

# Symptoms Of Psychological Distress Among U.S. Adults Over The Course Of The COVID-19 Pandemic

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# Disclosure Information



**Beth McGinty, PhD, MS**

- No Disclosures

# Session Learning Objectives

## **At the end of the session, you will be able to:**

- Understand prevalence of psychological distress during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Describe groups of U.S. adults highly affected by psychological distress during the pandemic.
- Discuss implications for mental health services.

# Motivation

- COVID-19 introduced stressors to mental health:
  - Social isolation and loneliness
  - Fear of contracting disease
  - Economic strain
  - Disruptions to education, employment, etc.
  - ...and others

# Questions

1. Relative to 2018, what is the prevalence of (1) psychological distress and (2) loneliness among U.S. adults in April 2020?
2. What was the prevalence of psychological distress at four time points in the pandemic: April 2020, July 2020, November 2020, and July-August 2021?
3. What sub-groups of U.S. adults were most affected by psychological distress during the pandemic?

# Methods

- *Johns Hopkins COVID-19 Civic Life and Public Health Survey*
  - Longitudinal survey of a cohort of U.S. adults aged 18+
    - Wave 1: April 7-13th 2020
    - Wave 2: July 7-22nd 2020
    - Wave 3: November 11-30th, 2020
    - Wave 4: July 26th-August 16th, 2021

# Methods

- Sample from NORC's 35,000-member Amerispeak® Panel.
  - Probability-based panel designed to be nationally representative of U.S. adults.
  - Sourced from NORC's area probability sample and a USPS address-based sample frame covering 97% of U.S. households.
  - Survey was administered online.
  - 1,068 adults 18+ responded to all 4 waves
    - 70% response rate, 73% retention rate

## *Measures*

- Psychological distress: Kessler-6.
- Loneliness: “How often do you feel lonely?” (from the 3-item loneliness scale, which was adapted from the Revised UCLA Loneliness scale).



## *Measures, continued.*

- Psychological distress: Self-administered Kessler-6.
  - During the past 30 days, about how often did you feel...
    - Nervous?
    - Hopeless?
    - Restless or fidgety?
    - So depressed that nothing could cheer you up?
    - That everything was an effort?
    - Worthless?
- All of the time (0); Most of the time (1); Some of the time (2) A little of the time (3) None of the time (4)
- Scores range from 0-24; 13 is cut-point for serious distress

