

Week of September 14, 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

- In the week of August 22, psychological distress increased slightly.
- Census data indicates decreases of anxiety and depression across the board. Although, younger populations are still suffering the highest polled rates of both anxiety and depression. As previously mentioned, lower socioeconomic status and unemployment continue to be risk factors for larger rates of anxiety and depression as well.
- During this period, domestic violence continued to increase while other offenses in general decreased.
- Both drug- and alcohol-related emergency department (ED) visits have decreased over the previous four-week period, though show some increase over the week of July 27.
- Cannabis sales continue to rise as compared to 2019 during the same period.
- Public social media sentiment seems to be slowly approaching baseline.

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 (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 or alert.

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 Although total ED visit counts appear to have returned to pre-pandemic levels, the below indicators are presented as counts of ED visits, rather than percentages of ED visits, to account for unstable denominators. Data for past weeks are subject to updates.

Psychological Distress

CDC Week 34 (week of August 22) had an ED visit count for psychological distress³ that was slightly increased as compared to previous Weeks 30-33, but not significantly different than the month of July or the same time period in 2019.

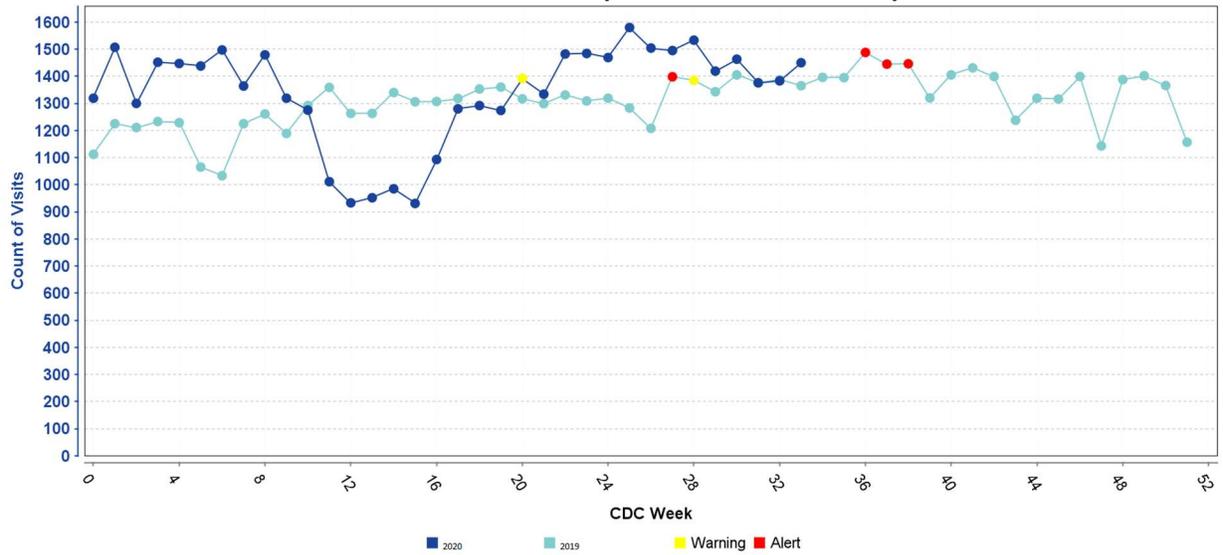
However, warnings for psychological distress among the <18 age group were triggered for Week 34, which have seen increased fluctuations in visits since April. Another group of concern is the 45-64 age group, who have seen a sustained increase in distress-related visits, though not quite enough to trigger a warning or alert during mid to late August.

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 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-definitioncommittee>.

