

Spikes in Teacher Depression during the Pandemic: Evidence from Virginia Early Educators

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The COVID-19 pandemic (COVID) created challenges for many early care and education (ECE) teachers. Some lost their jobs or had their pay cut.¹ Many faced heightened expectations at their already difficult jobs (e.g., following health and safety measures, learning technology for remote instruction). Reports throughout the pandemic documented high levels of stress, burnout, and depression among early educators.² This is troubling, both for the teachers themselves and for the children they serve. When early educators struggle, they are less likely to provide young children with the kinds of experiences that support learning; they are also more likely to leave their jobs.³

To effectively address the mental health needs of ECE teachers, it is important to understand how much of the currently-observed challenges are specific to COVID versus reflective of the longstanding difficulties facing this workforce—including the high rates of mental health challenges prior to the pandemic.⁴

SUMMARY

- Even before the pandemic, early childhood teachers' depression rates ranged from 8% among family day home teachers to 19% among lead teachers working in centers. These rates were higher than the average depression rate among adults in the United States (6.5%).
- During COVID, ECE teacher depression rates across all program types and roles rose from 17 to 29%.
- Spikes in depression rates were largest among school-based teachers, more than doubling from 18 to 43%.
- Nearly half (45%) of lead teachers in schools were concerned about the impact COVID would have on their teaching practice, while less than a third of teachers in other sites reported the same.
- Many teachers in child care centers and family day homes were worried about losing income and/or their job due to COVID.

Using data from over 4,000 early educators working in publicly funded school-based pre-kindergarten programs, child care centers, and family day homes in Virginia,⁵ this brief describes *changes* in the prevalence of depression symptoms relative to pre-pandemic levels. We use two waves of survey data: one from before the pandemic (Spring 2019) and one during the pandemic (Fall 2020) to demonstrate increases in depression rates over time, and document COVID-specific concerns which may have contributed to these changes.

The brief presents results separately for each program type⁶ (pre-kindergarten programs, child care centers, and family day homes) and role (lead teachers, assistants) because the likelihood of mental health challenges may differ across groups. Early educators face drastically different salaries, benefits, and professional development opportunities across program types. For instance, child care centers tend to hire teachers with lower levels of formal education and typically employ more women of color. Moreover, the impact of COVID likely differed across sectors as well. The governor closed all public schools by executive order on March 23, 2020, and teachers transitioned to remote instruction; in contrast, many child care centers and family day homes stayed open throughout the pandemic.

Virginia's Early Educators: Key Differences Across Program Types

In our sample, 32% of teachers worked in school-based programs, 62% worked in child care centers, and 6% worked in family day homes.⁷ Racial composition differed considerably across program types. For instance, 9% of lead teachers in schools reported they were Black, non-Hispanic, compared to 22% among lead teachers in child care centers or family day homes (Table 1). While only 3% of lead teachers in schools were Hispanic, this was 10% among child care teachers and 34% among family day home providers.

Nearly all school-based lead teachers held a bachelor's degree (BA), but this was only true for 31% of lead teachers in child care centers and 23% of family day home teachers. Almost no school-based lead teachers (1%) reported annual household incomes under \$25,000. In contrast, a third of child care lead teachers (34%) and one-quarter of family day homes teachers (23%) fell into this category. In both schools and centers, assistant teachers had lower levels of education and household income relative to lead teachers, though those differences were much more pronounced in schools.

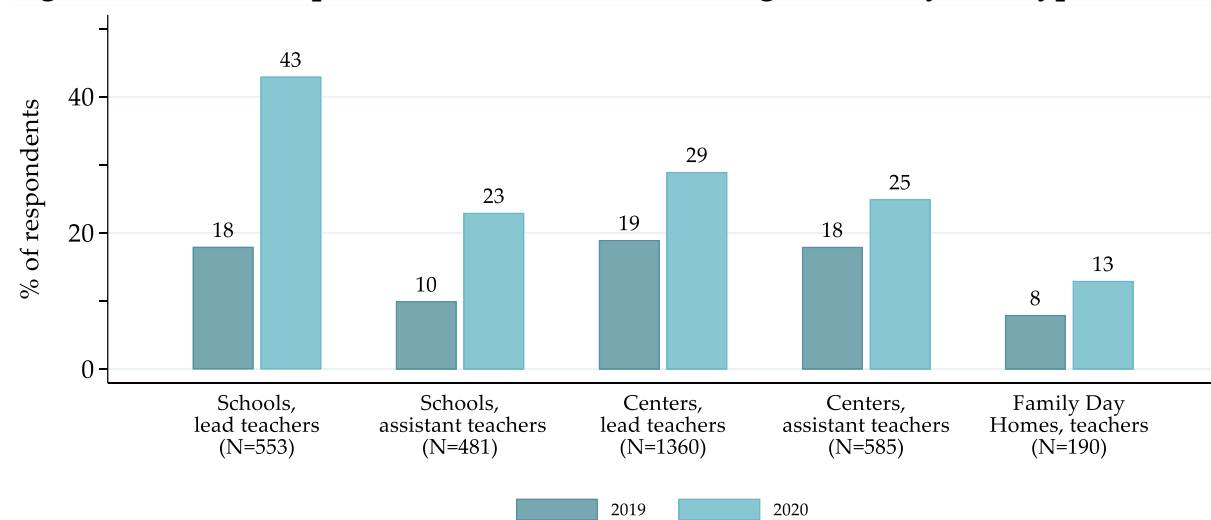
Table 1. Teacher Characteristics at Fall 2020

