

Mississippi Parents' Mental Health across the Pandemic

By Ben Porter, PhD

You've heard it everywhere but using the word "unprecedented" to describe the COVID-19 pandemic just fits. One way that COVID-19 is unprecedented is in the stress it has put on parents. Parents' jobs expanded to include teacher, technical support, and tutor. All of this is on top of normal caretaking activities, caring for elders, and normal 9-to-5s. I think we can all agree, it was harder than ever to be a parent in 2020.

Given how novel this crisis is, new research is coming out all the time identifying new (and often disheartening) impacts of COVID-19. Given our focus on Mississippi families, I wanted to look at some of the factors that increase or decrease Mississippi parents' mental health across the pandemic.

Spoiler: this pandemic has been particularly stressful for parents. No matter what, parents are demonstrating significant symptoms of depression and anxiety. If you are feeling this way, you aren't alone! On average, 39% of parents reported significant anxiety symptoms, and 34% reported significant depression symptoms.

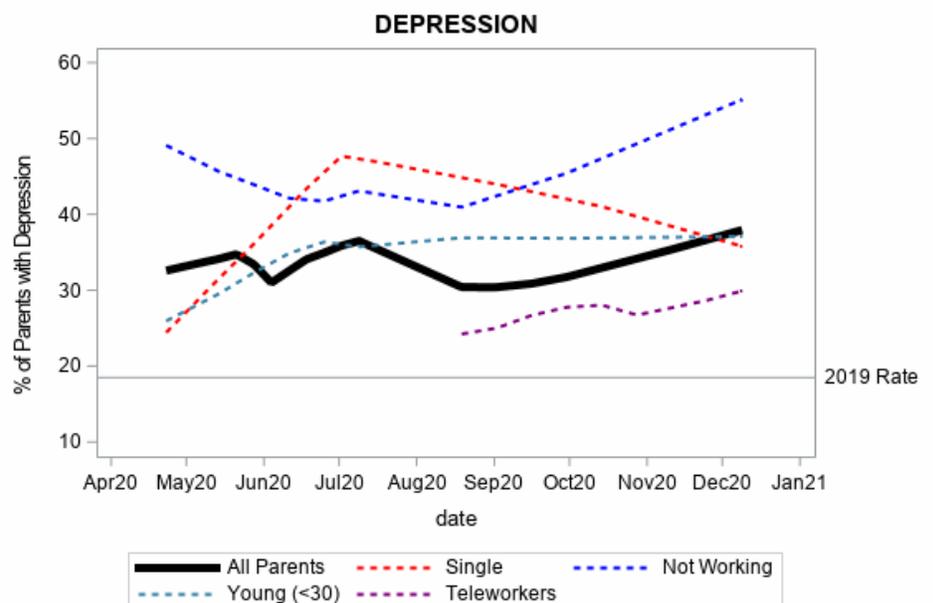
Why Parents' Mental Health Matters

Parents' mental health matters for their own well-being and for their kids' well-being. Mental health conditions are not fun. It can be hard to build up the motivation to work, to care for children, or even to get out of bed. Mental health conditions are the leading reason for work absenteeism and significantly impact work performance, increasing risk to financial stability.¹ Additionally, parents' mental health conditions may translate to problems for children.² The stress and uncertainty caused by COVID-19 may create additional ripples of distress in families that haven't yet been identified. Understanding which groups are at particular risk of these outcomes will be important to providing support to limit the impact of any such negative outcomes.

Working

Maintaining employment over the pandemic has been a major struggle for many Americans. Additionally, for Americans who have kept their jobs, many have moved to telework arrangement. Employees' lack of separation between home and work can be great ("More time with the family!") or terrible ("How can I get work done when my 5-year old child needs my attention!")

Overall, 44% of the sample was not working. COVID-19's impact



on the economy is likely partly responsible for this (30% reported being laid off or furloughed). However, the next most common reason (16%) for not working was the need to care for children who weren't able to go to school or daycare. However, there were not substantial differences between these two groups regarding mental health. Neither were good for parents' mental health.

For parents who were working, teleworking appeared to not impact or slightly increase parents' mental health problems. Teleworkers' rate of depression was 27%, and their rate of anxiety was 35%, compared to 25% (depression) and 31%

(anxiety) among other workers. However, teleworkers were still doing better than parents who weren't working. Additionally, as the pandemic has dragged on, teleworkers appear to be having declining rates of anxiety.

