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gradSERU survey

Graduate Student
Experience in the
Research University

Every student
has a voice.

Law Students' Mental Health During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Krista M. Soria & Bonnie Horgos

The COVID-19 pandemic has looming negative impacts on the mental health of law students at research universities. A survey of 644 law students at four large, public research universities in May through July, 2020 suggests that **27% of law students experienced clinically significant symptoms of major depressive disorder, while 37% of law students experienced clinically significant symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder** during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the gradSERU COVID-19 survey, the financial hardships and additional financial stressors experienced by law students during the pandemic are associated with increases in the odds of clinically significant symptoms for major depressive disorder and generalized anxiety disorder.

Specifically, law students who experienced housing insecurity and unexpected increases in living expenses had increased odds of clinically significant symptoms of major depressive disorder. Law students who experienced the loss or cancellation of an expected job or internship or unexpected increases in living experiences also had increased odds of clinically significant generalized anxiety disorder. Conversely, law students who felt supported by their universities during the pandemic had reduced odds of experiencing clinically significant symptoms for major depressive disorder and generalized anxiety disorder.

As institutional leaders continue to adapt to higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic, we encourage them to consider how to offer additional support with law students dealing with ongoing mental health concerns.

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Methodology

We administered the gradSERU COVID-19 survey to ten large, public research-intensive universities from May to July 2020. Four of the institutions included law students as a part of their administrations.

The comprehensive survey included questions about students' mental health, financial hardships, food and housing insecurity, and perceptions of institutional support during the pandemic. We used the following independent variables in multivariate logistic regression analysis:

- Demographic variables: gender, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, parental education, disability status, social class, caregiver status, citizenship
- Climate and support: feeling supported during the pandemic, feeling like they belong at their University, feeling valued as an individual at their university
- Food and housing insecurity
- Employment: paid employment off campus, at the university, and as a research assistant
- Financial hardships: unexpected increases in living expenses or spending for technology, loss of wages from on- and off-campus employment, loss or reduction in insurance or income from family members, loss or cancellation of an expected job or internship

As we reviewed the results of the multivariate logistic regressions for analyzing the odds of experiencing clinically significant major depressive disorder and generalized anxiety disorder symptoms, we utilized the common probability level of $p < .05$. We used effect coding for the demographic variables. A full explanation of the dependent and independent variables is shown below. A description of the sample is available at the end of the report.

Mental Health

We used the Patient Health Questionnaire-2 ([PHQ-2](#)) two-item scale to screen for major depressive disorder symptoms (Kroenke et al., 2003) and Generalized Anxiety Disorder-2 ([GAD-2](#)) two-item scale to screen students for generalized anxiety disorder symptoms (Kroenke et al., 2007). The PHQ-2 asks two questions about the frequency of depressed mood and anhedonia over the past two weeks while the GAD-2 asks two questions about the frequency of anxiety over the past two weeks. Each question is scaled from 0 (not at all) to 3 (nearly every day). The responses to two questions in each scale are summed and, if the score for PHQ-2 ≥ 3 (out of 6), major depressive disorder is likely. If the score for GAD-2 is ≥ 3 (out of 6), generalized anxiety disorder is likely.

According to the results of the survey, 27% of law students had clinically significant symptoms of major depressive disorder while 37% of law students experienced clinically significant symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder.

Climate and Support

We asked students to rate their agreement (1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree) to the following items:

- I feel that my university supported me during the COVID-19 pandemic
- I feel that I belong at my university
- I feel valued as an individual at my university

The results suggest that 81% of law students somewhat to strongly agreed that their university supported them during the pandemic, 87% of law students somewhat to strongly agreed that they feel they belong at the university, and 83% of law students somewhat to strongly agreed that they feel valued as an individual at their university.

Food and Housing Insecurity

We used a two-item food insecurity screen to identify students' food insecurity (Hager et al., 2010). We asked students how often they were worried whether their food would run out before they got money to buy more and how often the food that they bought didn't last, and they didn't have money to get more. A response of "often true" or "sometimes true" to either statement indicates a positive screen for food insecurity.

The results suggest that 12% of law students experienced food insecurity during the pandemic.

We asked students two items to measure their housing insecurity during the pandemic ("I worried I would not have enough money to cover the cost of my housing" and "I was unable to pay all of the cost of my housing on time"). Students responded whether those items were "often true," "sometimes true," or "never true" for them during the pandemic.

The results suggest that 35% of law students experienced housing insecurity during the pandemic.

Employment

In our sample, 10% of law students were employed at their university, 24% had off-campus employment, and 13% worked as a research assistant.

