

# Island County Behavioral Health Impact Situation Report

This situation report presents the potential behavioral health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic for Island County to inform planning efforts. The intended audience for this report includes organizations or individuals who are responding to, or helping to mitigate, the behavioral health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Purpose

The purpose of this report is to identify and provide localized data similar to the COVID-19 Behavioral Health Group's weekly statewide Behavioral Health Impact Situation Report. This report summarizes data from Center for Disease Control (CDC) Syndromic Surveillance Database, the United States Census Bureau Household Pulse Survey, Island County 911, CADA, and the Island County Human Services Support program. These analyses examine the likely current and future impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health and potential for substance use issues among Island County residents.

## Key Takeaways

- March saw a return to previous rates for drug related emergency department (ED) visits for Island County residents. More analysis of our ED numbers will be necessary going forward in order fully contextualize them given changes in syndromic surveillance data collection detailed below.
- The latest U.S. Census Bureau estimates show that about 58% of Washington adult respondents had feelings of anxiety and worry at least several days a week.
- Thus far, 2021 has brought a considerable increase in disorderly conduct and overdose calls managed by Island County 911. Encouragingly, mental health related calls dropped considerably this month compared to March of last year.
- Anxiety, stress, and depression continues to be the most frequent area of concern for residents looking for support from Island County Human Services.
- Visits to the ED for psychological distress and suicide ideation increased in March 2021 compared to March 2020, although data collection has changed (see Syndromic Surveillance section) which may impact these results.

## 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 Island County residents.

### Syndromic Surveillance

Syndromic surveillance data are collected in near real-time from hospitals and clinics across Washington, and are always subject to updates. [This system](#) is the primary source of ED data for Washington. WhidbeyHealth, the public hospital district for Island County, has recently had their data validated and are now participating members in the syndromic surveillance system. Year over year comparisons between counts of ED visits need to be interpreted with caution because last year's syndromic surveillance data does not include county residents' visits to the WhidbeyHealth ED and this year's data (as of March) does.

Through much of the pandemic, Island County residents sought medical care much less frequently, including emergency hospital medical care. Although total ED visit counts appear to have returned to pre-pandemic levels, the below indicators are presented as counts of ED visits, rather than percentages of ED visits, to account for unstable denominators.

