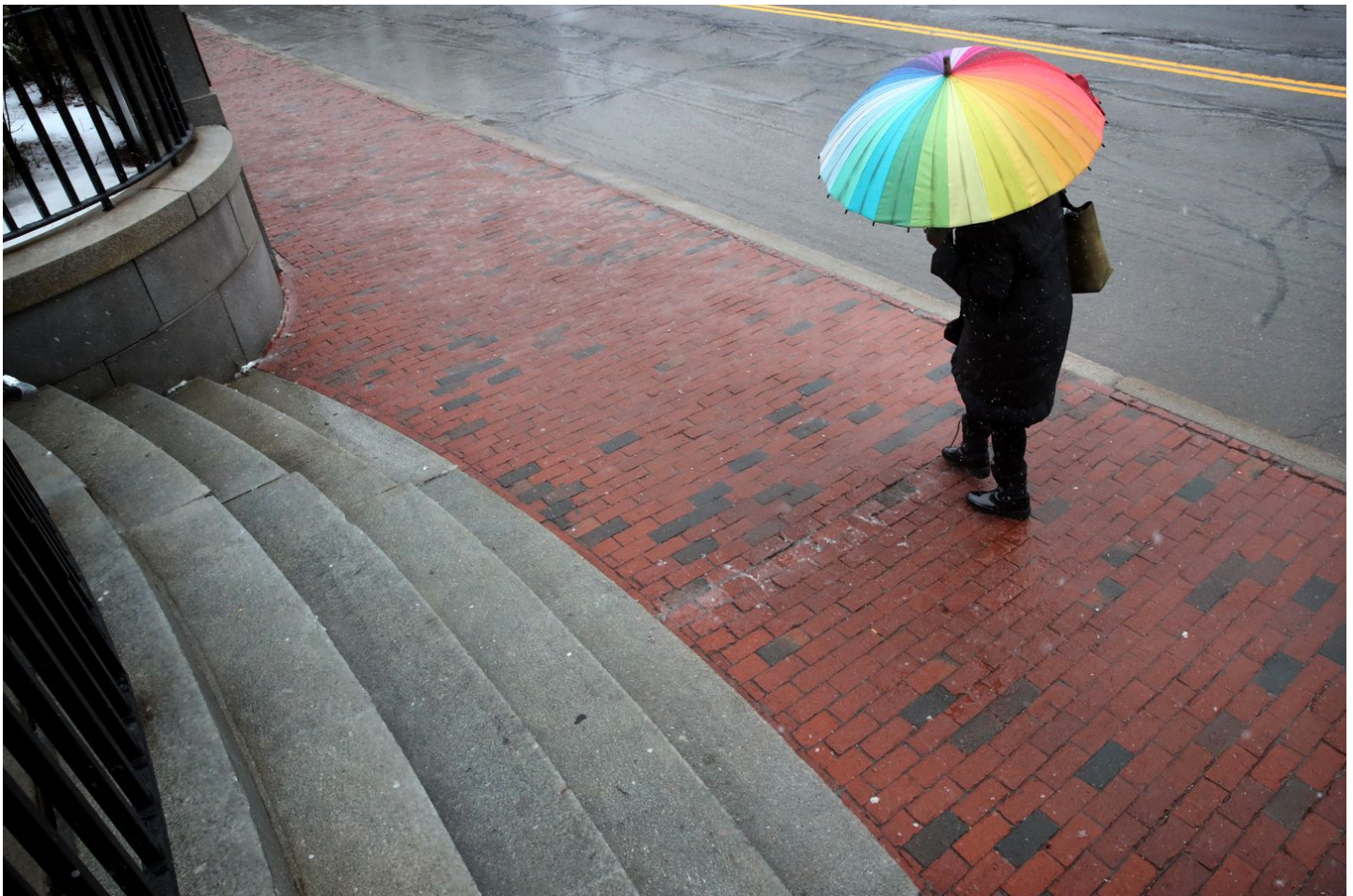


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Boston College researchers find sharp increase in anxiety, depression during pandemic

By [Martin Finucane](#) Globe Staff, Updated April 24, 2021, 12:16 a.m.



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In the latest evidence that the coronavirus pandemic has harmed people's mental health, Boston College researchers say reports of anxiety and depression among Americans increased in 2020 to levels more than six times higher than the year before.

“The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted nearly all aspects of life, leading to rising mortality rates, increasing economic inequities, and gross disturbances in people’s daily lives and social interactions. Perhaps not surprisingly, these myriad stressors have led to rising rates of mental health disorder symptoms,” the researchers [reported](#) earlier this month in the journal *Translational Behavioral Medicine*.

“Our results show that reports of anxiety and depression rose significantly from April to November 2020 to rates six times higher than in 2019,” the study said.

By November, the prevalence for probable anxiety and depression was 50 percent and 44 percent, respectively, researchers said.

The study also found that “rising mental health challenges” were affecting young people, people of color, and women disproportionately, and there was “evidence of growing unmet need for mental health services.”

The co-authors of the study, Boston College developmental psychologist Rebekah Levine Coley and economist Christopher F. Baum, reviewed survey data collected over eight months from nearly 1.5 million US adults from the US Census Bureau’s [Household Pulse Survey, which is measuring household experiences during the pandemic](#).

The six-fold increase is “just a very shocking number,” Coley said in a telephone interview. She said researchers were analyzing more recent data from the surveys, and would issue an update in the future.

People who were surveyed reported details about their symptoms of anxiety and depression, use of medication, use of counseling services, and unmet need for services.

The researchers said their results suggested that “a substantial portion of US residents experiencing mental health symptoms are not receiving necessary services, with the potential for expanded interruptions to optimal functioning and related repercussions for social and economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.”

The researchers said increased access to mental health services was needed, “particularly targeting young adults, women, and adults of color.”

“Policy to help US residents recover from the challenges driven by the COVID-19 pandemic must attend not only to elevated economic and physical health needs but also to rising mental health disorders and increased need for mental health services,” the researchers said.

Coley said the question of what will happen once the pandemic eases, with restrictions lifted and an improving economy, is “the elephant in the room.”

“A certain level of anxiety and sadness is not surprising and perhaps to be expected,” given the social isolation, fear, economic distress, and disruption in routines caused by the pandemic, she said.

Coley said the question was whether the feelings would “dissipate quickly as things get back to normal” or propel “some people into a significant mental health crisis and longer-term mental health problems.”

The researchers noted that previous studies have also found the pandemic was harming the population’s mental health, but they said they were looking to gain “a far more expansive view” and break down trends by demographic groups.

“I think this is broadly consistent with existing research, that there has been a substantial increase in mood-anxiety disorders during COVID-19, and that there is a gap between service availability and need,” said Dr. Sandro Galea, dean of the Boston University School of Public Health and senior author of [a study published in September](#) on the [rise in depression symptoms during the pandemic](#).

“The magnitude of the increase in mental disorders here is higher than that shown in other work, but that may be difference in measurement, and we need more science to emerge to settle on the likeliest scope of the increased burden of poor mental health in the population,” Galea said in an e-mail.

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