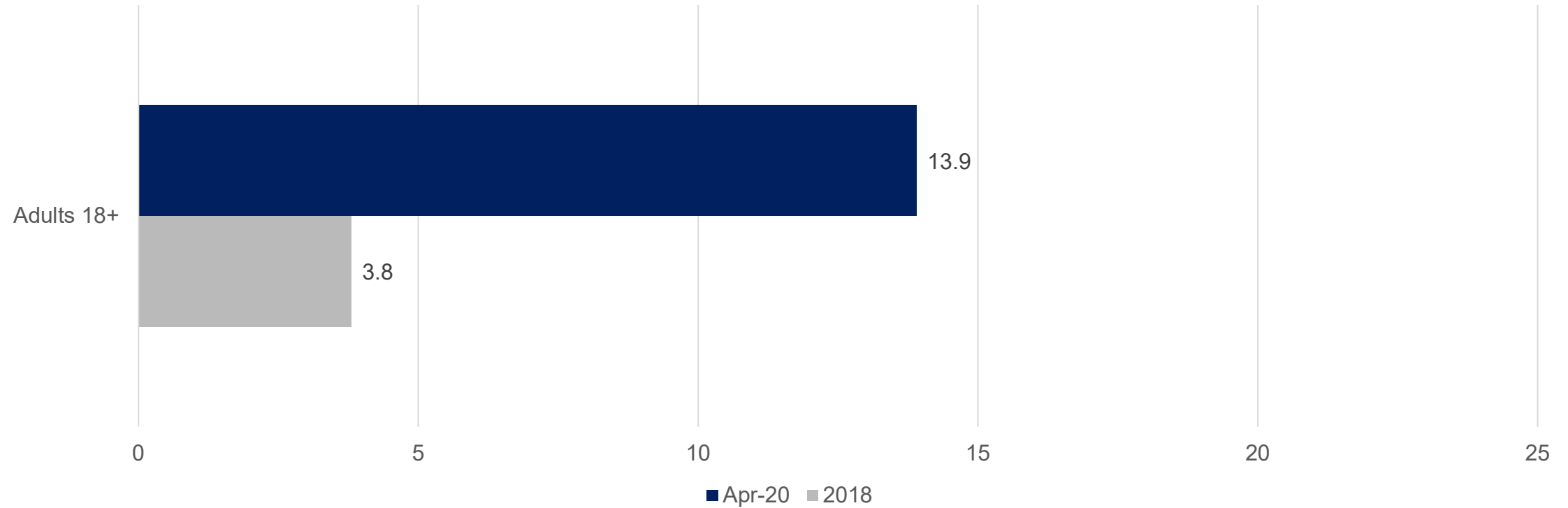
# Methods

- Calculated prevalence of serious psychological distress and loneliness in our sample.
- Compared to 2018 prevalence:
  - NHIS (psychological distress)
  - Kaiser Family Foundation survey (loneliness)
- All analyses incorporated survey sampling weights to generate nationally representative estimates.

# Results

## Serious psychological distress in the initial phase of the pandemic:

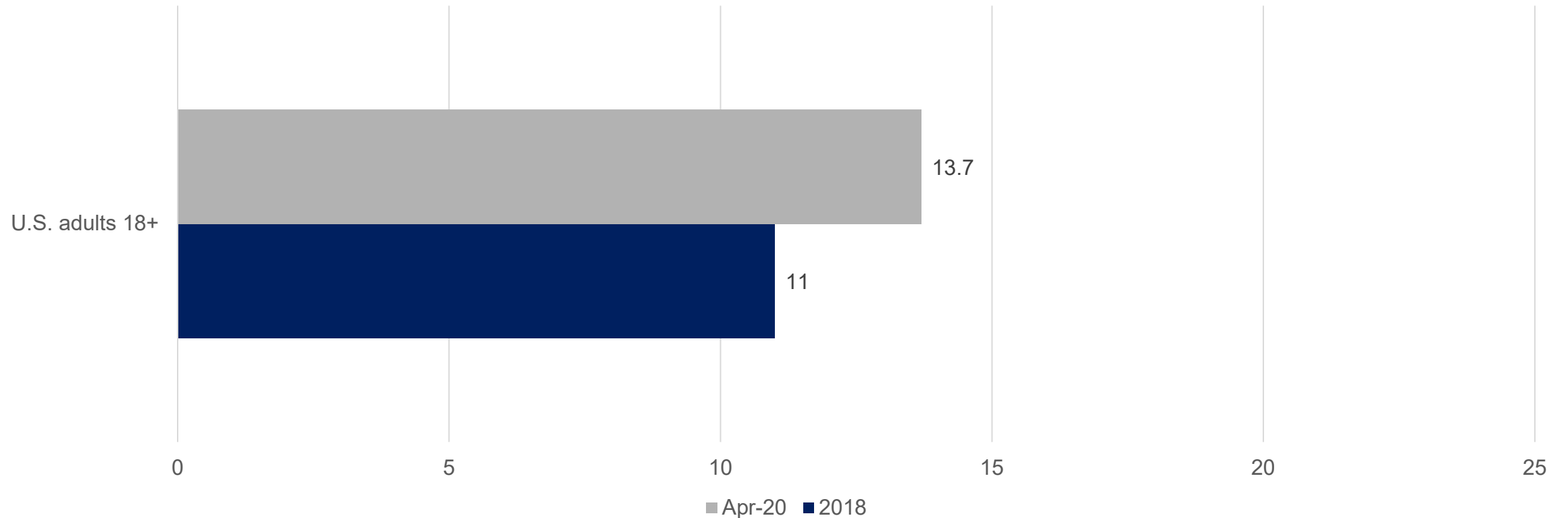
*Prevalence Of Serious Psychological Distress*