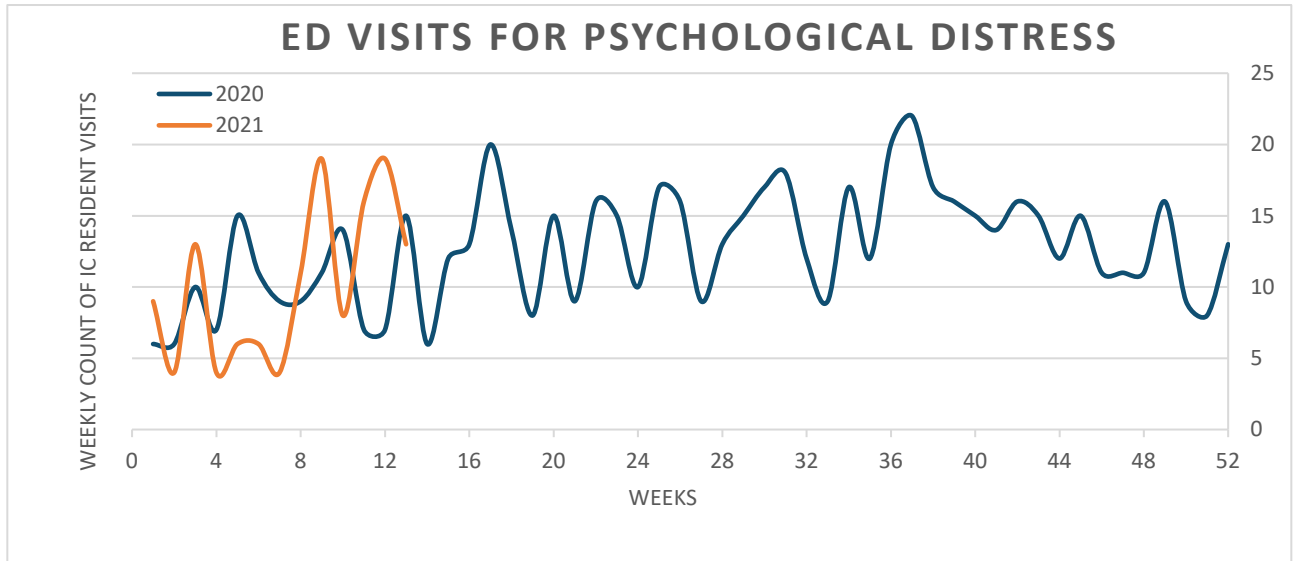
### Psychological Distress<sup>1</sup>

According to the CDC syndromic surveillance data, ED visit counts for psychological distress were comparable in the first two months of 2020 and 2021. Nineteen visits in the final week of February offset what was a somewhat less active opening to the year. March of 2021 brought more visits to the ED by Island County residents than this time last year, but that is to be expected given the change in data collection scope.

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<sup>1</sup> 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 available at <https://kr-drupal.syndromicsurveillance.org/disaster-related-mental-health-v1-syndrome-definition-subcommittee>

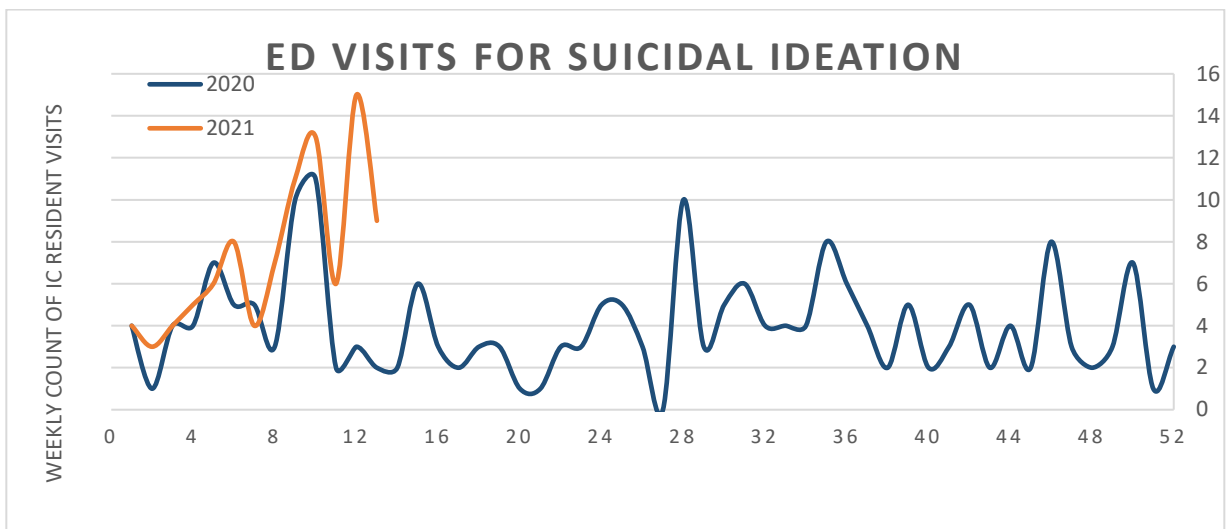
**Graph 1: Count of emergency department visits for psychological distress for Island County residents who received service 2020 and 2021 (Source: CDC ED Surveillance ESSENCE)**



### Suicidal Ideation and Suicide Attempts

Suicidal ideation ED visits for Island County residents in 2021 have been closely tracking the 2020 data. The peak of ED visits for suicidal ideation occurred in late February last year and we have reached that same weekly peak of 11 related visits at the end of February. March showed ED visit numbers that surpassed peaks from last year, though as previously stated that is not surprising and not necessarily indicative of any real increase in suicidal ideation-related trips to the ED given the changes in data collection.

