

MENTAL HEALTH & COVID-19 IN SASKATCHEWAN

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RESEARCH BRIEF

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Context

As we enter into the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic, an ever-increasing number of people in Canada and around the world are reporting increasing anxiety and depression levels. Increases in mental health disorders are caused by the negative impact of the pandemic in general as well as public health restrictions imposed to curb the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus among the population. There is a need to continue collecting current and rich population-level data on the mental health of Canadians to enable appropriate mental health service access and delivery.

This report presents results for the province of Saskatchewan based on a population-based survey conducted eleven months into the pandemic. The survey was conducted by Pollara Strategic Insights on behalf of Mental Health Research Canada (MHRC), supported by the Saskatchewan Health Research Foundation (SHRF), and analyzed by researchers at the Saskatchewan Population Health and Evaluation Research Unit (SPHERU).



1.2 Trends in Canada

Canadians have reported (both self-reported and diagnosed) the highest levels of anxiety (25%) and depression (17%) since the beginning of the pandemic in Canada. Depression has increased significantly—by 70%—since the peak of COVID’s first wave.

Respondents report being outside to be the best activity to support mental health (43%), as compared to physical activity (21%), indoor activities (30%), and entertainment such as movies and music (25%). Social isolation is the leading self-reported stressor, and the slowdown of the economy continues to have a negative impact on the population’s mental health. Younger people ages 18-34 years are more vulnerable to mental health decline.¹

1.3 Trends in Saskatchewan

Saskatchewan has seen a four-fold increase in the levels of anxiety (25%) and a three-fold increase in the levels of depression (17%) since the pandemic, as compared to before. Younger Canadians (ages 18-34 years) and women are experiencing the highest levels of anxiety and depression. About three times fewer in-person consultations with mental health professionals have been reported. Younger Saskatchewan adults (under the age of 55 years) are not as confident in their ability to bounce back from the challenges the pandemic has caused. Social isolation remains a leading stressor that negatively impacts mental health, whereas going outside continues to be the best activity to support good mental health. Of serious concern is that 12% of Saskatchewan respondents need mental health services but are not seeking any such supports.

(1) Mental Health Research Canada (2021). Available from:

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f31a311d93d0f2e28aaf04a/t/6038203f6a639e356c55461e/1614291009266/MHRC+Poll+5+Final+Public+Release.pdf>