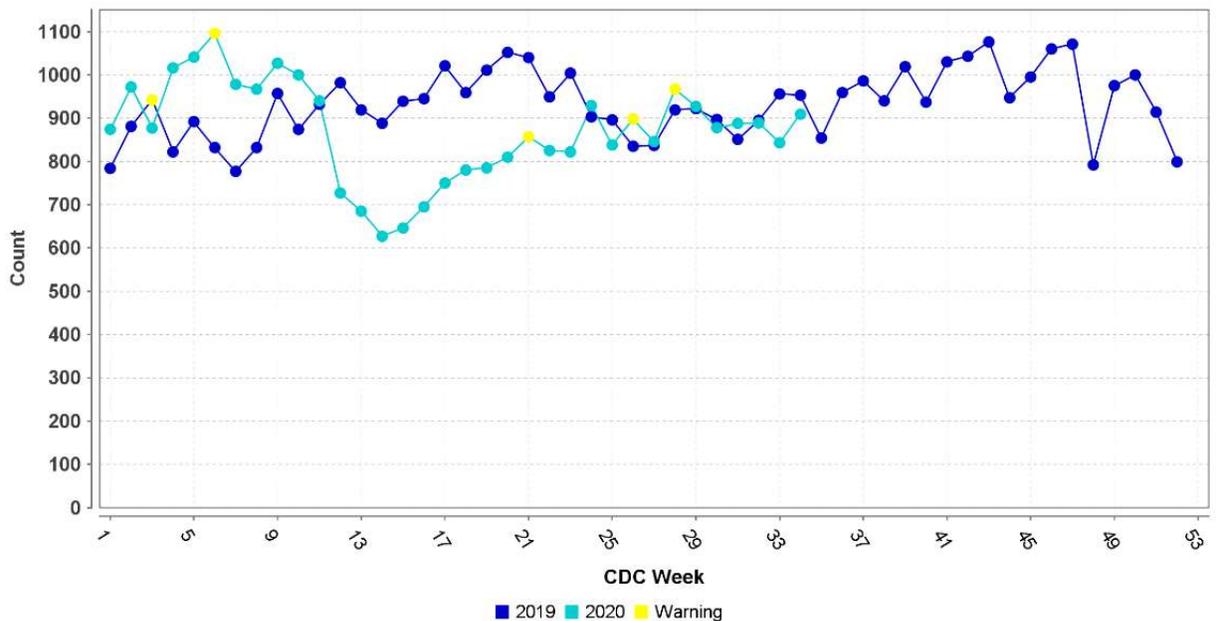
Graph 1: Count of emergency department visits for psychological distress³ in Washington, by week: 2020 vs. 2019 (Source: CDC ESSENCE)