# Results

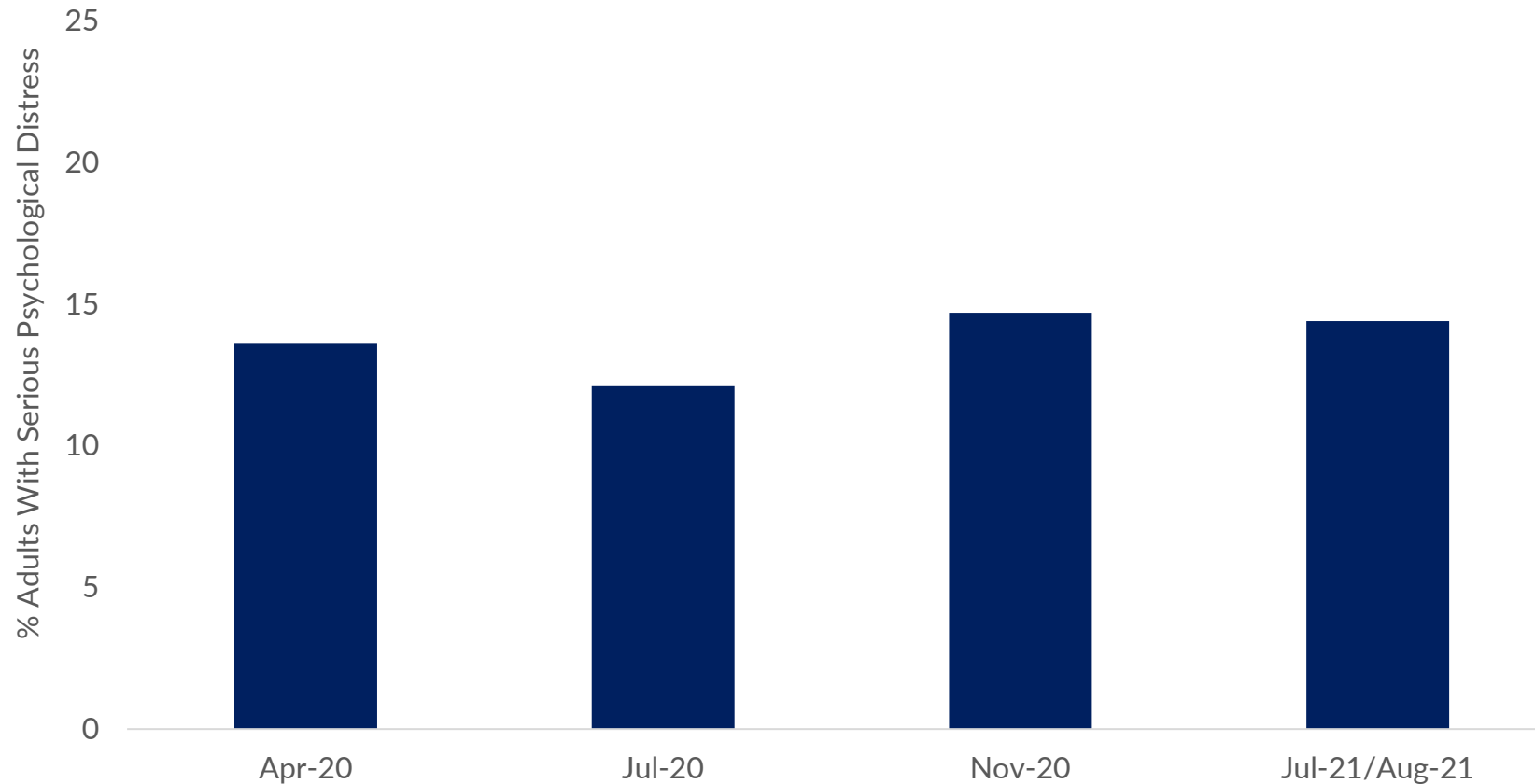
## Loneliness in the initial phase of the pandemic:

Proportion Of U.S. Adults Who Are Always/Often Lonely



# Results

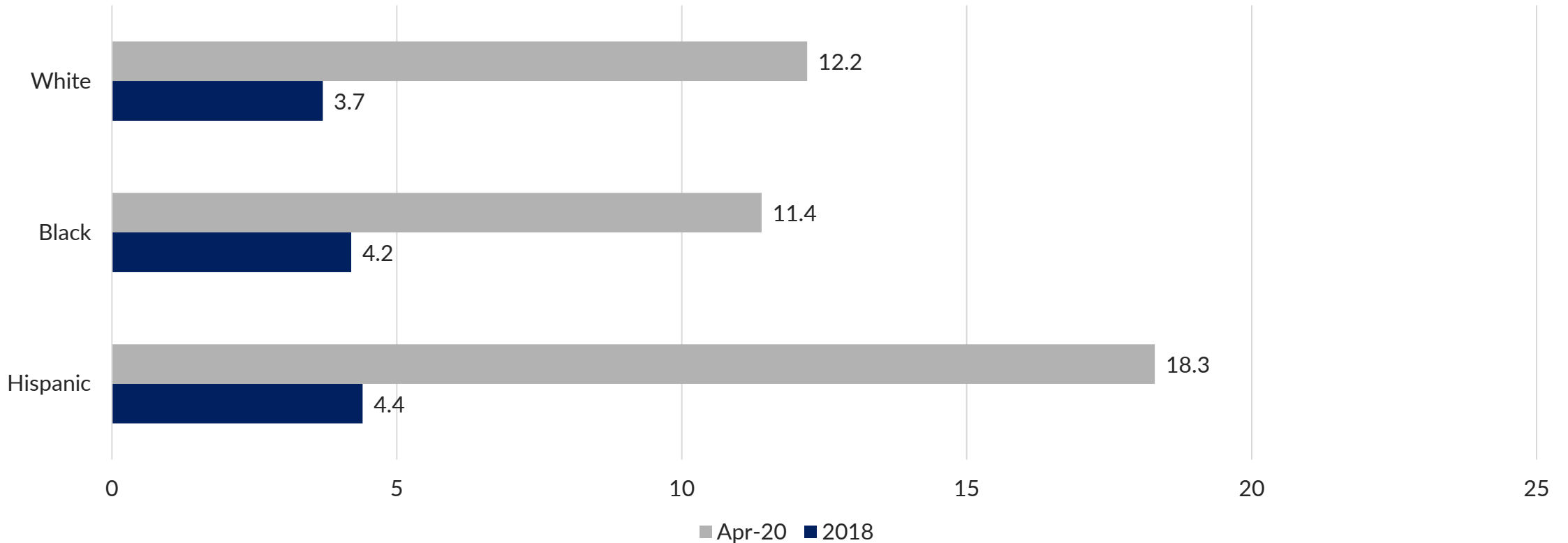
Serious psychological distress at 4 points across the pandemic:



# Results

## Serious psychological by sub-group (wave 1):

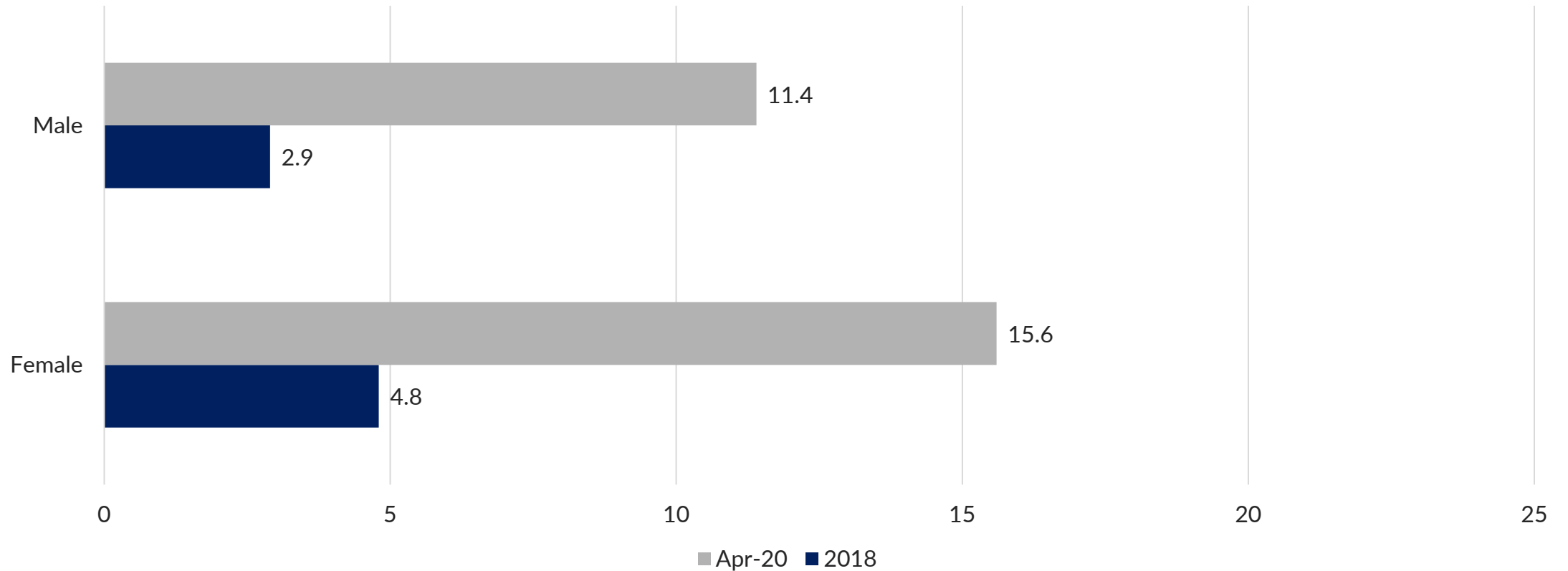
Prevalence Of Serious Psychological Distress, By Race/Ethnicity



