

Quantitative Evidence of Collaborative Impacts During COVID-19



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The Senator Walter Rand Institute for Public Affairs (WRI) at Rutgers University - Camden produces and highlights research leading to sound public policy and practice, and with that as a foundation, aims to convene and engage stakeholders in making the connections across research, policy, and practice in support of Southern New Jersey residents. From 2013 to 2022, WRI has conducted a comprehensive evaluation of the implementation of the Pascale Sykes Foundation's Whole Family Approach initiative across 12 nonprofit collaboratives in Southern New Jersey. The Whole Family Approach is a preventative, family-led strategy that provides adults and children tools to set, plan for, and achieve goals together. Collaborating agencies work together with families with two adult caregivers to develop long- and short-term goals to thrive. WRI's evaluation of the Whole Family Approach includes:

- A longitudinal, quasi-experimental evaluation of families' changes in forming healthy relationships, child wellbeing, and financial stability.
- A process evaluation to understand how the Whole Family Approach was implemented across collaboratives, including observations, interviews, focus groups, and document review.
- Multiple focused evaluations that examine the impact of the Whole Family Approach in areas of interest including student social, emotional, and behavioral growth, service model delivery, family-community partner relationship development, and the cultural responsiveness of the Whole Family Approach.

This report provides quantitative data to contextualize the findings of the Senator Walter Rand Institute's (WRI) 2020 report *COVID Impacts, Supporting Collaboratives: A Qualitative Evaluation Of Collaboratives' Work With The Whole Family Approach During The COVID-19 Pandemic*. Between May 6 and June 10, 2020, researchers from WRI interviewed twenty-seven staff members from eight collaboratives implementing the Whole Family Approach to understand the ways in which collaboratives contributed to supporting families during the COVID-19 pandemic. These interviews indicated that collaboratives played a pivotal role in a changing and challenging environment for families (Senator Walter Rand Institute for Public Affairs, 2020).

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During the interviews, collaborative members described the anxiety and fear that the pandemic brought to families and communities, on top of previously existing stressors. Collaboratives also discussed the rise of concerns regarding food security, access to transportation, housing, employment safety, and domestic violence. Nevertheless, qualitative evidence suggested that the implementation of the Whole Family Approach has helped families regain a sense of normalcy and security

through the COVID-19 pandemic, as collaboratives helped to address the changing needs of families throughout this time. (Senator Walter Rand Institute for Public Affairs, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting economic recession meant that collaboratives who utilize the Whole Family Approach framework had to adapt their work to meet the new needs of families. This report quantitatively investigates the role of collaboratives' impact in improving aspects of families' well-being and diminishing the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on families and their communities. This report includes areas of focus within the Whole Family Approach including access to transportation, relationships, health, and financial stability.

METHODS

Families in Atlantic, Cumberland, Gloucester, and Salem counties who have been engaged with nonprofit collaboratives completed surveys focused on healthy relationships, child wellbeing, and financial stability at the outset of their involvement with collaboratives, and again at 6-, 12-, 18-, and 24-months. Data from June 1, 2020 through October 31, 2021 were analyzed for this report. These dates were selected to ensure that when a survey was completed, a family had been engaged with a collaborative during what may be considered the height of the pandemic. Of the five timepoints potentially available for families, only data at an adult's most recent timepoint in which a survey was completed was analyzed. Variables were analyzed either by a frequency analysis or by comparing the mean of a variable over the five time periods the survey was completed by participants. Analysis included:

- Brief Resilience Scale (Smith et al., 2008)
- Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (Radloff, 1977)
- Opinions about their own health, child's health, and relationships
- Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet et al., 1988)
- Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen et al., 1994)
- Adjusted questions from the Social Capital and the Generation of Human Capital (Teachman et al., 1997)

- Child Feeding Questionnaire (Birch et al., 2001)
- Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (The Trustees of Princeton University, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2014)

Data from 73 adults were analyzed. The majority of adults identified as female (63%). Ages ranged from 20-68 with a mean age of approximately 40 years old. Adults more often identified as Hispanic/Latino (45.1%) or as White (29.6%) than as Black (12.7%), Asian or Pacific Islander (2.8%), as multiple races (8.4%), or as other (1.4%). Nearly half were employed full-time (47.2%), 12.5% were employed part-time, and 40.3% were not employed.