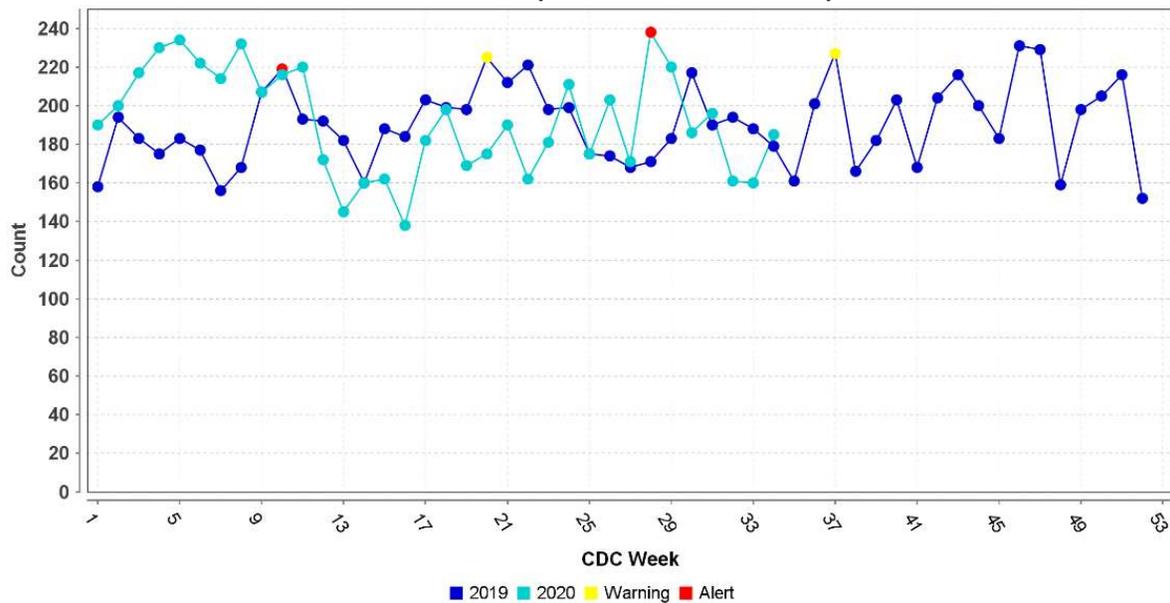
Suicidal Ideation and Suicide Attempts

For CDC Week 34, the trend of a slight increase continues from Week 13, approaching volumes similar to that of 2019. This count data should be interpreted with caution as overall ED visit data has continued to fluctuate since the March 2020 decline in ED visits. **During Week 34, there was a warning for suicidal ideation for those who identify as White (non-Hispanic). No groups registered a warning for suicide attempts during Week 34.**

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



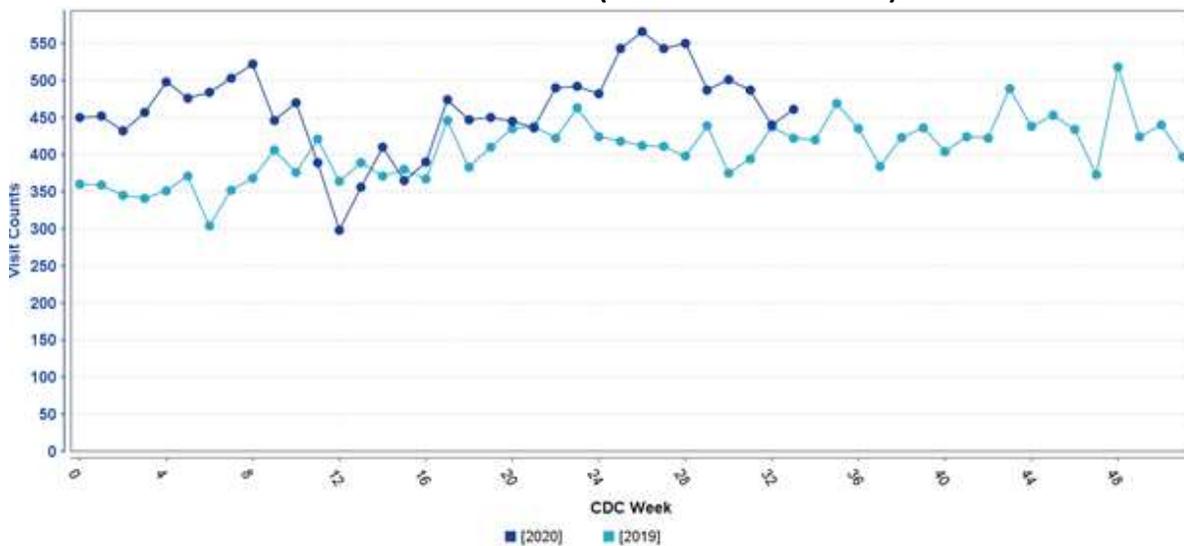
Graph 4: Count of emergency department visits for suicide attempts in Washington, by week: 2020 vs. 2019 (Source: CDC ESSENCE)



Substance Use: Drug Overdose and Alcohol-Related Emergency Visits

For CDC Week 34, there has been a slight increase in visits (9.6%) as compared to last year. While all age groups are trending down in opioid usage over the past four weeks, **other drug usage has shown slight increases in the 18-44 age group**. No race or ethnicity category experienced a warning or alert regarding all-drug⁴ visits for this period.