# Results

## Serious psychological by sub-group (wave 1):

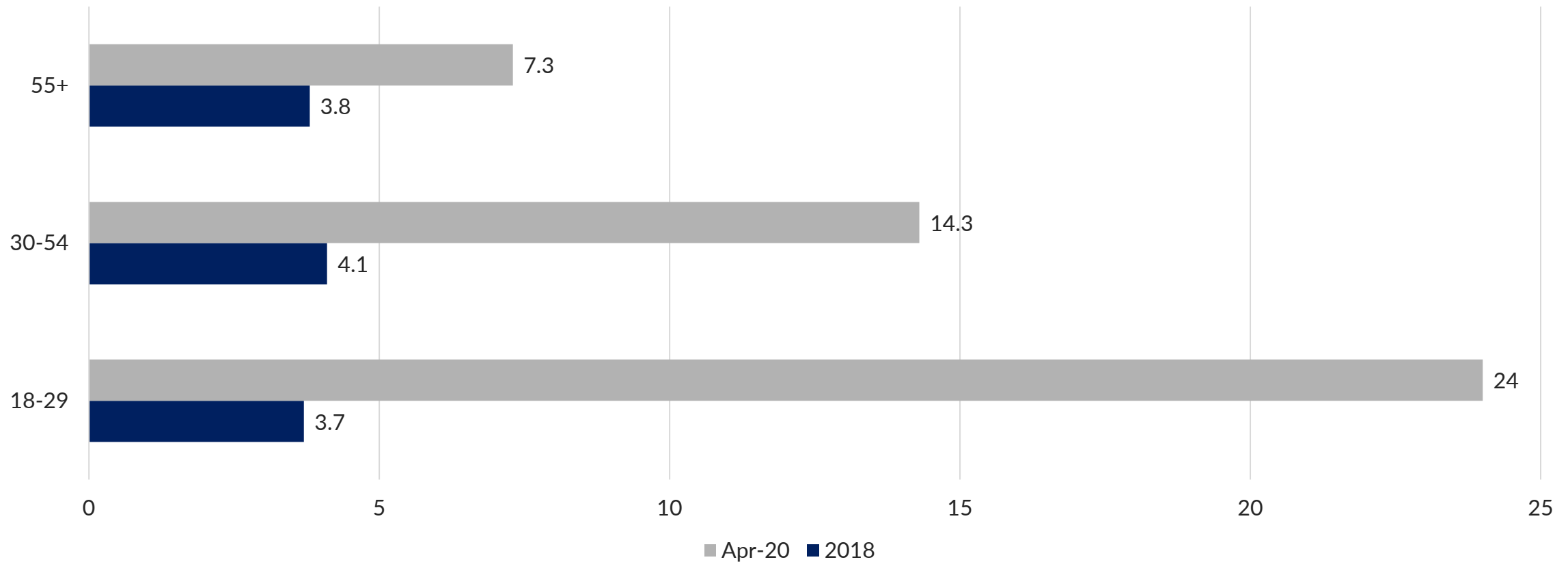
Prevalence Of Serious Psychological Distress, By Sex