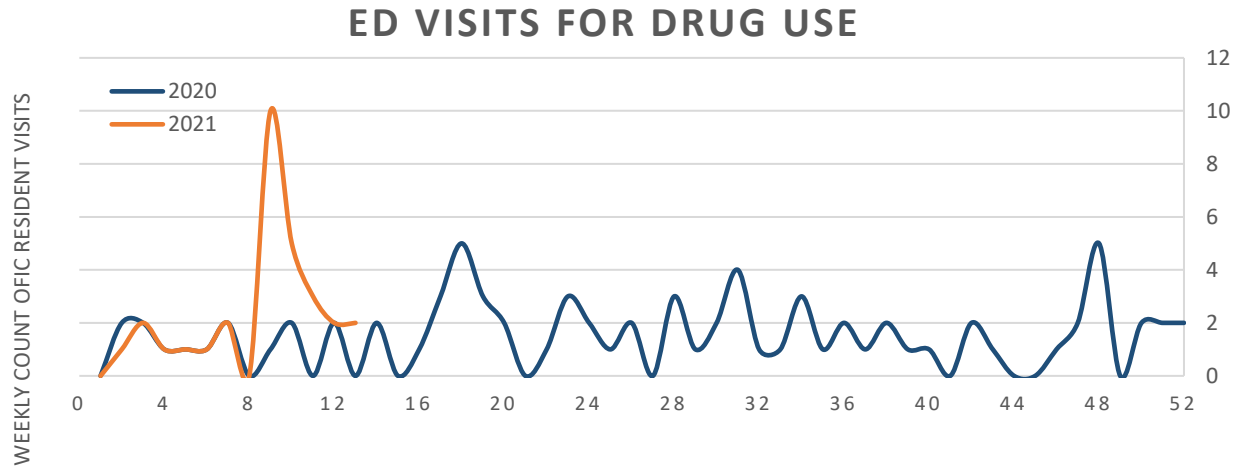
**Graph 2: Count of emergency department visits for suicidal ideation for Island County residents 2020 and 2021 (Source: Source: CDC ED Surveillance ESSENCE)**



## Substance Use — Drug Overdose<sup>2</sup> and Alcohol-Related Emergency Visits

As with suicidal ideation and psychological distress, 2021 drug overdose counts were similar to the first two months of 2020. However, in the case of drug related visits the end of February up tick is even more pronounced. The ten visits logged by county residents in the final week of February was the most of any week in either 2020 or 2021 thus far by a considerable margin. The end of March shows a return to expected weekly counts.

**Graph 3: Count of emergency department visits for alcohol and for overdose by any drug for Whidbey Island residents 2020 vs. 2021 (Source: Source: CDC ED Surveillance ESSENCE)**



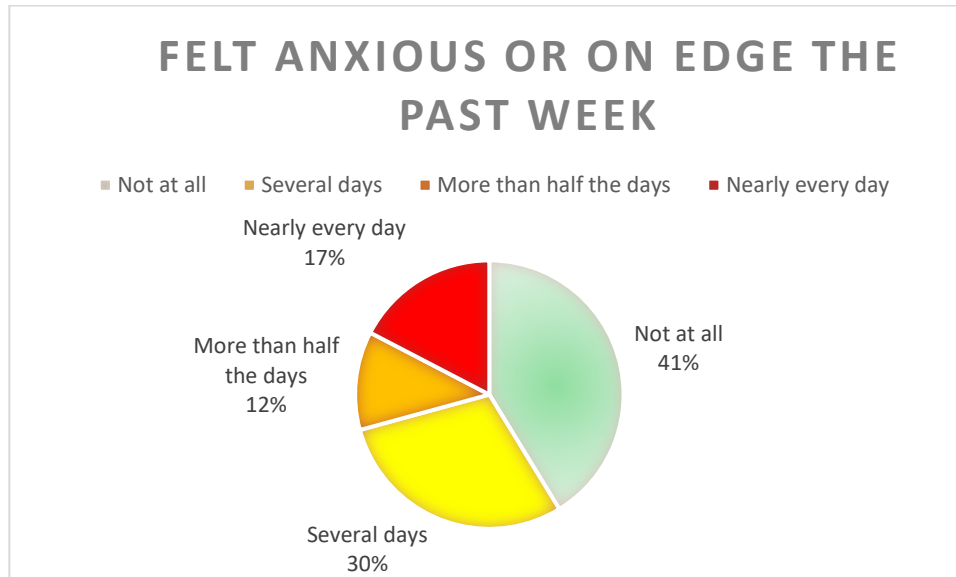
## General Surveillance — Symptoms of Anxiety and Depression

