



MENTAL HEALTH IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON NOVA SCOTIANS

*An update to the 2020 survey using data
from June 2021*

May 26, 2022



PROJECT INFO

PROJECT TITLE

Mental health impacts of COVID-19 on Nova Scotians: An update using survey data from June 2021

PROJECT LEAD

Dr. Mohammad Pulok, Senior Health Policy Researcher, Maritime SPOR SUPPORT Unit (MSSU)

PROJECT TEAM

- Scott Anderson, Knowledge Translation Coordinator, MSSU
- Dr. Amy Grant, Senior Health Policy Researcher, MSSU
- Elizabeth Jeffers, Research Manager, MSSU
- Amy Mireault, Research Assistant, MSSU

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The survey data analyzed in this report was provided in partnership with Mental Health Research Canada (MHRC) and Research Nova Scotia (RNS). RNS partnered with MHRC and Pollara Insights to collect additional data for our mental health research community to utilize on the state of mental health in Nova Scotia during the COVID-19 pandemic. All interpretation of data represents the views of the authors only and not MHRC. As a research organization, RNS recognizes that understanding the specific mental health challenges facing Canadians is critical. We must continue to invest in mental health services and gain real-time data to help improve service delivery.

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HOW TO CITE THIS REPORT

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SUMMARY REPORT

WHY IS THIS STUDY IMPORTANT?

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a drastic impact on many areas of our lives. Many of the measures to contain COVID-19 have limited social interactions and access to mental health coping strategies.^{1,2} Growing evidence from around the world has demonstrated the negative mental health consequences of the pandemic and efforts to curb the virus.^{3,4} A recent study by the Maritime SPOR SUPPORT Unit (MSSU), *Different Boats in a Stormy Sea: The mental health impacts of COVID-19 on Nova Scotians*, found negative impacts and some protective effects on different aspects of mental health for Nova Scotians in the early period of the pandemic (August 2020).⁵

This follow-up study analyzes data from June 2021, almost a year after the original report, to understand whether the mental health impacts of COVID-19 on Nova Scotians have changed since the early period of the pandemic. This summary report presents the key findings of this study. The full report is available upon request from the MSSU.

HOW WAS THIS STUDY COMPLETED?

This report compares data from two online surveys about the impacts of COVID-19 on the mental health of Nova Scotians from the early stages of the pandemic in August 2020 (poll 2) and 10 months later in June 2021 (poll 7). The survey data was collected by Pollara Strategic Insights, a research company who worked in partnership with Mental Health Research Canada (MHRC) to carry out a series of 12 online polls thus far across Canada and will continue this survey at least until 2025. The people answering the survey questions, or respondents, assessed the impacts of the pandemic on their mental health. This is also known as self-reported data.

A total of 505 and 524 participants responded to poll 2 and poll 7, respectively. It is likely that different people participated in the two polls, although the data was anonymous and thus there may have been some overlap in who completed each survey. The results were compared across age, gender, rural vs. urban geographic location, education, household status and previous mental health diagnosis. For more detailed information about the survey and research methods, please see the research methods section of the initial report *Different Boats in a Stormy Sea*.⁵ The same research methods were used for this report including for new factors that were added to the survey, for example, questions about suicidal ideation.