2. METHODOLOGY

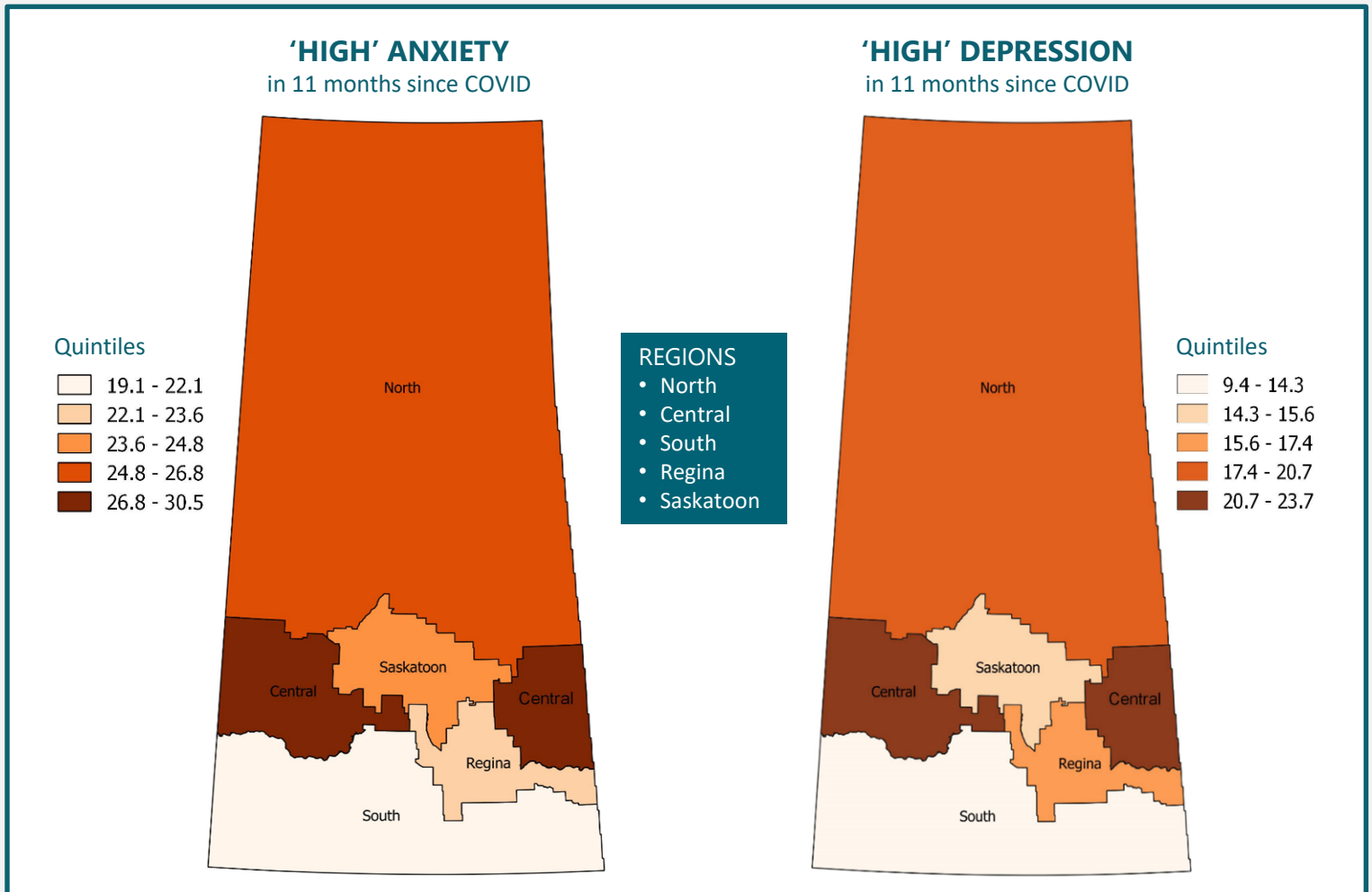
2.1 How was this survey conducted?

This is the fifth in a series of national surveys of Canadians on mental health during COVID-19 sponsored by Mental Health Research Canada (MHRC). Pollara Strategic Insights polling firm conducted the online survey amongst a sample of 3,005 Canadian adults (18 years and older) February 1-8, 2021. For this report, a subset of data collected from 577 Saskatchewan residents was sponsored by the Saskatchewan Health Research Foundation (SHRF) and the Saskatchewan Population Health and Evaluation Research Unit (SPHERU) and analyzed by SPHERU. SPHERU takes all responsibility for the reporting of results and interpretations.

2.2 Weighting

These results have been “weighted” by the most current census data (2016) in terms of gender, age, and region to ensure the total sample is representative of the population. The margin of error of is $\pm 4.07\%$, meaning the percentage estimates reported will fall within 4.07% (higher or lower) of the true value, 19 times out of 20.

Figure 1. Saskatchewan respondents experiencing high anxiety and depression since COVID, by region



3. ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION SINCE COVID-19

3.1 Since COVID-19, anxiety and depression in Saskatchewan (SK) adults continue to increase.

- Anxiety and depression were measured using the Kessler-10 scale.
- 25% of Saskatchewan respondents said they experienced 'high' levels of anxiety since COVID-19, up from 6% before the pandemic. This is more than a 4-fold increase.
- 17% of SK respondents said they have experienced 'high' levels of depression since COVID-19, as compared to 6% before COVID-19. This accounts for almost a 3-fold increase.

3.2 SK respondents most likely to rate anxiety high (8-10) since COVID-19:

- females (30% as compared to 17% males),
- younger people (34% in the 18-34 age group, as compared to 27% in those 35-54 years and 15% in those 55 and over),
- people with no children in the home (26% as compared to 24% of people with young children under 9 years in the home),
- adults living with their parents (46% as compared to 26% adults living alone and 20% adults living with their spouse),
- those who remain worried (43%) or are worried since COVID-19 (41%) about making ends meet,
- those who are negatively impacted by winter months (33%),
- SK adults who resided in the central region were **more likely** to report high levels of anxiety (31%) vs. North (26%), Saskatoon (24%), Regina (23%) and South (19%). (Figure 1)

