

Week of October 12, 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 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.

Key Takeaways

- For this reporting period (CDC Week 40: week of October 3), 3 of 5 syndromic indicators fell below 2019 levels.
- Public sentiment was at a lower level than previous weeks, following a cyclical trend of low sentiment preceding and following the first of the month.
- Census data indicates a potential rise in anxiety and depression symptoms, reversing the trend of the previous 4 weeks.

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, and are always subject to updates. 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 and alerts are raised when a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) algorithm detects a weekly count at

least three standard deviations¹ above a 28-day average count, ending three weeks prior to the week with a warning or alert. These warnings or alerts will be mentioned within each respective syndrome section.

As of Situation Report 13, visit count graphs are replaced with visits of interest per 10,000 Emergency Department visits. This measure can help provide insights into the effect of the “Stay Home, Stay Healthy” order from March 23 (CDC Week 13) onwards, 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, which allows readers to compare both the yearly week-over-week average, as well as the weekly visit fluctuations to better assess demand for care, as well as care-seeking behaviors. In scenarios where a statistical warning or alert is issued, such events will be mentioned within the syndrome description text.

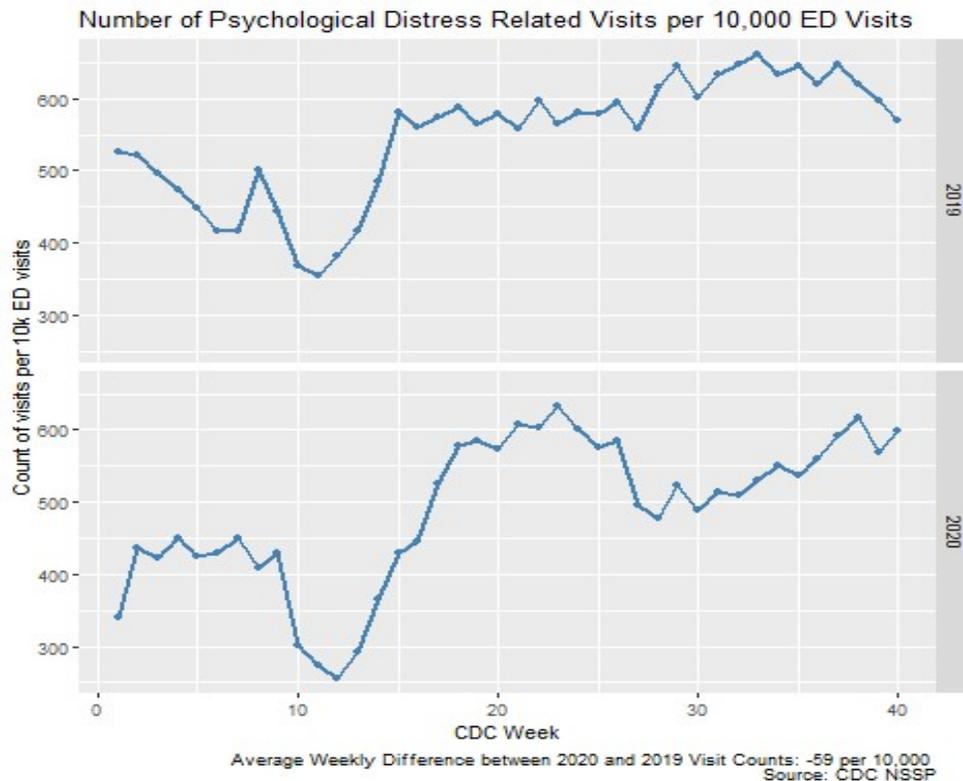
Psychological Distress

CDC Week 40 (week of October 3) had an ED visit relative count for psychological distress² that had increased as of CDC week 39, and is among the highest seen since week 25. Overall, there were no statistical warnings or alerts, though those over 65 years of age had increased representation.

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 average value of a data set.

² 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-definitioncommittee>.

