

COVID and Physical and Mental Health

Approximately half of all survey participants reported worse physical health during COVID-19. The subsequent lockdown in the wake of the pandemic has resulted in lack of access to regular physical activity, more screen time, irregular sleep patterns and worse diets, which can compound the anxiety or stress many experience in the face of social isolation and/or economic uncertainty.

Although happy to have constant income, I started getting physically ill thinking about my job and the many unfinished projects I could not get to. Started affecting my sleep patterns. Had a recent health scare — Older woman working in legal services

While COVID-19 has had a devastating effect on the physical health of people from all walks of life, it has also had a differential impact on certain groups due to their socio-economic status. For example, nearly 42 percent of respondents who were not receiving any sort of government support during the pandemic reported that their physical health had gotten worse. However, for those enrolled in OW or ODSP, the decline in their physical well-being was much greater, with nearly 70 percent reporting worse health outcomes. Those employed and financially stable appear to have fared much better in the physical health domain than those dependent on meagre welfare benefits. The same is true for those who were accessing the more generous and less conditional CERB/CESB: about 40 percent indicated poorer health, which is a significantly lower negative outcome than for those on OW/ODSP. This is likely because the benefit amount of CERB (\$2,000 per month) represented a 173 percent increase over OW and 71 percent increase over basic ODSP, making life more bearable for people able to access the program. Altogether these results are consistent with past research showing the substantially poorer outcomes and health problems of OW/ODSP recipients as compared to other groups.

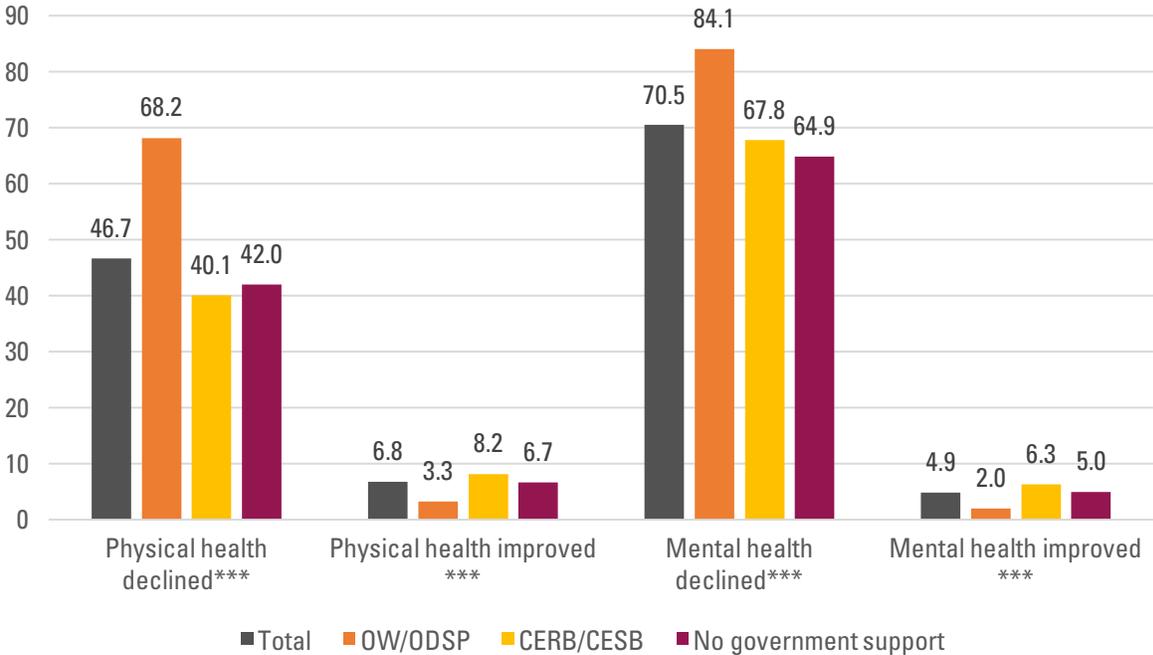
I worked 40 years before I became disabled 13 months ago from back breaking labor jobs. I did not qualify for CERB due to health problems preventing me from working — Middle-aged man receiving ODSP

Around 70 percent of all survey participants said their mental health had declined during the pandemic. The fall in psychological well-being among all respondents was much more marked than in the physical health domain (20 percent higher). This makes sense as the unfamiliar situation caused by public health fears, social distancing and confinement measures. The resulting social disruption left many to struggle with abrupt changes to their daily habits, routines and feelings, which likely exacerbated existing conditions or provoked new problems. Psychological health issues can also feel more immediate, persistent and difficult to overcome

than physical ones for many people, which might help explain the higher percentage of participants who reported greater mental hardship.