# Results

## Serious psychological by sub-group (wave 1):

Prevalence Of Serious Psychological Distress, By Age Group

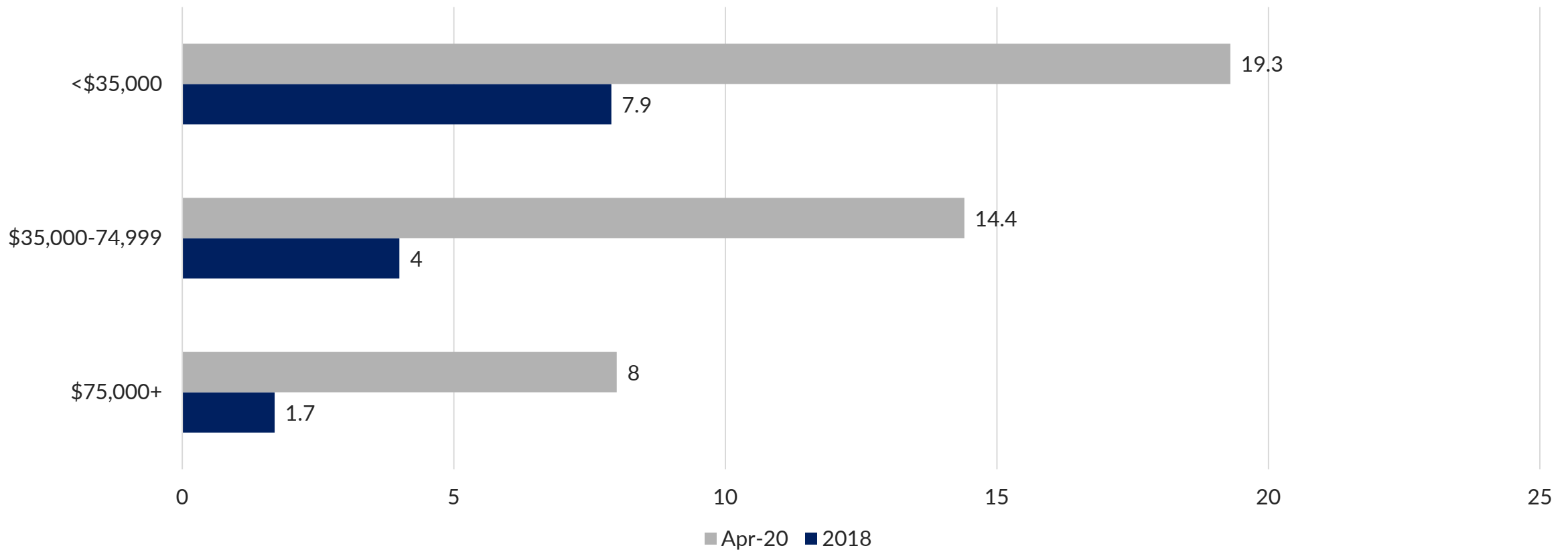




# Results

## Serious psychological by sub-group (wave 1):

### Prevalence Of Serious Psychological Distress, By Household Income



# Key Takeaways

- Serious psychological distress was more than three times higher than typical in April 2020, July 2020, November 2020, and July-August 2021.
- In the early phases of the pandemic, psychological distress was not driven (purely) by loneliness.
- Young, Hispanic, low-income adults disproportionately affected.
- Elevated distress may transfer to longer-term psychiatric disorders or exacerbate existing conditions.
- Each of our surveys was fielded at a time of increasing COVID-19 cases.

# References

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- 2. M.E. Hughes, L.J. Waite, L.C. Hawkley, J.T. Cacioppo. A short scale for measuring loneliness in large surveys: results from two population-based studies *Res Aging*, 26 (2004), pp. 655-672.
- 3. McGinty EE, Presskreischer R, Han H, Barry CL (2020). Psychological distress and loneliness reported by US adults in 2018 and April 2020.
- 4. McGinty EE, Presskreischer R, Han H, Barry CL (2022). Trends in Psychological Distress Among US Adults During Different Phases of the COVID-19 pandemic. *JAMA Network Open*, 5(1): e214477.