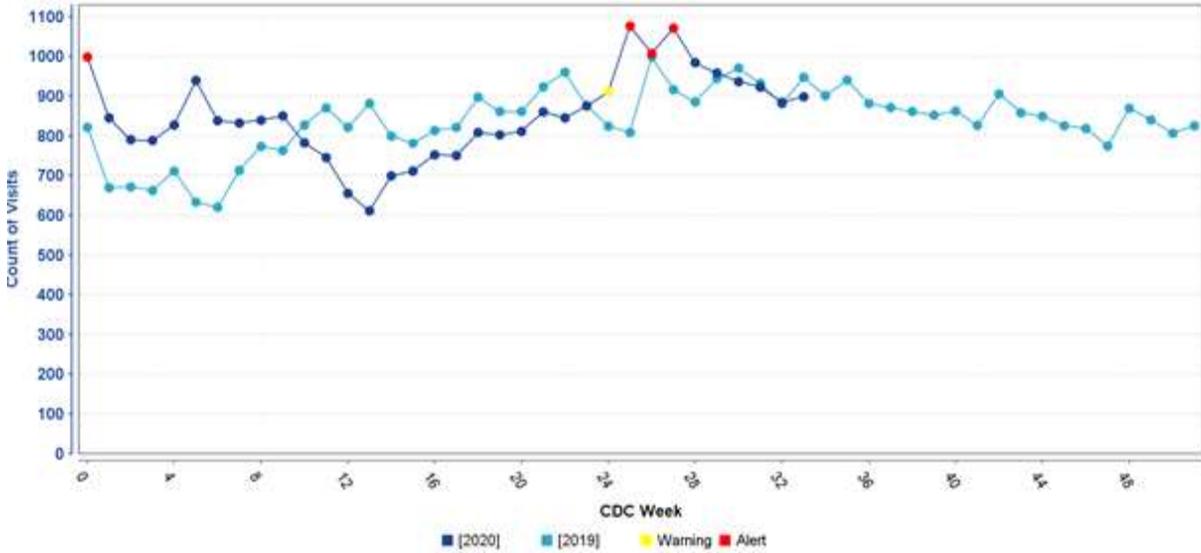
Graph 5: Count of emergency department visits for all-drug⁴ related visits in Washington, by week: 2020 vs. 2019 (Source: CDC ESSENCE)



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>.

Similar to previous weeks, **alcohol-related visits for Week 34 are showing either a slight decrease** or a similar visit count as compared to 2019, and a significant drop from peak visit rates in Weeks 23-28. In terms of rate increases, **the 65+ age group saw an increased visit rate, as opposed to rate decreases from every other age group**. No group warranted a warning.

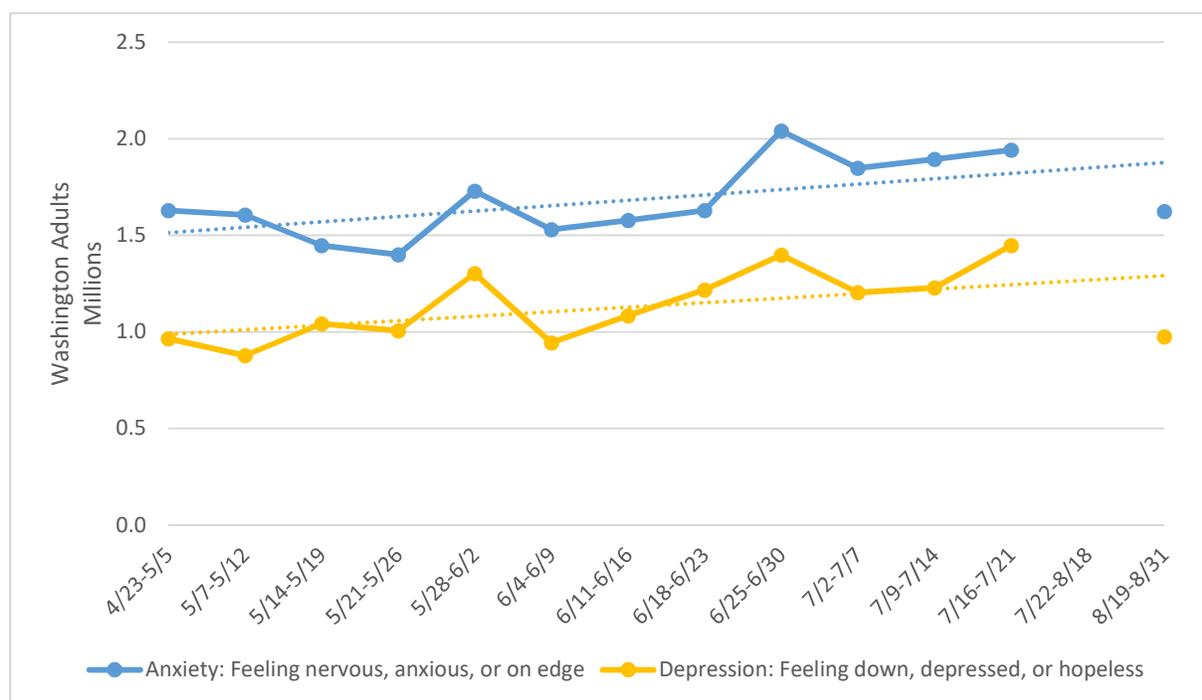
Graph 6: Count of emergency department visits for alcohol-related visits in Washington, by week: 2020 vs. 2019 (Source: CDC ESSENCE)



