Music and Brain Health Among African American/Black Adults
2020 AARP Music and Brain Health Survey — Adults Ages 18 and Older

ABOUT THIS SURVEY

The 2020 AARP Music and Brain Health Survey (Mehegan, L.L. and Rainville, G.A., 2020), supporting the Global Council on Brain Health (GCBH)¹, was conducted between April 1-14, 2020 and examined U.S. adults’ exposure and participation in music throughout their lives. This document showcases the results from the national survey for the African American/Black (AA/B) population age 18-plus which represents a subset of the general population sample of adults age 18 and older.

In this factsheet, we will explore the effects of active and passive music engagement within a national sample of African American/Black adults. We will also explore the relationship between music and adults’ self-reported brain health and cognitive function, depression, anxiety, and mental well-being. (Depression was measured using CES-D² [Radloff, L.S., 1977], anxiety was measured using GAD-7³ [Spitzer RL, Kroenke K, Williams JB, et al], and mental well-being was measured using the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale⁴ [Tennant et al., 2007]).

KEY FINDINGS

- Focused listening to recorded music has a small, positive effect on mental well-being, anxiety, and depression.
- AA/B adults who currently listen to recorded music in a focused way are more likely to self-rate their cognitive function highly.
- AA/B adults who currently engage in some form of music now report higher mental well-being.
- AA/B adults who display active engagement with some form of music are more likely to self-rate their brain health and cognitive function highly.

¹ The Global Council on Brain Health (GCBH) is an independent collaborative of scientists, health professionals, scholars and policy experts from around the world working in areas of brain health related to human cognition. The GCBH is convened by AARP with support from Age UK.

² The Center for Epidemiologic Studies - Depression (CES-D) scale includes twenty items comprising six scales reflecting major facets of depression: depressed mood, feelings of guilt and worthlessness, feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, psychomotor retardation, loss of appetite, and sleep disturbance. The score is the sum of the 20 questions. Possible range is 0-60. A score of 16 points or more is considered depressed.

³ The Generalized Anxiety Disorder Assessment (GAD-7) is a seven-item instrument that is used to measure or assess the severity of generalized anxiety disorder (GAD). Each item asks the individual to rate the severity of his or her symptoms over the past two weeks. Response options include “not at all”, “several days”, “more than half the days” and “nearly every day”. Each response is given a score of 0 to 3, respectively. GAD-7 total score for the seven items ranges from 0 to 21. Scores of 5, 10, and 15 represent cut-points for mild, moderate, and severe anxiety, respectively.

⁴ The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale consists of 14 positively worded items (e.g., I’ve been feeling optimistic about the future, I’ve been feeling loved, I’ve been thinking clearly). Respondents are asked to describe the frequency of each experience over the previous two weeks: None of the time, rarely, some of the time, often, all of the time. Each response is given a score of 1 to 5, respectively. The mental well-being score ranges from 14 to 70 with higher scores being indicative of greater mental well-being.
DETAILED FINDINGS

Music Listening

A clear majority listen to recorded music in a focused way. More than eight in 10 (83%) AA/B adults age 18 and older have ever listened to recorded music in a deliberate and focused way and nearly seven in 10 (69%) say they currently engage in this activity, similar to adults in the general population.

The research also suggests that AA/B adults ages 50+ are more likely to engage in focused listening to recorded music either currently or in the past compared to their younger peers age 18-49 (87% versus 79%). Additionally, significantly more older AA/B adults report that they listen to recorded music in a deliberate and focused way either currently or in the past compared to their peers in the general population (87% versus 73%).

Four in 10 listen to background music half the time or more often. Younger AA/B adults listen to music in the background while doing everyday activities more often than their older peers (47% vs. 33%), similar to the general population. However, younger AA/B adults are even more likely to listen to music in the background than are younger adults in the general population (47% vs. 39%).

One in four adults currently attend musical or dance performances; more older adults report having ever attended musical performances. While a majority (71%) of AA/B adults age 18 and older currently attend musical performances or have done so in the past, AA/B adults ages 50+ are significantly more likely to have ever attended musical performances compared to their younger peers (81% versus 63%).

Moreover, AA/B adults are less likely than are adults in the general population to say they currently attend musical or dance performances (25% versus 34%).

Focused listening to recorded music has a small, positive effect on mental well-being, anxiety, and depression. Similar to the general population, AA/B adults age 18 and older who listen to recorded music in a focused way have slightly higher average mental well-being scores and slightly lower anxiety and depression scores compared to adults overall, adults who have never engaged, and adults who only engaged in the past (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Average scores for mental well-being, anxiety, and depression by focused listening to recorded music

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mental Wellbeing (avg = 51.9)</th>
<th>Anxiety (avg = 11.4)</th>
<th>Depression (avg = 15.8)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Never Engaged</td>
<td>48.9</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>12.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past Engagement</td>
<td>48.0</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td>13.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Currently Engage</td>
<td>53.6</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adults who currently listen to recorded music in a focused way are more likely to self-rate their cognitive function highly. AA/B adults age 18 and older who currently listen intently to recorded music are significantly more likely to self-rate aspects of their cognitive function as excellent or very good compared to adults who have never engaged in this activity (Figure 2).
Active Music Engagement

A clear majority of adults have actively engaged in music or dance, either by themselves, with a group, or both; singing is the most common form of active musical engagement. A large majority (91%) of AA/B adults have actively engaged in some form of music or dance, similar to adults in the general population. In addition to singing and dancing, active engagement in music also includes playing a musical instrument or composing music.

