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COVID-19 and Early Childhood Workforce Emotional Well-Being: An Exploratory Investigation

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Abstract

This paper presents findings from a mixed method, exploratory study that sought to understand how New York State's early childhood (ECE) workforce was faring early in the COVID-19 pandemic ($n=3,555$). This was a project of the New York City Early Childhood Research Network, a research practitioner partnership organized to create evidence-informed early childhood public policy. Among the key findings were high levels of reported stress, for instance **those working remotely were approximately one-and-a-half times more likely to rate their emotional well-being negatively than those whose settings were closed (95% CI 1.157, 1.896)** and a strong desire for mental health support. Towards gaining further understanding of respondents' experiences, we used statistical analyses to inform the analysis of the survey's textual data resulting in **six themes: (1) Consequences of Social Distancing; (2) Commitment; (3) Time-Space Compression; (4) Working the Second Shift; (5) Mis/communication; and (6) Policies' Effects on Well-Being**. It is important to note that each of these themes included substantive evidence of resilience (e.g., creative transition to remote ECE, support for each other, support to families, etc.), but the focus in this paper is on the pandemic's adverse effects because of 1) a general tendency to expect educators to show resilience as a part of their jobs; and 2) because of the relative inattention being paid to educators' well-being, both for themselves and the children they care for and teach. While these findings should be treated cautiously, as these analyses are based upon a nonprobability (self-selected) sample, the issues respondents raised have broader policy implications that warrant ongoing attention, most notably the need to reorient ECE systems towards promoting racial equity, attuned interactions, reconsidering accessibility, and fostering experiences of belonging and well-being.

Introduction

This exploratory project emerged from a sense of responsibility about the small part we might play during the early phases of the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore we developed a *pulse check* survey to get a sense of how early childhood educators in New York (NY) were faring. The natural vehicle for this survey was the New York City Early Childhood Research Network, a research-practice partnership that brings together researchers from across the region, policymakers, funders, and practitioners to promote policy-relevant research in NYC. We consulted with policy partners so that the survey would address their questions about what the

field was experiencing. This paper focuses on teachers' emotional well-being, the exigencies of which are not only based upon ethical responsibilities to the workforce (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2011) but also upon what is known about how teachers' experienced stress and emotional responsiveness can impact children's social, emotional, and academic development (Becker, Goetz, Morger, & Ranellucci, 2014; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Jeon, Buetter, Grant & Lang, 2019).

Methods

The survey was available in Spanish and English and was comprised of 29 multiple-choice, scaled, and open-ended items focused on the pandemic's effects on: program (e.g., closure); individuals (e.g., job loss); and supports (receiving/wanting). In addition, all respondents were asked to provide their program's zip code, job roles, and program leaders provided administrative information such as program type and sources of funding. No individual demographic information was collected. The survey was sent to 25,192 members of the Aspire Registry (ECE professional registry) who worked in direct care roles. The survey was open from May 5 to May 12 and had a 13% response rate ($n=3,355$).

As this was a preliminary study, we took a sequential, exploratory mixed methods approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This was a recursive process of using descriptive summaries (i.e., frequencies and bi-/multi-variate contingency tables) and examining between-groups similarities and differences (e.g., program type, geography) through a combination of chi square and loglinear analyses. In order to further examine associations that appeared in these data, logistic ordinal regression models were developed to explore the effects of geography, program type, and other stressors, on outcomes such as job loss, program closure, and emotional well-being. These analyses were used to (1) develop and refine emerging hypotheses and (2) inform a mixed deductive-inductive content analysis of the responses to the open-ended questions ($n=629$), which in turn informed additional analyses of the scaled and choice data.

While the decisions we made, particularly using a self-selected sample from which drawing a probability sample was not possible, place limitations on the findings discussed in this paper, our intent was to act quickly and obtain a snapshot with which to engage policy partners and use qualified findings as a dialogic prompt about how to support the field. Throughout this process we have been guided by Lincoln and Guba's (1986) trustworthiness framework: (1) credibility through methodological transparency and by triangulating data; (2) transferability, nongeneralizable findings can still be useful; (3) dependability, subjecting work to critique; and (4) confirmability, providing procedural descriptions to encourage replications and interpretative comparison.