Survey data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau<sup>3</sup> between March 17th and March 29<sup>th</sup> of 2021 suggest the majority of Washington adults experience frequent feelings of anxiety. Thousands of respondents (58%) reported experiencing symptoms of anxiety on at least several days in late March, with nearly a fifth of all respondents reporting experiencing anxiety nearly every day. Encouragingly, those numbers are down slightly from February.

<sup>2</sup> 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 available at <https://knowledgerepository.syndromicsurveillance.org/cdc-all-drug-v1>.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

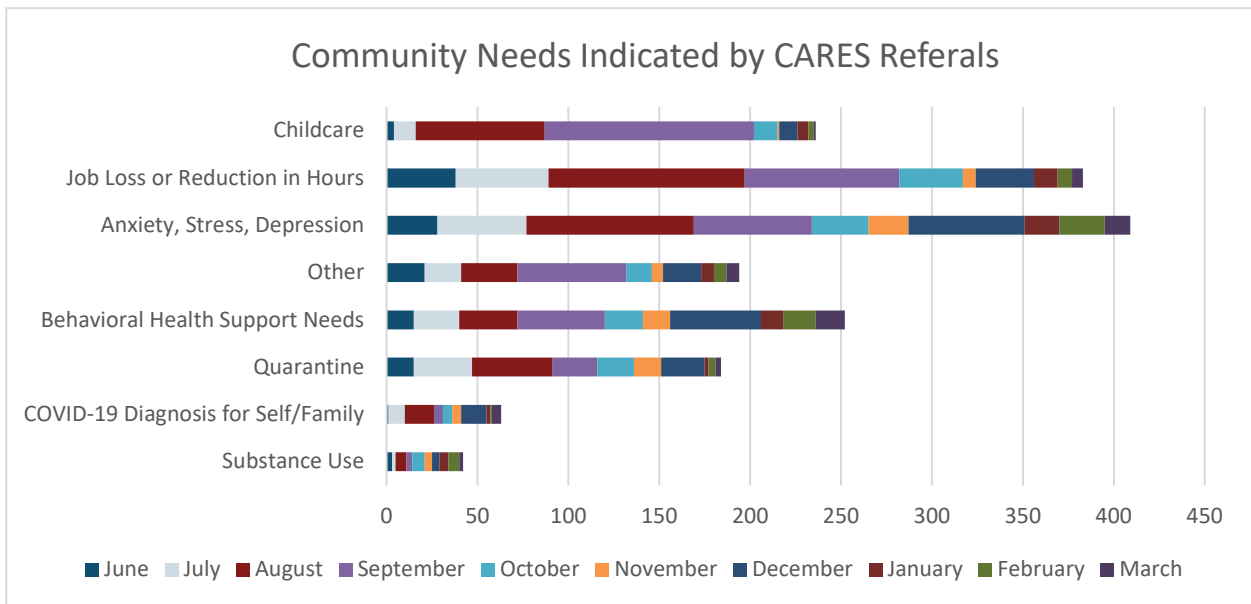
**Graph 4: Estimated percentage of Washington adults with feelings of anxiety at least several days, by week: March 17th –March 29th (Source: U.S. Census Bureau)**