3.3 SK respondents most likely to rate depression high (8-10) since COVID-19:

- females (18% as compared to 15% of males),
- younger people (21.4% in the age group of 18-34 vs. 21% in the age group of 35-54 years; and 9% above 55+ years),
- people with no children in the home (18% as compared to 16% of people with young children under 9 years in the home),
- adults living with their roommates (42% as compared to 21% of those living alone and 13% of those living with a spouse),
- respondents who remain worried (30%) or are worried since COVID (31%) about making ends meet,
- those who are negatively impacted by winter months (21%),
- SK adults who resided in the central region were **more likely** to report high levels of depression (23.73%) vs. North (20%), Regina (16.66%), Saskatoon (15.51%), Regina (22.89%) and South (9.38%). (Figure 1)

3.4 SK respondents frequently experience multiple symptoms of anxiety and depression.

- 11% of respondents reported feeling anxious, restless, or uneasy daily,
- around 13% reported feeling lonely daily,
- about 9% reported feeling sad, depressed or hopeless daily,
- 11% feel little interest or pleasure in things they normally enjoy, daily.

4. MENTAL HEALTH IMPACT SINCE COVID-19

4.1 Saskatchewan respondents reporting high anxiety or depression levels are likely to score moderate or severe mental health condition using the Kessler 10 scale.

- 20% of respondents are likely to have a **severe mental health disorder**,
- 17% of Saskatchewan respondents are likely to have a moderate mental health disorder,
- 15% are likely to have a mild mental health disorder,
- 48% are likely to have no mental health disorder.

4.2 Saskatchewan respondents most likely to be scored with a severe mental disorder include:

- females (22% vs. 17% males),
- younger (33% of 18-34 age group) as compared with older (23% of 35-54 age group, 6% above 55 years),

Psychological Distress 1-5 Point Scale Items	All/ Most	None/ Little
Tired out for no good reason	30%	36%
That everything was an effort	24%	51%
Restless or fidgety	20%	51%
Nervous	18%	48%
Depressed	17%	52%
Hopeless	14%	63%
Worthless	11%	71%
So restless you could not sit still	11%	72%
So sad that nothing could cheer you up	9%	69%
So nervous that nothing could calm you down	5%	78%

4.3 Social isolation is a leading factor in poor mental health.

- About 22% of SK residents reported **social isolation/being apart from others** has had a negative impact on their mental health.
- The second most cited reason for negative mental health is the **possibility of a family member catching COVID-19** (19%).
- This is followed by: the possibility of the respondent catching COVID-19 (16%), interacting with members of household in-person (12%), communicating with family/friends outside of household via phone, email, video, chats, etc. (11%), difficulties and challenges of getting necessities such as groceries, prescriptions, household items (10%), and lastly, supporting child's needs and schoolwork (8%).

4.4 Economic downturn and daily news has a negative impact on mental health for many adults

- **Recent job loss** has the most negative impact among Saskatchewan respondents (35%), followed by the **possibility of a family member (19%) or respondent losing their job (19%), economic downturn (18%), challenges working from home (16%), possibility of not being able to pay household bills in full owed in 2020 (13%)**.
- Daily news about the pandemic continues to have the most negative impact on mental health for many SK residents (19%),
- **Going outside** continues to have the most positive impact on mental health (13%).

5. IMPACT OF SOCIAL ISOLATION

5.1 Almost half of SK adults are optimistic about their mental health under COVID-19 restrictions.

- If social isolation continues for two more months, 42% of SK residents anticipate having low levels of anxiety and 48% of Saskatchewan residents anticipate having low levels of depression.
- Respondents reporting moderate levels of anxiety and depression are 34% and 27% respectively, whereas 17% of Saskatchewan residents anticipate having high levels of anxiety and 18% anticipate having high levels of depression.

5.2 Respondents who expect their levels of anxiety to be high if social isolation continues for two more months were:

- those living with a roommate (33%) and have a child/children (33%), as compared to those living alone (21%), living with a partner/spouse (15%), and those living with a parent (15%),
- residents of Central (27%) and South (22%) as compared to Saskatoon (18%), Regina (16%) and North (15%). (Figure 2)

5.3 Respondents who expect their levels of depression to be high if social isolation continues for two more months were:

- those living with a roommate (33% as compared to 26% of those living with a parent, 22% of those living alone, 21% of those living with a child/children, and 16% of those living with their partner/spouse).
- Residents of North (23%) as compared to Regina (20%), South (20%), Central (20%), Saskatoon (16%). (Figure 3)

