

Week of June 29, 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 organizations or individuals who are 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

- Weekly alcohol-related emergency department visits in Washington increased by 8% from the week of June 14 to the week of June 21. The increase is associated with men and triggered a statistical alert.
- More Washington adults reported feelings of depression at least most days in mid-June than in early June, according to U.S. Census Bureau data.

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

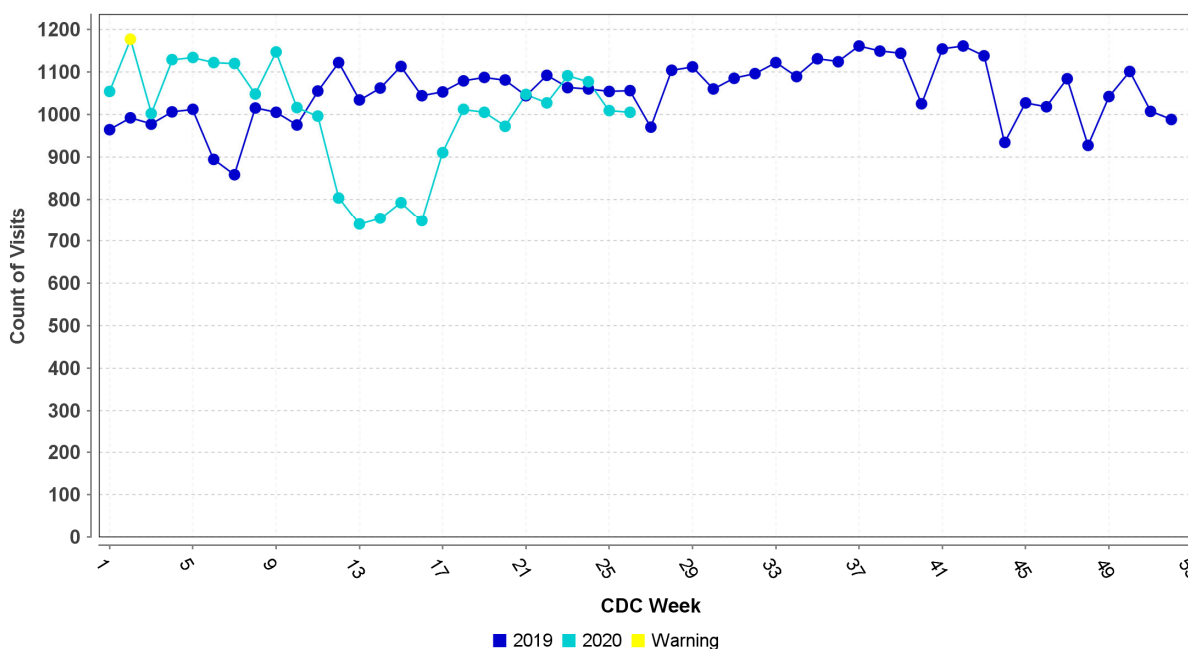
Syndromic surveillance data are collected in near real-time from hospitals and clinics from across Washington. Key data elements reported include patient demographic information, chief complaint, and coded diagnoses. This system is the only source of emergency department (ED) data for Washington. Statistical 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 deviations 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).¹ For this reason, indicators are presented as a total number of ED visits, rather than a percentage of ED visits, for 2019 and 2020. Many counts for CDC Week 24 and Week 25 in 2020 are higher than previously reported due to recent data updates.

Psychological Distress

Updated data suggest that **emergency department visits for psychological distress² are stabilizing near 2019 levels** at the current time, with no immediately discernable differences by sex or age group.

Graph 1: Count of emergency department visits for psychological distress² in Washington, by week: 2020 vs. 2019



