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**Low-Income Caregivers with Young Children Experience Risk and Resilience Through
Pandemic-Related Stressors**

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Abstract

In March 2020, United States government implemented health and safety mandates, including school closures, to prevent the spread of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19). As a result, some caregivers with young children were forced to take on new roles. Low-income households with young children appeared to be more highly impacted than other groups, experiencing acute pandemic-related stressors on top of previous vulnerabilities. Using qualitative analysis, this study examined how low-income caregivers with young children adapted to pandemic-related stressors and how stressors may have altered relationships and well-being in the household (Daks et al., 2020). Two research questions were examined: (1) how have relationships been altered by the pandemic, and (2) how have pandemic-related resource disruptions impacted well-being? Low-income caregiver responses (N= 38) to two open-response questions were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. Researchers extracted four themes answering the research questions. Findings delineate that low-income caregivers with increased resources appeared to build stronger relationships with their child/ren, whereas caregivers who encountered more stressors reported reduced feelings of well-being. Additionally, young children experienced feelings of isolation, as they missed relationships outside of the household. When lockdowns were lifted, their relationships outside the household were reported to have improved. These findings can be used to support families and young children in areas where they are most vulnerable post-pandemic.

Keywords: child development, COVID-19 Pandemic, young child, caregiver, relationship, hardship, well-being, psychological flexibility, psychological inflexibility, Head Start

Low-Income Caregivers with Young Children Experience Risk and Resilience Through Pandemic-Related Stressors

In March 2020, the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic began to disrupt the entire world with health and safety concerns (Kalluri et al., 2020; Prime et al., 2020). United States governments quickly enacted mandates changing typical work and educational experiences (Carson & Mattingly, 2020; Kalluri et al., 2020; Prime et al., 2020). These changes forced households to shift routines impacting relationships and access to resources, especially for low-income household with young children (Brown et al., 2020; Carson & Mattingly, 2020; Kalluri et al., 2020; Karpman et al., 2020; Prime et al., 2020). These impacts on low-income young children can ultimately impact their development (Daks et al., 2020; Prime et al., 2020). Research examining how resource disruptions have impacted relationships and well-being for low-income young children and their families is crucial to support household dynamics and the development of young children.

Background

Typical work and educational experiences were disrupted by COVID-19 pandemic-related mandates set in place by U.S. governments (Brown et al., 2020; Carson & Mattingly, 2020; Prime et al., 2020). Remote formats were implemented for school and work for some families (Carson & Mattingly, 2020; Prime et al., 2020; Salzwedel et al., 2020). Other households lost income due to reduced hours at work or being laid off (Witteveen & Velthorst, 2020; Prime et al., 2020), or continued to work as essential employees but lacked childcare (Carson & Mattingly, 2020; Prime et al., 2020). Many caregivers with young children had no choice but to take on new roles in the household: full-time childcare provider and teacher (Carson & Mattingly, 2020; Prime et al., 2020). New roles disrupted routines for many

households, likely altering relationships and impacting well-being, especially for previously vulnerable families. (Grasso et al., 2020; Karpman et al., 2020; Marques de Miranda et al., 2020; Prime et al., 2020; Rivers & Sanford, 2020).

Low-income households with young children appeared to have been most impacted by material and relational pandemic-related stressors (Karpman et al., 2020; Prime et al., 2020). During this time of stress, some low-income caregivers appeared to build resilience by strengthening relationships with their child and family (Brown et al., 2020; Prime et al., 2020). However, others were unable to build stronger relationships on top of newfound pandemic-related stressors (Brown et al., 2020; Prime et al., 2020). These relationship changes seemed to alter the relationships and well-being of low-income children and caregivers (Daks et al., 2020). According to a conceptual framework (Daks et al., 2020) related to Family Systems Theory (Broderick, 1993; Minuchin, 1985), the stressors of the pandemic may impact the relationships and well-being of families in different ways.

