

The state of mental health in America

The 2024 results of the American Psychiatric Association's annual mental health poll show that U.S. adults are feeling increasingly anxious. In 2024, 43% of adults say they feel more anxious than they did the previous year, up from 37% in 2023 and 32% in 2022. Adults are particularly anxious about current events (70%) — especially the economy (77%), the 2024 U.S. election (73%), and gun violence (69%).

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) reports that 57.8 million adults live with some form of mental illness.¹ The severity of a mental illness can vary from person to person. Some individuals can perform daily tasks, including work, with mental illness, and some people may qualify for disability due to their mental illness.²

Understanding the mental health statistics for the United States increases awareness and may help provide support to those who need it. Here, we discuss how many people struggle with mental health challenges and how prevalent they are in different populations.

Before proceeding, it's helpful to note the difference between mental health and mental illness. Mental health is how a person functions in daily activities, and mental illness is the collective term for all diagnosable mental disorders.³

What Are the Primary Causes of Mental Illness?

There are many causes of mental illness, and the psychology field and mental health professionals use the biopsychosocial model to understand the root causes of mental health issues.⁴ To diagnose a patient, the industry standard in the United States is to use the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5-TR).⁵ While the DSM-5-TR diagnosis helps label the specific illness, the biopsychosocial model allows mental health professionals to see beyond these labels.

The biopsychosocial model helps professionals understand the cause of mental illness by looking at three factors⁴:

- **Biology:** Genetics and family history may be a cause of mental illness. It's also possible that exposure to alcohol or drugs in the womb was a factor.
- **Psychology:** Stressful events, like a traumatic experience, in a person's life can alter their psychology and lead to a mental illness.
- **Social:** Social factors like a person's home environment, community, relationships, employment status and more can affect a person's mental health.

It's helpful to understand this model because it can lead to better treatment and understanding of a person's mental illness. For example, a person may have symptoms of anxiety and depression after losing a job, which is treated differently than someone who may be struggling with depression due to biological factors. Short-term mental health issues are referred to as "situational" rather than "clinical."⁶ However, as we discuss adolescent and adult mental health statistics, note that there's often no differentiation between situational or clinical mental illness.

Mental Health Statistics by Type

The NIH reports that the most prevalent mental illnesses for adults in the United States are various anxiety disorders.⁷ Approximately 19.1% of adults have had an anxiety disorder within the last year.⁷ Anxiety disorders come in many different forms and can include panic disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, social anxiety disorder, phobia and more.

The second most common form of mental illness is major depression.⁸ In 2021, 21 million adults reported having at least one episode of major depression, which is roughly 8.3 percent of the U.S. adult population.⁸ They also found that there's a higher instance of depression in women than in men.

The following are the rates of past year prevalence of mental illnesses in U.S. adults according to the NIH:

- Anxiety disorders: 19.1%⁷
- Major depression: 8.3%⁸
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD): 3.6%⁹
- Bipolar disorder: 2.8%¹⁰
- Borderline personality disorder (BPD): 1.4%¹¹
- Binge eating disorder: 1.2%¹²
- Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD): 1.2%¹³
- Schizophrenia: 0.25 -0.64%¹⁴

Mental Health Statistics by Age

Mental illness can affect anyone, including young people. For those struggling with mental illness, about 50 percent of individuals started to have symptoms by the age of 14, and 75 percent experienced symptoms by age 24.¹⁵ Signs and symptoms can include mood changes, problems thinking, apathy, and other unusual symptoms.

The following is how common mental illness is within different age groups:

- 18 to 25: 33.7%¹
- 26 to 49: 28.1%¹
- 50 and older: 15%¹

There are also millions of adolescents struggling with mental illness. In 2020:

- 17% experienced a major depressive episode¹⁶
- 12% had serious thoughts of suicide¹⁶
- Mental health-related emergency room visits for adolescents increased by 31%, compared to 2019¹⁷

Mental Health Statistics by Race

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) is a government organization that collects data on substance use and mental health. SAMHSA's 2021 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) includes data for different racial groups. They found that the highest reported instances of mental illness in the past year within one group are within the American Indian or Alaska Native group at 26.6 percent. For those who identify as mixed race or multiracial, approximately 34.9 percent have a mental illness.¹⁸

- Mixed or multiracial: 34.9%
- American Indian or Alaska Native: 26.6%
- White: 23.9%¹⁸
- Black or African American: 21.4%¹⁸
- Hispanic or Latino: 20.7%
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander: 18.1%
- Asian: 16.4%¹⁸

How Mental Illness Affects Individuals

Living with a mental illness can affect people in different ways. Much like the biopsychosocial model, the reported information shows how mental illness can take a toll on a person's biology, social life and psychology. For example, the data below shows how a person's mental illness can affect employment, which can lead to situational depression.⁶

- Children ages 6-17 are three times more likely to repeat a grade if they have mental, emotional, developmental or behavioral problems.¹⁹
- 21.6% of adults working full-time have experienced symptoms of mental illness within a one-year period, compared to 32.2% of those who are unemployed.¹⁸
- 33.5% of adults with a mental illness also reported a substance use disorder in 2021.¹⁸
- Those with a severe mental illness have a life span 10 to 25 years shorter than the general population.²⁰

How Mental Illness Affects Communities

Communities are also affected by mental illness. Mental health issues can lead to increased hospitalizations and economic challenges. Many unhoused people in communities around the country also struggle with mental illness.