Results

Responses were received from 92% of the state's counties ($n=57$), with 67% coming from NYC ($n=2,116$), a proportion that is generally consistent with the Aspire Registry's composition and

the distribution of children and early childhood programs across the state. Participants represented settings that include community-based child care centers, family child care that takes place in homes, and private and public schools. Participants' programs received support from different funding streams, including family fees, universal prekindergarten funding, Head Start and Early Head Start grants, and child care subsidies (table 1). The numbers of participants by their job roles are shown in table 2.

This paper's focus emerged from four initial findings. First, 19.7% of respondents' settings were closed (15.5% were physically open and 64.8% were operating remotely). Second, only 9.2% of respondents reported that their emotional well-being was unaffected by the COVID-19 pandemic, while 37.5% said that they had been affected a lot or greatly. Third, among respondents' coping tactics, informal social support was the most frequently identified ($n=1490$), followed by selfcare ($n=1122$), practicing faith ($n=896$), distractions ($n=755$), avoiding ($n=692$), and therapy/professional support was by far the least ($n=216$). Finally, and relatedly, we found that the most requested support was for mental health ($n=910$), which exceeded other needed supports (employment assistance was next highest, $n=724$). These called our attention to the absence of conversation about ECE professionals' well-being amidst public attention being paid to the stress families were experiencing (Maillard, 2020; Raising New York, 2020; Weiner, 2020).

Statistical Explorations

That the pandemic's emotional effects on respondents appeared to be more impactful than economic ones may not be particularly surprising given the infusion of economic assistance from the federal *Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act* (CARES Act), at the time of this survey; stable funding from existing public ECE funding sources (e.g., Head Start, state and local preschool); and that during that time New York City and state were at the center of the COVID-19 outbreak in the U.S. (Johns Hopkins University & Medical, 2020; Tarrant & Nagasawa, 2020).

Recognizing that these data could not be used to draw inferences about either the Aspire Registry participants or NY's ECE field as a whole but in service of considering what these respondents were saying more carefully, multiple nonparametric analyses of association were conducted. Relevant to this discussion, to assist with other modeling loglinear analysis found that ratings of emotional well-being were not significantly associated with program location, program type (e.g., Head Start, community-based child care), and job role (e.g., teacher, assistant teacher).¹

¹ Three-way, saturated model loglinear analysis using SPSS Statistics' hierarchical loglinear model selection procedure with a backwards elimination stepwise procedure ($n=1978$). This produced a model that included all main effects and two two-way associations of *location*emotional well-being* and *job role*emotional well-being*. The model had a likelihood ratio of $\chi^2(16) = 6.439, p = .984$.

Logistic ordinal regression was conducted to examine associations between job loss, reduced pay, family members' job loss, family members' reduced pay, personal health problems, loved one's health problems, the loss of a loved one, work-life balance, program status (open, remote, or closed), and emotional well-being ($n=1840$).² Respondents' program status (open, remote, closed), personal job loss, reduced income (personal), personal and family members' health, work-life balance, and feeling lonely or isolated made significant contributions to emotional well-being, with those less negatively affected by these factors being more likely to rate their well-being as better. Family members' job loss, reduced income (familial), and losing someone were not predictive of respondents' ratings of well-being (table 3).

While there were some surprises, what stood out was that those who were working remotely were 1.48 times more likely to rate their emotional well-being worse than those whose centers were closed (CI 95% CI 1.157, 1.896). We speculated that the demands of working remotely, often while simultaneously balancing parenting and other family responsibilities, was having adverse influences. In keeping with our exploratory, mixed-methods approach, this finding shaped how we approached the open-ended responses.

Textual Explorations

We took a multi-step approach to coding the open-ended responses ($n=629$), first reading for issues from the survey's items (e.g., stressors, online teaching, etc.), while also looking for unexpected topics (e.g., providing emotional support to parents). Subsequent readings involved clustering, interpreting, and naming themes. Those most relevant to the current analysis of educators' stress and emotional well-being include: (a) consequences of social isolation; (b) commitment; (c) boundaries and time-space compression; (d) working the second shift; and (e) policy effects on practice. In the following discussion, we explore each theme with an illustrative quote along with some discussion. While each theme has both positive and negative dimensions, our focus in this paper is on the pandemic's adverse effects because of 1) a tendency to take educators' resilience for granted; and 2) because of the relative inattention being paid to educators' well-being, both for themselves and the children they care for and teach.