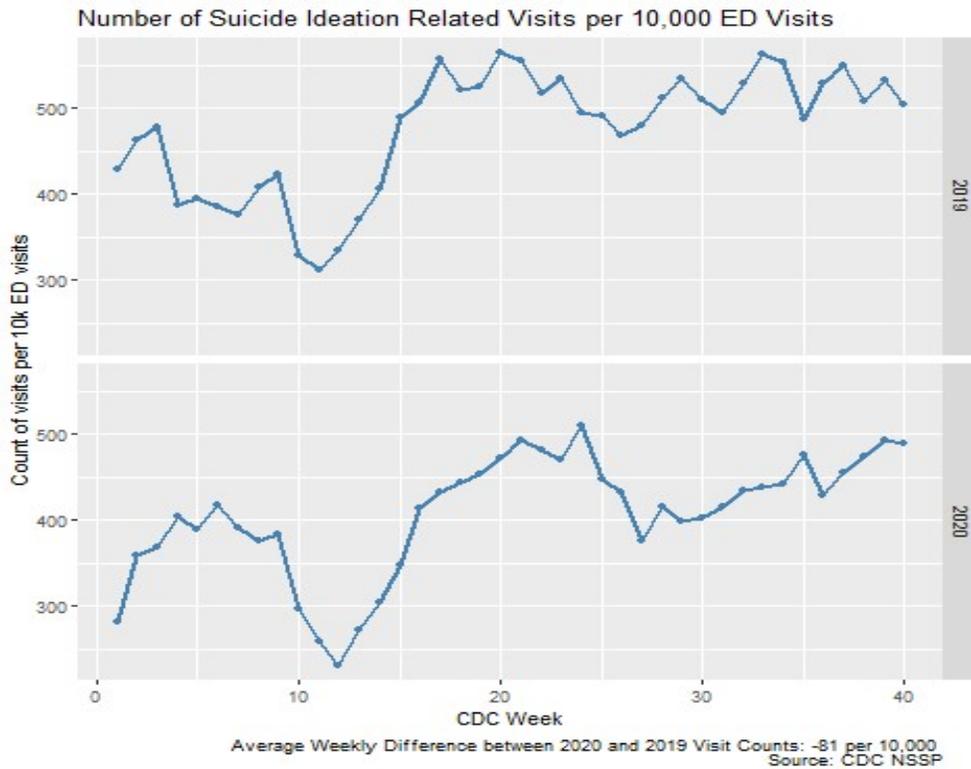
Graph 1: Relative Count of emergency department visits for psychological distress² in Washington, by week: 2020 vs. 2019 (Source: CDC ESSENCE)



Suicidal Ideation and Suicide Attempts

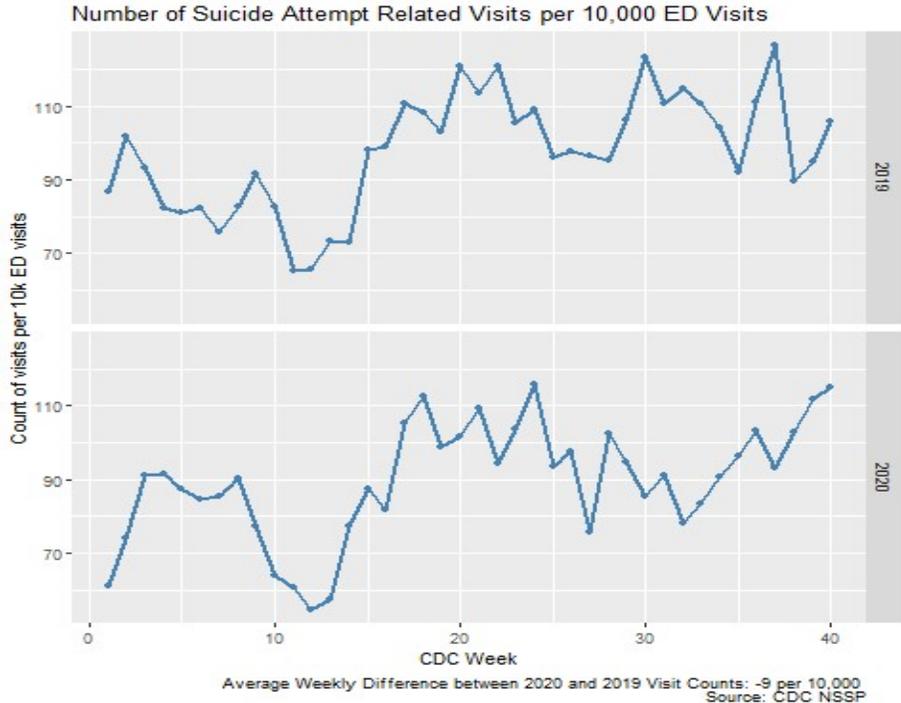
For CDC Week 40, there has been an increase in relative reported ED visits for suicidal ideation (Graph 2). This is in direct contrast to the same period within 2019, wherein there appeared to be a somewhat consistent downtrend from CDC Week 36 to CDC Week 40. It should be noted however, that this may be an effect of convergence as case counts are returning what would be expected during this time of year.