Suicidal Ideation and Suicide Attempts

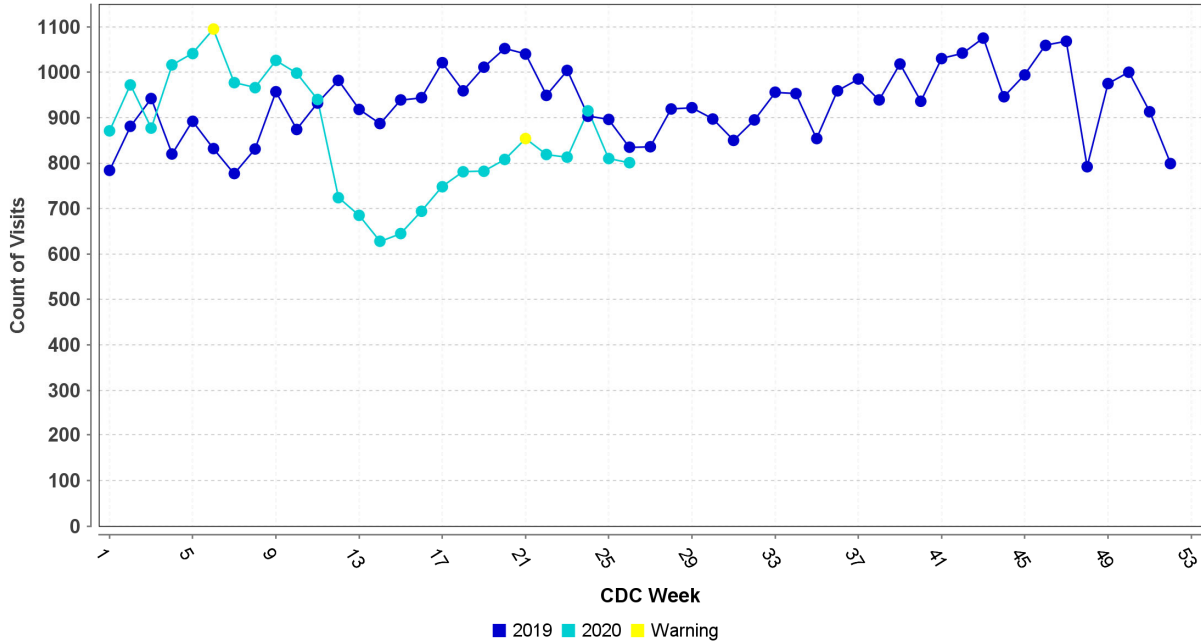
Despite an increase in Week 24, updated data suggest that **emergency department visits for suicidal ideation are stabilizing slightly below 2019 levels** at the current time (Graph 2). Although a general decrease in emergency department visits for suicide attempts was observed

¹ 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>

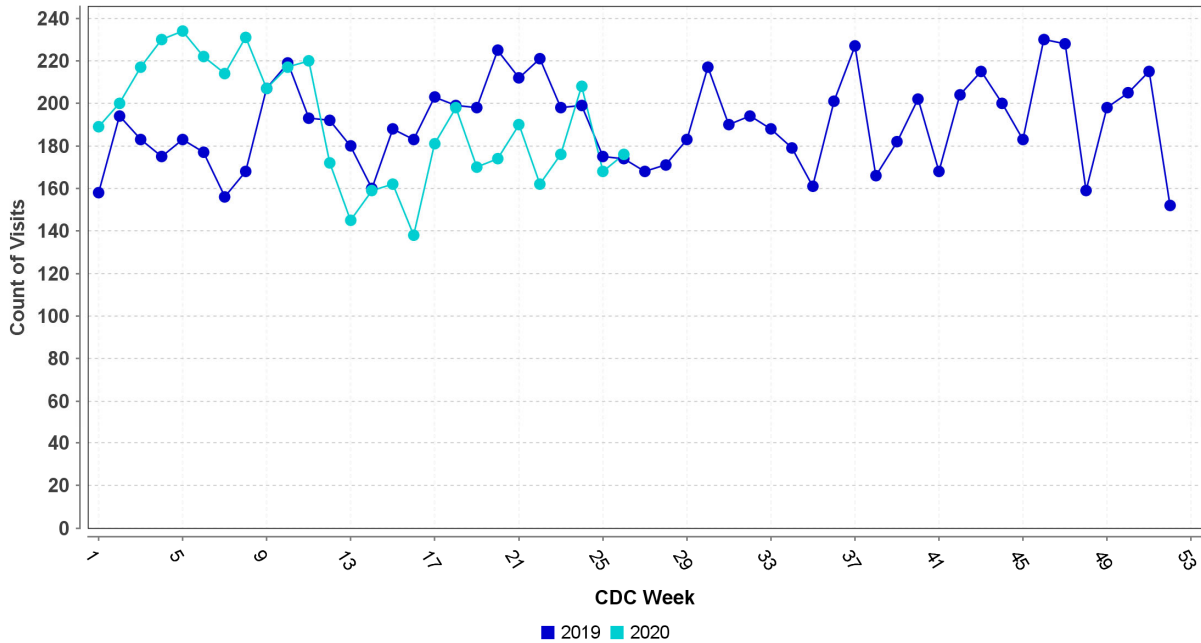
² Psychological distress in this context is considered a disaster-related syndrome comprised of panic, stress, and anxiety. It is indexed in the Electronic Surveillance System for the Early Notification of Community-based Epidemics (ESSENCE) platform as Disaster-related Mental Health v1. Full details are available at <https://knowledgerepository.syndromicsurveillance.org/disaster-related-mental-health-v1-syndrome-definition-committee>.

