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Measuring the Impact of COVID-19 on Older Adults in Massachusetts

Ceara Somerville, Jan E. Mutchler, and Caitlin Coyle

July 2020

CENTER FOR SOCIAL AND DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH ON AGING
GERONTOLOGY INSTITUTE
McCORMACK GRADUATE SCHOOL OF POLICY AND GLOBAL STUDIES



About the Authors

This report was prepared by the Center for Social and Demographic Research on Aging at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Individuals responsible for the report include Ceara Somerville, Jan E. Mutchler, and Caitlin Coyle. For questions, comments, or to request additional information, contact us at CSDRA@umb.edu.

About the Center

The CSDRA provides resources and research expertise to communities, non-governmental organizations, and other agencies that offer services to older adults in Massachusetts. The Center's mission is to inform communities as their populations become older demographically, including research on topics that impact older adults seeking to age in their communities. Established in 2012, the Center has worked with over 40 communities across the Commonwealth.

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Background

The spread of COVID -19 across the United States has affected every facet of life since early 2020. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), there are currently over 4 million cases across the nation and over 146,000 deaths from the virus. Massachusetts has been one of the states hit hardest, with over 100,000 confirmed cases and more than 8,000 deaths to date. The Commonwealth currently trails only New York and New Jersey in number of deaths¹. While cases surge around the country, Massachusetts has seen some leveling out of positive cases since the beginning of July².

Though any person can contract COVID -19, older adults are at greater risk for severe illness from COVID -19. Indeed, 80% of reported deaths in the United States were among adults age 65 or older³. Moreover, those with underlying chronic conditions (e.g., COPD, heart conditions, kidney disease) are at greater risk. Though evidence is more limited, some data suggest that those with neurological conditions, such as dementia, may be at higher risk for severe symptoms of COVID-19⁴.

The impact of COVID-19 runs far beyond the clinical implications for physical health. Local, state, and national response to the pandemic has led to changes in social, financial, nutritional, and medical environments across the country, all of which may disproportionately affect older adults. The purpose of this short report is to examine the implications of the COVID -19 experiences among older Massachusetts residents.

Data Note

The data presented in this report come from the Household Pulse Survey, a weekly internet survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau in collaboration with five other federal agencies. The Pulse Survey was designed to capture household experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. For more information about the Pulse Survey, please visit: <https://www.census.gov/household/pulsedata>.

This report uses a cross-section of Massachusetts residents age 60 and older (n=2,879 cases). Data are drawn from weeks 1-5 (April 23 through June 2, 2020).

All statistics presented were calculated by the authors of this report and weighted to represent the population of Massachusetts. The weighted data aligns with the 2018 American Community Survey (ACS) 5-year file on age, race, and gender, indicating that the Pulse data represents Massachusetts reasonably well.

¹ Data retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/cases-updates/cases-in-us.html> on July 26, 2020.

² Data retrieved from the most recent Massachusetts DPH COVID-19 Dashboard <https://www.mass.gov/doc/covid-19-dashboard-july-25-2020/download> on July 26, 2020.

³ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/older-adults.html>

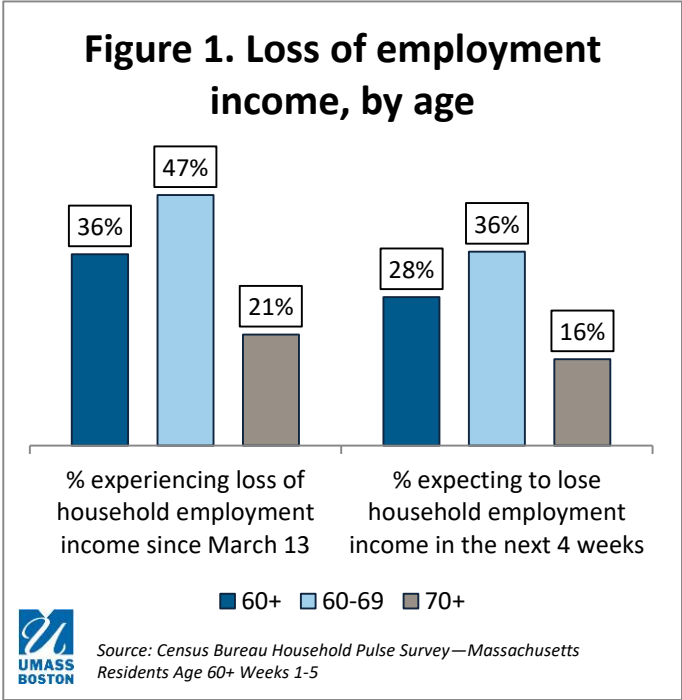
⁴ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/people-with-medical-conditions.html>

How are older Massachusetts residents being affected?

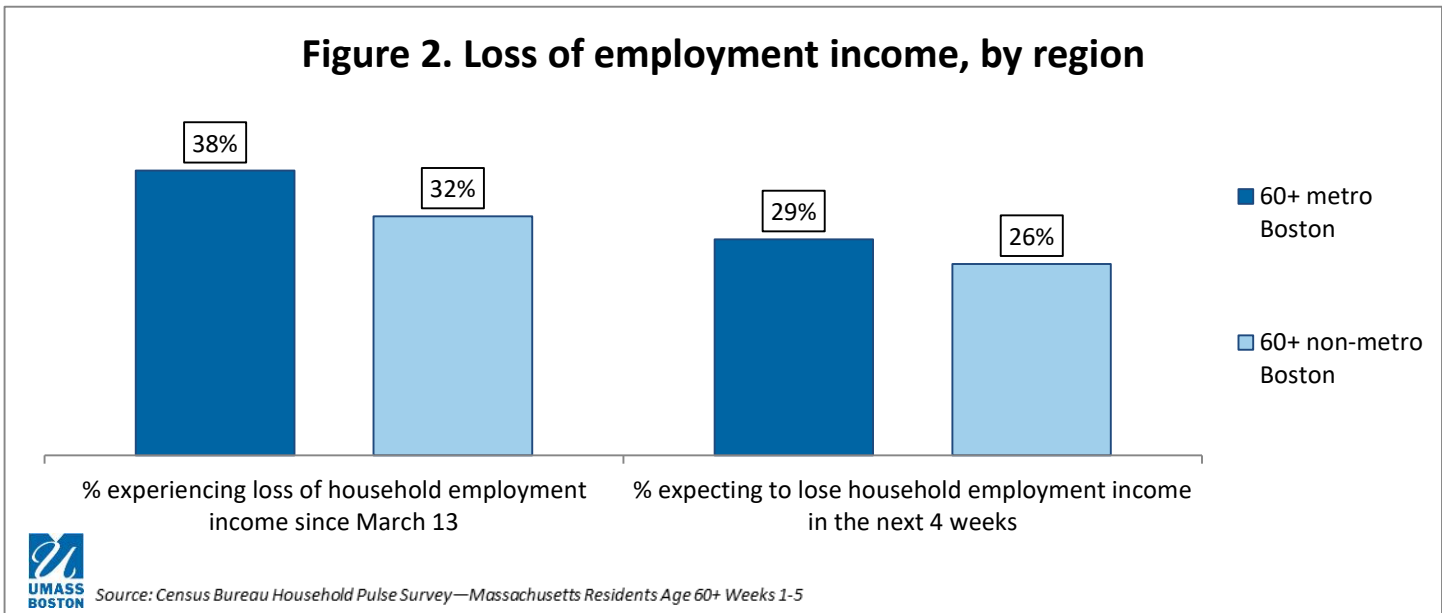
Loss of Employment Income

Many older Massachusetts residents have been impacted financially as a direct result of COVID-19. More than one-third of Massachusetts residents age 60 or older, or an estimated 584,000 people, experienced loss of household employment income since March 13, 2020 (see **Figure 1**), and 28% expect to lose employment income in the next 4 weeks.