Consequences of Social Distancing

At the time of the survey's administration, New York State had been under a stay-at-home order for two months, which, at that point, seemed like a long time to be socially distanced from others. In addition to what was shown statistically, recall that feelings of isolation were significantly associated with ratings of well-being (table 3), pursuing a mixed methods analytic

² The assumption of proportional odds was met, as assessed by a full likelihood ratio test comparing the fit of the proportional odds location model to a model with varying location parameters, $\chi^2(126) = 145.002, p = .118$. The final model significantly predicted ratings of emotional well-being over and above the intercept-only model, $\chi^2(42) = 523.367, p < .001$.

strategy enabled deeper explorations into respondents' experiences. For instance, one program director wrote of their³ attempts to support their staff at a distance,

“... I share my own grief over the loss of physical contact and connection with the children to normalize that feeling for others ... We remember with a profound grief and longing to be back, the smiles and accomplishments of the children, the joy of the staff members faces as children connect with them...”

Another shared,

I feel very isolated from the world where social media is just not enough contact for me personally. I have not lost anyone, but I am hearing about my friends losing touch and talking of sadness and I worry about depression for them as well as myself. I keep busy doing small projects around the house but being totally alone physically is really difficult. I miss people! I worry about not having enough money to pay my simple bills and I am being patient while waiting for my unemployment finally arrives.

This comment is a reminder not just about people as social beings but also about the importance of human connection for coping with the compound impacts of existential fear, environmental grief, and material uncertainty. And in a final example, many respondents were navigating these complex feelings while also juggling the competing demands of work and parenting,

It's been very stressful. I miss my kids and have no way to communicate with them... I will not get to say goodbye to the kids who will be going to kindergarten and that has taken a huge toll on my emotionally as most of these kids have been in my class the last two years. I am also being required to complete online training throughout my furlough with no compensation which has proven difficult as I am a single mom now homeschooling my elementary aged child. Overall this entire situation has been heartbreaking...

Two things are particularly noteworthy in this account. First, the loss of taken-for-granted, school-year rituals that provide mutual *closure* on what are important relationships and second, that their employer was literally demanding uncompensated labor, which relates to the double-sidedness of the next theme.

³ Because we did not ask for respondents' characteristics, such as gender identity, we are using non-gendered pronouns.

Commitment

One of the clearest themes involves early childhood educators' steadfast commitment to caring for and educating their young students and their families in the midst of the pandemic,

My deepest hope is that the families we work with feel supported right now and feel like we are true partners in this endeavor, and that they will look back on this time and feel that we did not let their children down. The sense of purpose that the work gives me is probably what is keeping me afloat mentally and emotionally during this awful time.

This quote fairly represents the examples of commitment that were shared, including delivering learning materials to families, volunteering to distribute food, and, problematically, continuing to work with children and families remotely when furloughed. This dedication calls attention to some of the hidden challenges faced by the survey's respondents.

Time-Space Compression

In 1989 geographer David Harvey coined the term time-space compression to describe phenomena that presaged today's e-commerce, 24-7 connectivity, and diffuse work-home boundaries. This technological ubiquity enabled ECE's pivot to online practice; however, this has its downsides as illustrated by this director's expanding work day,

Compartmentalizing work time vs. me time vs. family time. At first, I told staff that my hours of work would be 8-3:30pm, then I had to push it to 8-6 pm but now I'm doing work (helping teachers) almost until 9-10 pm.

In addition to illustrating time-space compression, this comment suggests the realities of a female-dominated workforce navigating what had been outside-of-the-home and at-home labors.

Working the Second Shift

The complications of online ECE must also be viewed in light of gender-based inequities in private-sphere divisions of labor, with women who work outside of the home commonly taking on unrecognized "second shift" work at home (Hochschild, 1989; Miller, 2020), for instance,

...teachers who are also parents of young children have taken on a workload that is truly overwhelming. I think those in positions of power need to start acknowledging the INSANE amount of energy and work we have put into our students, their learning, and their families in addition to our own.... My position is now 24 hours a day.... I'm trying my best, it's all I can do.