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



For suicide attempts, the pattern of fluctuations has continued, with a marked increase in Emergency Department visits for suicide attempts throughout the state. For CDC Week 40, though increases have slowed in terms of week-over-week increases, those who were identified as African American did appear to have a statistical warning around this time period.

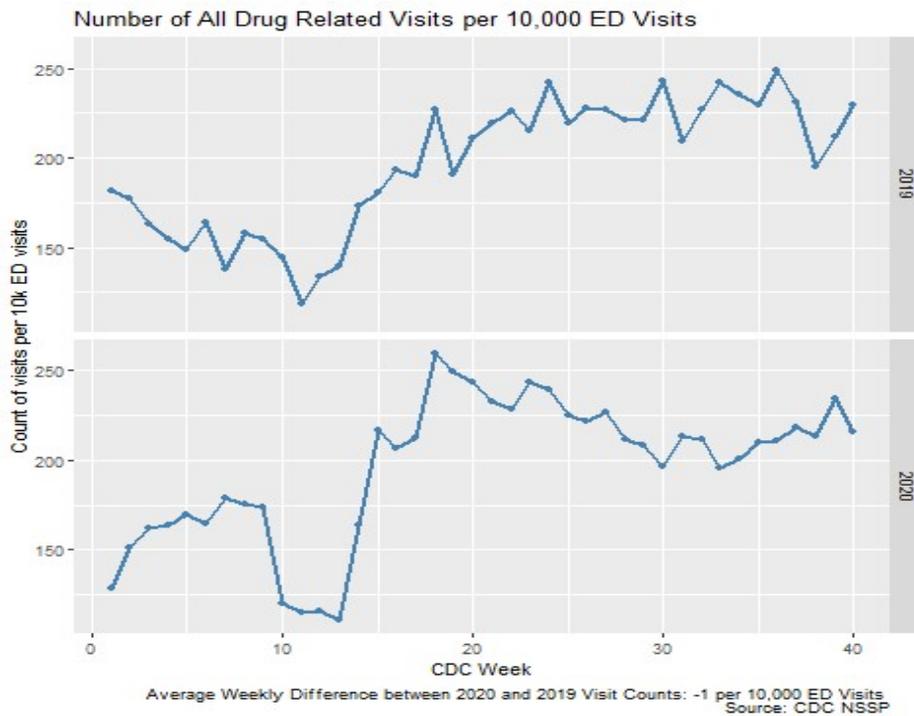
Graph 3: Relative Count of Emergency Department visits for suicide attempts in Washington by week: 2020 vs. 2019 (Source: CDC ESSENCE)



Substance Use: Drug Overdose and Alcohol-Related Emergency Visits

For CDC Week 40, there has been a very slight decrease in relative visits for all drug related visits as compared to last year (Graph 4). All age groups are trending down in opioid related ED visits over the past four weeks, other drug visits has shown slight increases in those aged 45-64. No race or ethnicity category experienced a warning or alert regarding all drug³ visits for this period.