Caregiver psychological flexibility or inflexibility has the power to shape how pandemic-related stressors may impact relationships and well-being in the household (Daks et al., 2020). Psychological flexibility is present when healthy caregiver-child relationships are formed through stressful experiences, which links to higher levels of well-being and more adaptive circumstances in the household (Daks et al., 2020). Psychological inflexibility is the opposite with poorer family functioning and worsened household well-being resulting from caregivers' inability to handle increased stress resulting from the pandemic (Daks et al., 2020). Ultimately, the distress levels for children may increase (Daks et al., 2020). As low-income families with young children already hold a plethora of socioeconomic vulnerabilities (Prime et al., 2020), it is important to see how caregivers have adapted to the stressors of the pandemic.

Purpose of the Present Study

This study uses qualitative analysis to identify how low-income caregivers have adapted to pandemic-related stressors by answering these two questions:

Research Question 1

How have pandemic-related resource disruptions impacted well-being?

Research Question 2

How have relationships been altered by the pandemic?

This study can support future research and help discover risk factors of the COVID-19 pandemic for local, state, and national governments. It also may delineate factors of resilience for low-income families with young children, which can bolster household well-being and young children's development.

Method

Design

The qualitative data from this study originated from a mixed-methods caregiver questionnaire distributed in April 2021 to two Head Start Programs in suburban Boston, Massachusetts. The questionnaire was offered in English (n=34) and Spanish (n=4) with a total of 38 caregiver participants (N=38) reporting for their self, child, and family. As our sample derived from Head Start Programs, the children attending these programs were of low-income status (Currie & Thomas, 1993). Caregivers were given one month to decide to participate, and then written consent was obtained. Participants were offered compensation via four separate

raffles: one \$50 gift basket and three \$20 children's book packages. Researchers created codes to de-identify information before data analysis.

Measures

The survey offered a section with quantitative questions on pandemic-related impacts. Additionally, the survey had two open-ended, qualitative questions. The two open-ended questions are the focus of this study. The qualitative questions derived from the *Covid-19 Exposure and Family Impact Survey* (Zazak et al., 2020). The two questions were combined into one statement, "Please tell us about other effects of COVID-19 on your child/ren and your family, both negative and/or positive," with space to reflect on "positive" and "negative" effects separately.

Analysis

In order to analyze the qualitative data, Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach was used. Two researchers served as coders, one primary and one secondary. The primary coder read all statements, then placed them into a document that served as the open codes. Next, closed coding was completed by grouping statements together based on similarity. The primary and secondary coders discussed the closed codes and resolved any disagreements which were negligible. Afterwards, the primary coder developed a codebook with code names for each group of closed codes, definitions, and illustrative quotes for each code; the primary and secondary coder discussed the codebook before themes were developed. Finally, the primary coder extracted themes from the data based on the research questions.

Results

After thematic analysis, we discovered four distinct themes. The themes are identified in the order they were encountered. The first two emerging themes answered the second research question, and the second two themes answered the first research question. Of the 38 caregiver responses, the first theme appeared in a majority of the responses (36.8%). The third theme was observed in 25% of the responses, the second theme in 20.6% of the responses, and the fourth theme with 17.6% of responses. Some participant responses were almost identical, some were more elaborative than others, and others were vaguely stated. Themes, descriptions, and illustrative quotes are represented in Table 1.

Research Question 2

The following two themes answered the second research question: *how have relationships been altered by the pandemic?*

Theme 1

Some caregivers had access to additional resources during the pandemic, which enabled them to spend more time and build stronger relationships with their children while gaining insight into their specific needs.

Low-income caregivers' responses noted in this theme were based on changes in resources, increased family connections, caregiver-child connections, and family togetherness. The responses in this theme described that the pandemic allowed families to spend more time together, get to know each other better, and brought families closer together. Ultimately, many caregivers reported having more time with their young children. Systems, like schools, social services, and healthcare, became more accessible to some families during the pandemic. Some

caregivers reported being able to better support their children with their education, needs, behaviors, and emotions.