Loss of employment income is especially prevalent among those age 60-69, among whom nearly half already experienced loss of employment income at time of survey, compared to about a fifth of those age 70 or older. Similarly, nearly 36% of adults between age 60 and 69 expected to lose income, which is 20 percentage points higher than for those age 70 and older.



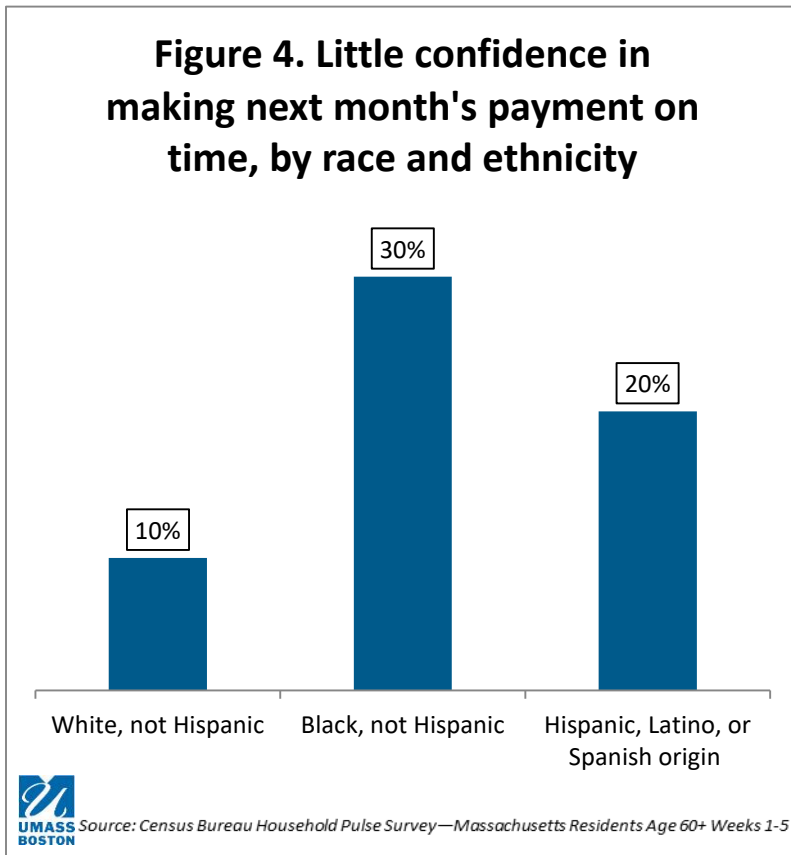
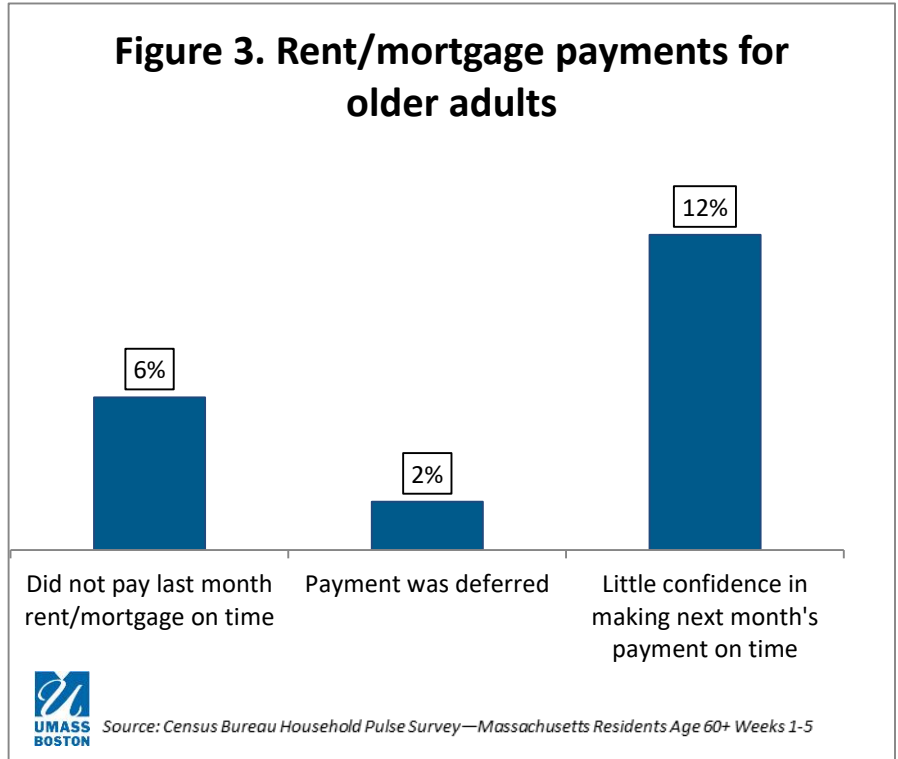
Income loss has impacted older residents of the metro Boston area⁵ to a slightly greater degree. As shown in **Figure 2**, 38% of older adults in metro Boston have experienced loss of employment income since March 13, 2020, compared to about one-third of older adults outside of metro-Boston. Nearly the same proportion of older adults living in metro-Boston expects to lose household employment income compared to older adults living outside of metro-Boston.