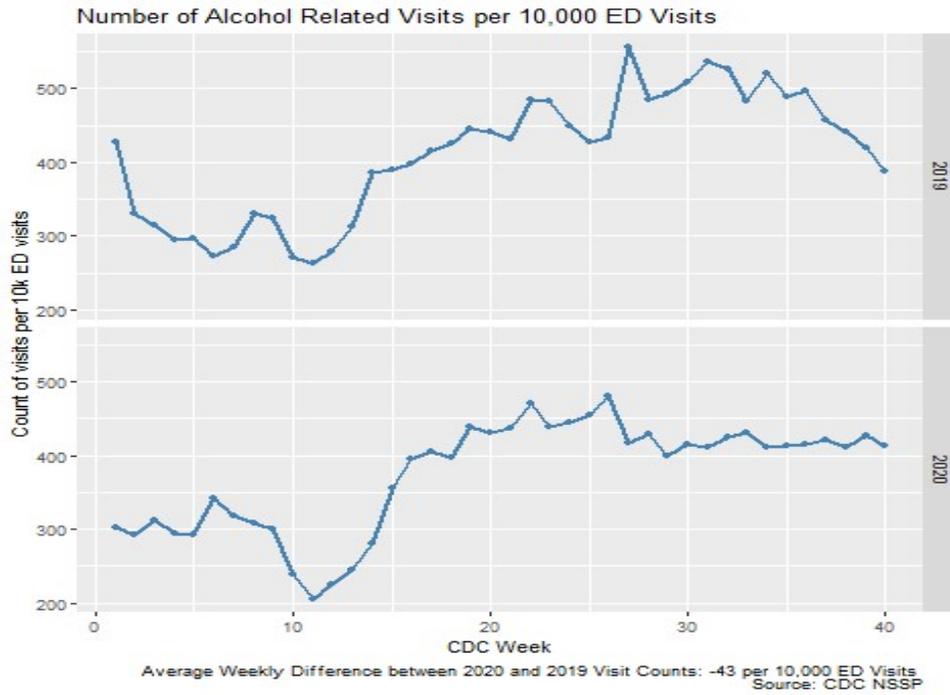
Graph 4: Relative Count of emergency department visits for all drug³ related visits in Washington, by week: 2020 vs. 2019 (Source: CDC ESSENCE)



Similar to previous weeks, **alcohol-related relative visits for Week 40 show a slight decrease** as compared to earlier weeks, and a significant drop from peak visit rates in Weeks 23-28 of this year (Graph 5). No group warranted a warning, though it should be noted that visits per 10,000 for alcohol have remained somewhat stable for 2020, while during 2019 there was a several week period of sustained decreases in visits.

³ 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>.

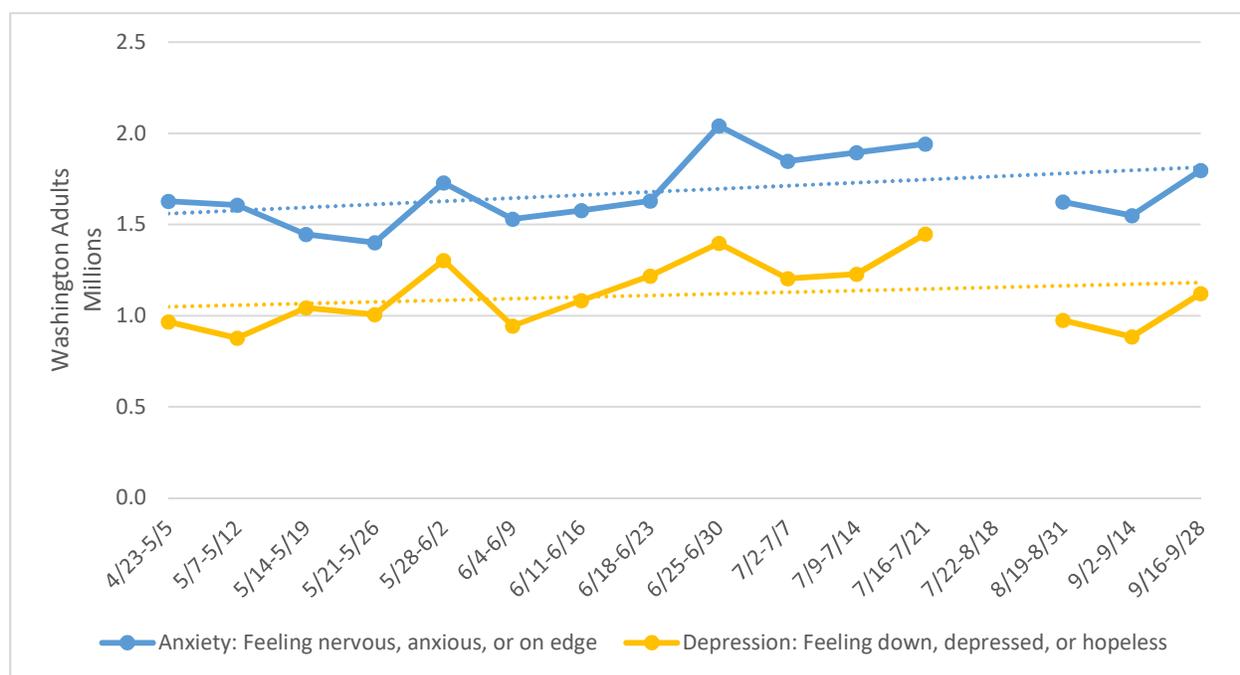
Graph 5: Relative Count of emergency department visits for alcohol-related visits in Washington, by week: 2020 vs. 2019 (Source: CDC ESSENCE)