Figure 2. Saskatchewan respondents who expect 'high' levels of anxiety by region if social isolation continues for two months

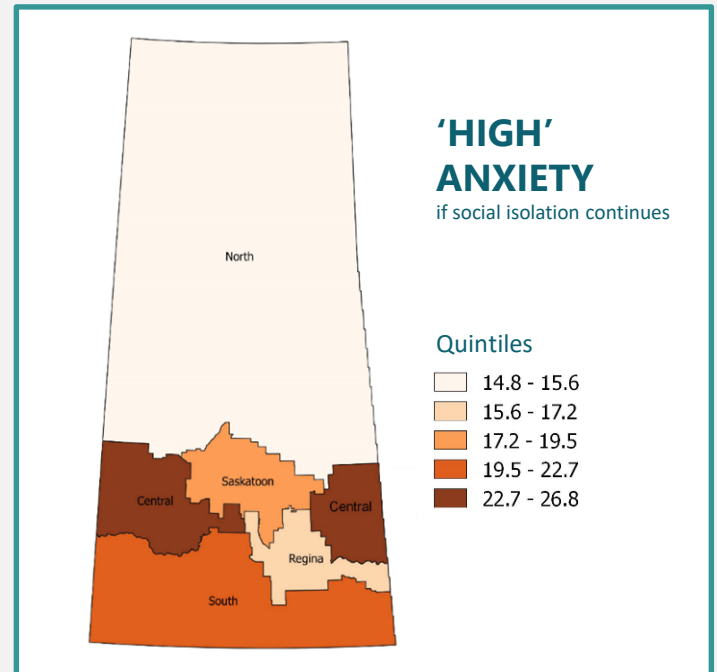
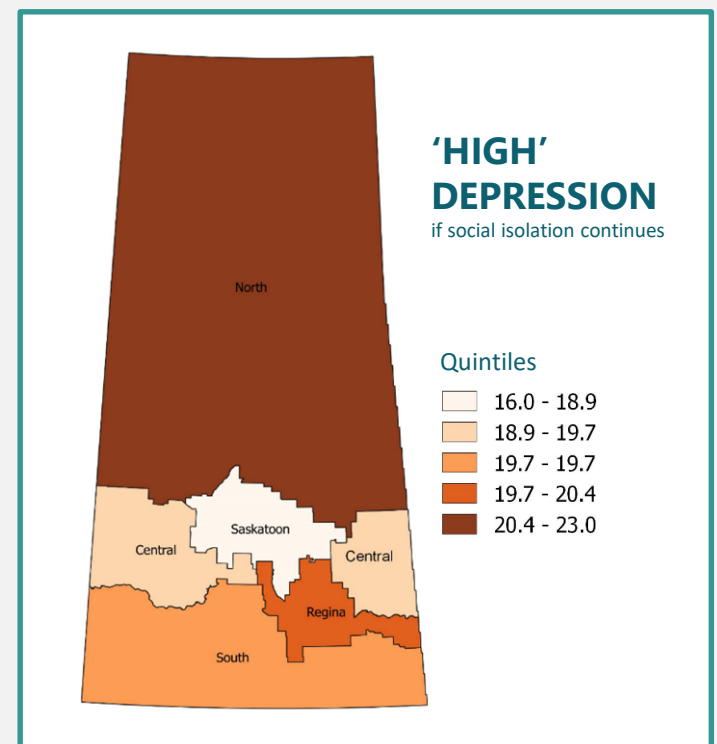


Figure 3. Saskatchewan respondents who expect 'high' levels of depression by region if social isolation continues for two months



6. ABILITY TO MANAGE AND RECOVER FROM COVID-19

6.1 The pandemic continues to have a negative impact on management of stress, anxiety, and depression.

- 34% of respondents said they were doing well managing feelings of stress, anxiety, and depression as compared to 47% before COVID-19, with close to 23% saying they are not doing well (as compared to 17% before COVID-19).

Those who reported that they were **most likely to handle stress well** (8-10) since COVID-19 are:

- male (37% vs 30% of females),
- respondents in the 55+ age group (45% as compared to 30% in the age group of 35-54 years of age and 23% of those 18-34 years of age),
- those with no children at home (38% vs 24% of those with children under 9 years).