### Island County Human Services Support Program Activity

Human Services support program activity refers to the services rendered by the Island County Human Services countywide referral system, which launched in June 2020. Behavioral Health support specialists help Island County residents address their stress and anxiety about COVID-19, in addition to assisting with a range of other issues, both pandemic-related and not. While Island County was only able to provide financial assistance through CARES funds until September of 2020, the system remains active and significantly utilized. As of March 31<sup>st</sup>, the referral systems has fielded 1763 referrals for services since June of last year. Service requests fell within eight categories including: COVID-19 Diagnosis for Self/Family; Substance Use; Childcare; Behavioral Health Support Needs; Quarantine; Anxiety, Stress, Depression; and an “other” category. Examples of request for “other” needs include requests for financial and housing assistance. In the first quarter of 2021, the majority of referrals, 55%, were for a combination of “Anxiety, Stress, Depression” and “Behavioral Health Support Needs”. These data suggest that the referral system continues to serve as an important behavioral and mental health support. “Job Loss or Reduction in Hours” referrals was a distant third among categorized referrals, which may be an encouraging economic sign as vaccination efforts continue and certain state restrictions are loosened.

**Graph 5 Referrals to the ICHS Support Program, by month (Source: Island County Human Services)**



### Crime – 911 Calls

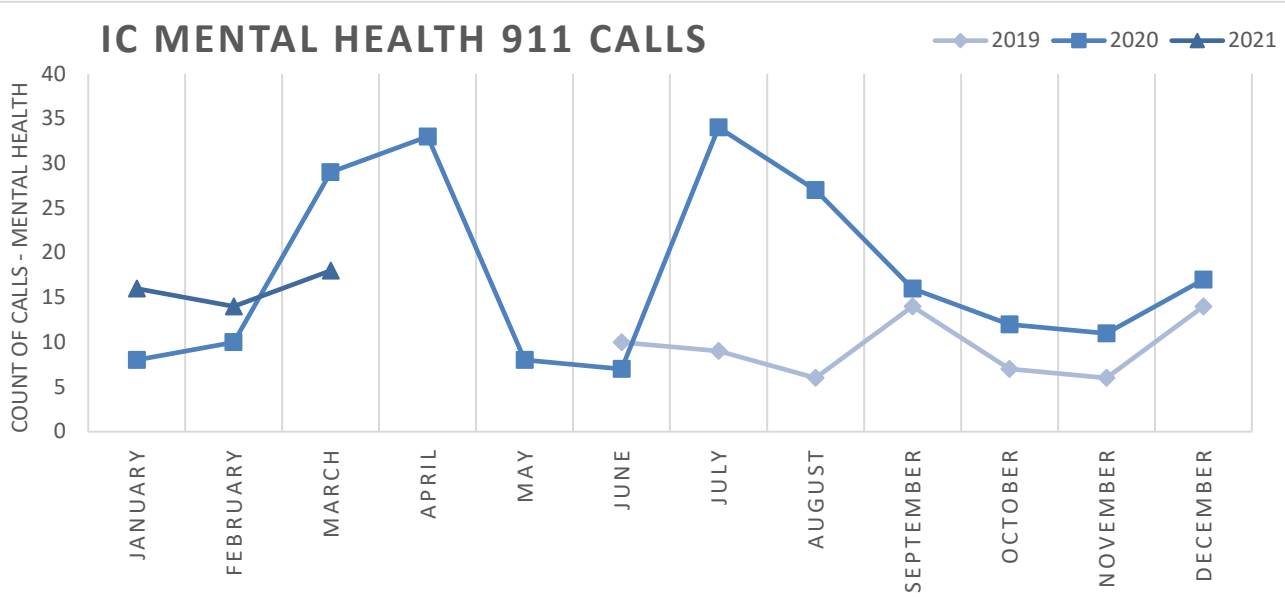
In March, there were increased calls made to city and county law enforcement agencies for disorderly conduct, and overdose response, compared to this time last year. Suicide related calls, wellness checks, and mental health calls are down compared to last year, mental health calls substantially so. Last year April and July were peak months for mental health-related 911 response. We hope to see call numbers well under those peaks in this year’s substantial different environment during April and July. Suicide related ED visits have been increasing over the past month or so while suicide related ICOM calls are slightly down. This may indicate slightly more willingness to seek serious mental health care in response to pandemic related changes, while 911 calls (generally an option of last resort) are less effected.