General Surveillance – Symptoms of Anxiety and Depression

Survey data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau⁴ during September 16–28 suggest an **increase of 16% in anxiety, and 36% in feelings of depression**, respectively, among Washington adults (Graph 6). **Just under 1.8 million reported experiencing symptoms of anxiety on at least most days, and over 1.1 million reported experiencing symptoms of depression on at least most days.** In these measures, the estimated standard error indicates that both upper and lower bound estimates limit how inaccurate this estimate may be by around 7% above or below the numbers previously mentioned. This survey data is not in any way related to the data presented in a previous section.

Graph 6: Estimated Washington adults with feelings of anxiety and depression at least most days, by week: April 23–Sept 28 (Source: U.S. Census Bureau)



Note: For the period of 7/21–8/19, census data was not available and thus, any trends during this point are an artifact of analysis.

⁴ 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.

Further analysis of the depression measure for September 2–14 survey data indicate marked disparities across demographic groups. As with the anxiety measure, there is an inverse relationship between age and frequency of depression symptoms. In other words, as age increases, frequency of depression symptoms decreases. **Over one in three (38%) 18–29 year-olds reported feeling down, depressed, or hopeless at least most days, compared to less than one in five (16%) adults age 50+ with those over 80 at one in twenty (5%).**

A similar inverse relationship can be seen between household income and frequency of depression symptoms. Individuals in a household that experienced a loss of employment income were 10% more likely to report feeling depressed at least most days, compared to those who have not experienced such a loss (28% and 18%, respectively). Additionally, **over 1 in 4 (32%) identifying as multiracial (non-Hispanic) reported feeling depressed at least most days, compared to 22% of the rest of adults surveyed.** The frequency of depression symptoms wasn't significantly greater among men or women as it was with anxiety, for which women reported more frequent symptoms.

Crime – Domestic Violence

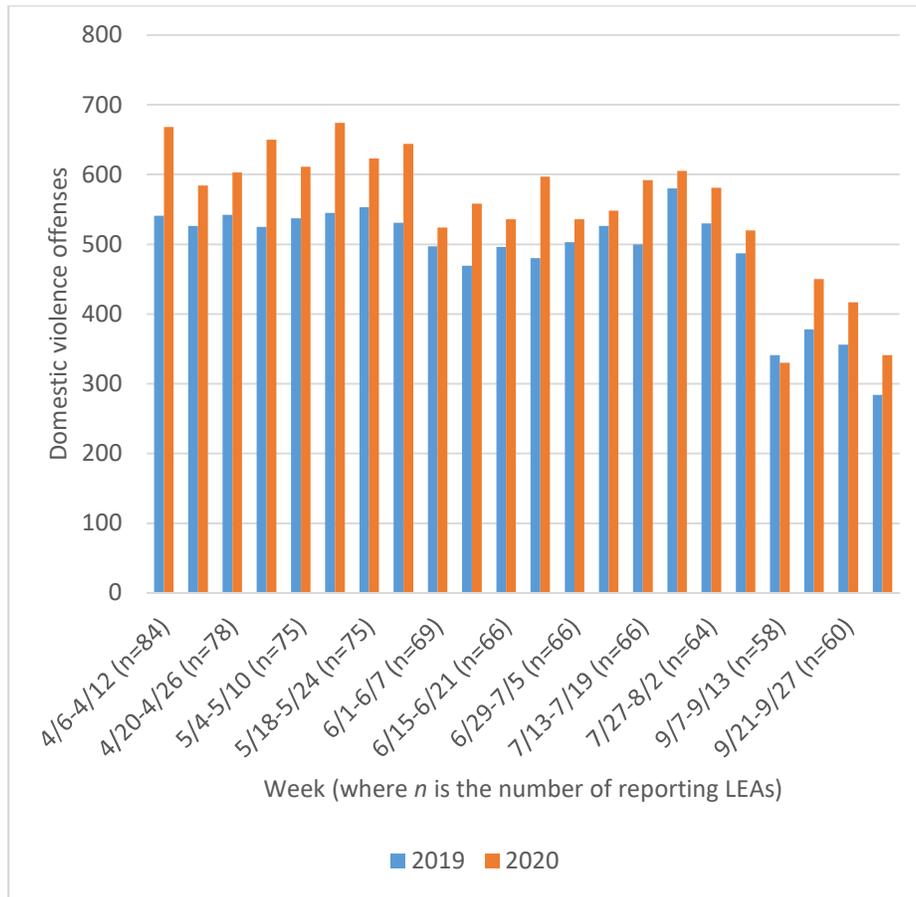
While the 9/28-10/04 reporting period has kept the trend of the previous period in terms of decreased domestic violence offenses being reported, **year-over-year⁵ reports continue to increase (16.7%)** according to survey data from the Washington Association of Sheriffs and Police Chiefs (WASPC).⁶

