

## Hughes Center Research Documents Pandemic's Effect on New Jerseyans' Mental Health

*For immediate release*

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**Galloway, N.J.** — The COVID-19 pandemic had wide-ranging impacts on New Jersey residents' mental health, treatment and outcomes involving numerous mental health issues, according to research published today by the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University.

The project, led by Stockton professor Justin Ostrofsky, Ph.D., overseeing three student researchers, investigated how New Jersey residents with specific mental health issues fared during the pandemic and whether COVID-19 worsened those problems. The researchers, working over two college semesters, analyzed public datasets, published research and the results of an original Stockton University Poll.

They evaluated data from before and after the pandemic began within the context of national and global trends to determine if those changes could be attributed to the pandemic or not.

Results indicate the pandemic was at least partly responsible for negatively affecting certain mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, stress-related problems and post-partum depression, especially among young people.

A statewide Stockton Poll conducted as part of the research corroborated trends found in the analysis, with 30% saying COVID worsened mental health problems, including those involving alcohol and drug use. A majority experienced disruptions in their lifestyle, with one in three saying those disruptions worsened their mental health.

"We have heard anecdotally and from some reports that the pandemic hurt mental health in New Jersey," said John Froomjian, director of the Hughes Center. "This research validates those concerns and documents specific areas of mental health that were affected.

"When COVID-19 first spread, officials and doctors appropriately rushed to protect the public's physical health with little ability early on to gauge the mental health impact. The value of this Hughes Center report is to show where we need to be prepared during the next public health crisis," Froomjian said.

Stockton student researchers and report co-authors included Psychology majors Keith Jennings, Matthew Crilley and Anna Caputo. Crilley and Caputo graduated in May.

Their report identified a number of trends in the data. Highlights include:

- The number of diagnoses for depression, anxiety and trauma or stress-related disorders increased in 2020 over the prior year.

- Analyses confirmed that young people, especially teenagers, experienced the largest increase in anxiety, depression and related disorders.
- Self-reported rates of depression in pregnant and postpartum women increased in 2020.
- Reports of child maltreatment decreased during the pandemic, though it remains unclear if this reflected an actual decline in abuse or a decrease in detection and reporting, potentially due to pandemic-related factors.
- The use of telehealth forms of mental health treatment dramatically increased during the pandemic and remained elevated into 2022.
- Between September 2020 and April 2022, anywhere from 7%-11% of adult residents reported needing but not obtaining mental health treatment, highlighting a treatment gap in New Jersey.
- Additionally, in 2020 and 2021, an estimated 60% of individuals needing substance abuse treatment did not obtain it.

“Throughout the academic year, as the students analyzed datasets, we never lost sight of the fact that the numbers represent human beings and are a reflection of suffering endured during the pandemic,” said Hughes Center Research Associate Alyssa Maurice, who provided support for the project.

The report examined how different populations fared. A common thread identified by the researchers is that young people were impacted by the pandemic to a larger extent than older residents. For example, the increases in diagnoses for depression, anxiety and trauma or stress-related disorders were largest among 15-20-year-olds.

A Stockton Poll also found stark generational divides with younger residents more likely to say the pandemic impacted their mental health and that they needed treatment. Those ages 18-29 said the pandemic caused or worsened a mental health problem at a rate of 45% compared to a rate of 13% among those 65 and older.

### **Stockton University Poll findings**

A poll of 664 adult New Jersey residents conducted by the Hughes Center in March and April as part of this larger study corroborated the main results of the faculty-student research. It also highlighted lifestyle changes brought on by the pandemic.

- 30% of respondents said the pandemic caused their mental health to worsen, according to the poll.
- Nearly one in five residents said their alcohol or recreational drug consumption increased during the pandemic. For 40% of these individuals, it remains elevated.
- The most common ways people managed pandemic-related stress was by engaging more with family and friends (20%), exercising (19%) or watching TV (16%).
- Almost two thirds said their lifestyle routines were disrupted by the pandemic either temporarily (16%) or permanently (49%). When asked to name the top two that were most impacted, social life (70%) and exercise (24%) were cited.

Residents were split evenly on the impact of these disruptions, with 32% saying the lifestyle changes made their mental health worse and the same rate saying they made it

better, while 30% had mixed feelings in that some changes made it better and some made it worse.

The poll also captured the historic job loss spurred by the pandemic. More than one-fourth (28%) said they had a change of employment during the crisis, a plurality of whom said the change worsened their mental health. For about half, this change constituted temporary or permanent job loss, while others changed roles or switched careers entirely.

The vast majority said their religious or spiritual practices did not change due to the pandemic (75%) or that their practices were temporarily disrupted but they have since returned to them (9%).

You can watch a video conversation with the researchers discussing their findings [here](#).

Find the full research study [here](#).

Find the full Stockton Poll results [here](#).

### **Methodology**

The poll of New Jersey adult residents was conducted by the Stockton Polling Institute of the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy from March 20-April 3, 2023. Stockton University students texted cell phones with invitations to take the survey online and Opinion Services supplemented the dialing portion of the fieldwork, which consisted of cell and landline telephone calls. Overall, 90% of interviews were conducted on cell phones and 10% on landline phones. In terms of mode, 83% were reached via dialing and 17% were reached via text-to-web. A total of 663 New Jersey adult residents were interviewed. Both cell and landline samples consisted of random digit dialing (RDD) sample from MSG. Data are weighted based on U.S. Census Bureau ACS 2021 data for New Jersey on variables of age, race, education level, and sex. The poll's margin of error is +/- 3.8 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. MOE is higher for subsets.

### **About the Hughes Center**

The William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy ([www.stockton.edu/hughescenter](http://www.stockton.edu/hughescenter)) at Stockton University serves as a catalyst for research, analysis and innovative policy solutions on the economic, social and cultural issues facing New Jersey, and promotes the civic life of New Jersey through engagement, education and research. The center is named for the late William J. Hughes, whose distinguished career includes service in the U.S. House of Representatives, Ambassador to Panama and as a Distinguished Visiting Professor at Stockton. The Hughes Center can be found on [YouTube](#), and can be followed on Facebook [@StocktonHughesCenter](#), Twitter [@hughescenter](#) and Instagram [@stockton\\_hughes\\_center](#).

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**Stockton University**

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