My work hours got slashed at the start of lockdown. My mental health suffered greatly. My work hours have increased to nearly unmanageable, and my benefits are on hold — Middle-aged woman working in the non-profit sector

Chart 1: Change in physical and mental health during COVID by type of government support (%)



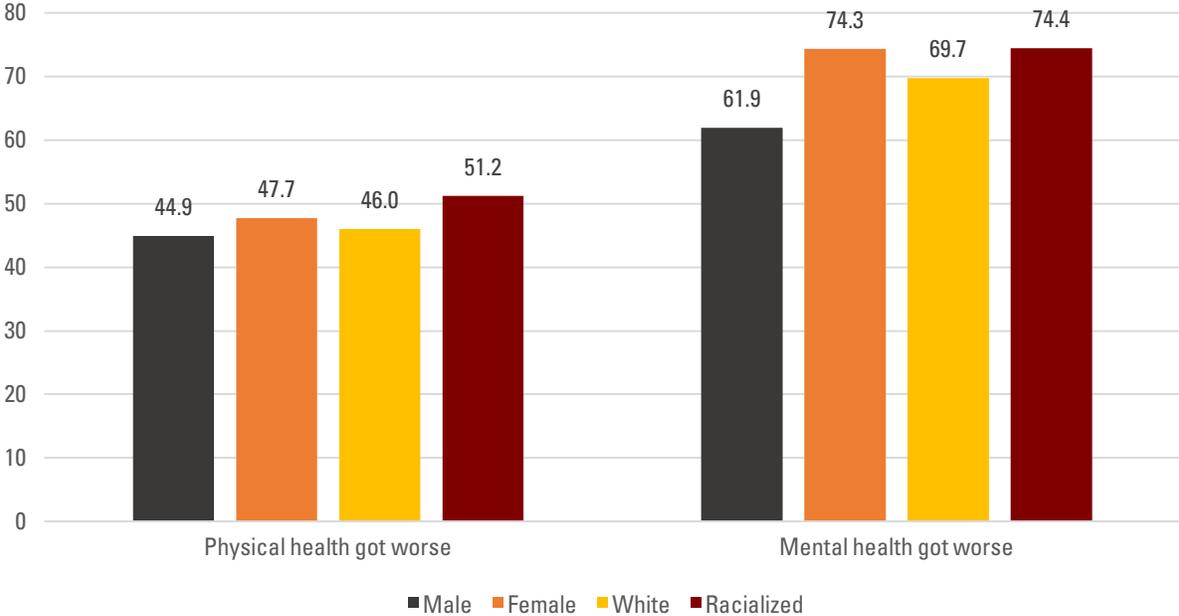
* p<.10 ** p<=.05 ***p<=.001

While all groups reported negative effects on their mental states during the pandemic, there were differences in outcomes between them. For example, while slightly over two-thirds of respondents without government support experienced more psychological discomfort over the past year, deteriorating well-being was much more common among the social assistance group again. Indeed, close to 85 percent of OW/ODSP recipients reported adverse mental consequences, which is 20 percent higher than the former group. Of those receiving CERB/CESB, 68 percent indicated a decline in their mental health. Taken together, these findings correspond to what would be expected given differences in life circumstances between these groups, with the employed faring the best, followed by CERB/CESB beneficiaries and those on social assistance the worst. Respondents receiving other kinds of government support reported similar

negative outcomes to those on OW/ODSP, with almost 79 percent indicating worse mental health during COVID-19.

Chart 2 reports health findings by gender and race. The differences were relatively small. The one exception was mental health by gender. Women were significantly more likely to report their mental health had deteriorated during COVID-19 than men.

