

## Gender Differences in Past Year Mental Health among Young Adults Aged 18 to 25

This data brief presents gender differences in past year prevalence rates of mental health outcomes among young adults aged 18 to 25 for any mental illness (AMI), serious mental illness (SMI), major depressive episode (MDE), and suicidal thoughts and behaviors based on 2021 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) data. This brief also includes data about receipt of and perceived need for mental health services among young adults.

In 2021, it was estimated that nearly 1 in 4 adults aged 18 or older (57.8 million people) had AMI in the past year.<sup>1</sup> Mental illness can interfere with or limit life activities including maintaining close relationships, working, performing household tasks like cooking and cleaning, and having a social life. The prevalence of mental illness is unequally distributed across the U.S. population. Research has demonstrated that depression and anxiety are more common among young adults aged 18 to 25 than among adults in other age groups.<sup>2,3</sup> Studies have also found gender differences in the prevalence of past year MDE,<sup>1</sup> major depressive disorder,<sup>4</sup> and generalized anxiety disorder.<sup>4</sup>

### Definitions

**Any Mental Illness (AMI).** AMI refers to the presence of a mental, behavioral, or emotional disorder in the past year of sufficient duration to meet criteria from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4th edition,<sup>5</sup> excluding developmental disorders and substance use disorders. AMI and serious mental illness (SMI) were estimated based on a statistical prediction model.

**Major Depressive Episode (MDE).** Respondents were classified as having had an MDE in the past 12 months if (1) they had at least one period of 2 weeks or longer in the past year when for most of the day nearly every day, they felt depressed or lost interest or pleasure in daily activities; and (2) they also had problems with sleeping, eating, energy, concentration, self-worth, or having recurrent thoughts of death or recurrent suicidal ideation. The MDE questions are based on diagnostic criteria from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th edition.<sup>6</sup>

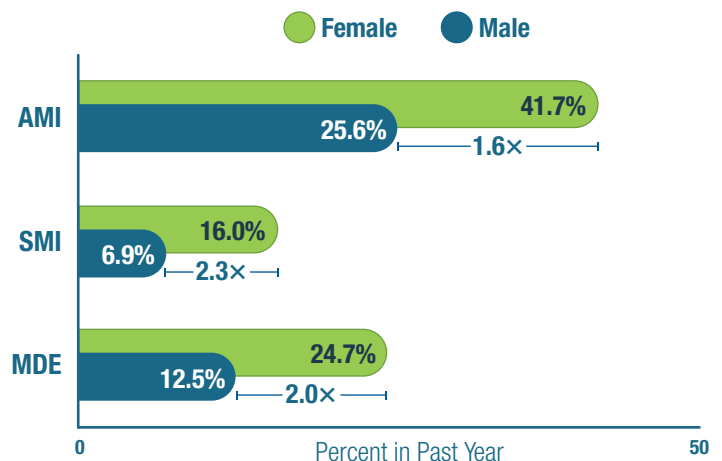
**Serious Mental Illness (SMI).** SMI refers to the presence of a mental, behavioral, or emotional disorder that substantially interfered with or limited one or more major life activities. AMI and SMI were estimated based on a statistical prediction model.

**Race/Ethnicity.** The racial or ethnic groups discussed in this data brief are mutually exclusive. People who were of Hispanic or Latino ethnicity could be of any race but are not included in the estimates for any of the racial categories. Estimates for people who were not of Hispanic or Latino ethnicity are reported by race. People reporting two or more races and who were not of Hispanic or Latino ethnicity are noted as "Multiracial" in this data brief.

More details on these definitions are available in Appendix A of the *2021 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH): Methodological Summary and Definitions*.<sup>7</sup>

### Prevalence of Any Mental Illness, Serious Mental Illness, and Major Depressive Episode among Young Adults Aged 18 to 25, 2021

- Approximately 33.7 percent of young adults aged 18 to 25 had AMI in the past year. This percentage was higher than that for adults aged 26 to 49 (28.1 percent) and adults aged 50 or older (15.0 percent).
- A similar pattern was seen for the prevalence of past year SMI and MDE across these same age groups.<sup>1</sup>
- Regardless of age group, females were more likely than males to have AMI, SMI, or MDE; however, the gender gap was most apparent among young adults aged 18 to 25.<sup>1,8</sup>