This survey has also detected **a double-digit decrease (50%) in other offenses during the 9/21–9/27 period, which in the previous measured week were down by 37.6% from last year.** The only exception to this trend was a slight increase in Animal Cruelty offenses from 0 in 2019, to 1 in 2020 for the agencies who reported during this period (n=41)

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

⁶ WASPC began conducting a weekly survey to all Washington law enforcement agencies (LEAs) in April to understand the likely impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on common crimes. Between 24–31% of the 275 LEAs respond each week. It should be noted that despite varying numbers of law enforcement agencies reporting offenses week-over-week, all values for each week are tied strictly to that week's reporting number for both 2019 and 2020. A smaller or larger number of reporting agencies does not affect year-over-year comparisons.

Graph 7: Domestic violence offenses reported, by week for April 6–September 27: 2020 vs. 2019 (Source: WASPC)



Product Sales – Alcohol and Cannabis Taxes & Handgun Background Checks

The Liquor and Cannabis Board (LCB) summarizes monthly beer, wine, and cannabis tax collections, which may be used as a representation of sales of legal recreational substances and by extension, potential for substance use issues. Additionally, federal background checks for handgun sales⁷ may represent access to firearms,⁸ which is a risk factor for suicide and other gun violence.⁹

⁷ 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.”

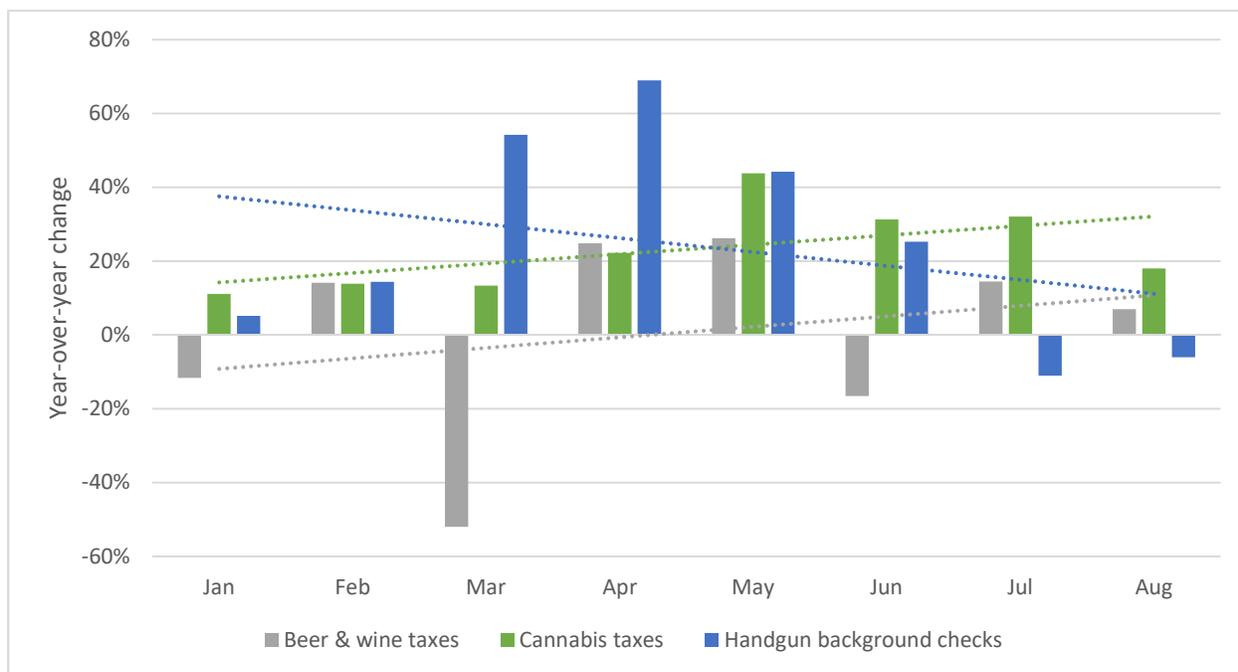
⁸ Nemerov, Howard Ross. Estimating Guns Sold by State (January 11, 2018). Available at SSRN: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3100289>