Chart 2: Change in physical and mental health during COVID by gender and race (%)



I really do believe I'm one of the forgotten in society. Being on ODSP isn't a lifestyle choice. I'm here because of mental and physical limitations — Middle-aged man receiving ODSP

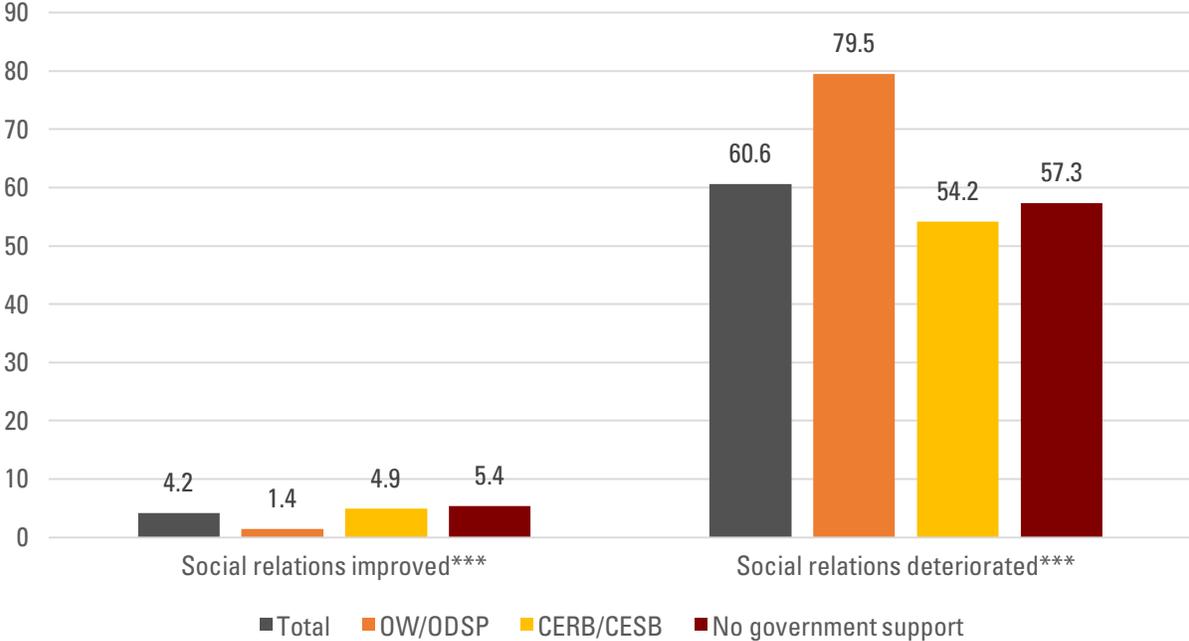
As a method of breaking the chain of transmission, social distancing has negatively affected the ways that people maintain friendships. Not surprisingly, we find an almost directly parallel increase in feelings of loneliness, exclusion and lack of regular companionship due to physical separation measures. Over 60 percent of all respondents indicated that their meaningful connections that provide a nurturing environment for personal growth and love have suffered amid COVID-19. But again, the impact has been uneven. Nearly 80 percent of social assistance

recipients reported worse outcomes while about half or slightly more reported negative changes in their social relations from the other three groups.

I have derived most of my social interaction from strangers when I go out for groceries because friends and 'family' have deserted their support roles using COVID as their excuse — Middle-aged male receiving ODSP

I am overworked and almost entirely focused on just getting through each day without physical or mental collapse, but it is isolating. We need more ways to exhibit teamwork and community — Middle-aged female educator

Chart 3: Change in social relations with friends and family by type of government support (%)



* p<.10 ** p<=.05 ***p<=.001

This factsheet is co-authored by Mohammad Ferdosi, Dr. Peter Graefe, Dr. Wayne Lewchuk and Dr. Stephanie Ross, who are the co-investigators in the **COVID Economic and Social Effects Study (CESES)** at McMaster University. CESES is a collaboration between the School of Labour Studies, the Department of Political Science, and the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction, and is supported by funding from MITACS and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. For other factsheets in the series, go to the CESES project website: <https://labourstudies.mcmaster.ca/research/covid19-impact>