I can say that my relationship with my students' parents is the best it has been.... They are what are keeping me going, but there has also been a cost. My children don't get all of me, and they are YOUNG. I feel for my oldest who is in kindergarten.... I can't place her in front of a computer and just say: GO!

What can get lost in the field's commitment to children is that teachers' needs are rarely considered, with teacher-parents caught in-between their roles as teacher of other people's children and being parents to their own, a dilemma that has likely been magnified by the pandemic.

Mis/communication

The issue of communication is double-sided and, of course, closely related to the preceding themes but was distinct enough to merit attention, particularly because of issues around technological mediation and role diffusion/redefinition as a part of responding to a crisis for which very few in this society were prepared. The theme also has multiple dimensions. We will focus on professional and systemic aspects.

With regard to professional communication, one teacher related that,

Not only am I supporting my preschoolers on Zoom multiple times a day with check-ins, story time, and assignments, but I have also taken on the role of a support system for the parents and families ... I am taking on more work hours with the influx of reliance on technology. I am also engaging in many managing roles other than head teacher. I am now the education direction, curriculum planner, family engagement coordinator, administrative task manager, facilitator of all parent communication, technology coordinator, and overall face of the school....

Again, other themes are apparent here, but most notably for this discussion is the complexity of communication involved in instructional leadership, project management, and home-school communication, all while metacognating about teaching young children online. This can only suggest the emotional and cognitive load that this teacher was under.

Acknowledging that all of these examples are out of context, they do raise questions about the broader systems in which these professionals were working – their school, the ECE system, and the broader systems involved in the emergency response (e.g., public health and social safety net). For instance, this respondent wrote,

[Office of Child and Family Services] Consultants are giving conflicting information that causes confusion. [child care facility] License expires 5/13/20 and the consultant had the information in February and was due to visit and did not. Emailing me to find and submit information several times.

The pandemic highlights that child care licensure is about more than compliance. It is a public health measure, and at that time the U.S.'s public health system was in disarray (Lipton, Sanger, Haberman, Shear, Mazzetti & Barnes, 2020). It also speaks to layers of systemic communication breakdowns that extend beyond ECE but which had direct effects on local programs,

I have never been so disappointed in the support of child care centers in all my 22 years in business. We were told to prepare for a huge influx of kids because of this and 2 weeks later I had to temporarily close because I couldn't make payroll. I let the essential parents I had left down because the operating cost far outweighed the income....

Here we sit with no way to pay rent, utilities, no stimulus check, or unemployment (not for lack of trying). If it wasn't for the school sending breakfast/lunches my kids, I don't know what I would do. I've never felt so broke and alone in my life and if the PPP [Payroll Protection Program] loan (I have applied 4 times and have heard nothing each time) doesn't come through, I don't even know if I can get back on my feet and open. I have no idea what I'm going to do at that point. I will have no job, no place to live, no income and 5 mouths to feed. So disappointed in NYS right now.

This anecdote speaks to the complicating issue that in the U.S. ECE is a mixed public-private system that rests largely upon free market logics which can obviate systemic responsibilities for effective communication (and caring) because ultimate responsibility lies with individual business owners. In fairness, systems are made up of people, and all of society was in crisis. However, this calls attention to an important aspect of the advocacy for "rebuilding" post-pandemic ECE systems (e.g., Evans Allvin, 2020; Child Care Aware, 2020) that need to include attention to coordinated disaster response in what is a famously fragmented system (Afifi, Basinger & Kam, 2020; Gallagher, Clifford & Maxwell, 2004). This example also raises the issue of how policy enactment can help and harm people's well-being.

Policies' Effects on Well-Being

As in the preceding example, participants illuminated policies' impact on their experiences, but this was not only in terms of macro policies like child care licensure of the PPP exemplified by this person's experience, "Got kicked off SNAP [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program] when I was on unemployment because I 'made' too much money," but also the particular stress

some reported from striving to meet pre-pandemic program-level policy implementation. For example,

This pandemic has really put stress on us teachers ... we have so many people to report to, but no one reports to us and ask[s] us how we are doing? I want to just teach and be there for my students but us teachers [are]... worried about following a schedule that [we] did not have a say in... we get monitored and telling us what to do at all times making sure we teach for 3 hours split into 3 sessions. Then we have to please [supervisory staff] then we have to make sure parents and children are okay. And what are we left with? Nothing. I love my job, and I think that's the only reason why we are here...