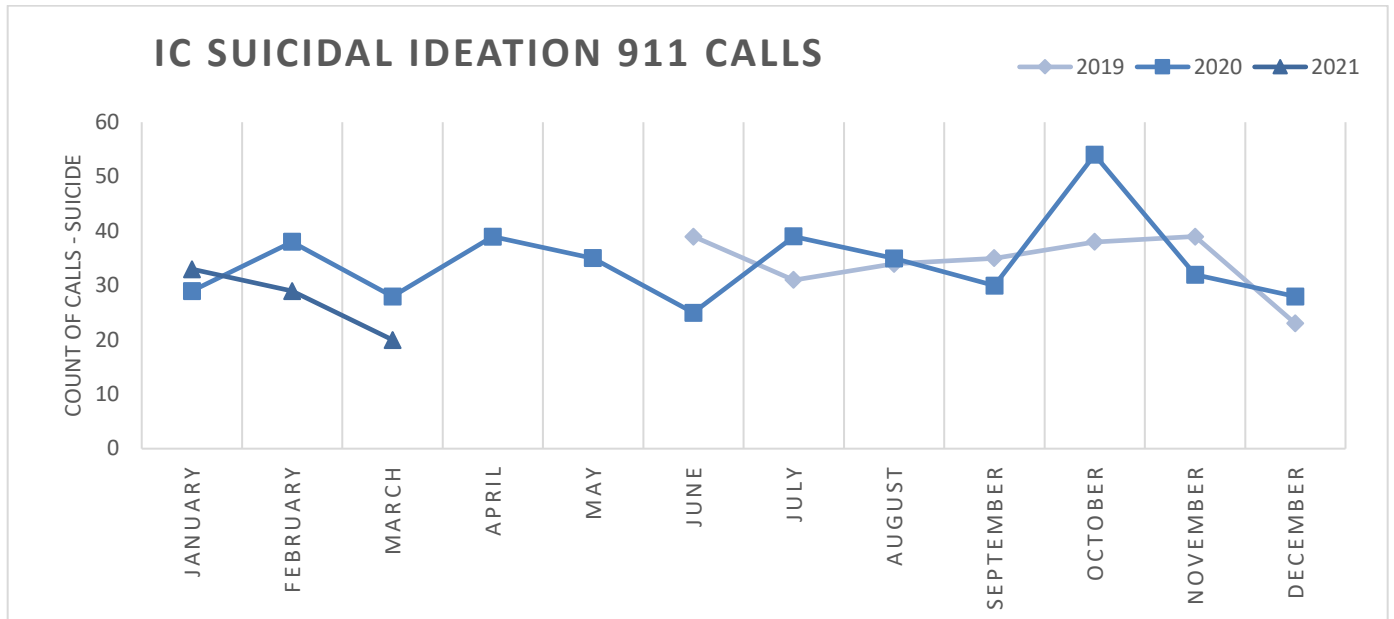
**Graph 6.1, 6.2, and 6.3 : Year-over-year change in Overdose, Mental Health Non-Criminal, and Suicidal Ideation 911 calls, by month: 2019–2021 (Sources: ICOM)**

### IC OVERDOSE 911 CALLS



### IC MENTAL HEALTH 911 CALLS






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## Domestic Violence

In February of 2021 Citizens Against Domestic and Sexual Assault (CADA) saw a decrease in the total number of hours spent providing service to victims of sexual assault and domestic violence, when compared to 12 months ago. In February of both 2020 and 2021, CADA provided 57 individuals with services, though hours of service provided were down from 173 to 135. Service areas fell across most categories to some small extent including: Advocacy; Crisis Counseling/Intervention; Emergency DV Shelter; Emergency Financial Assistance, Referrals, Safety Planning; Support Groups; and Transportation Assistance. Given the need to maintain social distancing it isn't surprising that support group hours are down by nearly half when compared to this time last year. The relatively small amount of time spent on housing support however increased by 85% which may be indicative of the continued housing and financial stress that is a direct result to the pandemic.



**Graph 7: Year-over-year change in client service areas for domestic violence victims, February: 2021 vs. 2020 (Sources: WA State InfoNet)**