- There are over 580,000 unhoused people in the United States, and 21% have a severe mental illness.²¹
- In 2021, over 6.6 million hospital emergency department visits were from mental health or substance use.²²
- Untreated serious mental illness results in over \$193 billion in lost earnings each year.²³

The Impact of COVID-19 on Mental Health

At the start of 2020, the world faced many challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic. To help stop the spread of the virus, many people practiced social distancing, socialized less and started working from home. During this time, many people struggled with mental health and substance use issues. In 2020:

- 12% of adolescents and 4.9% of adults had serious thoughts of suicide.¹⁶
- 69.1% of youths aged 12 to 17 said they experienced a major depressive episode during the first year of the pandemic.¹⁶
- 45.2% of adults with a mental illness perceived the pandemic harmed their mental health.¹⁶
- 14.5% of adolescents said they started drinking alcohol a little more or much more than prior to the pandemic.¹⁶
- 10.7% of adults say they weren't able to get the mental health services they needed, which had a moderate to severe impact on their health.¹⁶

Mental Illness and Criminal Justice System Statistics

The reality is that many people in jails and prisons have mental illnesses. Aspects of having a mental illness include changes in emotion, thinking or behavior.³ Understanding this may provide some new perspectives on incarcerated individuals.

- 64% of jail inmates have a mental illness compared to 21% of the general adult population.²⁴
- Individuals with an untreated mental illness are 16 times more likely to be killed by the police.²⁵
- Suicide is the leading cause of death in jails.²⁶

Mental Illness in Rural Communities

It's important to discuss mental illness in more rural areas because these communities have additional challenges. Over 25 million rural Americans live in areas that have a shortage of mental health professionals.²⁷ In a one-year period, in 2021:

- 22.7% of adults in nonmetropolitan areas experienced symptoms of mental illness.¹⁶
- 22.4% of adults in completely rural areas experienced symptoms of mental illness.¹⁶
- 4.4% of adults in completely rural areas have a serious mental illness.¹⁶
- 4.5% of people in completely rural areas had serious thoughts of suicide.¹⁶

Suicide Statistics

Suicide is often a tragic result of mental health problems. Sometimes, suicide happens after years of struggling with a mental illness like depression, but can also be attributed to situational issues that pass, like the end of a relationship or money problems.²⁸ Understanding suicide statistics may help communities be more aware of the problem to provide support for those in need.

- Over 13 million adults had serious thoughts about suicide in 2022.²⁹
- 49,476 people died by suicide in 2022.²⁹
- Suicide rates increased by approximately 36% between 2000–2022.²⁹
- 1.6 million adults made a suicide attempt in 2022.²⁹

Conclusion

The state of mental health in America reflects a growing concern that cannot be overlooked. With a significant percentage of the adult population reporting increased anxiety and millions living with various mental illnesses, it is crucial to prioritize mental health awareness and support systems. The biopsychosocial model offers valuable insights into the complex causes of mental health issues, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive approach to treatment that considers biological, psychological, and social factors.

Understanding the demographics affected by mental illness, including age and race, allows for targeted interventions and better resource allocation. As we face ongoing societal challenges, such as economic instability and rising violence, the mental health of Americans remains at risk. It is imperative that we foster open dialogues, reduce stigma, and promote access to mental health care for all individuals, ensuring that those in need receive the support necessary for recovery and well-being. Taking proactive steps now can help build a healthier, more resilient society for the future.

Recommendations:

Increase Funding for Mental Health Services:

Allocate more resources to mental health programs and services, particularly for community-based mental health care. This includes funding for prevention, early intervention, and treatment services to ensure accessibility for all individuals, especially those in underserved areas.

Enhance Mental Health Education and Awareness:

Implement nationwide campaigns to raise awareness about mental health issues. Educating the public on the signs and symptoms of mental illness can encourage individuals to seek help early, reducing stigma and promoting understanding.

Expand Access to Services for Youth:

Focus on improving access to mental health resources for adolescents and young adults, particularly in schools. This includes training teachers and staff to recognize mental health issues and providing on-site counseling services.

Support for Nonprofit and Community Organizations:

Provide grants and resources to non-profit organizations and community groups that offer mental health services, particularly in low-income areas. These organizations often bridge the gap in services where government resources are sparse.

Expand Support for Housing and Employment:

Implement programs aimed at providing stable housing and job training for individuals with mental health issues. Secure housing is a crucial component of mental health recovery, and job support can reduce economic burdens.

The United States Needs More Mental Health Workers:

With millions of people having mental illness in the United States, there's a need for more mental health workers. Additionally, social workers, psychologists and healthcare workers often interact with those who have a mental illness.

By adopting these recommendations, the U.S. government can significantly improve the mental health landscape, ensuring that individuals have access to the care and support they need to thrive.

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