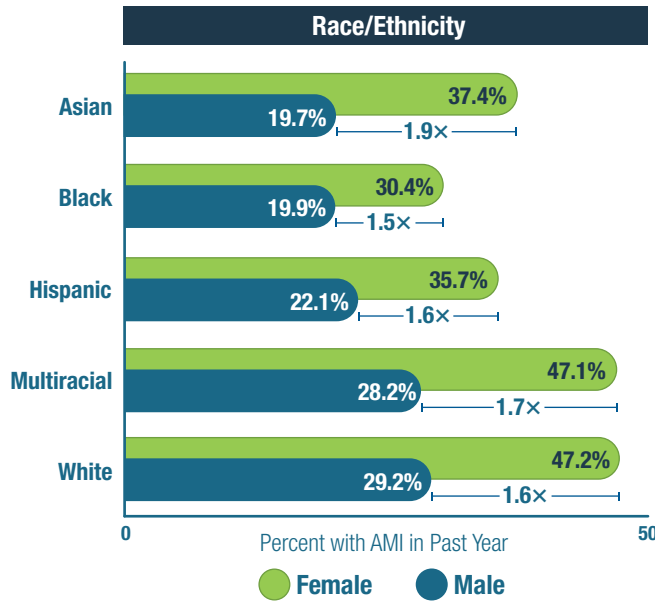


AMI = any mental illness; MDE = major depressive episode; SMI = serious mental illness.

Source: SAMHSA, Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 2021.

## Any Mental Illness

Prevalence of Any Mental Illness among Young Adults Aged 18 to 25; by Race/Ethnicity, 2021



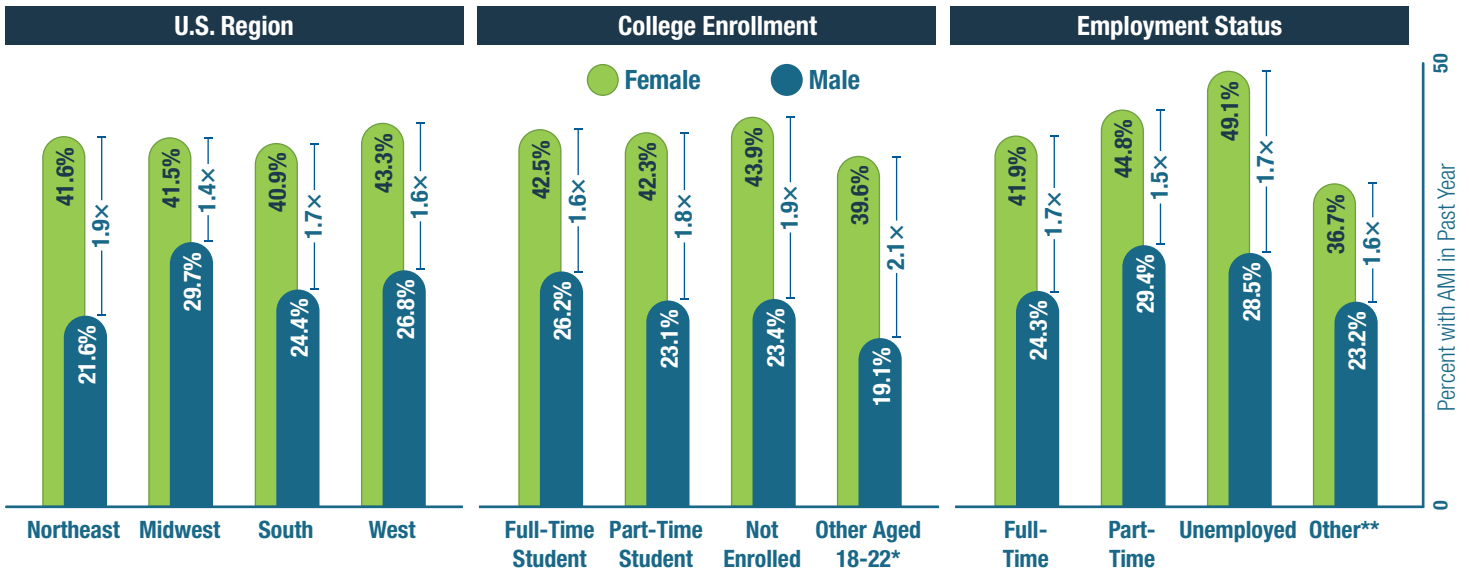
Across **every racial or ethnic group**, female young adults aged 18 to 25 were **1.5 to 1.9 times more likely** than male young adults aged 18 to 25 to have AMI.

