



# STATE OF THE NATION'S MENTAL HEALTH

Inaugural Report  
May 2021



# Introduction

As the nation faces the COVID-19 pandemic along with the rest of the world, the physical health implications are clear. Less clear are the behavioral health repercussions, but as the pandemic continues to unfold, it is becoming more and more evident that it is taking a toll on people's mental health and well-being. Indeed, history has taught us that pandemics and other national traumatic events lead to a rise in mental health conditions, particularly rising suicide rates.

The strain is understandable. The social distancing and quarantining recommended to protect our physical health is the very thing that paradoxically can have a damaging effect on our mental health. On top of the pandemic pressure in 2020 was the additional turmoil of a contentious election, social unrest and a declining economy. The most unprecedented of years in modern history reminded us of the critical and inextricable connection between physical and mental health: we can't address one without addressing the other.

To learn more about our nation's mental health, Anthem and its affiliated health plans recently issued an inaugural report, State of the Nation's Mental Health, which is based on an analysis of healthcare claims and an Anthem-commissioned nationwide clinician survey. The report's broad takeaway is that, in spite of the increased mental distress due to the pandemic, there is a disconnect between this escalated distress and a flat rate of diagnoses in 2020, which could have implications for the nation's long-term mental health.

This executive summary will provide an overview of the report's data as a means to help understand the state of the nation's mental health through:

- High-level trends
- Trends by lines of business and generation
- Most common diagnoses by generation

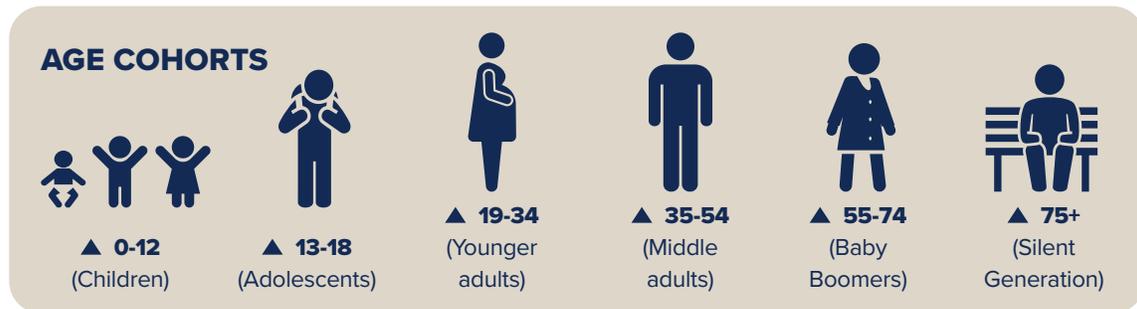
## Key findings

Nationally, more individuals have been seeking mental health services in recent years. In 2002, 13 percent of adults aged 18 and older received mental health services, according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. By 2019, that percentage grew to a little more than 16 percent.

This upward national trend provides context for today's mental health landscape because it shows that people need—and are becoming more open—to seeking services, reflecting an increasing acceptance to address mental health conditions. However, Anthem's 2020 data for its affiliated health plan members show little change in the rate of diagnoses: there was a slight decrease from 2019-2020, compared to an increase in 2018-2019.

The pandemic is the likely explanation for the overall decline in 2020 diagnoses. National and global data show that individuals' normal patterns of care were disrupted during the pandemic, for both physical and mental health. For example:

- Approximately 41 percent of those surveyed avoided or delayed receiving medical care during the pandemic, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), in spite of the uptick in telehealth services.
- The pandemic has disrupted mental health services in 93 percent of countries, according to the World Health Organization (WHO).
- Many people have opted for the convenience and ease of self-care, such as buying a rowing machine or making use of meditation apps to manage stress.

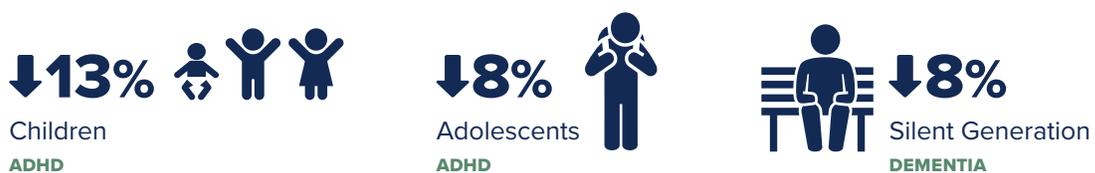


The CDC and WHO data, along with Anthem's findings, reflect current trends concerning the pandemic's impact on mental health. However, they aren't definitive regarding the pandemic's long-term impact. What we do know is that prior national traumatic events have affected individuals' long-term mental health. For example, the SARS outbreak in 2003 led to a 30 percent increase in suicides that year for people older than 65. Mental health conditions, particularly psychological distress and PTSD, lingered five years after people lost their homes during Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

Changes in the prevalence of mental health diagnoses were not consistent among the different groups. Children and adolescents showed a decrease in diagnoses in 2020. The only other group to experience an overall downturn was the Silent Generation.