General Surveillance – Symptoms of Anxiety and Depression

Survey data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau⁵ during August 19–31 suggest **decreases of 16% and 36%** in frequent feelings of anxiety and depression among Washington adults, respectively. **Over 1.6 million reported experiencing symptoms of anxiety on at least most days, and over 900,000 reported experiencing symptoms of depression on at least most days.** In both of these measures, the estimated standard error indicates that both upper and lower bound estimates limit how inaccurate this estimate may be by around 1% above or below the figures 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–August 22 (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.

Further analysis of the depression measure for August 19–31 survey data indicate marked disparities across demographics. As with the anxiety measure, there is an inverse relationship between age and frequency of depression symptoms. As age increases, frequency of depression symptoms decreases. **Nearly one in three (31%) 18–29 year-olds reported feeling down,**

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.

depressed, or hopeless at least most days, compared to less than one in five (14%) adults age 50+.

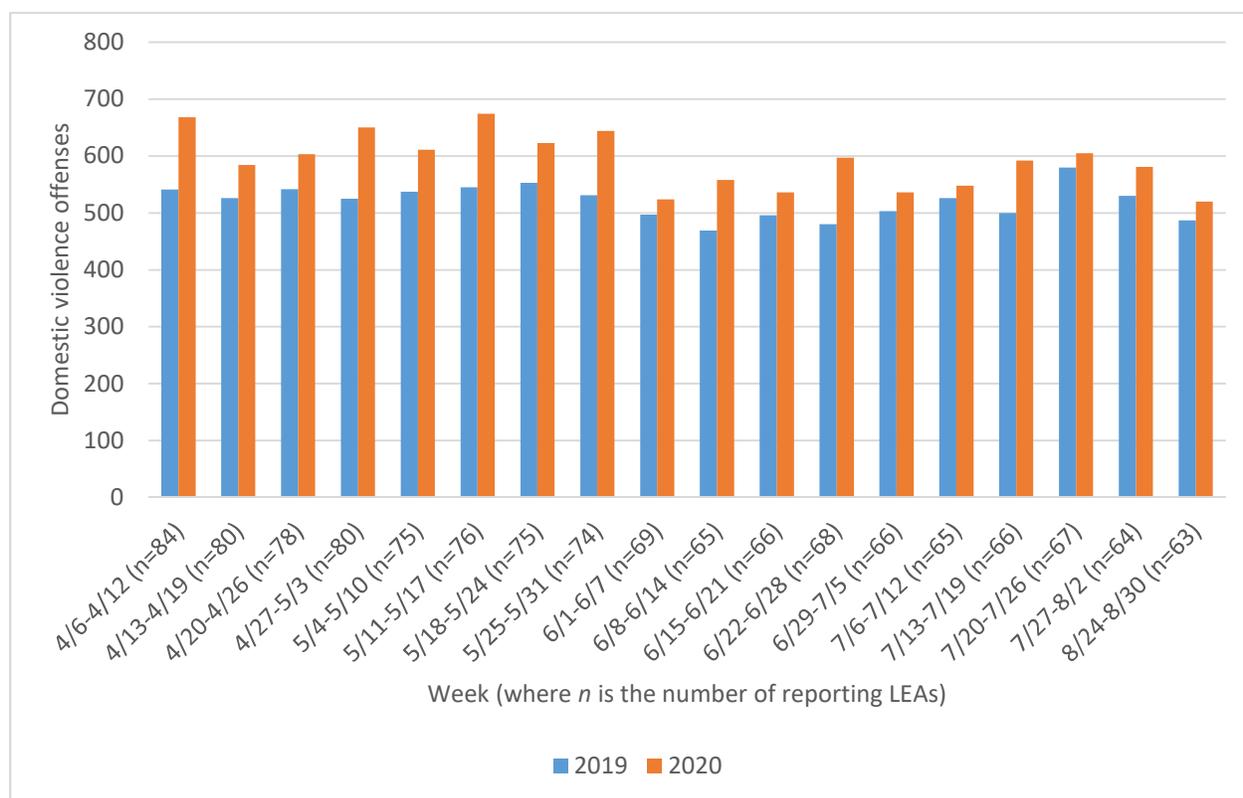
A similar inverse relationship can be seen between household income and frequency of depression symptoms. Individuals in a household that experienced a loss of employment income were more than twice as likely to report feeling depressed on at least most days, compared to those who have not experienced such a loss (27% and 13%, respectively). Additionally, **nearly 1 in 4 (23%) identifying as multiracial (non-Hispanic) reported feeling depressed at least most days, compared to 17% 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 this recorded period (8/24–8/30) has kept the trend of the previous period in terms of decreased domestic violence offenses being reported, **year-over-year⁶ reports continue to stay at a double-digit increase (11%)**, according to survey data from the Washington Association of Sheriffs and Police Chiefs (WASPC).⁷