What is particularly striking in this comment is the weight this teacher is bearing: implementing policy decisions about schedules, curricular expectations, and being monitored. Another added, "I am working harder now, and for more hours, than I did at school.... The amount of documentation required is enormous." These examples are suggestive of the ways that policy demands that are misaligned with current realities of practice can exacerbate emotional distress. They also call into question which aspects of daily policy enactment are actually necessary (i.e., promote teachers', children's, and families' well-being) and who should be involved in making these decisions (Austin, Barajas-Gonzalez, Bromer, Kent, Nagasawa, & Rodriguez, 2021).

Conclusion

While the data obtained through this survey have issues related to self-selection/non-response and our analyses are subject to critiques of confirmation bias, we argue that there is enough trustworthiness and usefulness in them to engaging with decision-makers and other scholars in dialogic reflection about ways to alleviate early childhood educators' stress as central to post-pandemic recovery efforts, particularly because our findings converge with others' (e.g., Bergey, Quick, Anthony, Crolotte & Lozano, 2020; Markowitz, Bassok, Smith & Kiscaden, 2020). However, in light of this exploratory study's limitations, these data and analyses are informing decisions for a follow-up study of how the field has fared over time.

We close with one director's powerful observation,

The impact of trauma has been heavy. Not only for our children and families, but also for our teachers and ourselves. Real grief is being experienced in real time and vicariously. Our profession does not do enough to support teachers with trauma informed care, nor does it educate leaders in trauma informed supervision. COVID 19 is a collective trauma, and the aftermath will change all of us. I am not sure we are prepared for the catch-up game we will be playing as we watch and experience recovery.

Their incisive commentary raises questions for us about the fine-grained details of post-pandemic ECE systems rebuilding efforts; critically understanding this implementation; its effects on teachers, children, and parents (including the degree to which these efforts will be trauma-informed, which includes *top-to-bottom* commitment to restorative racial equity, accessibility, and not-just-inclusion-but-belonging (e.g., Afifi et al., 2020; Ginwright, 2018; Nagasawa & Swadener, 2017; National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations, 2020; National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2016; 2017). Given what *we* have all lived through, what are scholars' responsibilities for active engagement in the long-term work of "recovery"?

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Tables

Table 1.

Respondents' Program Types		
	<i>n</i>	%
Child Care: Subsidy (State)	138	6
NYC Early Ed. Center (NYC)	309	14
Child Care: Private Pay (State + NYC)	590	27
Family Child Care (State + NYC)	407	19
Early/Head Start (State + NYC)	357	16
3K/UPK (State)	169	8
Public School (State + NYC)	118	5
4410, Special Education (NYC)	107	5
Total	2195	100

Note: These reflect primary funding sources, as programs often rely upon different sources of funding. However, 68.7% of administrators indicated that their program relied upon one source of funding. Another 19.9% reported having two funding sources, and 11.3% had three or more.

Table 2.

Respondents' Job Roles				
	NYC	State	Total	%
Program Leader	340	224	564	19
Family Child Care Provider	90	64	154	5
Lead Teacher	701	352	1,053	36
Assistant Teacher	652	208	860	30
Program support staff (e.g., family coordinator, office staff)	79	42	121	4
Other (e.g., related services)	70	90	160	5
Totals	1932	980	2912	

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Table 3.