Theme 2

Children were isolated from family, teachers, and peers unexpectedly, which increased appreciation for social interactions.

Responses noted in this theme related to how caregivers' child/ren were able to handle socioemotional experiences during and after pandemic-related school closures, and how school closures impacted their child/ren. Some caregivers reported children to experience difficulties with remote school. Furthermore, they experienced less time in the classroom. Some also reported observing their child/ren to experience feelings of loneliness during periods of lockdowns. After lockdowns, some young children were able to engage better with peers and appreciate what is important in life.

Research Question 1

The following two themes answered the first research question: *how have pandemic-related resource disruptions impacted well-being?*

Theme 3

Increased stress due to job loss and stay-at-home orders forced some caregivers to take on new household roles.

Caregivers noted how mandate frustrations, income-related disruptions, and resources were altered during the COVID-19 pandemic. Income-related disruptions were reported as losing hours at work weekly, losing work for a few months, or even losing their job all together. Some

reported that this income-related disruption added financial stress. Mandate frustrations were noted as not being able to leave the home for school, work, recreational activities, and supportive services. Due to pandemic-related lockdowns, some caregivers reported having a difficult time handling work, their child's educational experiences, and increased time in the home.

Theme 4

Pandemic-related health and safety concerns increased feelings of anxiety, depression, and stress for some caregivers.

Caregiver responses encompassed health, wellness, and grief concerns, feelings of psychological well-being, and mandate frustrations resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Some participants reported contracting COVID-19, losing family and members of their community to the virus, and lack of comfort with sending their child to school post-lockdown.

Table 1
Themes regarding low-income caregivers' reports of hardship, relationships, and well-being during COVID-19

Themes	Description	Illustrative Quotes
Some caregivers had access to additional resources during the pandemic, which enabled them to spend more time and build stronger relationships with their children while gaining insight into their specific needs.	Positive reports in resources, family connections, caregiver-child connections, and family togetherness	"Had more time to connect with pediatrician for his needs" "Extra benefits we received" "Spending more time together was nice" "Needed less support from teachers" "We became close to each other" "We've found more creative ways to have fun together as a family" "I was able to potty train my daughter in a few days" "Our relationships grew stronger"
Children were isolated from family, teachers, and peers unexpectedly, which increased appreciation for social interactions.	Caregiver observations of child social-emotional interactions	"The kids missed friends/family" "Not being able to go to school fulltime" "Not in school as much as only 2 days a week" "The kids were bored and not getting stimulation" "Engaged better with peers" "Made new friends"
Increased stress due to job loss and stay-at-home orders forced some caregivers to take on new household roles.	Negative reports towards mandates, income-related disruptions, and resources	"Financial stress" "Only one income made our bills pile up fast" "Not enough laptops for home schooling, which caused a huge problem with the school and teachers" "Stressful balancing everything" "Can't go places we like" "I had trouble trying to teach them and work" "A lot of time together gets stressful sometimes" "Losing work for a few months was difficult" "Lack of babysitter" "Not being able to leave the house for longer periods of time has made an impact on the house" "Perdi mi trabajo" (<i>I lost my job</i>) "Our hours at work decreased"
Pandemic-related health and safety concerns increased feelings of anxiety, depression, and stress for some caregivers.	Negative reports of health, wellness, and grief concerns, feelings of psychological well-being, and mandate frustrations	"We all had COVID" "Overall stress increased anxiety and depression" "Lost a family member" "Felt unable to control the important things in life" "The masks are very annoying!" "Many deaths around us" "We got very ill with COVID" "Stressful balancing everything"

Other families reported feelings of annoyance due to mask mandates. Finally, a few caregivers reported feelings of stress and inability to control important things in life.