Common diagnoses for each of these groups that had a decrease in 2020 compared to 2019 are shown below.



## WHY THE DROP?

One likely explanation for the drop in children's diagnoses is that they experienced fewer face-to-face encounters in 2020 with teachers, coaches and other adults who may have identified potential mental health concerns.

For the Silent Generation, the explanation could be they're less likely to adopt telehealth services and generally seeing all healthcare providers less.

Younger adults, meanwhile, had a smaller than expected increase in mental health diagnoses for the full year of 2020. Younger and middle adults had a combined increase of only 3 percent. Finally, Baby Boomers' rate of diagnoses had a small increase of only 1 percent in 2020.

Not surprisingly, diagnoses and treatment for anxiety and PTSD increased in 2020 relative to 2019. The increase in diagnosed anxiety corresponds with a [recent study](#) showing that, during the pandemic, four in 10 adults reported symptoms of anxiety or depression, up from one in 10 in 2019.

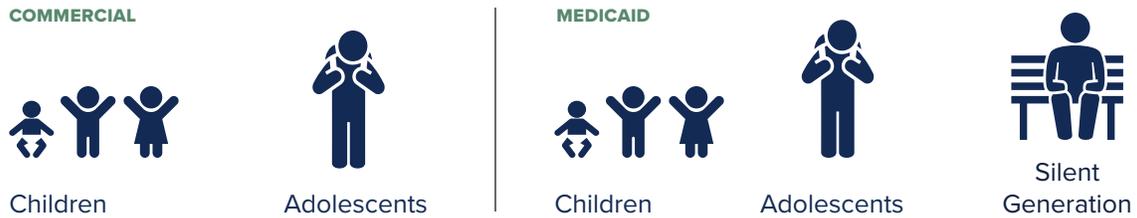
In summary, Anthem's data do not show an overall increase in people seeking services in 2020 despite a prior increasing trend and clear challenges from the pandemic. Nearly three out of four behavior health specialists and primary care doctors who participated in the Anthem-commissioned survey estimated that mental health repercussions from the virus will last up to three years or longer. If they're correct, the need for mental health services will only compound.



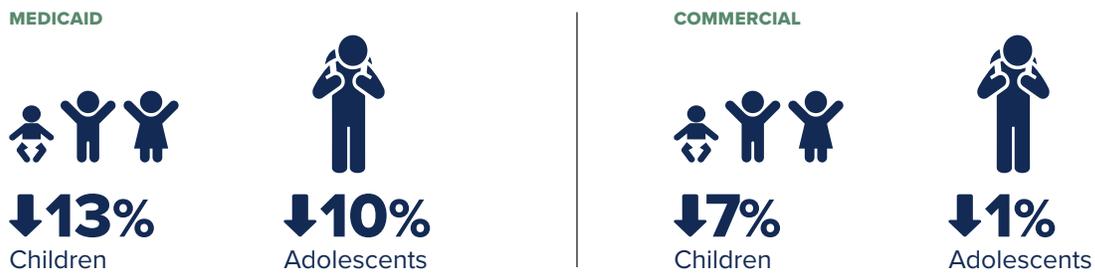
# Trends by lines of business and generation

The diagnosis trends by line of business (commercial, Medicaid and Medicare) and generation reflect the overall trends described above.

## Greatest declines by age and line of business



Interestingly, among all three lines of business, the Silent Generation experienced significant declines, especially among Medicaid, which dropped 11%. Children and adolescents showed significant declines among the commercial and Medicaid lines of business, with diagnoses among adolescents covered by Medicaid showing a much greater decline compared to adolescents with commercial insurance.



Healthcare professionals who participated in the Anthem-commissioned survey support the findings that children and adolescents have experienced the most significant short- and long-term impacts on their behavioral health due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The next group to suffer the effects most are younger adults, they say.

## Percentage of providers on short- and long-term impacts



## Most common diagnoses by generation

Anthem's data on the most common diagnoses during the pandemic reflect national trends as well. As noted in the introduction, four in 10 adults reported symptoms of anxiety or depression. Anxiety and depression emerged in the top three diagnoses for all age groups, except for children and adolescents, in 2020.

### **MORE ON DEPRESSION**

Additional Anthem data from IngenioRx, its pharmacy benefits manager, supports the report's finding that individuals didn't access treatment in 2020 at as high of a rate as they did in 2019, in spite of the rising need. While the overall utilization for drugs to treat depression was up in 2020, much of that increase can be attributed to existing users being more adherent to their dosing regimens, according to IngenioRx medication-adherence data. New users of these drugs in 2020 increased at the same rate as 2019.