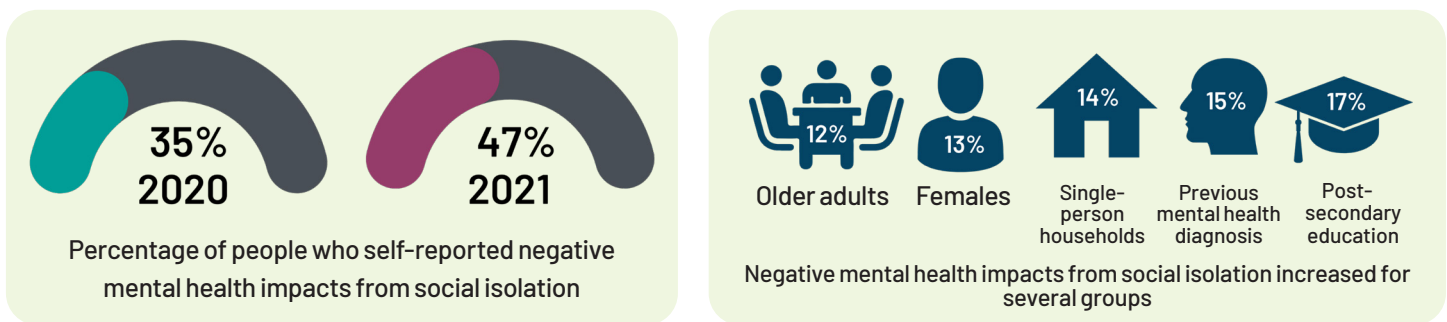
WHAT WERE THE KEY FINDINGS?

This study demonstrates that the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of Nova Scotians changed for some factors over time. The findings highlight the impacts of several factors analyzed in the original report and introduce new considerations from the more recent survey (poll 7).

Social Impacts

- Social isolation (47%), fear of getting COVID-19 (37%), fear of a family member getting COVID-19 (45%), and challenges getting necessities (32%) remained or increased as the most reported negative social impacts on mental health.
- Social isolation became the most reported negative social impact on mental health (47% in 2021 vs. 38% in 2020) among Nova Scotians.
- The negative impact of social isolation increased across all groups with the greatest increase among people with a post-secondary education (17% increase from 2020) followed by people with a previous mental health diagnosis (15% increase), people in single-person households (14% increase from 2020), females (13% increase from 2020) and older people (12% increase from 2020).
- Younger people (18-39 years) reported an increase (62% in 2021 compared to 52% in 2020) in fear of family member catching COVID-19, while older people (70+ years) reported a decrease (32% in 2021 from 42% in 2020).

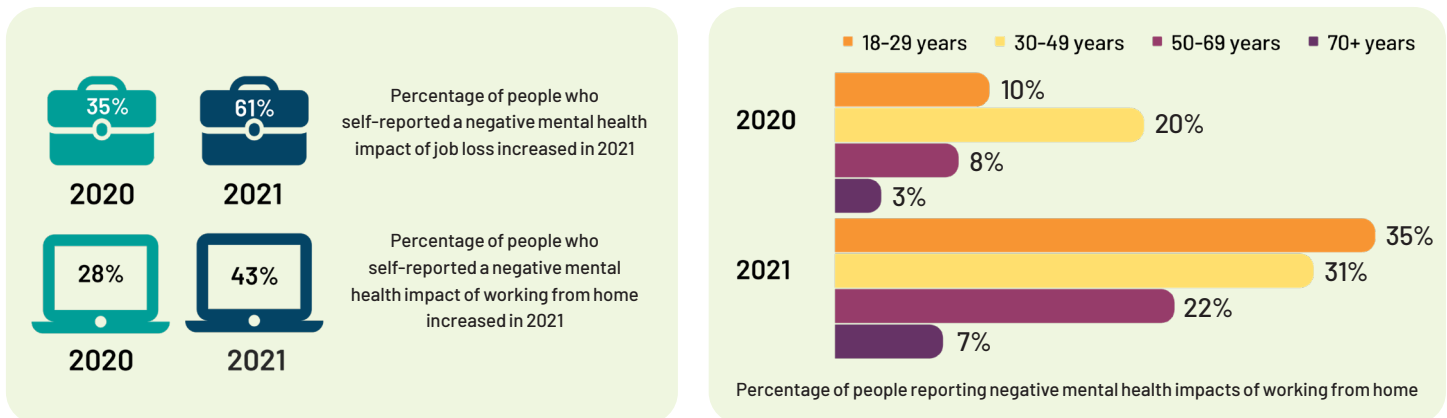
Figure 1. Social Isolation. Social isolation became the most reported factor with a negative mental health impact on Nova Scotians. The negative mental health impact of social isolation increased for some groups from 2020 to 2021.