	School-Based PreK		Child Care		Family Day Homes
	Lead teachers	Assistant teachers	Lead teachers	Assistant teachers	Teachers
<i>Race/Ethnicity⁸</i>					
White, non-Hispanic	85%	72%	59%	57%	24%
Black, non-Hispanic	9%	12%	22%	19%	22%
Hispanic	3%	8%	11%	13%	34%
Multiracial/other	3%	8%	8%	11%	21%
<i>Education</i>					
Bachelor's or higher degree	97%	32%	31%	18%	23%
<i>Household Income/year</i>					
< \$25,000	1%	25%	34%	47%	23%
<i>Sample size</i>	557	496	1405	609	201

Depression Among ECE Teachers

Prior to the pandemic (Spring 2019), 17% of teachers reported clinically-relevant levels of depressive symptoms on the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (CESD), a widely-used, well-validated measure, which asked educators to indicate how often in the past week they felt sad, experienced lost appetite, had trouble focusing, or experienced other depressive symptoms.⁹ As shown in Figure 1, depression rates differed considerably across sites and roles, ranging from 8% among family day home teachers to 19% among lead teachers working in centers.

Figure 1. Teacher Depression Rates Before & During COVID by Site Type and Role



Note: Bars are labeled based on 2020 sample sizes. Overall, in 2020 the sample included 3169 teachers and in 2019 it included 1928 teachers.

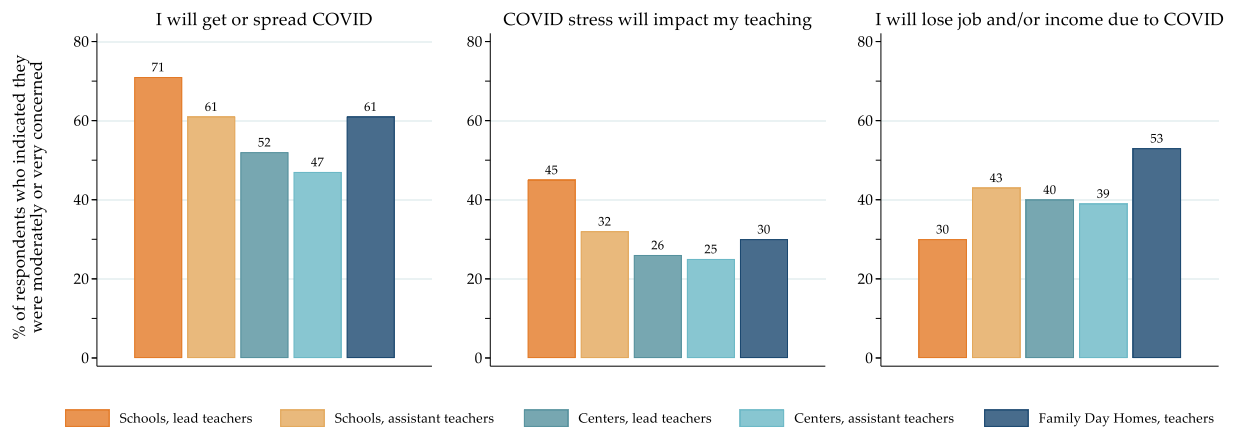
Depression rates spiked during the pandemic in all program types and roles. Overall, by Fall 2020 nearly 3 in 10 (29%) of teachers reported clinically-relevant levels of depressive symptoms (not shown in figure). The increases were largest among teachers working in school settings, for whom depression rates more than doubled. Rates for school-based lead teachers increased from 18% to 43%, assistant teacher rates increased from 10% to 23%.¹⁰

COVID-related Concerns

To better understand differences in the impact of COVID on teachers across program types, the survey also asked teachers about specific workplace stressors and concerns. Teachers across program types reported high rates of worry about getting or spreading COVID, stress from COVID impacting their teaching, and about their job security.