⁵ Metro Boston is defined by the Census Bureau Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs) and includes the following Massachusetts counties: Essex, Middlesex, Norfolk, Plymouth, and Suffolk. List of counties derived from the March 2020 file found here: <https://www.census.gov/geographies/reference-files/time-series/demo/metro-micro/delineation-files.html>

Housing

Some older Massachusetts residents are experiencing challenges paying for housing. Among those who rent or have a mortgage payment, 6% did not pay their rent or mortgage on time in the previous month and an additional 2% deferred their payment (Figure 3). When asked about their confidence in making the next month's payment on time, nearly 12% reported little or no confidence.



Although the numbers of non-White and Hispanic or Latinx⁶ older adults is small in this sample, there are significant differences in confidence about paying for housing. Figure 4 displays the proportion of older Massachusetts residents who reported little or no confidence in making their next month's rent or mortgage payment by race and ethnicity. Compared to only 10% of White older adults, 30% of Black older adults report little confidence. As well, nearly 1 in 5 Hispanic or Latinx older adults have little confidence in making a timely housing payment.

⁶ The U.S. Census Bureau identifies this group as “Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin,” as seen in the figures of this report, a group that includes people of all races. In the text, we use the inclusive language of “Hispanic or Latinx” to refer to this group.

Food Security

The Pulse Survey asked respondents to indicate if they had enough food to eat before March 13 and again in the 7 days prior to completing the survey during the pandemic. **Figure 5** shows that the proportion of older adults in Massachusetts who did not have enough food is low, and is largely unchanged prior to March 13 compared to at the time of survey. This may reflect the efforts of many community organizations, including local Councils on Aging, to stabilize food access among older residents. However, food security remains a concern for many older Massachusetts residents, and almost 1 in 5 older adults have little or no confidence that they will have enough food to eat in the next week—amounting to an estimated 308,000 older residents who are concerned about their food security.

Figure 6 shows the proportions of older Massachusetts residents with little or no confidence they will have enough food in the coming week, by region and by age group. There is a slight difference by region, with 18% of metro-Boston older adults compared to 20% of non-metro-Boston older adults reporting little confidence in having enough food. Comparing by age group, however, it is clear that people in their 60s (22%) are less confident about having enough food than are adults age 70 or older (14%).