AMI = any mental illness.

Note: Estimates for American Indian or Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander were not reported due to low precision. Black = Black or African American; Hispanic = Hispanic or Latino.

Source: SAMHSA, Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 2021.

Prevalence of Any Mental Illness among Young Adults Aged 18 to 25; by Sociodemographic Characteristics, 2021



AMI = any mental illness.

\* College Enrollment includes only those aged 18 to 22 years old. "Other Aged 18-22" includes respondents enrolled in other grades either full time or part time or enrolled with no other information available.

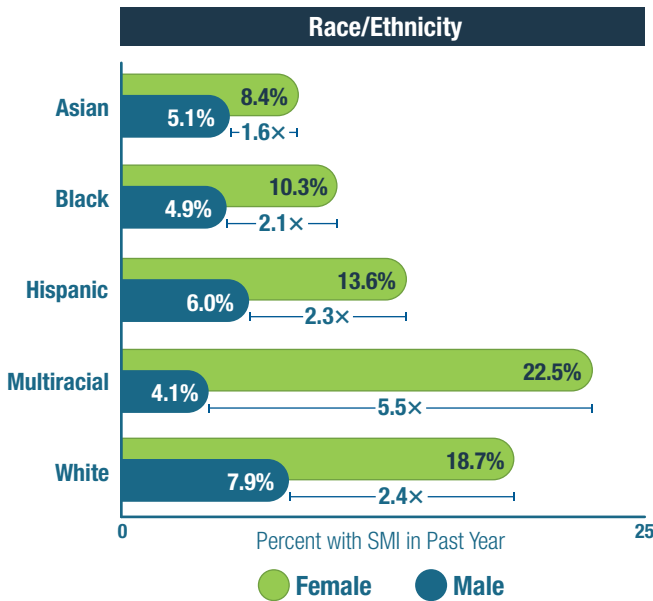
\*\* Other Employment Status includes students, people keeping house or caring for children full time, retired or disabled people, or other people not in the labor force.

Source: SAMHSA, Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 2021.

The prevalence of AMI among female young adults aged 18 to 25 was **1.4 to 2.1 times higher** than among male young adults aged 18 to 25, regardless of **U.S. region, college enrollment, or employment status.**

## Serious Mental Illness

Prevalence of Serious Mental Illness among Young Adults Aged 18 to 25; by Race/Ethnicity, 2021