in June 2019, weekly emergency department visit counts for suicide attempts remained relatively level between and May and June (Graph 3).

Graph 2: Count of emergency department visits for suicidal ideation in Washington, by week: 2020 vs. 2019



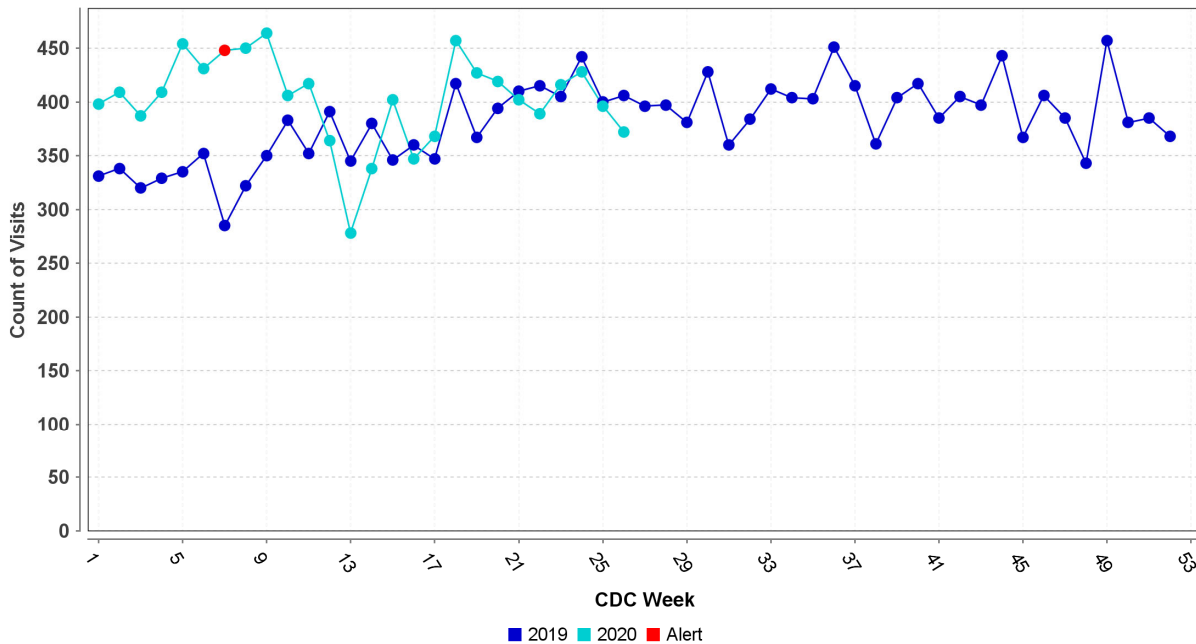
Graph 3: Count of emergency department visits for suicide attempts in Washington, by week: 2020 vs. 2019