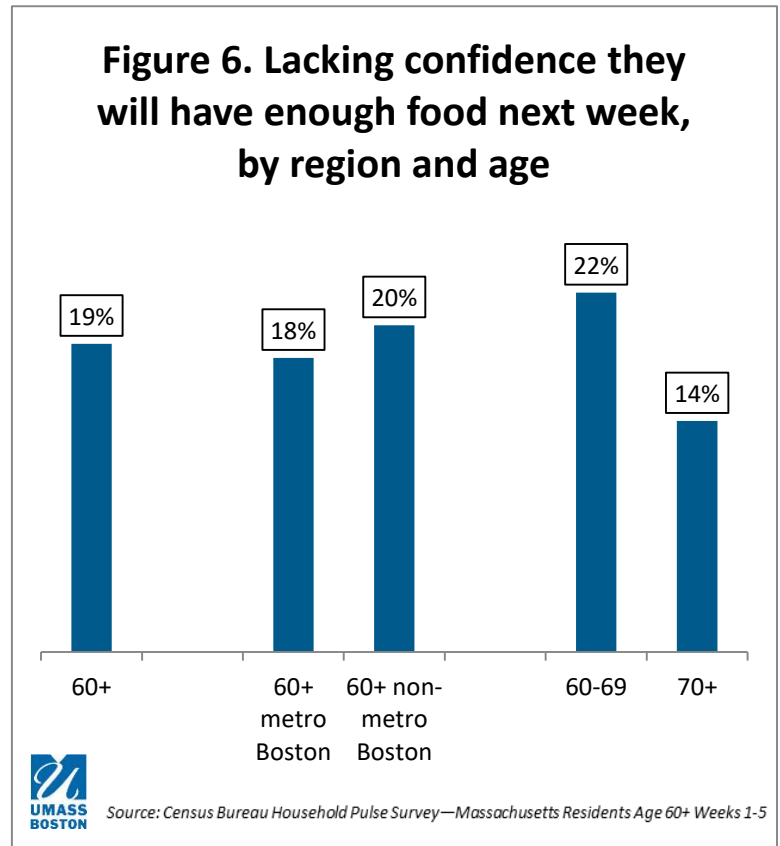
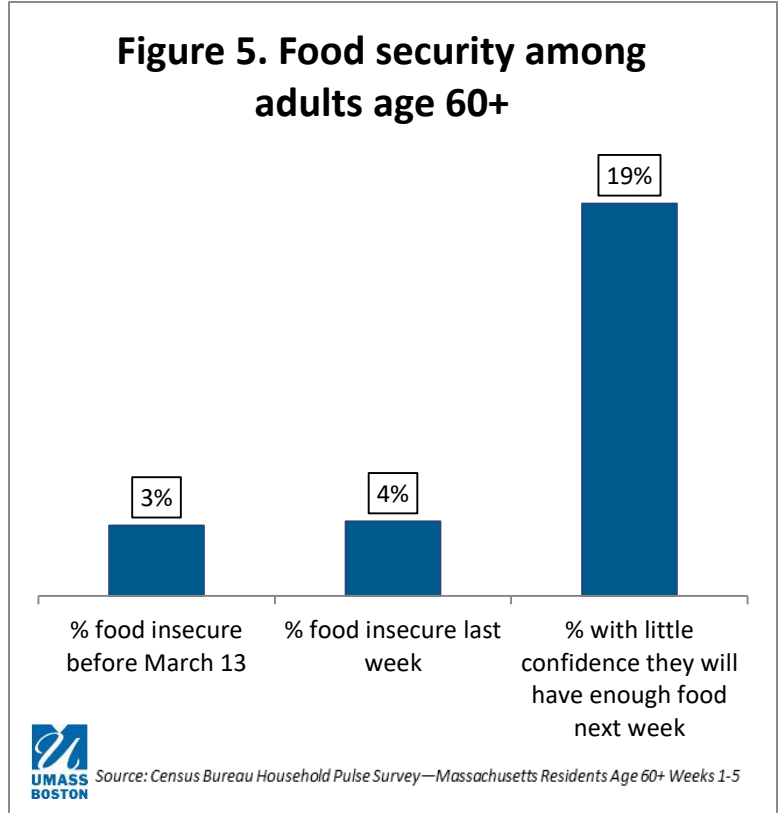
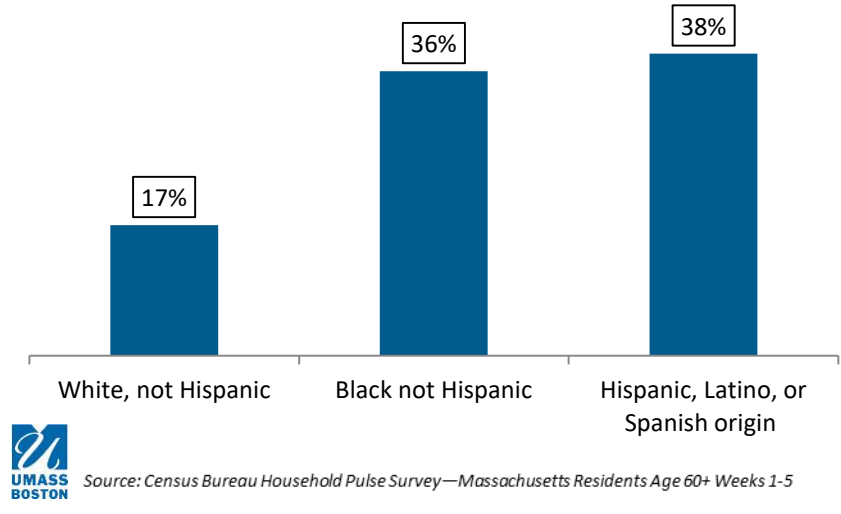