Single vs multi parent households

Single parents have to shoulder all the burdens of dual-parent households. However, they have to do this without the practical, fiscal, and emotional support that a spouse or partner can

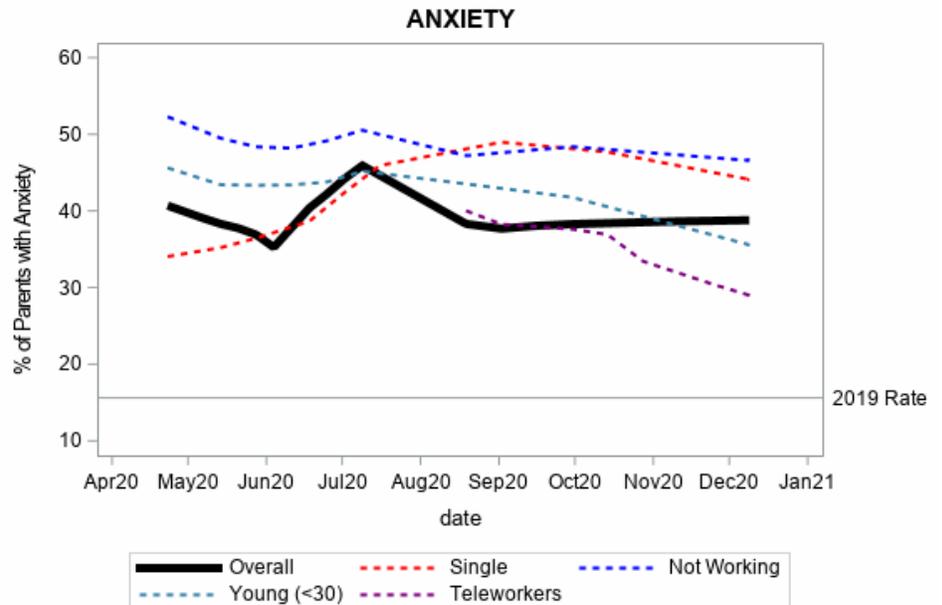
provide. About 20% of folks taking this survey reported they were the only adult in their household (so presumably a single parent). Relative to parents with other adults in the home, these single parents were more likely to have anxiety (43% vs 39%) and depression (41% vs 33%). Early in the pandemic, it seems like single parents were doing pretty well. This might be because of increased flexibility and social support and goodwill to single parents at the beginning of the pandemic.

Younger vs older parents

Younger parents are likely to have a number of stressors that may compound the impact of the pandemic. Their children are generally younger. Younger children likely need more monitoring and help with remote learning. They are also earlier in their careers, which can lead to financial problems or feelings that they need to be proving themselves at work. Surprisingly, parents 30 and younger are doing about as well as older parents based on their rates of depression (35% vs 33%) and anxiety (43% vs 39%).

Conclusions

There are definitely some factors that are impacting parents' mental health. Specifically, not working and being a single parent are particularly large risk factors for mental health problems. Regarding parents who are not working, economic recovery and increased availability of high-quality childcare are the two factors that are likely to benefit this group. Single parents likely need increased support on



multiple fronts that can be addressed through government programs, but also through community support of these parents.

Some parental attributes were not as bad/good as I initially thought. Flexibility from teleworking didn't really translate into benefits for parents. Alternatively, younger parents weren't struggling much more than older parents. However, all groups of parents were reporting mental health problems at a way higher rate than in 2019.

Resources

If you are having mental health problems, there are effective treatments and resources that are available to you. There are also other types of mental health problems that I didn't cover in this blogpost. That doesn't mean they weren't more prevalent in 2020. If you are struggling, reach out to your doctor and get help! It's worth it!

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 800-273-8255

Information on Depression: <https://www.nami.org/About-Mental-Illness/Mental-Health-Conditions/Depression>

Information on Anxiety: <https://www.nami.org/About-Mental-Illness/Mental-Health-Conditions/Anxiety-Disorders>

Data Sources

The U.S. Census has been monitoring Americans' reactions to the COVID-19 crisis since late April 2020 (<https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/household-pulse-survey.html>). They have been giving a questionnaire to Americans every two weeks with about 9000 Mississippi Parents responding. Ismail Yigit PhD had presented some other interesting information about Mississippi parents using this survey for anyone interested (<http://forum-for-the-future.s3-website-us-east-1.amazonaws.com/ismail-yigit/index.html>).

Citations:

¹ Johnston, D. A., Harvey, S. B., Glozier, N., Calvo, R. A., Christensen, H., & Deady, M. (2019). The relationship between depression symptoms, absenteeism and presenteeism. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 256, 536-540. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2019.06.041>

² Smith, M. (2004). Parental mental health: disruptions to parenting and outcomes for children. *Child & Family Social Work*, 9(1), 3-11. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2206.2004.00312.x>

2019 levels of anxiety and depression

Vahratian, A., Terlizzi, E. P., Villarroel, M. A., Zablotsky, B. & Blumberg, S. J. (September 2020). Mental Health in the United States: New Estimates from the National Center for Health Statistics.

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