Singing is the most common form of active musical engagement for AA/B adults – engaged in by more than eight in 10 (84%) AA/B adults, with 69 percent currently engaging in singing. AA/B adults are also more likely to have ever engaged in singing than are either adults in the general population or Hispanic/Latino adults (84% versus 77% and 61%).

Majority currently engage in singing by themselves.

More than 80 percent of AA/B adults age 18 and older have engaged in singing at some point in their lives. Two-thirds of AA/B adults ages 18 and older currently engage in singing by themselves, a slightly higher percentage than that reported by adults in the general population (66% versus 58%).

Women more likely than men to have ever participated in singing and dancing. Female AA/B adults are more likely to have ever engaged in singing compared to their male peers (91% versus 75%), similar to results by gender in the general population. Female AA/B adults are also more likely to have ever engaged in singing compared to women in the general population (91% versus 83%).

Nearly eight in 10 (77%) AA/B adults have ever engaged in some form of dance (versus 66% of the adults in the general population). Moreover, as seen with singing, female AA/B adults are significantly more likely to have ever engaged in dancing compared to their male peers (88% versus 64%). The research also highlights that, in-tune with other forms of musical engagements, AA/B adults age 18 and older are also more likely to currently engage in dancing by themselves without singing than are adults in the general population (51% versus 38%).

Over four in 10 adults have played an instrument in their lives and younger adults are more likely to have ever played than are older adults. Relatively few AA/B adults age 18 and older are currently playing a musical instrument alone or as part of a group (11%). A similar trend is observed in the general population as well. However, AA/B adults are slightly less likely to have ever played a musical instrument than are adults in the general population (42% versus 48%). The piano or keyboard is the most common instrument played at a satisfactory level (33%), followed by drums (17%), flute (16%), acoustic guitar (13%), and recorder (11%).

Younger AA/B adults (ages 18-49) are significantly more likely to have ever played a musical instrument than their older peers ages 50 and above (49% versus 34%). A similar trend is seen in the general population as well. It is also observed that female AA/B adults are more likely to have ever played an instrument than their male peers (44% versus 38%).
Composing music is the least common form of music engagement. One in five (20%) AA/B adults have ever composed music. Additionally, the research shows that younger AA/B adults are significantly more likely to have ever composed music compared to their older peers (26% versus 13%), similar to adults in the general population.

Adults who currently engage in music report higher average mental well-being scores and are more likely to self-rate their cognitive function highly. The average mental well-being score for AA/B adults overall is 51.9. AA/B adults age 18 and older who currently engage in any type of music have slightly higher mental well-being scores than those who do not currently engage in any type of music (53 versus 49) (Figure 4).

Moreover, as showcased in Figure 5, compared to those who are not actively engaged in any form of music, AA/B adults who currently engage in some form of music are significantly more likely to rate their brain health and certain aspects of their cognitive function as “excellent” or “very good.” The highly rated cognitive functions are “remembering names,” “decision-making,” “ability to focus,” “learning new things in general,” and “ability to finish what you start.”

Early Music Exposure

Most adults experienced music in elementary school. Nearly seven in 10 (68%) AA/B adults age 18-plus were exposed to music in elementary school classrooms at least some of the time, similar to adults in the general population.

The research also suggests that AA/B adults ages 18 and older are as likely as Asian American and White adults to have been exposed to music in elementary school classrooms at least some of the time. However, AA/B adults are significantly more likely than Hispanic/Latino adults to have experienced music in elementary school (68% versus 51%).

One-third of African American/Black adults come from musical families. Nearly one-third (32%) of African American/Black adults said they come from a musical family, significantly more compared to all other racial/ethnic groups. (Hispanic/Latino 24%, Asian American 22%, White 22%) (Figure 6).
As shown in Figure 7, it is also observed that younger AA/B adults ages 18-49 are significantly more likely to come from a musical family than are older AA/B adults ages 50+ (41% versus 22%). Additionally, more younger AA/B adults come from a musical family compared to their peers in the general population (41% versus 26%).

Frequent exposure to music in elementary school is related to more attendance at musical performances in adulthood. Compared to those who were “never” exposed to music in their elementary classroom, significantly more AA/B adults who were exposed “often” to music report having attended a musical performance (79% versus 68%), having listened to music in a focused way (85% versus 69%), and listening to background music half the time or more (50% versus 29%). This reflects trends observed in the general population as well.

Exposure to music in elementary school is related to active musical engagement. As shown in Figure 8, significantly more adults age 18 and older who say they were “often” exposed to music in their elementary classroom actively engage in music compared to those who were “never” exposed to music.

Race/ethnicity dictates the choice of preferred music genre. Among adults age 18 and older, African American/Black adults prefer to listen to R & B and Gospel music over other music genres. On the other hand, Hispanic/Latino adults favor Latin and popular music, Asian American adults prefer popular music, and White adults prefer country and rock music (Figure 3).
METHODOLOGY

The data presented in this brief were collected through a 20-minute online probability-based survey via Ipsos KnowledgePanel®. 3,185 U.S. adults ages 18 and older including 376 African American/Black adults participated in the survey. Fielded from April 1–14, 2020, the survey data were weighted to include a balance of respondents by demographics. The margin of error for the national survey is ± 1.86 percentage points.

REFERENCES

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This fact sheet was written by Apoorva Sharma in collaboration with Laura Mehegan and Gerard “Chuck” Rainville. For more information, please contact Laura Mehegan at lmehegan@aarp.org or Gerard Rainville at grainville@aarp.org. For media inquiries, please contact media@aarp.org.