Figure 7. Lacking confidence they will have enough food next week, by race and ethnicity

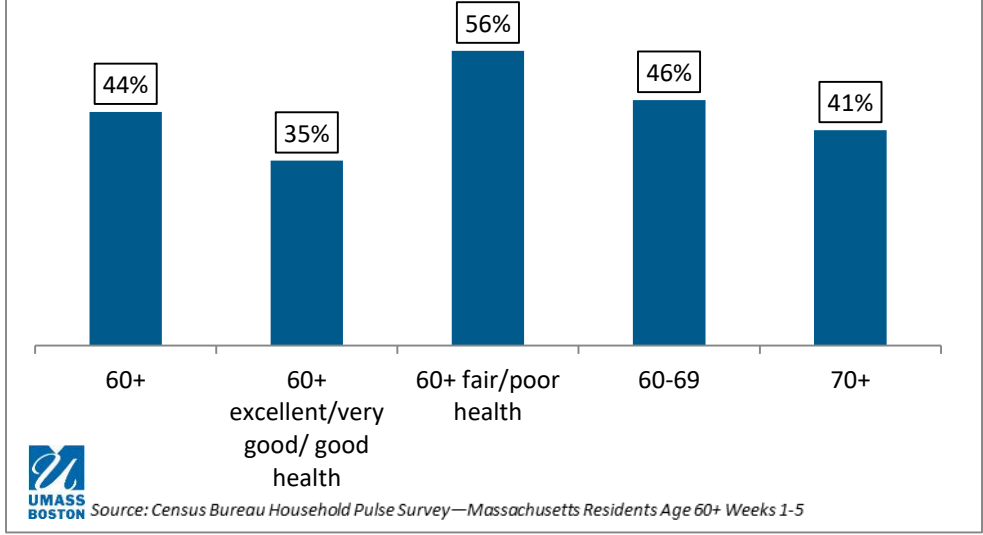


Significant differences in food confidence exist when comparing across race and ethnic group (Figure 7). More than a third of Black older adults report little or no confidence in having enough food to eat in the coming week. Similarly, 38% of Hispanic or Latinx older adults have little to no confidence in having enough food in the coming week, twice that for non-Hispanic Whites.

