

ECONOMIC AND EMOTIONAL DISTRESS

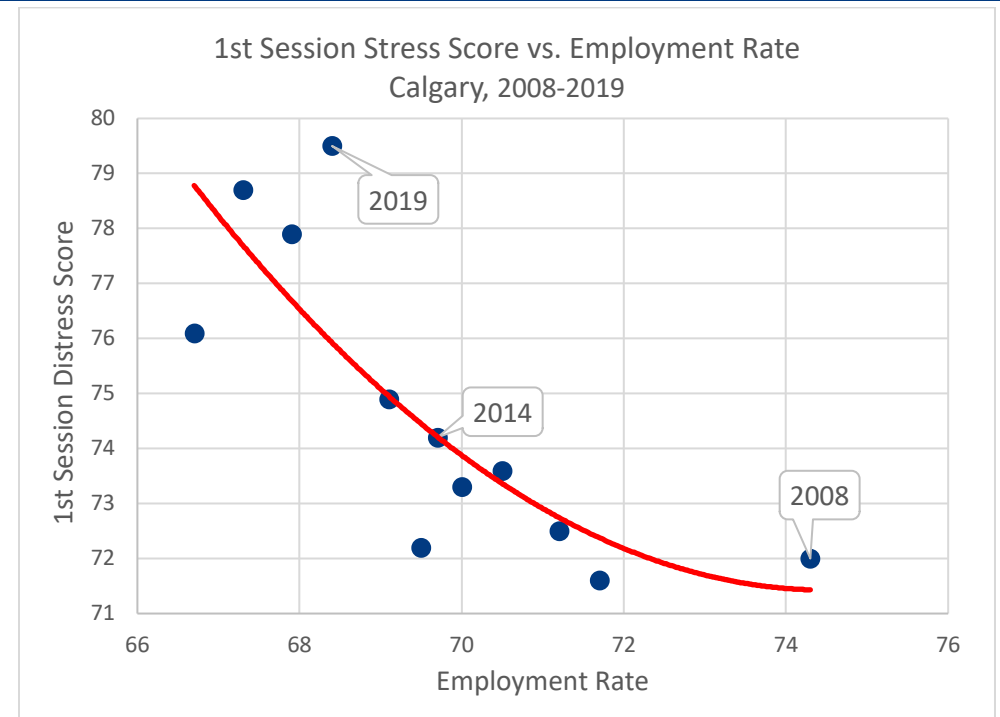
While recessions are typically measured in terms of lost jobs and lost income they can also be observed in measures of emotional distress.

[Calgary Counselling Centre](#) (CCC) is a charitable organization that has been providing counselling to Calgarians since 1962. Especially since 2004, CCC has been diligent at collecting data designed to measure the progress made by clients in improving their emotional well-being. These data are used to measure the effectiveness of its services and inform practice guidelines. An important piece of data collected measures the level of stress exhibited by clients in their first counselling session. The goal of counselling is to reduce this measure of stress to manageable levels.

In this issue of Social Policy Trends we examine how economic conditions are related to the measure of distress as measured in first sessions with CCC counsellors. Our measure of economic conditions is the *employment rate*. This measures the percentage of adults living in Calgary who are employed. A fall in the employment rate signals an economic slowdown and is associated with rising unemployment and falling incomes.

There is a clear correlation between worsening economic conditions and the level of distress experienced by people who seek counselling to deal with that stress.

The dots in the figure to the right show, for each year from 2008 to 2019, how the average distress score of clients completing their first session with a CCC counsellor compares to the employment rate in Calgary. In 2008 the economy was doing well and the employment rate in Calgary was high – over 74% of adults in Calgary were employed – and the distress levels exhibited by new CCC clients was relatively low. By 2019 the employment rate had fallen and the first session distress score had increased to what CCC reports as being the



Source: Data on distress scores provided courtesy of Calgary Counselling Centre. Data on the employment rate in Calgary is from Statistics Canada Table 14-10-0096-01.

highest level they had recorded to that point. The red line in the figure is a trend line intended to show the correlation between economic and emotional distress in Calgary. This relationship between emotional stress and economic conditions is [well-established](#) in the literature. Not shown in the diagram is the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. This has dramatically reduced the employment ratio and introduced a new level of stress beyond that created by unemployment alone. CCC can undoubtedly expect very high 1st session distress scores in 2020.

Emotional distress is not an illness in itself but it has been identified as contributing to a variety of [physical diseases](#) and mental health conditions including depression, anxiety and psychosis. This suggests that rapid and effective responses to economic downturns and pandemics that might cause them yield benefits to re-employed individuals, certainly, but also to health care systems.