As shown in Figure 2, these concerns varied across program types. School-based lead teachers were most likely to report they were concerned¹¹ that they would get or spread COVID to people they care about (71%), compared to 52% of child care lead teachers and 61% of family day home teachers. Teachers’ concerns about COVID’s impact on their teaching showed a similar pattern. More than two in five (45%) lead teachers in schools were concerned about the impact that stress from COVID would have on their ability to teach and care for children, while less than a third of teachers in other program types and roles reported the same.

Figure 2. Teachers’ COVID-related Concerns by Site Type and Role



Note: Sample sizes vary slightly across items but include 554 lead teachers in schools, - 488 assistant teachers in schools, - 1327 lead teachers in centers, - 584 assistant teachers in centers, and 194 teachers in Family Day Homes

School-based lead teachers were *least* likely to report concerns about COVID-related job and income loss. Among school-based lead teachers, 30% reported worried about this, compared to about 40% of school-based assistant teachers and child care teachers, irrespective of roles. Over one-half (53%) of family day homes teachers were concerned about losing their job or income. These differences may reflect pre-pandemic differences across program types in funding and COVID's profound impact on revenue in child care centers and family day homes.¹² These settings rely primarily on private tuition dollars from families, which were severely disrupted by the pandemic.

Discussion

Prior to the pandemic, teachers in Virginia experienced higher depression rates (17%) than the adult population in the United States (6.5%).¹³ Rates of depression rose considerably during the pandemic. In Fall 2020, overall depression rates in our sample of early educators rose to 29%, comparable to the national depression rate in November 2020 (also 29%).¹⁴

While many adults struggled with depression during the pandemic, the high rates among ECE teachers are concerning. When teachers struggle with stress and depression, they are less able to provide high-quality classroom experiences and more likely to leave their jobs, actions that negatively impact children's development and disrupt ECE programs. Early educators' struggles during the pandemic may have long-term implications for the children they serve.

School-based teachers reported much larger increases in depression than did teachers in child care centers or family day homes, a finding echoed in other states.¹⁵ They were more likely to report concerns about catching and spreading COVID, a surprising finding given that only 18% of school-based teachers reported teaching and caring for children primarily in person, compared to nearly all child care and family day homes teachers (91%). They were also more likely than child care teachers and family day home teachers to report they were worried that the stress of COVID would impact their practice with children. While it is unclear why school-based teachers experienced such striking spikes in depression and worry relative to other early educators, it may reflect the challenges of teaching young children remotely. Recent findings from Virginia highlight the heightened challenges early educators faced teaching virtually relative to those teachers teaching in person.¹⁶

Child care and family day home teachers did report more concerns about job and income loss. More than half of family day home teachers, for instance, worried about losing their job or income. The financial instability COVID created for these private businesses created stress for early educators, over and above the low wages and difficult working conditions they faced pre-pandemic.

Addressing this financial instability is a necessary but insufficient response. The policymakers need to introduce comprehensive strategies to address the emotional turmoil early educators are facing. Not doing so will translate to lower quality early learning experiences for young children, many of whom have also had difficult experiences throughout the pandemic. Greater access to key mental health services for early educators is essential. Given the large increases in depression, especially among school-based teachers, offering mental health screening and responding with resources is imperative.

Further, while the COVID-era spikes in depression and the COVID-specific worries are troubling, so too are the very high rates of depression among early educators *prior to the pandemic*. A return to pre-pandemic conditions and pre-pandemic depression rates cannot be the goal. Bold investments are needed to build a more stable and higher quality ECE system that serves teachers, children, and families. Such comprehensive strategies also cannot ignore the financial insecurity of many early educators, and in particular the low wages and inequitable access to benefits and professional supports teachers in child care and family day homes have long suffered.