Substance Use — Drug Overdose and Alcohol-related Emergency Visits

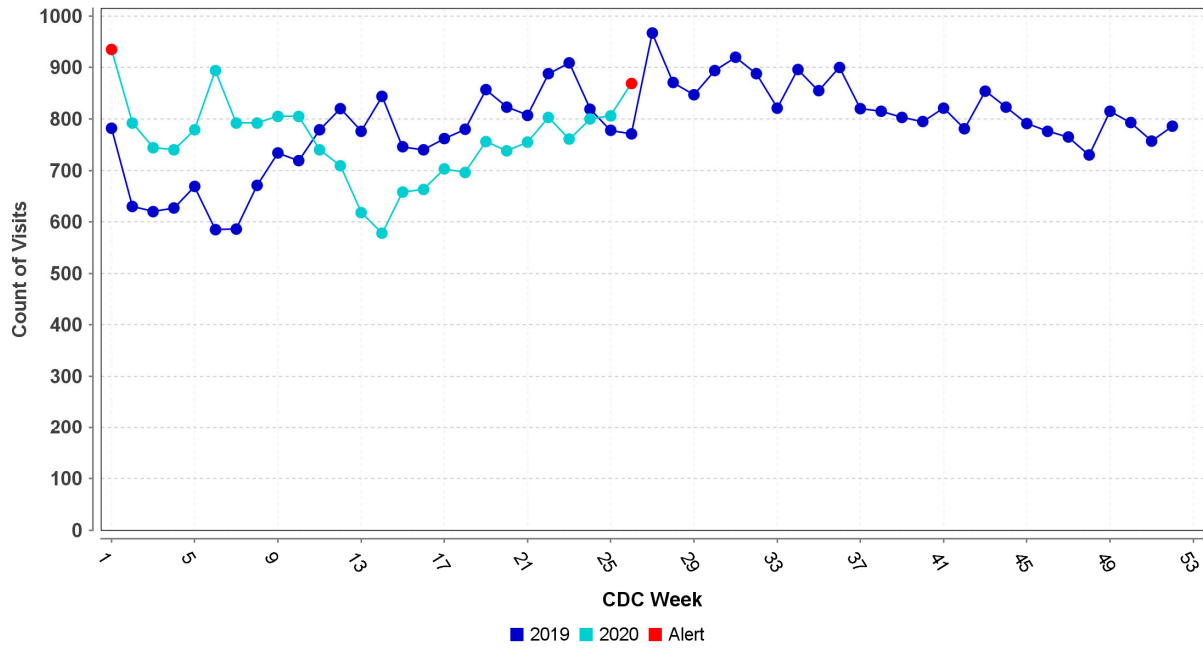
Following a slight elevation in May, the absolute count of emergency department visits for overdoses related to any drug³ in June 2020 were comparable to those in June 2019. Additionally, the initial Week 26 (week of June 21) count is below that of the corresponding time period last year (Graph 4). However, weekly **alcohol-related emergency department visits in Washington increased by 8%** from Week 25 (week of June 14) to Week 26 (Graph 5). A statistical *alert* was activated for Week 26, the week prior to Independence Day which only detected a statistical *warning* in 2019. Comparing by sex, **the recent increase is associated with men** (587 visits in Week 26 vs. 519 visits in Week 25), rather than women as seen in prior weeks.

Graph 4: Count of emergency department visits for overdose by any drug³ in Washington, by week: 2020 vs. 2019



³ 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 are available at <https://knowledgerepository.syndromicsurveillance.org/cdc-all-drug-v1>.

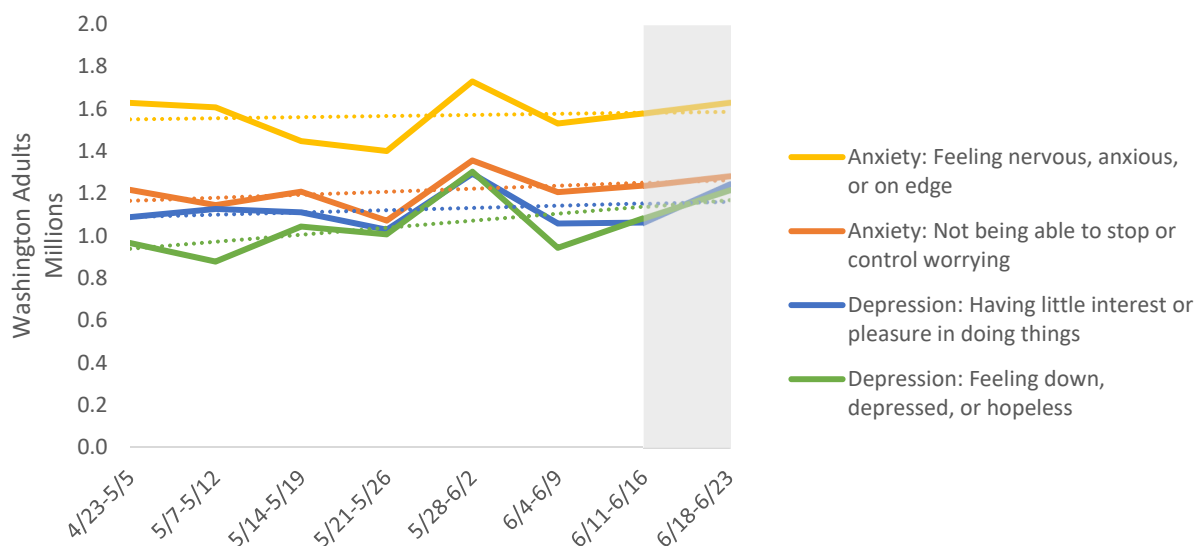
Graph 5: Count of alcohol-related emergency department visits in Washington, by week: 2020 vs. 2019