This survey has also detected **a double-digit decrease (10%) in other offenses, which in the previous measured week was down by 28% from last year during the 8/24–8/30 period.** Notably, destruction of property offenses (647 from 577 in 2019) and animal cruelty offenses (5 from 1 in 2019) are both significantly higher compared to last year, with all other crimes lessened.

Graph 7: Domestic violence offenses reported, by week for April 6–August 30: 2020 vs. 2019
(Source: WASPC)



⁶ Year-over-year: The comparison of two years, specifically 2020 to 2019.

⁷ 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.

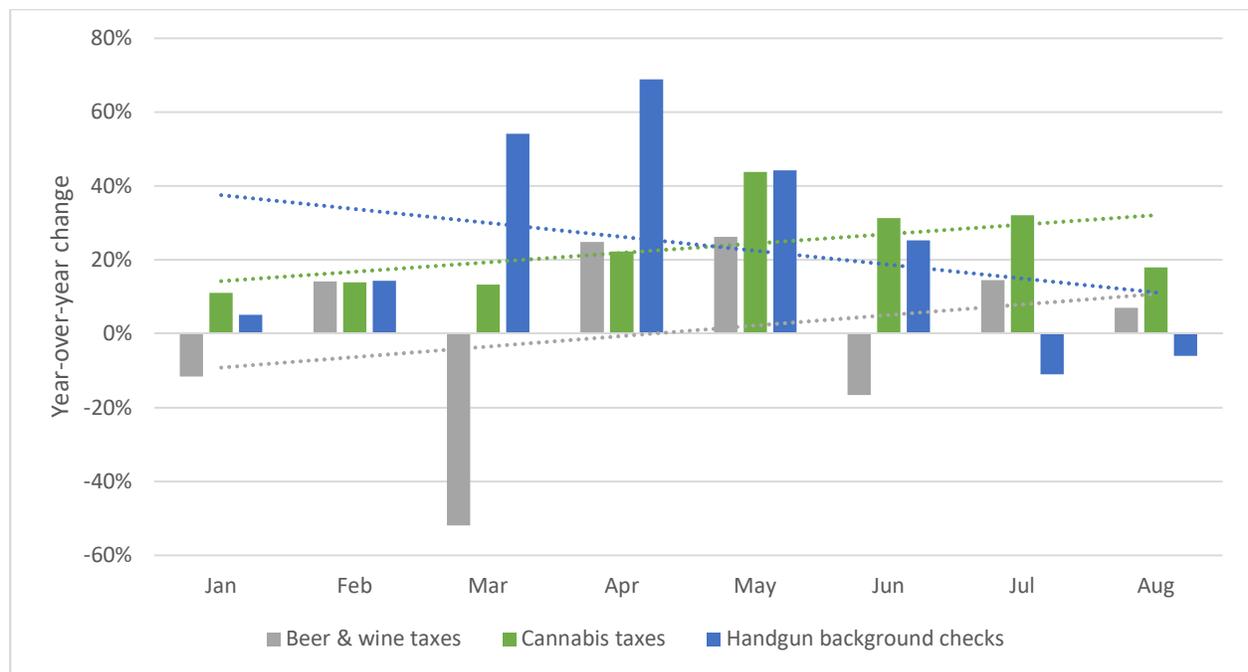
Product Sales – Alcohol and Cannabis Taxes & Handgun Background Checks