Endnotes

- ¹ Bassok, D., Michie, M., Cubides-Mateus, D. M., Doromal, J. B., & Kiscaden, S. (2020). *The Divergent Experiences of Early Educators in Schools and Child Care Centers during COVID-19: Findings from Virginia*. Retrieved from http://bit.ly/see_partnerships_tchr_covid
- ² Hanno, E., Gonzalez, K. E., Gardener, M., Jones, S. M., Lesaux, N. K., Hofer, K., Checkoway, A., & Goodson, B. (2020). *Pandemic meets preschool: Impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak on early education and care in Massachusetts*. Saul Zaentz Early Education Initiative. Retrieved from https://zaentz.gse.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/ELS@H-COVID-Report_-ECE-Providers_Final_2.pdf
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- ³ Grant, A. A., Jeon, L., & Buettner, C. K. (2019). Relating early childhood teachers' working conditions and well-being to their turnover intentions. *Educational Psychology, 39*(3), 294–312. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01443410.2018.1543856>
- Kwon, K. A., Jeon, S., Jeon, L., & Castle, S. (2019). The role of teachers' depressive symptoms in classroom quality and child developmental outcomes in Early Head Start programs. *Learning and Individual Differences, 74*(June), 101748. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lindif.2019.06.002>
- ⁴ Whitebook, M., McLean, C., Austin, L. J., & Edwards, B. (2018). *Childhood Workforce Index - 2018*. Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California at Berkeley. Retrieved from <https://csce.berkeley.edu/topic/early-childhood-workforce-index/2018/>
- ⁵ This report uses data from Spring 2019 and Fall 2020 PDG B-5 teacher surveys. All teachers working in 26 cities and counties —covering about a third of Virginia's total population— with children ages 0-5 for at least 30 hours per week at publicly funded ECE programs participating in the PDG B-5 were invited to take a survey about their experiences working with young children before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. This survey was distributed online and on paper, was available in English and Spanish, and could be completed in about 30 minutes. Teachers who completed the survey received a \$20 gift card. The Spring 2019 survey was conducted in May 2019, and 2,292 teachers responded to the survey, representing a response rate of 76%. The Fall 2020 survey was conducted between October and December 2020; 4,274 teachers responded to the survey, a response rate of 78%. This report focuses on 4,332 lead and assistant teachers who reported some information either 2019 or 2020.
- ⁶ Head Start programs are included in child care centers and public schools, depending on their physical location. They are classified as a child care center if located in a community-based organization, and a school-based program if located in a public school.
- ⁷ The 2019 sample included 1,213 teachers in 194 child care centers, 696 teachers in 204 schools, and 86 teachers in 86 home-based child care programs. The 2020 sample included 2,014 teachers in 309

child care centers, 1,053 teachers in 278 schools, and 201 teachers in 152 home-based child care programs.

- ⁸ Respondents were asked to identify with one or more of the following race/ethnicity groups: American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, Black or African American, Hispanic, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, White, or other race/ethnicity. These are the race/ethnicity groups used by the Virginia Department of Education. This brief presents information for the three largest race/ethnicity groups (White, Black, and Hispanic). All other respondents are included in the group labeled Other, due to small sample sizes.
- ⁹ Levine, S. Z. (2013). Evaluating the seven-item Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale short-form: A longitudinal US community study. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 48(9), 1519–1526. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00127-012-0650-2>
- ¹⁰ For these analyses, we use the full sample of teachers who responded to either 2019 or 2020 surveys. However, when we reduced our sample to the fixed sample of teachers who reported information in both 2019 and 2020, we saw the same overall, sector, and role, patterns. This indicates the observed changes over time are not due to changes in the sample.
- ¹¹ In this report, we use the term “concerned” to refer to respondents who indicated they were moderately or very concerned. The excluded group corresponds to those who were not at all or a little concerned.
- ¹² Bassok, D., & Weisner, K. (2021). *The Impact of COVID on Enrollment and Revenue at Virginia Family Day Homes*. Retrieved from http://bit.ly/see_partnerships_FDH_covid_impact
- ¹³ Terlizzi, E.P., Schiller, J.S. (2021) Estimates of mental health symptomatology, by month of interview: United States, 2019. National Center for Health Statistics. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/covid19/pulse/mental-health.htm>
- ¹⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2020). Mental health: Household pulse survey. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/covid19/pulse/mental-health.htm>
- ¹⁵ Markowitz, A. J., Bassok, D., & Kiscaden, S. (2021). *Changes in Early Educator Wellbeing and Job Commitment in the Wake of the Coronavirus Pandemic: Lessons from Large-Scale Surveys in Jefferson and Rapides Parishes*. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/seela_changes_wellbeing_COVID
- ¹⁶ Bassok, D., Weisner, K., Markowitz, A.J., & Hall, T. (2021). *Teaching Young Children during COVID-19: Lessons from Early Educators in Virginia*. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/see_partnerships_covid_teaching