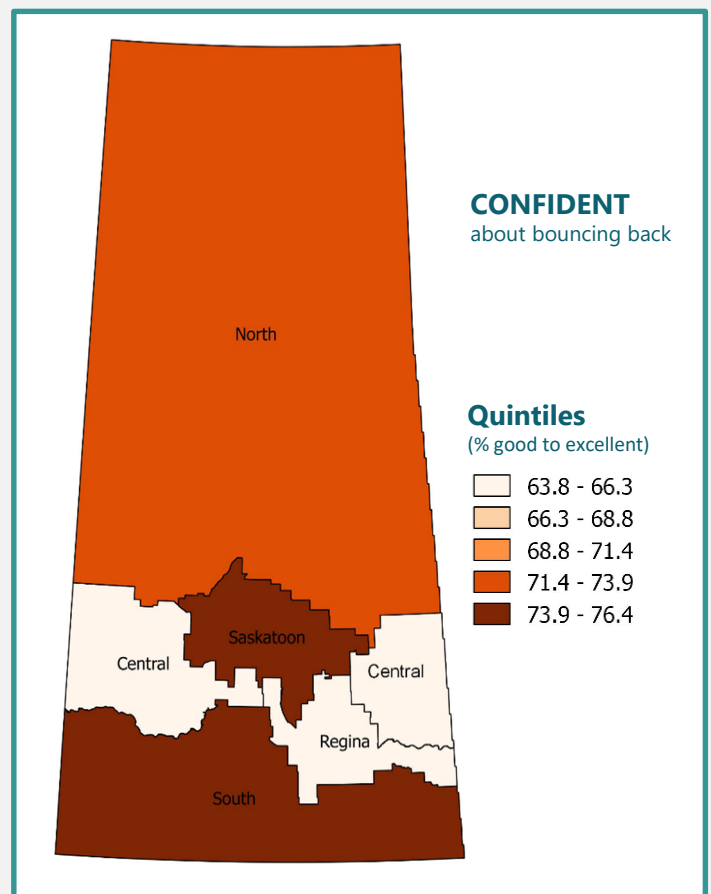
6.2 SK adults continue to feel confident about their ability to recover from the challenges caused by COVID-19.

- Three-fifths of adults continue to feel confident about their ability to recover from challenges (65% rate this 7-10, where 10 means excellent ability to recover), with 21% feeling very confident (9 or 10 rating).
- Younger SK adults (under the age of 55) are **not as positive** (7-10 rating) about their ability to bounce back from the challenges presented by COVID-19, as compared to older adults. (18-34: 53%; 35-54: 61%; 55+: 76%).

6.3 SK adults continue to feel confident about their ability to bounce back, by region (Figure 2).

- In Saskatoon, 76% of respondents feel confident about bouncing back after the pandemic,
- Around 76% respondents from South, followed by 74% from Northern Saskatchewan feel confident about bouncing back.
- Respondents from Regina (65%) and Central (64%) feel least confident about bouncing back after the pandemic.

Figure 4. Saskatchewan respondents confident about bouncing back, by region



7. MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT AND SERVICES

7.1 The number of Saskatchewan adults accessing mental health supports since COVID-19 has decreased to a great extent.

- Adults still receiving mental health supports comprise of 59% SK residents.
- Of the 59%, Saskatchewan adults currently still receiving these mental health supports are **mostly likely** to be:
 - younger adults (40% in the age group 18-34 years, 46% aged 35-54 years as compared to 14% of those 55 years and older).