⁹ 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

Monthly cannabis tax collections in the first half of 2020 were consistently higher than in 2019. They have continued to rise in July and August with an approximate 18% increase in purchases, as indicated by revenue. While changes in year-over-year⁵ monthly beer and wine tax collections (combined) have fluctuated, they are generally increasing.

Additionally, federal background checks, while fluctuating over the last several months, have seen a 6% decrease for the month of July, with a two-month trend that has led to an 11% decrease as compared to the same period last year.

Graph 8: Year-over-year change in select product sales indicators, by month: 2020 vs. 2019
(Sources: LCB, Federal Bureau of Investigation)



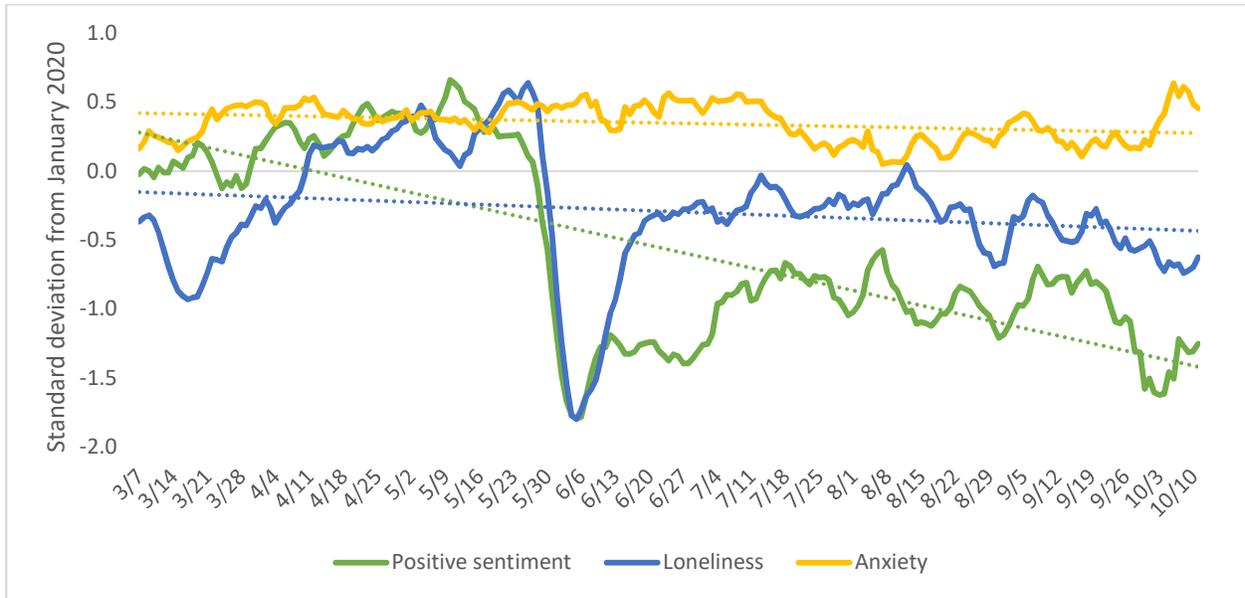
Social Media – Expressions of Positive Sentiment, Loneliness, and Anxiety

Social media data continue to plateau after stabilizing from events around July 6. Tweets related to COVID-19 and geotagged to Washington^{10,11} suggest that since late June, all three measures have fluctuated around new averages, with positive sentiment remaining the most variable measure. As to be expected given the pattern previous months, positive sentiment dropped, and anxiety rose near the start of October, with a slight climb in positive sentiment and decline in anxiety from around 10/3 to the cutoff date of 10/12.

¹⁰ 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.”

¹¹ 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>

Graph 9: 7-day moving averages of deviations in select expression measures^{10,11} relative to January 2020 baseline: March 7, 2020–Oct 12, 2020
 (Source: Penn Center for Digital Health)



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