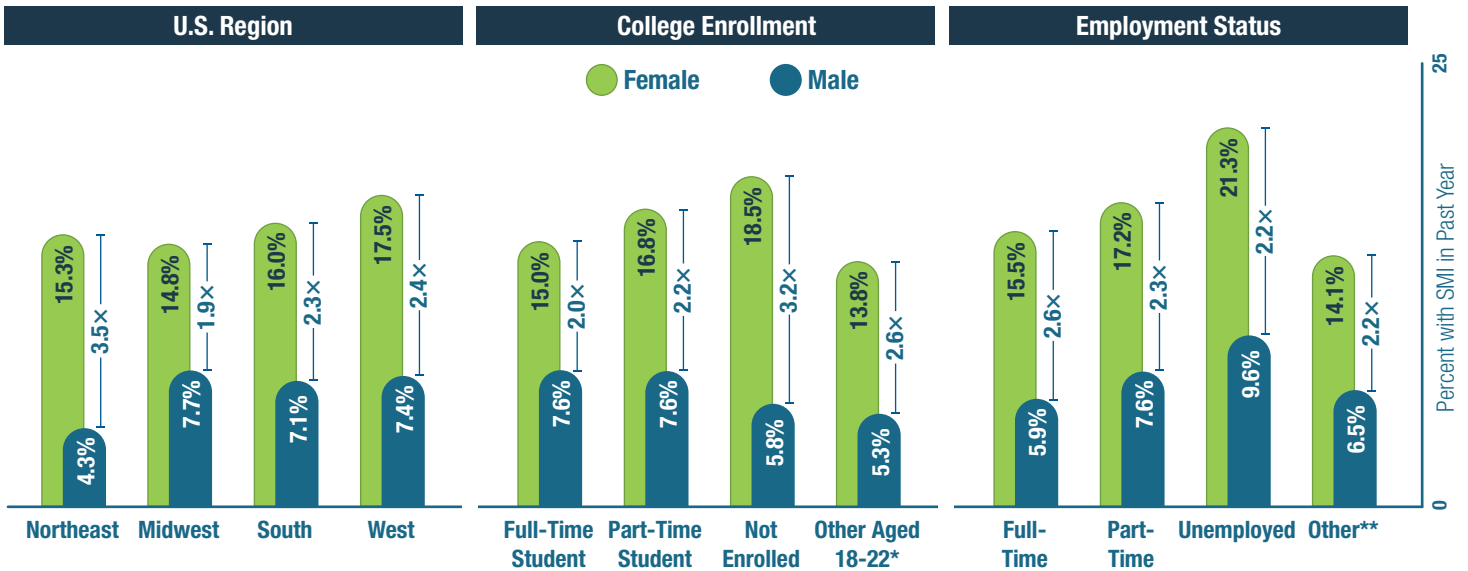


Female young adults aged 18 to 25 were **1.6 to 2.4 times more likely** than male young adults aged 18 to 25 to have SMI in **all racial or ethnic groups except Multiracial** young adults.

Among **Multiracial** young adults aged 18 to 25, females were **more than 5 times as likely** as males to have SMI in the past year. **More than 1 in 5** Multiracial female young adults aged 18 to 25 had SMI.

SMI = serious mental illness.  
 Note: Estimates for American Indian or Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander were not reported due to low precision. Black = Black or African American; Hispanic = Hispanic or Latino.  
 Source: SAMHSA, Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 2021.

Prevalence of Serious Mental Illness among Young Adults Aged 18 to 25; by Sociodemographic Characteristics, 2021

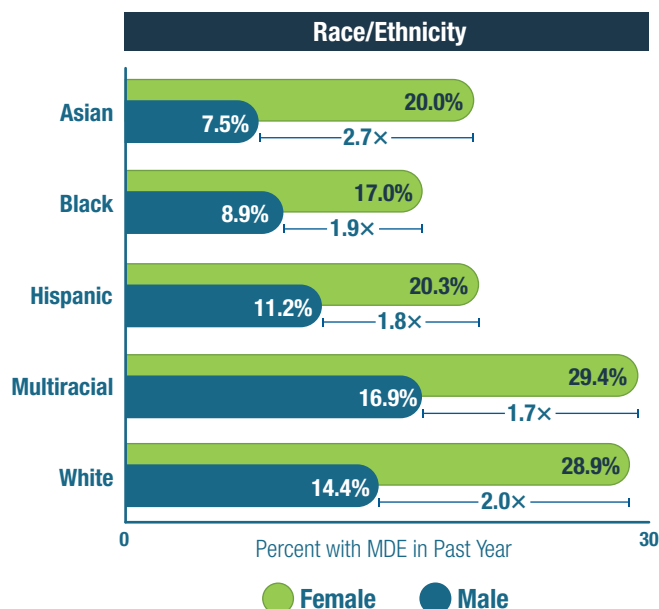


SMI = serious mental illness.  
 \* College Enrollment includes only those aged 18 to 22 years old. "Other Aged 18-22" includes respondents enrolled in other grades either full time or part time or enrolled with no other information available.  
 \*\* Other Employment Status includes students, people keeping house or caring for children full time, retired or disabled people, or other people not in the labor force.  
 Source: SAMHSA, Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 2021.

The prevalence of SMI among female young adults aged 18 to 25 was **1.9 to 3.5 times higher** than among male young adults aged 18 to 25, regardless of **U.S. region, college enrollment, or employment status.**

## Major Depressive Episode

Prevalence of Major Depressive Episode among Young Adults Aged 18 to 25; by Race/Ethnicity, 2021