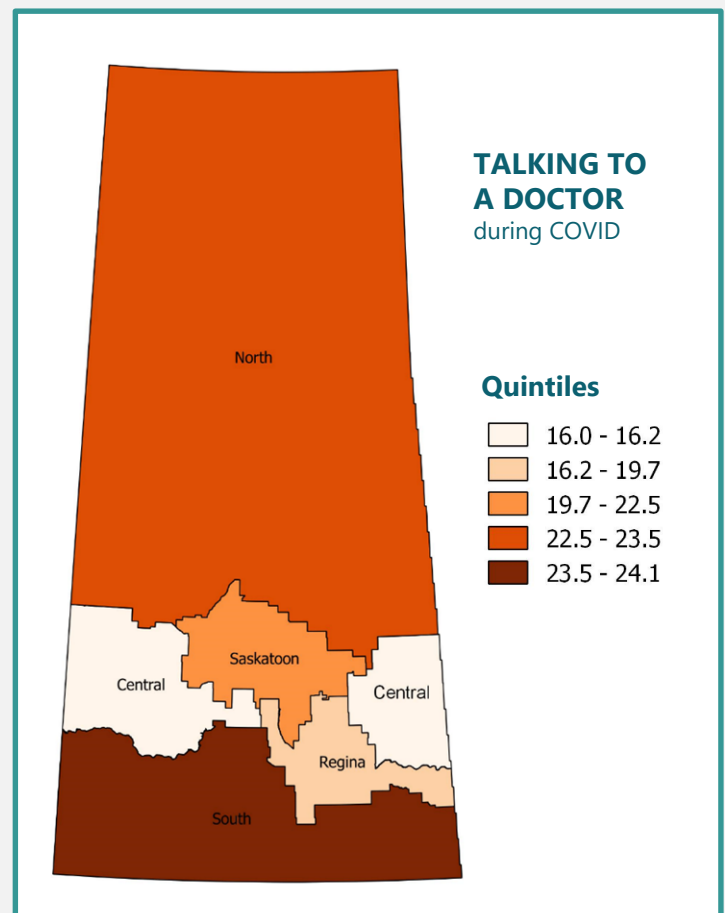
7.2 Many Saskatchewanians have lost access to mental health supports.

- **One-to-one in-person support** with a mental health professional (i.e., counsellor, psychologist, psychiatrist) has decreased three times, from 25% before COVID-19 to 8% since.
- Accessing support through a **family doctor or general practitioner** has also decreased, from 12% before COVID-19 to 7% since.
- Adults opting for **one-to-one support virtually via ONLINE** (i.e., video chat) with a mental health professional has seen a very slight increase, from 3% to 4%.
- **One-to-one virtually via VERBAL PHONE CALLS** with a mental health professional has seen a marginal increase, from 4% to 6%.
- Saskatchewan adults who **needed mental health supports but did not access any such supports since the pandemic has doubled since the pandemic** (12% since COVID vs. 7% before COVID).

7.3 Saskatchewan adults (by region) who are talking to a doctor during the pandemic are most likely to be from (Figure 3):

- South (24%), North (23%), and Saskatoon (22%) vs. Regina (16%) and Central (16%)

Figure 5. Saskatchewan respondents talking to a doctor during COVID-19, by region



8. INFORMATION ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES AND COMPLIANCE WITH GUIDELINES

8.1 Saskatchewan adults are interested in obtaining more information about mental health services.

- Respondents are most interested in obtaining information about **activities they can do on their own** (16%).
- 11% of respondents are interested in information for **one-to-one counselling** with a mental health professional.
- Adults wanting information about **self-help activities** with the support of a mental health professional account for 9% of SK adult respondents.
- Respondents are **least interested** in obtaining information regarding **group counselling led by a mental health professional** (37%).
- Information that SK respondents are likely to want is about **group activities with the support of a coach or teacher** (36%).

8.2 Most Saskatchewan adults are compliant with the government’s COVID-19 guidelines.

- 76% of adults reported being compliant with current COVID-19 guidelines.
- 20% of adults reported monitoring the guidelines but did what they thought was reasonable or right—sometimes following the guidelines, sometimes not.

8.3 Saskatchewan adults most likely to be complaint with the government’s COVID-19 guidelines are:

- older adults 55 years and over (83% vs. 75% in the age group of 35-54 years of age and 64% in the 18-34 years of age) and
- males (slightly more likely to be compliant, 76% vs 75% of females).

Research Team

SPHERU’s analysis of the Saskatchewan mental health and COVID-19 data was led by Dr. Nazeem Muhajarine (Community Health and Epidemiology, University of Saskatchewan) and SPHERU researchers, including Dr. Daniel Adeyinka (Postdoctoral Fellow), Dr. Bonnie Jeffery (Social Work, University of Regina), Dr. Tom McIntosh (Politics and International Studies, University of Regina), Dr. Nuelle Novik (Social Work, University of Regina), Vaidehi Pisolkar (PhD student), Saiful Alam (PhD student), Vithusha Coomoran (Medical student), and Natalie Kallio (Research Officer). This work was done in collaboration with the Saskatchewan Health Research Foundation (SHRF).

For more information on the Mental Health and COVID-19 in Saskatchewan project:
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