Consistent with other analyses, young children and the Silent Generation experienced the greatest declines in diagnoses, with a 13 percent drop in ADHD and 12 percent drop in adjustment disorders for children. At the other end of the spectrum, the Silent Generation saw a 12 percent drop in neurodegenerative diseases, such as Alzheimer's, and nearly an 8 percent drop in dementia.

The declines for both age groups were among the conditions for which they are most commonly treated. Possible explanations for the declines include difficulty in accessing services and the lack of personal contact during a pandemic year. Both groups may have had a more difficult time switching to telehealth services. Further, they likely experienced fewer in-person interactions that could lead to a mental health referral; children no longer attended school in person, and the Silent Generation likely remained home more than usual.

For more specific information on diagnoses by age groups, refer to the following chart.

Group	Most common diagnoses (in order of prevalence)	% change in 2020 from 2019
<b>Children</b>		
	ADHD	-12.7%
	Adjustment disorders	-11.6%
	Behavioral disorders of childhood and adolescence	-5.4%
	Anxiety	-5.5%
<b>Adolescents</b>		
	ADHD	-7.5%
	Depressive disorders	-3.1%
	Anxiety	1.5%
<b>Younger Adults</b>		
	Anxiety	8.9%
	Depressive disorders	1.5%
	Substance use disorders	-3.9%
<b>Middle Adults</b>		
	Anxiety	8.8%
	Depressive disorders	-2.8%
	Substance use disorders	2.5%
<b>Baby Boomers</b>		
	Depressive disorders	-2.9%
	Anxiety	8.5%
	Substance use disorders	0.9%
<b>Silent Generation</b>		
	Organic psychotic disorders	-11.9%
	Depressive disorders	-3.0%
	Anxiety	5.8%
	Dementia	-7.6%

Anthem’s provider survey confirms anxiety and depression as top diagnoses. Providers reported that they have been treating anxiety (90%) and depression (95%) more frequently than before the pandemic’s onset, along with other behavioral conditions, as shown below.



- A. **76%** Relationship/domestic challenges
- C. **54%** Suicide ideation
- E. **39%** Eating disorders
- B. **75%** Alcohol use
- D. **45%** Illicit drug use
- F. **32%** Prescription drug use

The survey also sheds light on what factors providers think are driving the escalated mental health needs. Nearly 70 percent of those surveyed think loneliness had a significant negative impact, while 58 percent reported that financial issues are a root cause.



Finally, surveyed providers don't think these challenges are going away any time soon. Almost all (96%) believe that there will be lingering mental health effects up to a year after the pandemic, and approximately 75 percent believe that the mental health effects will linger for up to three years or longer.

## Final thoughts and observations

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a life-changing event. It has been a difficult, upending experience, but as with many such experiences, there are lessons to be learned. One of those is the acknowledgment of mental health as critical to overall health and well-being.

If the surveyed providers are correct that the pandemic's effect on people's mental health will linger up to three years or longer, this acknowledgment is significant. Nine out of 10 of those surveyed said that COVID-19 has made them more aware of the mental health conditions their patients are facing. Equally important, patients are also opening up about mental health concerns: 70 percent of surveyed providers said their patients have been more willing to proactively bring up mental health conditions during appointments.

The pandemic's upside, then, is that people are becoming more aware of the importance of health and well-being and mental health care's role in supporting their whole health. A majority of the surveyed providers said that patients who were already seeking therapy or in a support group prior to the pandemic have more successfully coped with their mental health conditions. Further, more than half (54%) believe that an increased emphasis in self-care and better work/life flexibility have had the most positive impact on their patients.

In summary, the year 2019-2020 was flat in diagnoses compared to the increase in 2018-2019. In spite of increased mental health conditions due to the pandemic, the data do not show a corresponding increase in diagnoses. Anthem's findings suggest that we cannot fail to address mental well-being during a public health crisis that targets our physical health. As we navigate an unknown future, we are reminded that whole-person health is indeed just that—two parts that complete the whole—and we cannot focus on one at the exclusion of the other.

Our changing world means all stakeholders need to be aware and to take action—aware of mental health's impact on well-being and to ensure that all people have access to mental health care as they emerge from the very shared experience of a global pandemic.

## **Survey and claims methodology**

The State of the Nation's Mental Health report is based on claims data from 27 million members in Anthem-affiliated individual, employer-sponsored, Medicare and Medicaid health plans in all states. Prevalence of a behavioral health diagnosis each year (2019 and 2020) was determined by the number of individuals with at least one claim containing that behavioral health diagnosis during the calendar year divided by the number of members enrolled in the plans.

The Anthem online survey was conducted among a national sample consisting of 552 healthcare professionals, broken out into 285 behavioral health specialists and 267 primary care physicians/general practitioners living in the United States, with an oversample of 100 rural healthcare professionals. The sample includes a diverse set of respondents across key demographics (age, gender, region, race/ethnicity) and experience as a physician (time spent in practice, type of practice, size of practice). The margin of error for the total sample at the 95 percent confidence level is +/- 4 percentage points.