Financial Hardships

The following percentages of law students reported experiencing these financial hardships:

- Unexpected increases in spending for technology: 20%
- Loss of wages from on-campus employment: 4%
- Loss of wages from off-campus employment: 23%
- Loss or reduction in insurance coverage: 2%
- Loss of cancellation of an expected job or internship: 26%
- Unexpected increases in living expenses: 34%
- Loss or reduction of income of other family members: 24%

Results

Below, we report the odds ratios and p -values for only the variables where $p < .05$. The results for law students' odds of experiencing clinically significant major depressive disorder are as follows:

- Straight students: OR 0.670, $p < .05$
- Gay or lesbian students: OR 0.380, $p < .01$
- Bisexual students: OR 2.601, $p < .01$
- Students who cared for children during the pandemic: OR 0.202, $p < .05$
- Students who cared for adults during the pandemic: OR 2.580, $p < .05$
- Students who cared for both children and adults during the pandemic: OR 5.015, $p < .01$
- Students with physical disabilities: OR 4.874, $p < .01$
- Feeling supported during the pandemic: OR 0.780, $p < .05$
- Housing insecurity: OR 1.805, $p < .05$
- Unexpected increases in living expenses: OR 1.68, $p < .05$

In summation, straight students, gay or lesbian students, and students who cared for children during the pandemic had reduced odds of clinically significant major depressive disorder compared to their peers. Bisexual students, students who cared for adults during the pandemic, students who cared for both children and adults during the pandemic, and students with physical disabilities had increased odds of clinically significant major depressive disorder symptoms.

Students who felt supported by their universities during the pandemic had reduced odds of clinically significant major depressive disorder symptoms. Finally, students who experienced housing insecurity and unexpected increases in living expenses had increased odds of clinically significant major depressive disorder symptoms.

The results for law students' odds of experiencing clinically significant generalized anxiety disorder are as follows:

- Cisgender men: OR 0.531, $p < .05$
- Gay or lesbian students: OR 0.516, $p < .05$
- Bisexual students: OR 1.97, $p < .01$
- Students with neurodevelopmental or cognitive disabilities: OR 2.452, $p < .01$
- Feeling supported during the pandemic: OR 0.734, $p < .01$
- Loss or cancellation of an expected job or internship: OR 1.548, $p < .05$
- Unexpected increases in living expenses: OR 1.730, $p < .05$

The results suggest that cisgender men and gay or lesbian students had reduced odds of clinically significant generalized anxiety symptoms. Bisexual students and students with neurodevelopmental or cognitive disabilities had increased odds of clinically significant generalized anxiety disorder symptoms. Students who felt supported during the pandemic had reduced odds of clinically significant generalized anxiety disorder symptoms. Finally, students who experienced the loss or cancellation of an expected job or internship and unexpected increases in living experiences had increased odds of clinically significant generalized anxiety disorder symptoms.

About the gradSERU COVID-19 Survey

The Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) Consortium administered a special survey on the impact of COVID-19 on student experience at U.S. public research universities. The gradSERU COVID-19 Survey assesses five areas to better understand undergraduates, graduates, and professional students' experiences during the global pandemic: 1) students' transition to remote instruction, 2) the financial impact of COVID-19 on students, 3) students' health and wellbeing during the pandemic, 4) students' belonging and engagement, and 5) students' future plans. You can access the full survey instrument [here](#).

Sample

The survey was a census survey administered from May 18 to July 2020 to undergraduate students at ten large, public research universities. The report uses data from 644 law students who were enrolled at four of those universities. The response rate was 14-31% at the respective institutions. More details about the sample are available below:

- 57% cisgender female, 41% cisgender male, < 2% transgender, genderqueer, prefer to state, or declined to state
- 5% gay or lesbian, 80% straight, 7% bisexual, 1% queer, < 3% questioning, asexual, pansexual
- 18% first-generation
- 6% international
- 5% Latinx, 0.6% American Indian or Alaska Native, 8% Asian, 4% Black, 67% White, 5% multiracial, 10% no race provided
- 4% have a physical disability, 3% have a learning disability, and 8% have a neurodevelopmental or cognitive disability
- Age: 27.44 (M), 6.00 (SD)
- 76% were not a caregiver during the pandemic, 7% cared for children, 13% cared for adults, 4% cared for both children and adults
- 6% low-income or poor, 16% working-class

About the SERU Consortium

The Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) Consortium is an academic and policy research collaboration based at Center for Studies in Higher Education at the University of California – Berkeley (CSHE) working in partnership with the University of Minnesota and partner institutions. More information is available at <https://cshe.berkeley.edu/seru>.

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