RESULTS

Collaborative Services. Collaboratives continued to provide services throughout the pandemic, including tutoring/mentoring for children and adults, job training, career help, financial planning, and ideas for recreational activities to do at the home as a family. The majority of adults (78.5%) found services helpful. Most (81.6%) also were satisfied with the services and indicated that services were delivered in a respectful way (90.1%).

Transportation. 15.3% of adult participants reported not having access to a car, truck or van to use. Collaborative members noted how transportation obstacles impacted families during the pandemic, and how collaboratives had to adapt to overcome these challenges: "Most people who needed to use the food banks didn't have transportation. We partnered with local food banks that had to close their doors because they couldn't socially distance their operations. We got volunteers and started delivering food every week to families."

Healthy Relationships. Collaboratives mentioned how mutual support among family members has been reflected in several ways, such as children supporting their parents in learning new technologies, and more generally, goal-setting and problem-solving together. The majority of adults (75%) rated their relationship with their child as very good or excellent. More than half (56.7%) of adults reported discussing school, their future, health, or money often or always with their child, and one-third (29.9%) reported discussing these topics sometimes. Most participants (62.1%) also reported being responsible for preparing their

child's meals most of the time or always, which includes deciding what their child's portion sizes are and if that child has eaten the right kind of food. In general, adults demonstrated high scores on the family support scale (*Mean* = 5.3 out of 7). The majority of adults indicated that their family helps them (63.2%), that they get the needed emotional support from the family (61.2%), and that their family is willing to help make decisions (56.8%). Nearly one-third (22.1%-23.8%) expressed mild agreement or felt more neutral about these statements. Lastly, half of the participants 50.8% strongly agreed that they can talk about their problems with the family, with one-third (34.3%) feeling mild agreement or more neutral.

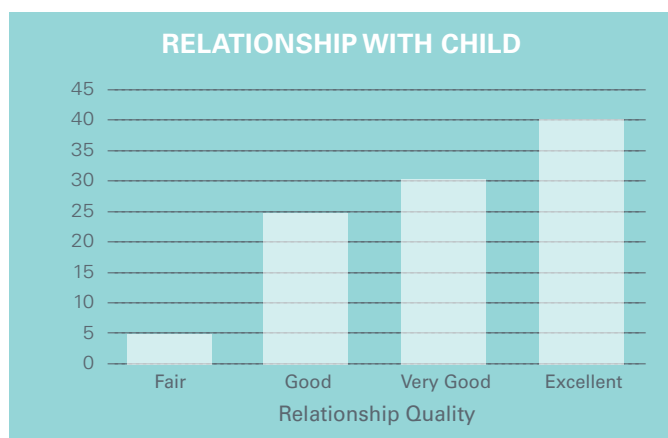


Figure 1. Adult-child relationship quality.

Adult Well-Being. About 82% of adults rated their own health as good, very good, or excellent. Nearly seventy percent (69.2%) of adults had health insurance coverage. The average stress score was at the minimal level (*M* = 2.26 out of 5, where 1 is no stress), with 90.8% of participants reporting no to mild stress, 7.7% moderate stress, and only 1.5% reporting high stress. Indicators of their mental health were also good among the adults, as evident from their scores on the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (*M* = 21.6 out of 40), with 93.8% of participants reporting no depression symptoms. Adults who received services from the collaboratives for a longer time reported higher resilience, compared to those who just started, with the resilience score increasing from 3.0 to 3.7 (Figure 2). Collaborative staff members reported that families expressed stress, fear, anxiety, and new mental health concerns caused by the pandemic (WRI,

2020). These concerns are not shown through the family survey, possibly due to the work of collaboratives in reducing these concerns, such as in continued check-ins with families to assess parents' emotional state, among the many other ways in which collaboratives may reduce stress and other mental health concerns indirectly. The higher resilience scores reported may also suggest that collaborative staff's presence may have provided some structure to the surrounding chaos: "Crisis is always going to come to people in life. Following the basic steps of goal setting [and] applying an approach which capitalizes on family [and] community support, clear goal setting, and communication, strengthens anybody's ability to overcome challenges."