Program Status, Stressors, and Emotional Well-being

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>Wald χ²</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>OR</i>	<i>95% CI OR</i>
Emotional Well-Being=1 (Not Affected)	11.023	.4094	725.015	.000	1.631E-5	[7.313E-6, 3.640E-5]
Emotional Well-Being=2 (A Little)	-8.578	.3902	483.405	.000	.000	[8.759E-5, .000]
Emotional Well-Being=3 (Moderately)	-6.274	.3705	286.808	.000	.002	[.001, .004]
Emotional Well-Being=4 (A Lot)	-3.870	.3393	130.067	.000	.021	[.011, .041]
Status, Open	.259	.1619	2.555	.110	1.295	[.943, 1.779]
Status, Remote	.393	.1261	9.692	.002	1.481	[1.157, 1.896]
Status, Closed	0	.	.	.	1	.
Job Loss=1 (Not Affected)	-1.132	.2580	19.261	.000	.322	[.194, .534]
Job Loss=2 (A Little)	-1.239	.2718	20.770	.000	.290	[.170, .494]
Job Loss=3 (Moderately)	-1.170	.2609	20.123	.000	.310	[.186, .517]
Job Loss=4 (A Lot)	-.954	.2593	13.524	.000	.385	[.232, .641]
Job Loss=5 (Greatly Affected)	0	.	.	.	1	.
Reduced compensation=1	-.199	.2435	.669	.413	.819	[.508, 1.321]
Reduced compensation=2	.177	.2588	.466	.495	1.193	[.719, 1.982]
Reduced compensation=3	.224	.2541	.779	.378	1.251	[.760, 2.059]
Reduced compensation=4	-.095	.2510	.144	.705	.909	[.556, 1.487]
Reduced compensation=5	0	.	.	.	1	.
Family member job loss=1	.129	.2714	.225	.635	1.137	[.668, 1.936]
Family member job loss=2	5.672E-5	.2840	.000	1.000	1.000	[.573, 1.745]
Family member job loss=3	.214	.2708	.623	.430	1.238	[.728, 2.105]
Family member job loss=4	-.051	.2631	.037	.847	.950	[.567, 1.592]
Family member job loss=5	0 ^a	.	.	.	1	.
Family member reduced wages=1	.189	.2589	.532	.466	1.208	[.727, 2.006]
Family member reduced wages=2	.195	.2671	.533	.465	1.215	[.720, 2.052]
Family member reduced wages=3	.088	.2589	.117	.733	1.093	[.658, 1.815]
Family member reduced wages=4	.174	.2484	.491	.484	1.190	[.731, 1.936]
Family member reduced wages=5	0	.	.	.	1	.
Your health=1	-3.159	.2622	145.190	.000	.042	[.025, .071]
Your health=2	-2.609	.2523	106.909	.000	.074	[.045, .121]
Your health=3	-1.771	.2449	52.252	.000	.170	[.105, .275]
Your health=4	-.873	.2617	11.133	.001	.418	[.250, .697]
Your health=5	0	.	.	.	1	.
Others' health=1	-2.335	.2500	87.229	.000	.097	[.059, .158]
Others' health=2	-1.633	.2222	54.002	.000	.195	[.126, .302]
Others' health=3	-1.124	.2060	29.753	.000	.325	[.217, .487]
Others' health=4	-.754	.2033	13.758	.000	.470	[.316, .701]
Others' health=5	0	.	.	.	1	.
The loss of family members, neighbors, or colleagues =1	.036	.2137	.028	.866	1.037	[.682, 1.576]
Loss=2	-.001	.2174	.000	.997	.999	[.653, 1.530]
Loss=3	-.283	.2172	1.701	.192	.753	[.492, 1.153]
Loss=4	-.036	.2245	.026	.872	.964	[.621, 1.497]
Loss=5	0	.	.	.	1	.
Work-Life Balance=1	-.789	.1776	19.733	.000	.454	[.321, .643]
Work-Life Balance=2	-.933	.2103	19.658	.000	.394	[.261, .594]
Work-Life Balance=3	-.944	.2042	21.378	.000	.389	[.261, .581]
Work-Life Balance=4	-.628	.2112	8.833	.003	.534	[.353, .808]
Work-Life Balance=5	0	.	.	.	1	.
Feeling lonely or isolated=1	-4.218	.2162	380.653	.000	.015	[.010, .022]
Feeling lonely or isolated=2	-2.980	.2013	219.306	.000	.051	[.034, .075]
Feeling lonely or isolated=3	-2.201	.1948	127.706	.000	.111	[.076, .162]
Feeling lonely or isolated=4	-1.237	.1996	38.384	.000	.290	[.196, .429]
Feeling lonely or isolated=5	0	.	.	.	1	.