General Surveillance — Symptoms of Anxiety and Depression

U.S. Census Bureau data suggest that the numbers of **Washington adults experiencing symptoms of anxiety and depression at least most days increased by 6% and 12%, respectively, from early-June to mid-June.** Survey data collection will continue through mid-July.⁴

Graph 6: Estimated Washington adults experiencing symptoms of anxiety and depression at least most days, by week: April 23–June 23

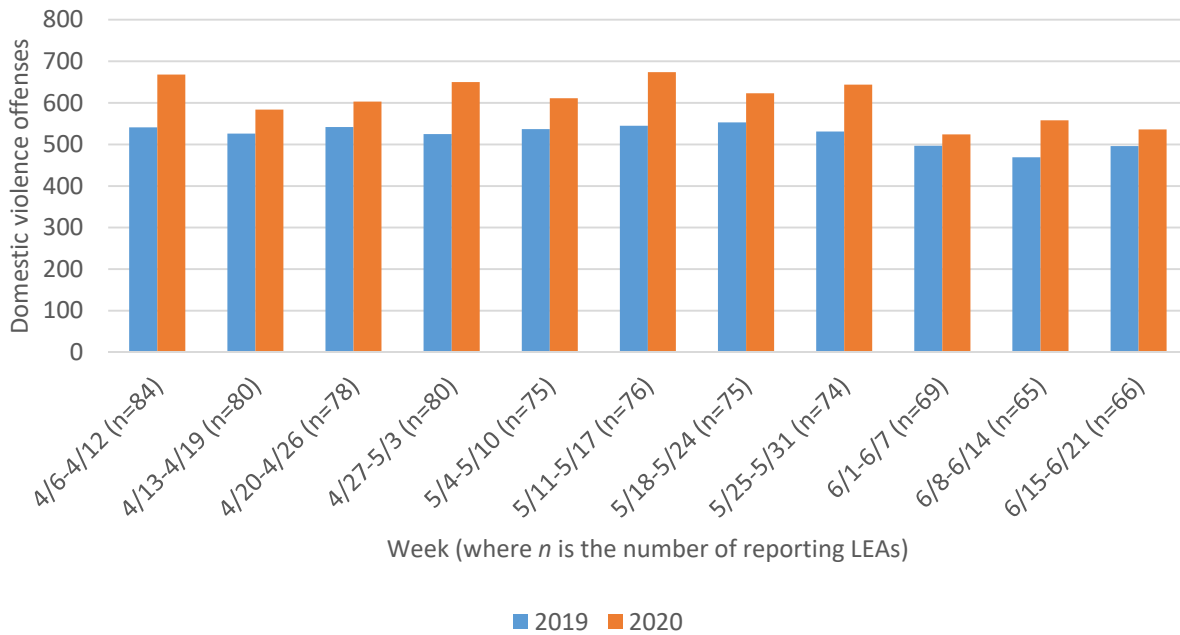


Crime — Domestic Violence

Domestic violence offenses were up 8%, year-over-year, for the week of June 15–21, according to data reported by 66 law enforcement agencies (LEAs) to the Washington Association of Sheriffs and Police Chiefs (WASPC). Since WASPC began surveying in early April, domestic violence offenses are up 16% over 2019, while other surveyed offenses – including theft, destruction of property, assault, and burglary – are down a combined 25%.

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.

Graph 7: Domestic violence offenses reported to WASPC, by week: 2020 vs. 2019



Telephonic Support Line Activity — Suicidality and Substance Use

There is no update since the Week of June 8 Situation Report for data related to the Washington State Tobacco Quitline (WAQL), Washington Recovery Help Line (WRHL), and Suicide Prevention Lifeline (SPLL). Calls to WAQL in April and May combined show a 41% decrease year-over-year, suggesting that Washingtonians addicted to nicotine may be coping with stress by postponing quit attempts and continuing to use tobacco. Meanwhile, calls to the WRHL are fairly stable (down 3%, year-over-year) after a 13% increase from April to May. No new WA data are currently available for SPLL, but May 2020 and 2019 comparison data will become available in the coming weeks.

