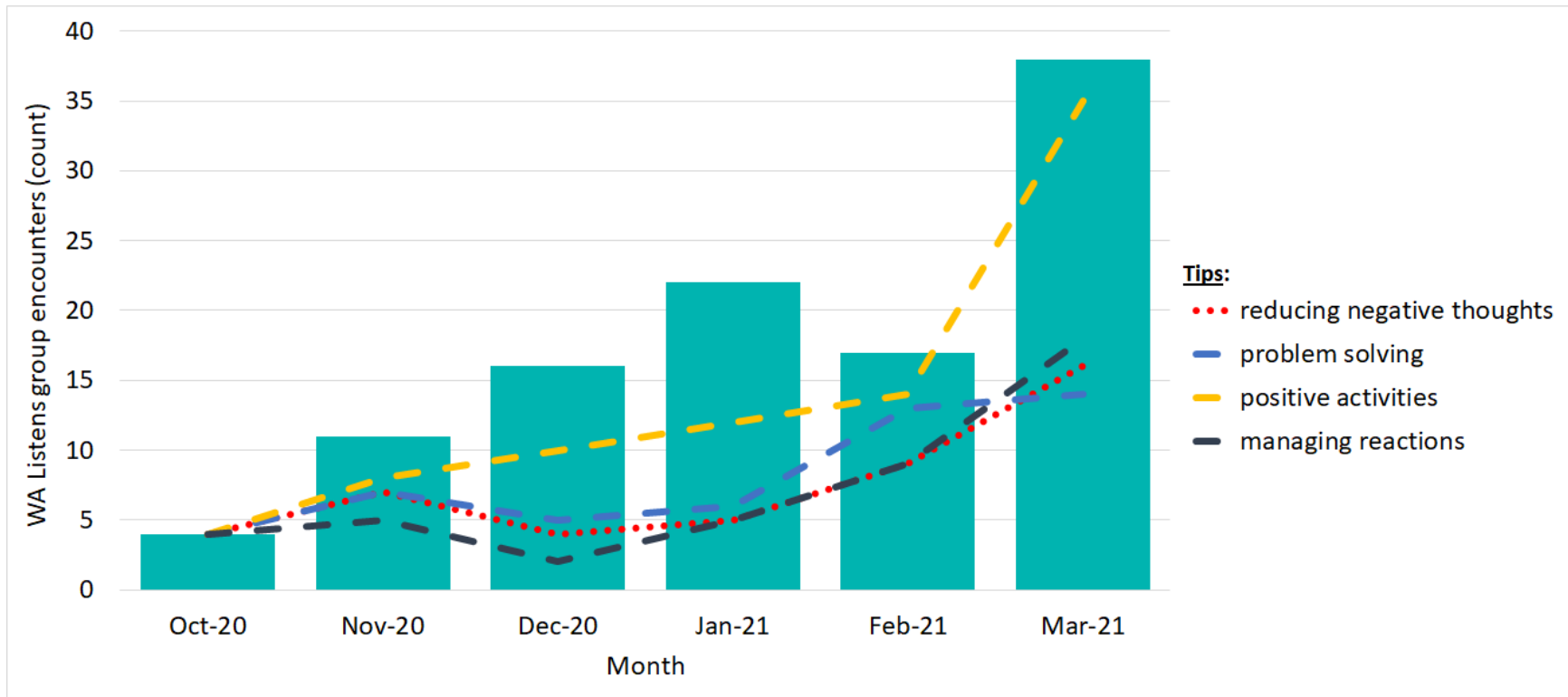


Note: Referrals are not mutually exclusive (i.e., individuals can receive more than one referral).

Since WA Listens inception, a total of 108 **group encounters** (2 or more people) have been completed (Graph 14). Due to the group environment, gender, age, and race were not collected in a standardized method. In March 2021, most group encounters (73.7%) occurred in a virtual setting, 18.4% occurred at a public place/event, and 7.9% occurred in a temporary home.

For **outcomes from services** in March 2021, all group sessions provided a minimum of one type (42.1%) of information, while 7.9% of all group sessions provided all three types of information (reactions to disasters, community resources, and the crisis counseling program). All group sessions in March provided at least one tip (36.8%), while 15.8% provided all four types of tips (Graph 14).

Graph 14: WA Listens group encounters and outcome of services, by month (Source: HCA)



Note: Tips are not mutually exclusive (i.e., individuals can receive more than one tip).