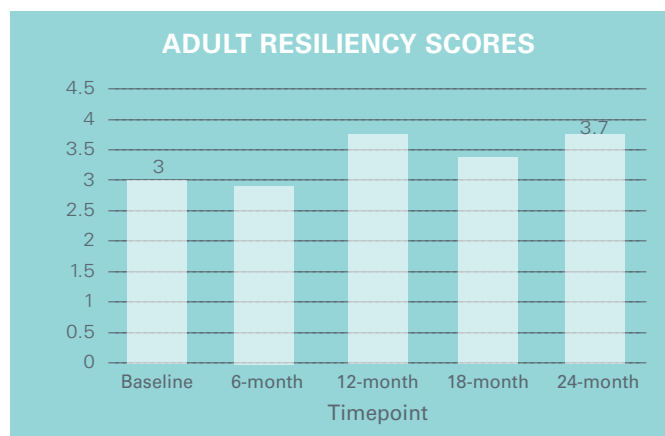


Figure 2. Comparison of adults' resilience scores by the time point.

Child Well-Being. About 75% of adults reported their child's health as being very good or excellent (Figure 3). A majority of adults reported their child's grades as mostly A's (42.6%) and 36.8% reported their child receiving mostly B's. Even as schools conducted learning online and students and parents had to adapt to a changing school environment, a majority of children were doing well. Collaboratives reported many ways in which they assisted children and parents with virtual education, such as taking on the role of educator, helping parents set up routines that best work for their child (WRI, 2020). Collaboratives also reported helping parents understand the technology their children are using and also through funding that collaboratives applied for, provide families with technology so that children could complete their schoolwork (WRI, 2020). All adults reported that receiving a high school diploma was somewhat

or very important to their child's life goals. Going to college was also an important part of obtaining their life goals with 95.3% of adults reporting it as somewhat or very important.

Financial Stability. More than one-third (36.5%) of the participants had yearly household income of less than 20,000 and 14.3% reported income less than \$5,000 a year. Nearly one-fourth (23.8%) of adults indicated yearly household income in the range between \$20,000 and \$60,000 a year, and 40% reported income above \$60,000 a year. The majority of the adults reported that they have at least one other adult in the household who is employed (69.4%) and contributes to the rent and other household bills (72%). Most adults (80.1%) reported that they were able to pay the full amount of monthly rent or mortgage in the past six months. However, 13.8% of participants specified that they borrowed money from friends to help pay the bills. No adults reported that they went hungry in the past 6 months and no adults reported that their child went hungry in the past 6 months. Collaboratives reported that the pandemic exacerbated food insecurity among families and in order to give relief to families, staff members were involved in distributing grocery store gift cards, directing families to food banks or collecting the food themselves and delivering it to families.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the needs of families who have been engaged with collaboratives. Collaboratives' work was adapted to reflect a rapidly changing environment that led to the development of new needs for families. Though the effects of the pandemic were challenging for families and collaboratives, collaboratives impacted the lives of families in many ways.

Results support the importance of the pillars of the Whole Family Approach and collaborative engagement. Child well-being in school, healthy relationships, and financial stability were addressed within families through the services offered by collaboratives. Adult well-being was also considered, and highlights the ways collaboratives have contributed towards offsetting

the impacts of COVID-19, while still addressing pre-existing issues. For example, it is worth noting that adults who had longer engagement with collaboratives grew more resilient than those with less engagement when comparing both at baseline.

As families may have spent more time together during COVID-19 and may have experienced more challenges and strain in their relationships due to the pandemic, it is important to note the areas in which collaborative services were impactful to child well-being and healthy family relationships. Those areas include child health and grades, adult-child relationship, and family support.

Transportation challenges were another negative outcome of COVID-19 that families faced. An important aspect relevant within NJ families is the accessibility to reliable transportation, which for some determines their accessibility to resources, such as food or work that provides income. Collaboratives provided services and resources to families like groceries, as 15.3% of adults reported not having access to reliable transportation during the pandemic.

Adult well-being ratings indicate that they are in good physical and mental health overall. The majority also reported having access to health insurance. Good health ratings and food security for adults and children in the prior six months of the survey might be attributed to collaboratives' impact on families as collaboratives reported shifting to focus on food security and family wellbeing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. As COVID-19 caused the closure of schools, which many families relied on for their child to receive breakfast and lunch, collaboratives reported picking up these meals for those who could not do so themselves.

Interviews with collaboratives have indicated their impact and role in a changing environment during COVID-19. The quantitative evidence highlighted in this report supports the work that collaboratives of the Pascale Sykes Foundation have done during the COVID-19 Pandemic in order to further serve families in Southern New Jersey.

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