

# Trends in Extreme Distress in the USA, 1993-2019

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## Abstract

### OBJECTIVES

To investigate changes from 1993 to 2019 in the percentage of U.S. citizens suffering extreme distress.

### METHODS

Using data on 8.1 million randomly sampled Americans, the paper creates a new proxy measure for exceptional distress (the percentage who report major mental and emotional problems in all 30 of the last 30 days). Time trends for different groups, and predictors of distress, are examined.

### RESULTS

The proportion of the United States population in extreme distress has risen from 3.6% in 1993 to 6.4% in 2019. Among low-education midlife whites, the percentage has more than doubled, from 4.8% to 11.5%. Regression analysis reveals: (i) At the personal level, the strongest statistical predictor of extreme distress is 'I am unable to work'. (ii) At the state level, a decline in the share of manufacturing jobs is a predictor of greater distress.

### CONCLUSIONS

Increasing numbers of U.S. citizens report extreme levels of mental distress. This links to poor labor-market prospects. Inequality of distress has also widened.

### POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Policy needs to recognize the crisis of an ever-growing group of Americans in extreme distress.