

The Pandemic's Impact on the Mental Health of Older Blacks, Asians and Hispanics

by Cheryl Deep

Covid-19's impact varies significantly depending on a community's racial and ethnic composition. The Alliance of National Psychological Associations for Racial and Ethnic Equity wanted to understand the specifics of these differences. It enlisted research partners to help define that impact on three communities of color. Dr. Lichtenberg and IOG researcher Dr. Wassim Tarraf contributed to the project with an analysis of Census and other survey data on the mental and physical health of Blacks, Asians and Hispanics since the beginning of the pandemic. Participants were 45 or older. Some key findings:

- Nearly 1/3 of older adults in all three racial/ethnic groups reported mental health symptoms. This is an alarmingly high rate for any population and was especially high (2 out of 5) among older Hispanics.
- Mental health problems increased during June and July then dropped to starting levels by the end of summer and early fall. This trend was particularly evident in the Hispanic group.
- The prevalence of fair/poor general health also increased over time.
- Mental and physical health varied significantly by national region, so a one-size-fits-all approach to alleviate these problems is unlikely to succeed.

As might be expected, mental health symptoms of anxiety or depression were more prevalent when basic food, employment and income needs were not met or perceived to be at-risk. The lower a person's income and education, the more likely he or she was to feel anxious, depressed and report fair/poor health. Of the Black, Asian and Hispanic groups, Hispanics showed more anxiety or depression around food insufficiency and job loss.

On a more positive note, Drs. Lichtenberg and Tarraf found statistical support for increased resiliency in aging. Older persons reported less anxiety or depression, a steady decrease from age 50 to 88. This trend held across all three racial/ethnic groups, supporting the finding that resilience against certain mental health problems often improves with age.