Economic Impacts

- Recent job loss, working from home, and financial issues for older adults all increased as negative economic impacts on mental health between 2020 and 2021.
- There was a significant increase in negative mental health impact for recent job loss among those who responded (61% in 2021 vs. 35% in 2020).
- There was a significant increase in negative mental health impact of working from home (43% in 2021 vs. 28% in 2020).
- The negative mental health impact of working from home increased across all groups with respondents in the 18-29 age group reporting the highest increase (26% increase from 2020).
- The negative impacts of the possibility of not paying bills significantly increased for older adults 70 and older (up 17% from 2020).

Figure 2. Economic Impacts. The negative impact on mental health of working from home or having a recent job loss increased in 2021. The negative impact of working from home was higher for younger people, but increased across all ages.



Recreational Impacts

- Going outside (42%), reading (28%), and entertainment (20%) were consistently reported to be the top three recreational factors positively impacting the mental health of the Nova Scotians during COVID-19.
- The proportion of people responding to the negative impact of daily news on their mental health increased from 36% in 2020 to 42% in 2021.
- The proportion of people reporting a negative mental health impact of social media use also increased slightly from 20% in 2020 to 24% in 2021.

Figure 3. Recreation. Going outside, reading and entertainment were the top three recreational factors positively impacting mental health.



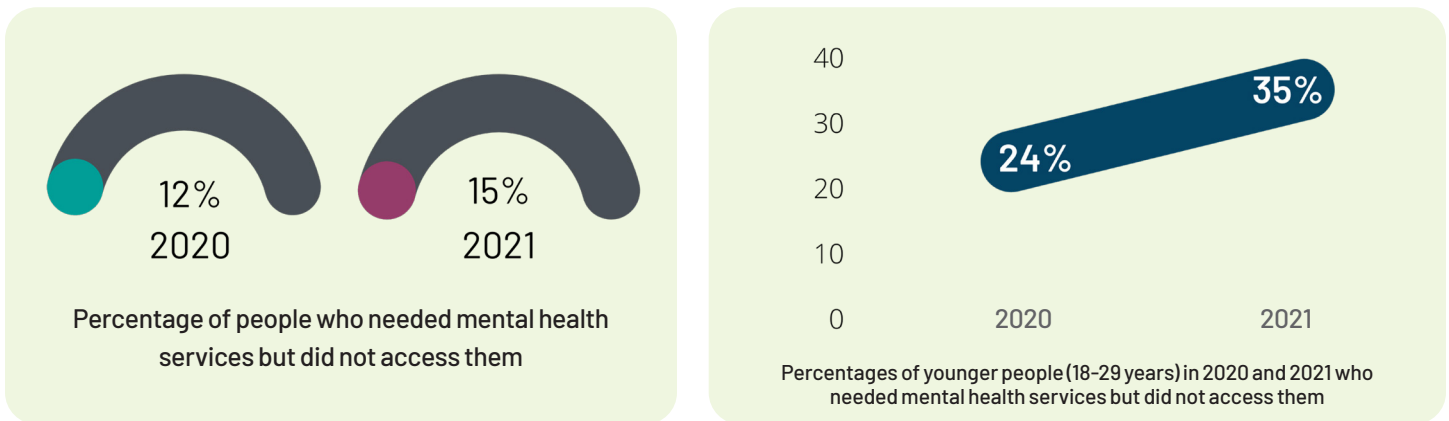
Substance Use

- Of those people who reported consuming alcohol, the percentage of people who reported that they have increased their alcohol consumption since COVID-19, decreased slightly in 2021 (27%) compared to 2020 (30%).
- In 2021, younger age groups (18-29 and 30-49), males, and people with college/trade education reported that they decreased consumption of alcohol since the start of the pandemic.
- On the other hand, there has been a slight increase in cannabis use with 33% saying this has increased (29% in 2020).