Medical Care

The healthcare system has faced a substantially increased burden during this public health crisis. As such, many systems have changed how they provide non-COVID-19 related healthcare, transitioning to virtual appointments, delaying appointments, or cancelling appointments. For many older adults, web or phone-based healthcare may not be a viable option. As well, getting out for in-person appointments may not be feasible for some, or too stressful to contemplate for others.

Figure 8. Delayed or cancelled non-COVID-19 related medical care, by health status and age group



Forty-four percent of all older adults in Massachusetts have cancelled or delayed medical care during the pandemic, or about 713,000 people age 60 or older. Figure 8 shows that more than half of older Massachusetts residents with fair or poor health had to cancel or delay medical care, which is significantly higher than for those with better physical health. As well, slightly more adults age 60-69 (46%) had to cancel or delay compared to those age 70 or older (41%).

Emotional Wellbeing

With the spread of COVID-19 has come much uncertainty about the present and future, which can often induce feelings of anxiety and depression. Nearly a quarter of older Massachusetts residents reported experiencing symptoms of anxiety most or all of the time in the week before completing the survey, and 16% experienced symptoms of depression (**Figures 9 & 10**). Older adults who live alone are experiencing symptoms of anxiety similarly to those who live with others; however, nearly a fifth of those living alone are experiencing depression, which is higher than the 16% of those who live with others.

People in their 60s are experiencing anxiety and depression at higher rates than those 70 and older. While 27% of those aged 60-69 are experiencing anxiety, only 17% of those 70 and older report this experience. Similarly, 19% of 60-year olds are experiencing depression, while 12% of 70+ year olds report having symptoms of depression most or all of the time.