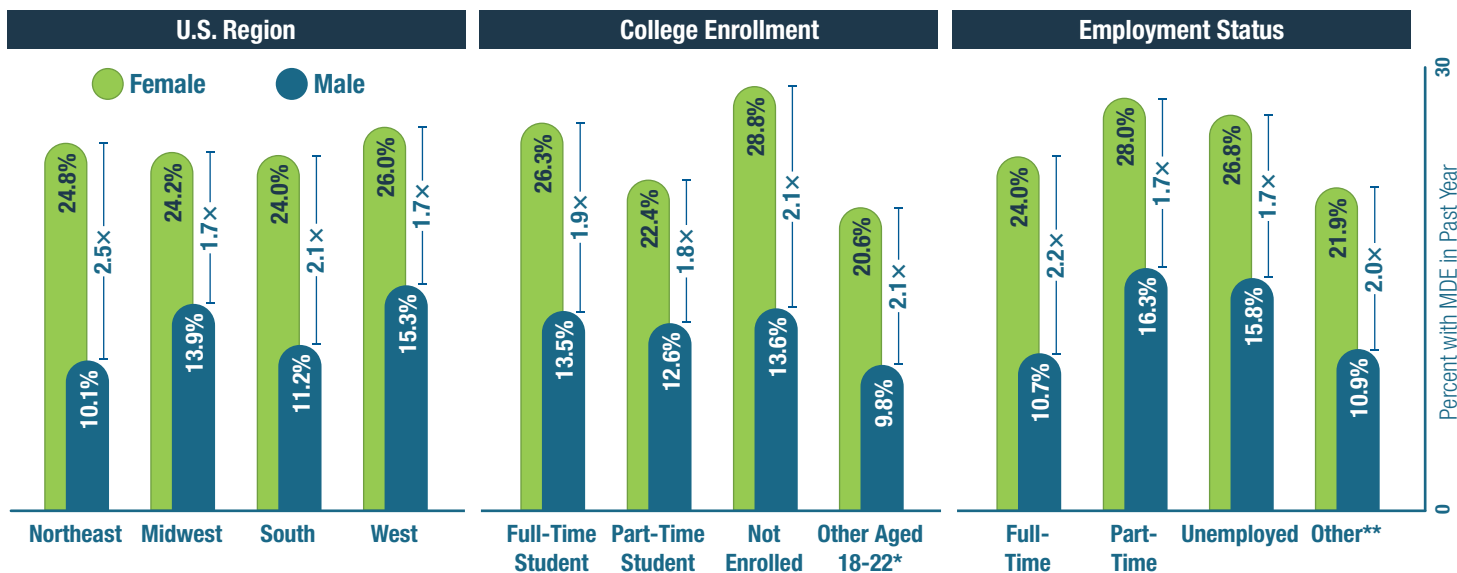
Female young adults aged 18 to 25 were **1.7 to 2.7 times more likely** than male young adults aged 18 to 25 to have MDE in **all racial or ethnic groups**.

MDE = major depressive episode.

Note: Estimates for American Indian or Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander were not reported due to low precision. Black = Black or African American; Hispanic = Hispanic or Latino.

Source: SAMHSA, Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 2021.

Prevalence of Major Depressive Episode among Young Adults Aged 18 to 25; by Sociodemographic Characteristics, 2021



MDE = major depressive episode.

\* College Enrollment includes only those aged 18 to 22 years old. "Other Aged 18-22" includes respondents enrolled in other grades either full time or part time or enrolled with no other information available.

\*\* Other Employment Status includes students, people keeping house or caring for children full time, retired or disabled people, or other people not in the labor force.

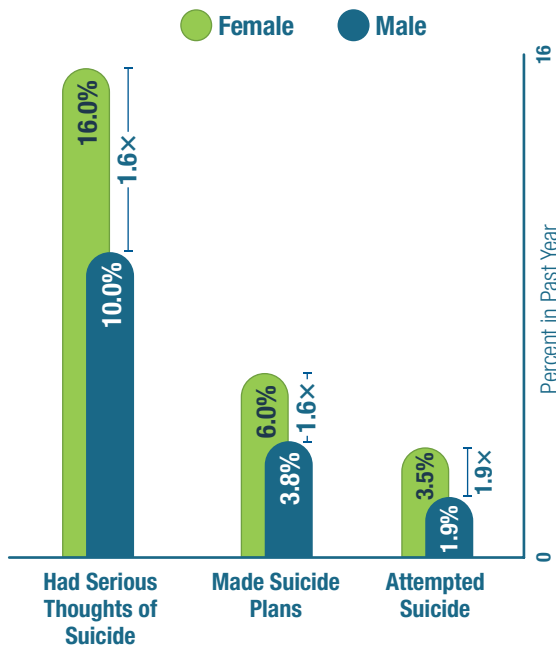
Source: SAMHSA, Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 2021.

The prevalence of MDE among female young adults aged 18 to 25 was **1.7 to 2.5 times higher** than among male young adults aged 18 to 25, regardless of **U.S. region, college enrollment, or employment status**.

