

# How Current Events Impact College Student Mental Health

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## Background:

Studies show that serious mental health issues are typically developed during young adulthood and that current young adults report high rates of anxiety. Other studies suggest that the various aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic have negatively impacted the mental health of young adults and caused an increase in stress levels. This can lead to several deleterious outcomes, including a drop in academic learning ability and a reduction in physical and psychological well-being. However, the pandemic may not be solely responsible for this, as several significant social and political events have occurred throughout the past several months. Therefore, this study aims to examine how the perception of current events impacts the mental health of students at the University of Texas at Austin (UT).

## Methods:

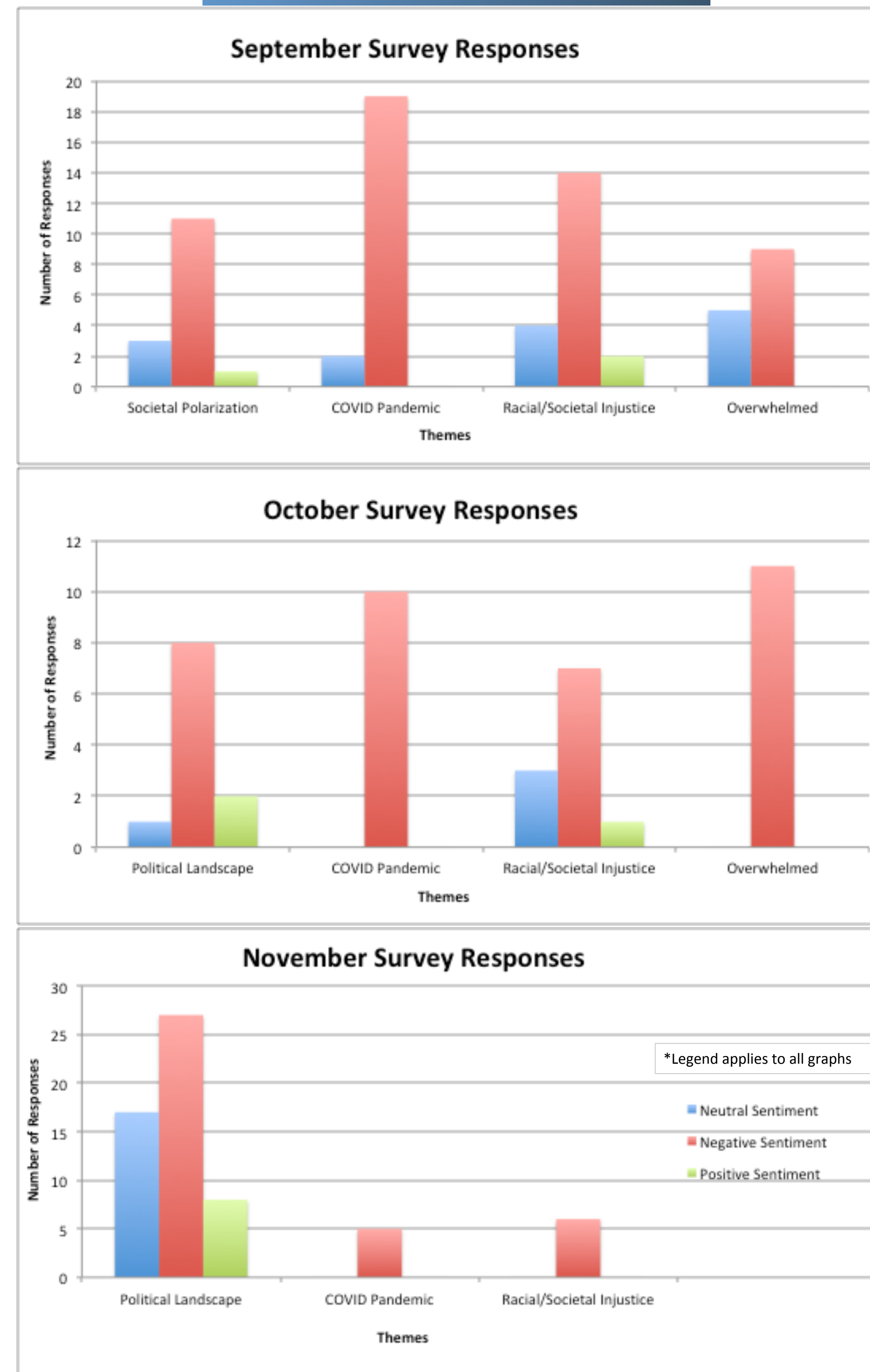
Sub-study of longitudinal study examining the mental health of UT students during the COVID-19 pandemic

- Three monthly surveys (September, October, November)
- Qualitative question of interest asked how current events have impacted life in past 30 days
- Responses coded into thematic categories
- Responses assigned positive, negative, or neutral sentiment
- Socio-demographic information matched to responses

## Example Quotes:

- "I no longer see or talk to many friends because they refuse to follow public health and safety guidelines. It has been distressing to see that many people put on a facade to seem like they are doing the right thing, but they do the same things they criticize others for."
- "I worry for the safety of my black friends and family members, as well as the black community as a whole. I feel angry about how some Americans are being treated."
- "The week of the election was so stressful that it was difficult to accomplish anything productive"
- "Due to the very unpredictable circumstances as of recent, I find it very difficult to be able to mentally commit to any longterm goals or desires."

## Results:



## Findings:

- 145 responses across three surveys revealed two prominent themes: **COVID-19 pandemic** and **racial/societal injustice**
- **COVID-19 pandemic major subthemes**
  - Social isolation
  - Impact on personal relationships
  - Economic impact
  - Compromised online learning
- **Racial/societal injustice major subthemes**
  - Lack of social change
  - Safety concerns
- Political landscape theme apparent near time of election
- **Political landscape major subthemes**
  - Emotions during election time
  - Concern for future of United States
- No apparent relationship between response themes and socio-demographic information
- 72.3% of responses expressed negative sentiments
- Respondent demographics - 1 Native American, 43 Asian, 12 African American, 42 Hispanic, 8 Middle Eastern, 73 White
- Majority of survey respondents identified as female

## Conclusion:

Overall, a vast majority of all responses expressed negative sentiments. While the pandemic was a commonly identified theme, the physical health component of the virus was not of major concern. Instead, social isolation and the impact on personal relationships were more prevalent issues. These findings may be valuable for university mental health centers to improve and promote the resources available to students in light of current events.

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