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 sales⁸ may represent access to firearms,⁹ which is a risk factor for suicide and other gun violence.¹⁰

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-year 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)



⁸ 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.”

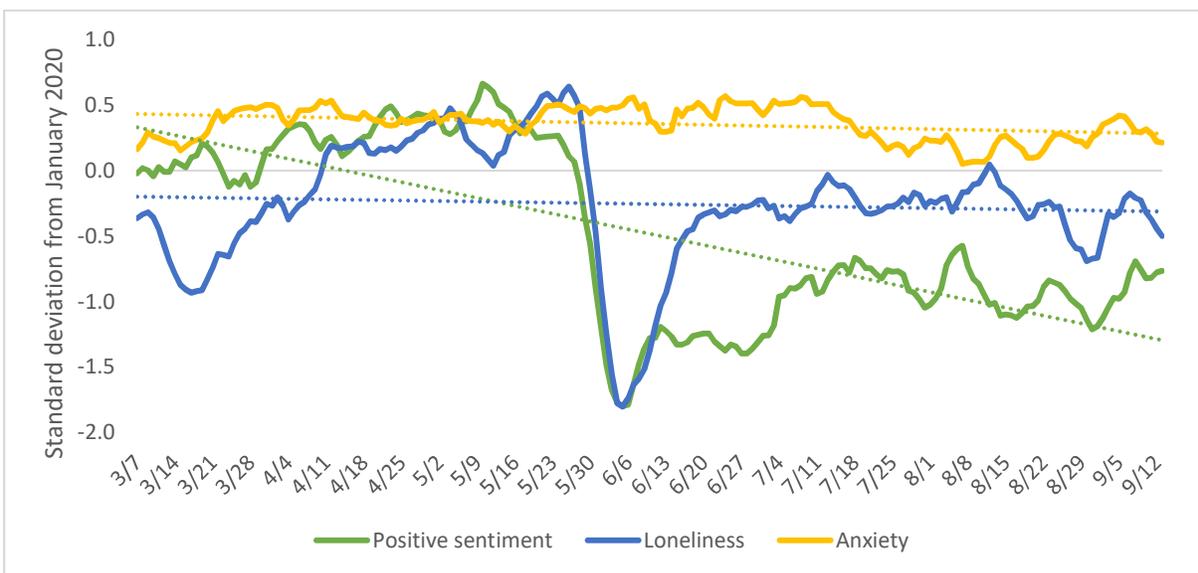
⁹ Nemerov, Howard Ross. Estimating Guns Sold by State (January 11, 2018). Available at SSRN: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3100289>

¹⁰ Anglemeyer, 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

Social media data continue to show more positive signs. Tweets related to COVID-19 and geotagged to Washington^{11,12} suggest that social media trends of the past several months have continued into September. The exception to this is the positive sentiment, which while still below pre-pandemic levels, appears to be having an upward trend, where earlier months indicated a potential plateau.

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



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¹¹ 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.”

¹² 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>