

Stress and Distress among Child Care Workers in Eastern New York

Introduction

One of the hardest hit segments of the population during the COVID-19 pandemic is child care workers. These essential workers provide a valuable service that enables those with young children to resume work, thereby bolstering economic productivity nationally. Child care work may be highly stressful under normal conditions, and the COVID-19 pandemic has made matters worse for many in this field. The current analysis investigates the psychological distress experienced by child care workers by considering several relevant factors that include job satisfaction, financial difficulties, COVID fatigue, race, rural identity, and the stress of managing children with challenging behaviors.

Research Hypotheses

1. *As job satisfaction increases, levels of psychological distress will decline.*
2. *As COVID fatigue increases, so too will levels of psychological distress.*
3. *As the presence of challenging behaviors in children increases, so too will the level of distress.*
4. *Female and non-white child care workers will experience higher levels of distress, compared to their white and male counterparts.*
5. *As finances are negatively impacted by COVID-19, levels of distress will increase.*
6. *Respondents identified as "country" (a measure of rural identity) will experience higher levels of distress.*

Literature Review

COVID-19 has had impacted lives all around the world in many different ways. One of the most significant ways the impact has become evident is through distress in the population. Throughout the time of the pandemic, fear of the virus has been a significant factor in the level of distress. Reizer, Koslowsky, and Geffen (2020) found that participants who reported lower levels of self-rated health also reported higher levels of fear of the virus. Robinson and Daly (2020), in a longitudinal study, found that distress levels of participants changed as the perceived health risks changed throughout the pandemic. Other factors that have been shown to contribute to the distress are economic as well as social impact. To the point of economics, Moore and Lucas (2020) found that along with health worries of the virus, financial status also played a predictive role in higher levels of distress. McGinty et al. (2020) found similar results in that participants reported that finances negatively impacted mental health. Aside from the financial factor in the levels of distress, Nitschke et al. (2021) found a negative relationship between distress and social connectedness. Research has also shown that along with financial vulnerability, females have also shown a higher level of distress than males (Simha et al., 2020).

The intertwined relationships, behaviors, and stressors of child care work have been evident in research since before the COVID-19 pandemic, but the magnitude of distress has become more pronounced. For instance, Bigras et al. (2021) found that half of child care workers studied reported their stress level has increased since the pandemic, specifically while at work. Similarly, Horiuchi et al. (2020), more than half of child care workers reported at least moderate mental distress

Methods

Respondents were administered a version of the Knowledge, Attitudes, Beliefs & Behaviors (KABB) Survey, an instrument developed to measure stress, distress, and behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic (Fulkerson et al., 2021). The current survey was modified to include questions related to the experiences of employees and parents in the child care system in eastern New York State. The research team worked with *Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies* in each county to access email addresses of child care centers. The emails were sent through the lists of each organization, and organizations reported email lists of 750 (Capital District in Albany, New York) and 350 (Mohawk Valley, located in and around Utica, New York), for a total sampling frame of 1,100. It was possible for a recipient to forward an email, and so the team takes this number as a baseline. There were 366 child care workers who responded to the survey, and who comprise our final sample data.

Analysis and Results

In addition to descriptive and bivariate analyses, we used OLS regression models and completed the analysis with a Structural Equation Model (SEM). First, we will address the relationship between children's challenging behaviors and child care worker distress. Compared to when children never exhibit challenging behaviors, for those children who sometimes exhibit challenging behaviors, child care worker distress increased by 2.885 points. Similarly, compared to when children never exhibit challenging behaviors, for those children who often exhibit challenging behaviors, child care worker distress increased by 4.805 points. Lastly, compared to when children never exhibit challenging behaviors, for those children who almost always exhibit challenging behaviors, child care worker distress increased by 5.662 points.

Both COVID fatigue and job satisfaction are inversely and significantly related to child care worker distress. Next, we see that there is a positive, significant relationship between COVID-19's impact on finances and child care worker distress. Lastly, none of the remaining control variables—race, gender, rural identity—were significant, net of the effects of the other variables in the model.

Conclusions

- Hypothesis 1: Receives support
- Hypothesis 2: Receives support
- Hypothesis 3: Receives support
- Hypothesis 4: Indirect, partial support
- Hypothesis 5: Weak, statistically significant support
- Hypothesis 6: Not fully supported

References

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