## Prevalence of Suicidal Thoughts, Plans, or Attempts

In 2021, the prevalence of suicidal thoughts, plans, or attempts was higher among young adults aged 18 to 25 than among adults aged 26 to 49 and adults aged 50 or older. In 2021, 13.0 percent of young adults aged 18 to 25 had serious thoughts of suicide, followed by 5.4 percent of adults aged 26 to 49, and then 2.0 percent of adults aged 50 or older.<sup>1</sup> The prevalence of suicidal thoughts, plans, or attempts was higher among females, regardless of age group.<sup>8</sup>

### Prevalence of Suicidal Thoughts, Plans, or Attempts among Young Adults Aged 18 to 25, 2021



Source: SAMHSA, Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 2021.

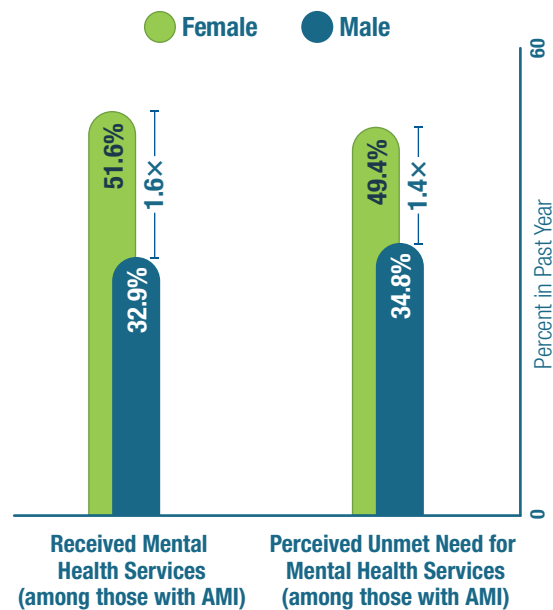
- Female young adults aged 18 to 25 were more than 1.5 times as likely as male young adults aged 18 to 25 to have suicidal thoughts, plans, or attempts.
- Although females have a higher prevalence of nonfatal suicidal behavior, regardless of the age group, males are more likely to use a lethal method and die by suicide, especially those in older age groups.<sup>9</sup>

## Mental Health Services

The 2021 NSDUH assessed receipt of mental health services and perceived unmet need for mental health services in the past year. Among those with SMI and MDE, young adults aged 18 to 25 were less likely to receive mental health services than adults aged 26 to 49 and adults aged 50 or older, but differences in receipt of mental health services did not differ by age group among adults with AMI.<sup>1</sup>

However, young adults aged 18 to 25 with AMI were more likely to have a perceived unmet need for mental health services in the past year (43.9 percent) than adults aged 26 to 49 (29.5 percent) and adults aged 50 or older (14.2 percent).<sup>1</sup>

### Mental Health Services among Young Adults Aged 18 to 25, 2021



AMI = any mental illness.

Source: SAMHSA, Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 2021.

- Female young adults aged 18 to 25 with AMI were more likely to receive mental health services and more likely to perceive an unmet need for mental health services than male young adults aged 18 to 25.
- Females with AMI across all age groups were more likely to perceive an unmet need for mental health services than males, and this pattern was more noticeable among young adults aged 18 to 25.

## Summary

Mental health is important at every stage of life. Mental health conditions have been linked to physical health problems,<sup>10</sup> increased substance use,<sup>1</sup> unemployment,<sup>10</sup> and poor quality of life.<sup>10</sup> Research suggests mental health issues in young adulthood might negatively affect a person's ability to attain education, maintain social relationships, and obtain and maintain employment.<sup>11</sup>

Females had higher rates of AMI, SMI, and MDE across all age groups, but particularly among young adults aged 18 to 25. These findings highlight the need to implement comprehensive and targeted mental health programs focused on addressing differences by age and gender.

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**Data Source:** The 2021 **National Survey on Drug Use and Health** (NSDUH) is a household survey of 69,850 people aged 12 or older. NSDUH collects information on tobacco, alcohol, and drug use; mental health; and other health-related issues in the United States. NSDUH uses a complex sampling method. Interviews are conducted in person and via the web. Estimates presented are weighted to the noninstitutionalized, civilian U.S. population aged 12 or older.

**Note:** Interval lines in figures illustrate the proportional difference between the prevalence of any mental illness; serious mental illness; major depressive episode; suicidal thoughts, plans, or attempts; or mental health services among males and females.

**Note:** In the 2021 NSDUH, only a binary measure of male or female was collected. Therefore, this data brief does not present findings for transgender people, non-binary people, or those people with any other identity besides binary male or female. Beginning with the 2023 NSDUH, the survey asks respondents their sex at birth and their gender identity, including whether they identify as male, female, transgender, or another identity.

## References

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