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Substance Use and Mental Distress During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Findings from a recently published survey documents the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental distress and substance use. The survey was conducted by Project Opioid in November 2020 among Floridians who reported past month drug use. As seen in Table 1, results indicate that the majority of respondents reported negative impacts to their mental health because of COVID-19. Half of all respondents described the impact as significant and 63% stated that their symptoms began since the start of the pandemic. Common mental distress symptoms included anxiety/nervousness (75%) and depression/loneliness (69%). Many respondents (49%) also reported difficulty in accessing mental health treatment; these numbers increased among those currently receiving treatment (72%) and among those considering treatment (63%).

The sample also reported high frequencies of substance use: 82% reported use or misuse of alcohol and 49% reported daily use of one or more drugs during the pandemic. Among individuals reporting symptoms of depression, daily substance use pre-pandemic was 29%, which increased to 37% during the pandemic. People who use opioids reported increased substance use during the pandemic, compared to people who use other drugs. In fact, these individuals were 41% more likely to report that their substance use increased from less than daily, to daily and 49% more likely to report that their use increased to multiple times per week. As seen in Table 2, people who use opioids reported high frequencies of mental distress symptoms, the most prevalent was anxiety/nervousness (88%) which was 17% higher than compared to those who use other drugs.

Another concerning finding from the survey is that people who use opioids were 112% more likely to report a COVID-19 diagnosis compared to people who use other drugs. Together, the survey results highlight the need for mental health and substance use treatment among people who use drugs, especially so because of the impact of COVID-19.

Sources: Project Opioid <https://projectopioid.org/data-and-briefings/>

Table 1: “Has your mental health been impacted by COVID-19?”		%
Yes		77%
There has been a significant impact		50%
Onset of symptoms since pandemic began		63%
Experienced anxiety / nervousness		75%
Experienced depression /loneliness		69%

Table 2: Mental distress symptoms among people who use opioids		
Symptom	%	Increase compared to others
Anxiety / nervousness	88%	17% higher
Depression / loneliness	78%	12% higher
Anger / agitation	51%	26% higher
Sleep problems	47%	8% higher

People who use opioids were 112% more likely to report a COVID-19 diagnosis, compared to other people who use drugs.

Broward Briefings may be copied. Please cite United Way of Broward County Commission on Behavioral Health & Drug Prevention.