Crisis System of Care

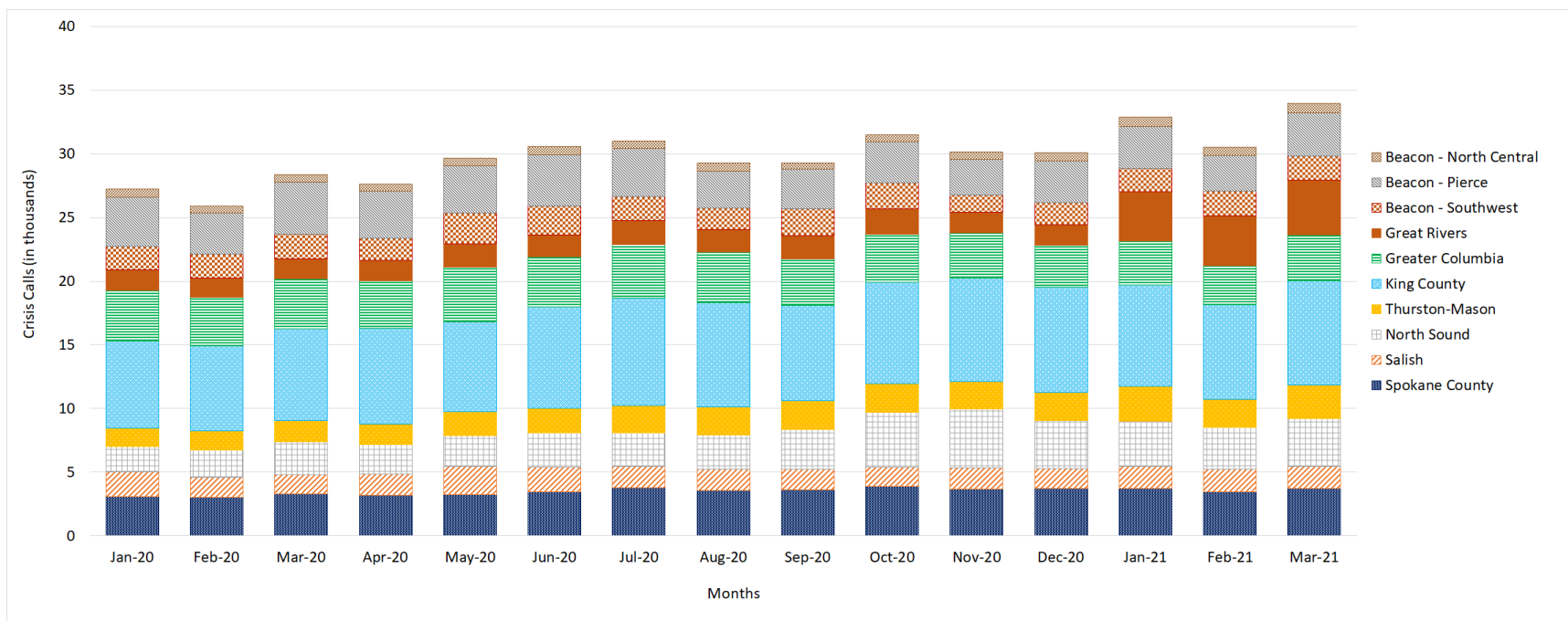
The crisis system of care completed by [behavioral health administrative service organizations](https://www.hca.wa.gov/assets/free-or-low-cost/19-0040-bh-aso-map.pdf)¹⁵ (BH-ASOs) provides regional [crisis line](https://www.hca.wa.gov/health-care-services-supports/behavioral-health-recovery/mental-health-crisis-lines)¹⁶ support that serves as the entry point or *front door* to crisis services (Graph 15). This includes support, initial risk assessment,

¹⁵ <https://www.hca.wa.gov/assets/free-or-low-cost/19-0040-bh-aso-map.pdf>

¹⁶ <https://www.hca.wa.gov/health-care-services-supports/behavioral-health-recovery/mental-health-crisis-lines>

and referral to appropriate follow up services, if needed. Graph 15 provides data on crisis system utilization during 2020 and 2021 to date.

Graph 15: Total count of individual encounter crisis calls, by month and BH-ASO (Source: HCA)



In 2020, the average monthly call volume (excluding hang ups, wrong number, and messages) was 29,218. During 2020, there was an increase in call trend in the beginning of the year (outside of February and April), but a stable trend at the end of 2020 (with a peak in October). Most recently, March 2021 presented with an 11.3% increase of all individual crisis calls.

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