Causes and Consequences of Anxiety Disorder Among Young Americans

Preliminary Findings

As the first generation raised on the internet and social media, as a generation that came of age in the wake of one of the worst recessions in modern history, and as a generation still grappling with increased economic uncertainty and worsening financial prospects, Millennials are experiencing anxiety like no other generation.

Public policy, public health, medical, and economic experts have yet to comprehensively examine the many important questions that would shed light on this problem: What is the magnitude and nature of this spike in anxiety? Who is most at risk? What is contributing to the rise in anxiety among students and young adults? What are the consequences for young Americans and for society as a whole if this problem goes untreated?

Preliminary research from the Berkeley Institute for the Future of Young Americans confirms an alarming trend: college students and young adults are more anxious than ever before.

Over a third of American adults will develop an anxiety disorder during their lifetime.

Research shows that nearly 34% of US adults and college students are now experiencing an anxiety disorder at least once in their lives. Data also reveals that anxiety disorders are the most common mental disorders among today’s adolescents in the US, with approximately 32% of 13 to 17-year-olds having met criteria for an anxiety disorder at least one point in their lives. The fact that adolescents have already reached anxiety prevalence rates almost as high as those in adults indicates that anxiety prevalence will likely only continue to increase as current younger generations age.

According to data gathered from 147 college and university counseling centers, anxiety and depression are the most common presenting mental health concerns of students visiting college counseling centers and are the only presenting concerns of a clear majority of cases over the last 4 years. Surpassing depression in 2009, anxiety is now the top presenting concern.

For this study, we examine trends underlying anxiety by analyzing the American College Health Association’s National College Health Assessment (NCHA) dataset, a nationally recognized research survey that assists colleges and universities in collecting data about student health habits, behaviors, and perceptions. Preliminary analysis of student data from the NCHA illustrates that anxiety was the most prevalent self-reported mental health diagnosis among college campuses represented between gender hospitals.

To date, research illustrates that poor mental health is associated with material disadvantage and unemployment, income, debt, educational attainment, and parental education. Existing literature also points to several potential factors contributing to this spike in anxiety. They include but are not limited to economic and financial stressors, technology, social media and internet use, sociopolitical factors, and student life in the US higher education setting.

The final analysis for this study will delve deeper into these determinants and examine the nuances among potential driving forces. The final report will provide insight into why reported anxiety among millennials and college students continues to grow, illustrating that the increase is not solely attributable to changes in the detection of anxiety or stigma surrounding mental health. We will also evaluate the resulting economic costs, including the impact on productivity and academic performance, and propose effective policy solutions to address this mental health crisis.

What is driving the spike in anxiety? Why are students and Millennials, and some gender and racial/ethnic groups within these cohorts, disproportionately and increasingly at risk?

When Congress passed the 1990 Clean Air Act Amendments, the United States took a giant step to improve air quality and public health. The law mandated many costly, and complicated new requirements, for USEPA and states, to abate acid rain, air toxics, chemical accidents, telepipe emissions, smog, and global pollution issues. Since then, the air has become cleaner and clearer. However, pockets of bad air quality persist, particularly in places where historic redlining policies systematically forced minority communities up against factory fence lines and into clouds of concentrated mobile source pollution.

Since 1998, California has recognized that diesel emissions cause lung cancer, heart disease and other adverse health effects. But only recently have innovations in low-cost monitoring technology (some pioneered by UC Berkeley scientists) enabled us to measure local and neighborhood air quality. The data clearly shows that people living near heavy truck traffic suffer dangerous exposure to diesel emissions. In minority, low-income, neighborhoods, diesel pollution exposure can be 2–3 times higher than in more affluent areas. This is the unfinished business of the clean air movement.

My note in the Spring 2018 issue of Policy Notes describes the Goldman School’s role in the passage of a new law (AB 617) designed to address this problem. It is the first legislation of its kind, and could set an example for other states and nations. Hence, much rides on its successful implementation. Here is an update on efforts to implement AB 617.

Late in June, the Board of the Port of Oakland issued plans to achieve zero emissions from port and freight operations. Goldman School and Environmental Public Policy (CEPP) recently filed comments on the plan. While implementation details of the Port’s zero-emissions plan need to be worked out, this is an important commitment. It could improve public health in West and Central Oakland, reduce greenhouse gas emissions from trucking and freight operations, and incite truck electrification throughout the region.

In July, Oakland Mayor Libby Schaaf, Bay Area Air Quality regulators, and West Oakland activists convened stakeholders to discuss the potential mobilization of the Port of Oakland’s heavy-duty truck fleet to zero emissions. The event, and the Port’s draft plan, stem from work by West Oakland citizens groups, who used new monitoring technology and community engagement to demonstrate the need for action. Technical studies by Google, Environmental Defense Fund, UC Berkeley researchers, and also helped document pollution hotspots in minority neighborhoods.

In August, CEPP released a report, Financing Low- and Zero-Emission Freight Transportation Technologies in California. Truck electrification is a key strategy to implement AB 617. This report provides a roadmap to $1.8 Billion of state funding for diesel emission reduction and electric truck financing. It shows where to find the funding and how to secure it. Electric trucks cost less to operate and maintain than diesel engines, but currently the initial equipment cost is higher. The CEPP incentives address that barrier and help transform markets toward mass production of electric drives, higher demand and lower purchase prices.

By David Wooley
Executive Director

Clean Air: Unfinished Business

Public-private partnerships to electrify trucking can achieve environmental justice for disadvantaged communities, reduce fuel costs, and cut greenhouse gases.