Figure 9. Experiencing symptoms of anxiety, by age and living situation

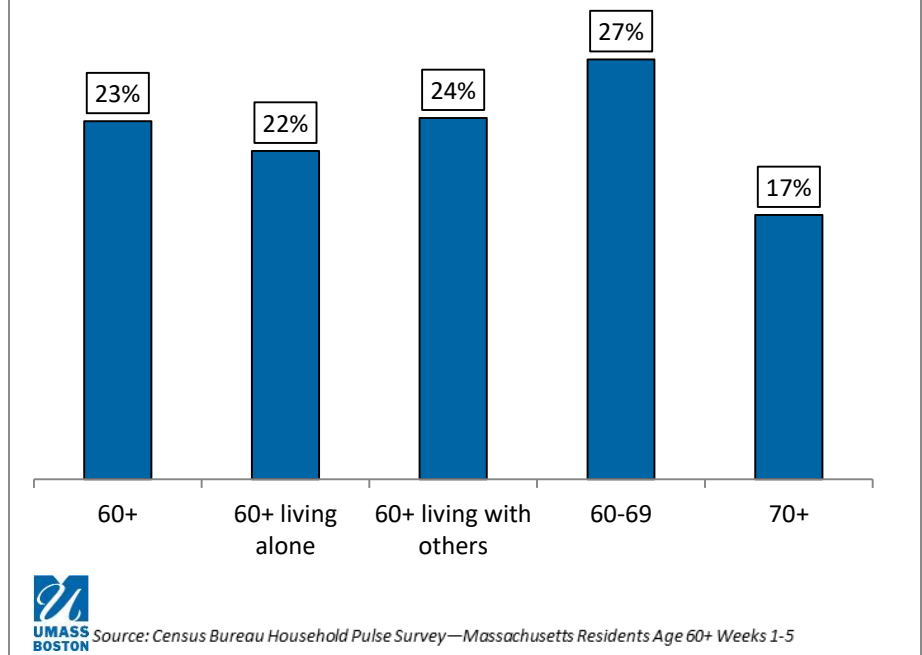
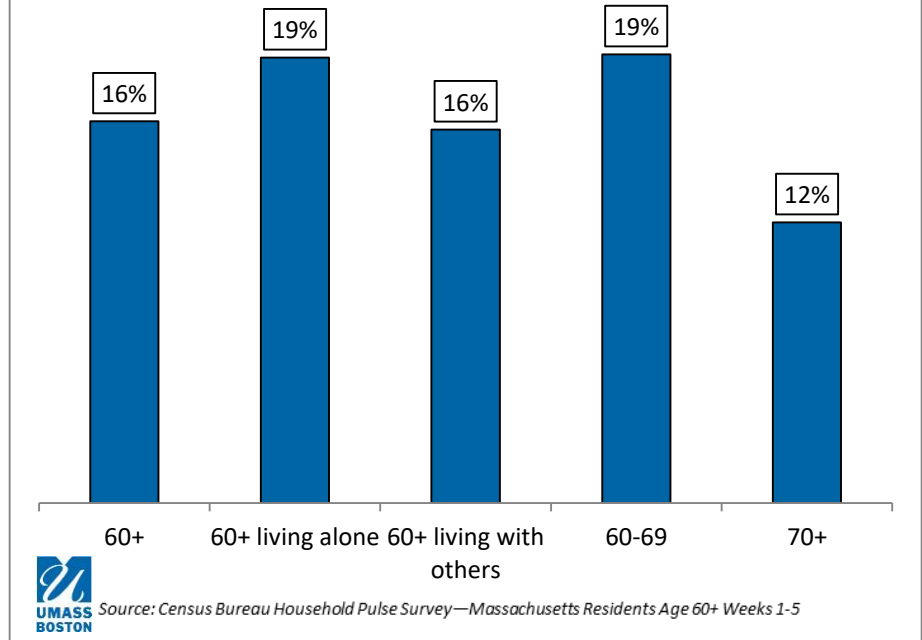


Figure 10. Experiencing symptoms of depression, by age and living situation



The effects of anxiety and depression are far-reaching, limiting an individual's ability to function. In this sample, 55% of older Massachusetts residents who are experiencing either anxiety or depression have cancelled or delayed medical care (not shown). This compares to 40% of older adults in Massachusetts who are not experiencing negative emotional wellbeing.

Conclusion

Overall, older adults in Massachusetts have experienced many negative effects of COVID-19. When compared to adults under 60, however, older adults seem to be doing reasonably well⁷. This pattern aligns with responses from the Pulse survey across the United States, showing that younger adults report higher rates of anxiety and depression, less confidence in making rent or mortgage payments or having enough food, and greater loss of employment income. So although many older people are experiencing negative financial and emotional consequences from COVID-19, their younger neighbors appear to be struggling even more.

National data from the Pulse survey makes clear that persons of color are experiencing more negative effects of COVID-19 than are their White neighbors⁷. On dimensions such as loss of employment income, food security, and housing, Black and Hispanic or Latinx adults are struggling more than their White counterparts, highlighting existing inequity. While the Massachusetts data analyzed for this report did not yield enough cases to fully examine disparities by race and ethnicity, those addressed in this report suggest that older persons of color may be experiencing more negative consequences in the Commonwealth, as throughout the U.S.

The full impact of COVID-19 on older adults in Massachusetts has yet to be fully realized. The data in this report demonstrate the short-term effects the pandemic has had thus far on the older population in the Commonwealth. The pandemic has brought to the forefront common obstacles experienced by older people, and has exacerbated some challenges as they relate to income, housing, nutrition, medical care, and emotional wellbeing. The already important work done by community organizations (e.g., Councils on Aging, Aging Service Access Providers, and many others) to meet the needs of older adults is critical during this public health crisis.

⁷ Detailed data tables can be accessed at <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/household-pulse-survey/data.html>