Mental Health and Mental Health Care Access

- There was no significant change in self-reported anxiety and depression among Nova Scotians between the two periods of pandemic.
- In 2021, approximately 15% of respondents indicated that they needed mental health care services but did not access these services since COVID-19 started.
- The proportion of younger people that needed mental health services but did not access them increased from 24% in 2020 to 35% in 2021.

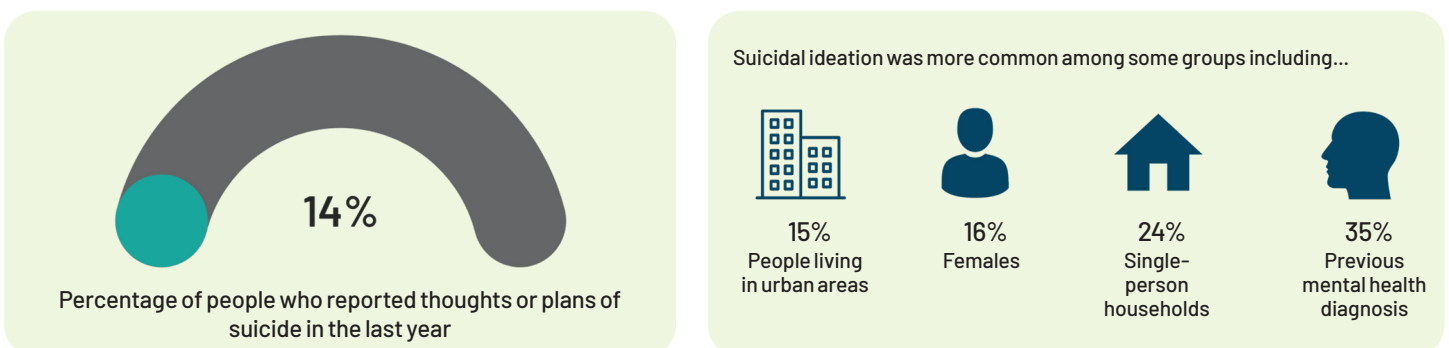
Figure 4. Mental Health Care Access. The percentage of people who needed mental health services but were not able to access them increased between 2020 and 2021. The largest increase was among younger people (18-29 years).



Suicidal Ideation

- Questions about suicidal ideation were new to the 2021 survey.
- About 14% of the NS residents reported having thought about or planned suicide in the past year (2021).
- Thoughts of or planning suicide were higher among younger people (33% among those aged 18-29 years).
- About 35% of the people with a previous mental health diagnosis had reported suicidal ideation in the past year. Suicidal ideation was also higher among specific groups, such as those who live alone (24%), females (16%) and people living in urban areas (15%).

Figure 5. Suicidal Ideation. Having suicidal thoughts or plans impacted certain groups more highly.



Resiliency

- Despite the many challenges participants face with their mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic, belief in the ability to recover from mental health challenges (resiliency) increased from 63% in 2020 to about 68% in 2021.

LIMITATIONS

There are several limitations to this study. This study used self-reported data which may be limited by reporting bias. Participants with higher socioeconomic status may be more likely to fill out an online survey, so the survey results may not reflect the general population. Although the survey was balanced across sex, age and educational level, survey data is still less likely to include people from marginalized groups and thus may not accurately reflect experiences from the larger population.

CONCLUSIONS

This study found that negative mental health impacts due to COVID-19 persisted amongst the population in Nova Scotia. The negative mental health impact of social isolation increased in 2021 from 2020, as did the impact of job loss and working from home. Unmet need for mental health services during the COVID-19 pandemic warrants the attention of policy-makers. Higher prevalence of suicidal ideation among younger people and people with mental health history highlights the need for mental health care access for these groups. There were also some positive impacts reported in August 2020 that remained protective in June 2021, such as going outside and recreational reading. Despite the persistence of negative mental health impacts, Nova Scotians remained confident in the ability to recover from the pandemic.

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