There is no update since the Week of June 22 Situation Report for data related to the Washington Poison Center. According to the Washington Poison Center, suspected suicide cases among 13–17 year-olds are up 4% from 2019 to 2020 for the period of January 1–June 10, which is greater than the 2% increase across all ages.

Product Sales — Cannabis and Liquor Taxes & Handgun Background Checks

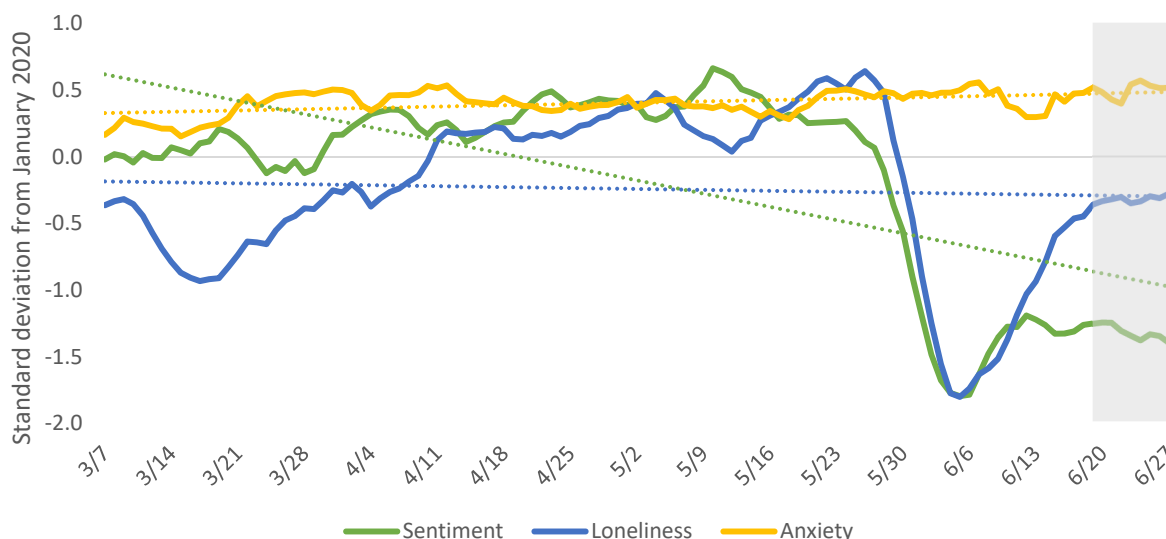
There is no new data for cannabis and liquor tax collection since the Week of June 8 Situation Report. The Liquor and Cannabis Board (LCB) and Department of Revenue (DOR) summarize monthly cannabis and liquor tax collections, which may be used as a representation for sales of legal recreational substances and, by extension, potential for substance use issues. After three months of elevated tax revenue levels for cannabis and comparable levels for liquor, year-over-year sales of cannabis and liquor were up a combined 27% for April–May 2020.

There is no update since the Week of June 22 Situation Report for data related to handgun background checks. Federal background checks for handgun sales⁵ in Washington increased by 81% between February and March 2020. This was followed by a 56% increase in background checks for the period of March–May 2020 compared to the corresponding period in 2019. Although access to firearms is a risk factor for suicide,⁶ the state’s increase is much lower than the overall U.S. increase (+90%). June product sales data will be available in a future report.

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

The latest tweets⁷ geo-tagged to Washington suggest that **loneliness may be stabilizing slightly below pre-pandemic levels and positive sentiment is gradually decreasing**. Meanwhile, anxiety remains approximately half of one standard deviation above pre-pandemic levels.

Graph 8: 7-day moving averages of deviations in select expression measures⁷ relative to January 2020 baseline, by day: March 1, 2020–June 27, 2020



To request this document in another format, call 1-800-525-0127. Deaf or hard of hearing customers, please call 711 ([Washington Relay](https://www.washingtonrelay.com)) or email civil.rights@doh.wa.gov.

⁵ 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.”

⁶ Sacks C. A. & Bartels S. J. Reconsidering Risks of Gun Ownership and Suicide in Unprecedented Times. *N Engl J Med* 2020; 382:2259-2260. DOI: 10.1056/NEJMe2007658

⁷ 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.”