Discussion

This study aimed to delineate how low-income caregivers with young children were able to handle pandemic-related stressors that may have altered household relationships and well-being. The findings of this study lend support to the conceptual framework relating to the COVID-19 pandemic and the Family Systems Theory (Daks et al., 2020). Some low-income caregivers appeared to experience psychological flexibility with others feeling symptoms of inflexibility. This study particularly examined low-income families with young children and how they handled pandemic-related changes, whereas the conceptual framework looks at families of all income levels and children's ages. The results propose that low-income households with young children experienced pandemic-related stressors differently.

Implications

The stressors of the pandemic appeared to impact low-income caregivers differently, as some caregivers reported their experiences to be more positive. Some caregivers took advantage of the additional time they had with their children by building their relationships and learning more about their child/ren's needs (flexibility). Through stressful changes and experiences, these caregivers were able to discover areas of resiliency that could support against the risks of the pandemic. Some caregivers spent more time with their household family members, where they were able to attend to their child/ren's needs more often, understand their children, and build stronger connections. It was perceived that families who were able to be more flexible through stressors experienced increased resources from systems around them. This is consistent with

Daks and other researchers' (2020) conceptual framework related to the Family System Model and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Similarly, the findings resembling inflexible caregivers appeared to be consistent with the conceptual framework (Daks et al., 2020). For other caregivers, new roles brought on by mandates were difficult to manage along with everyday roles prior to the pandemic, which negatively impacted caregiver feelings of well-being (inflexibility). Daks and other researchers (2020) explain that psychologically inflexible caregivers may result in increased distress levels for their children. Low-income caregivers reported that their households lost income or work entirely, contracting COVID-19 or losing loved-ones to the virus, and having their children complete online school. Through these stressors, caregivers reported worsened psychological well-being. Following the framework, the impact of the pandemic on psychologically inflexible caregivers appears to impact the entire household, and, ultimately, the child (Daks et al., 2020).

Low-income children appeared to have been socioemotionally impacted due to the pandemic, in both positive and negative ways. Although some caregivers reported stronger relationships, some children still missed relationships outside of the household, leading to feelings of isolation. When mandates were lifted, children had a newfound appreciation for their relationships with others. As described in the framework (Daks et al., 2020), caregiver well-being appears to negatively alter relationships in the household. This household disruption can in turn impact the development of low-income young children.

Limitations

Although themes emerged answering the research questions, there were limitations to the study that could have impacted the results. First, the sample size was minimal with only 38

participants. This could have resulted from the timing of the survey (end of the school year). The lab anticipated receiving demographic information, behavioral reports, academic reports, and other information, but were unable to obtain them. Additionally, the questionnaire was only offered in Spanish and English, and the centers supported families that spoke many other languages. Furthermore, the sample only derived from two suburban programs in Massachusetts and is not representative of all communities in the U.S. Overall, the purpose of this study was to determine how low-income caregivers handled pandemic stressors to determine future directions for research, which was discovered through data collection and analysis.

Future Research & Recommendations

Local and national governments should account for the positive impact increased resources appeared to have on caregiver-child relationships in low-income households. Resilience through pandemic-related hardships seemed to result from positive caregiver-child relationships formed during periods of lockdown and stress. Governmental institutions should bolster protective factors for low-income families to support positive relationships, higher levels of well-being, and factors of resiliency. Furthermore, resilience was found through the increase of resources for some caregivers, as they reported to be able to better support their children and household. Future research should aim to examine what increased resources appeared to be most supportive for household relationships and well-being.

Conclusion

Stressors of the COVID-19 pandemic changed relationships and well-being for families with young children in positive and negative ways. As low-income families already experienced previous risks pre-pandemic, it was important to study how they may have been further impacted

during the pandemic. Through this sample, some low-income caregivers reported gaining more positive relationships with their children, whereas others could not handle the additional pandemic-related risks added onto previous roles. Children also felt isolated and appreciated relationships outside the household post-lockdown. Social and protective services should aim to alter their support for low-income households with young children to reflect how this generation may be impacted socially and emotionally. Ultimately, low-income young children may become impacted developmentally, if services are not implemented to increase resilience and decrease risks.

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