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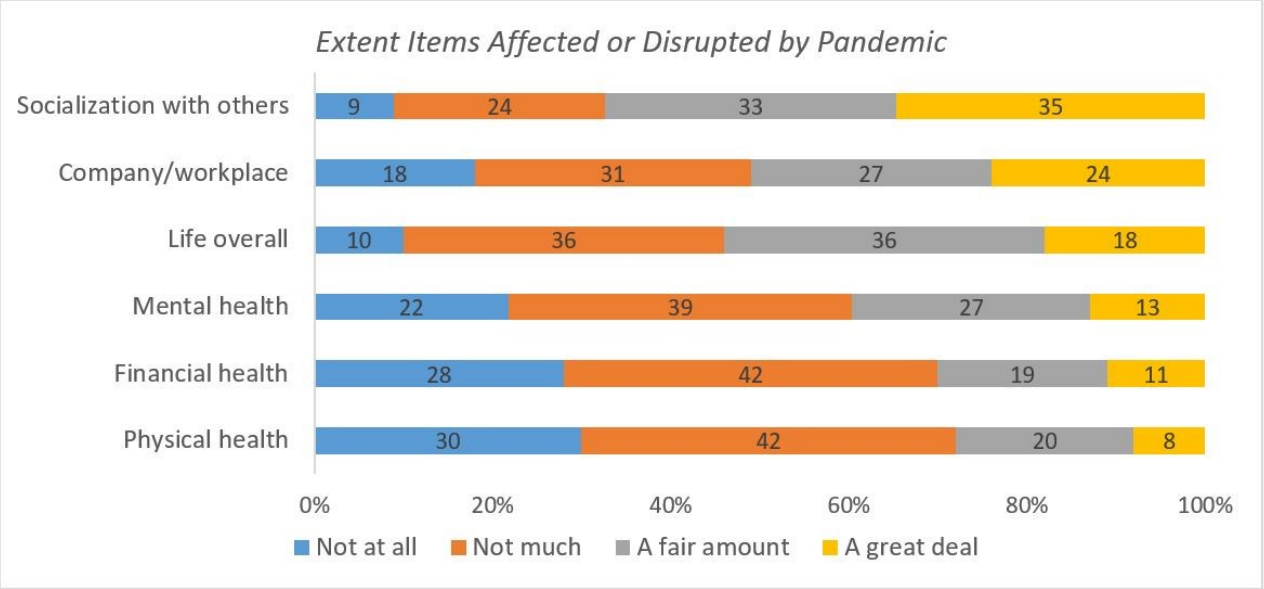
Relationships between Reported Pandemic Impacts and Well-Being of Rural Nebraskans

Since March of 2020, the coronavirus pandemic has impacted Nebraskans in many ways, including their physical health, mental health, work, and socialization. The 2021 Nebraska Rural Poll examined to what extent various elements of life were affected or disrupted by the pandemic as well as respondents' general assessments of their well-being. Did rural Nebraskans' assessments of the impacts the pandemic has had on their lives correlate with their assessment of their well-being?

In the spring of 2021, most rural Nebraskans said the following were affected a fair amount or a great deal by the pandemic: their socialization with others (68%), their life overall (54%), and their company/workplace (51%). Conversely, most rural Nebraskans said their physical health, their financial health and their mental health were either not at all impacted or not much.

These six items were combined to create a pandemic impact scale. The values of this scale range from 1 to 24, with a mean value of 14.01. To simply look at the relationships between this scale and measures of personal well-being, responses to this scale were collapsed into three categories: low (values ranging from 1 to 11), medium (values ranging from 12 to 15) and high (values from 16 to 24). These categories are roughly even in size: low (27%), medium (39%) and high (35%).

Perceived severity of pandemic impacts has a negative relationship to their assessments of their current situa-



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tion. Persons who are in the low or medium pandemic impacts categories are more likely than persons in the high pandemic impacts category to believe they are better off compared to five years ago. Over one-half of persons in the low or medium pandemic impacts categories say they are better off compared to five years ago, compared to 49 percent of persons in the high pandemic impacts category. Conversely, 18 percent of persons in the high pandemic impacts category believe they are worse off than they were five years ago, compared to seven percent of persons in the low or medium pandemic impacts categories.

This same pattern occurs with satisfaction with their general quality of life. Persons in the low or medium pandemic impacts categories are more likely than persons in the high impacts category to express satisfaction with their general quality of life. Almost nine in ten persons in the low or medium pandemic impacts categories are satisfied with their general quality of life, compared to just over seven in ten persons in the high pandemic impacts category. And 13 percent of persons in the high pandemic impacts category are dissatisfied with their general quality of life, compared to approximately five percent of persons in the low or medium pandemic impacts category.

While there was a statistically significant relationship between the pandemic impacts scale and expected future well-being, it was not in the same direction as the previously discussed variables. Persons in either the medium and high pandemic impacts categories are more likely than persons in the low pandemic impacts category to believe they will be better off ten years from now. Approximately one-half of persons in the medium and high impacts categories believe they will be better off ten years from now, compared to 42 percent of persons in the low impacts category.

The final well-being variable examined was feelings of powerlessness. Respondents were asked, "Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Life has changed so much in our modern world that most people are powerless to control their own lives." The responses to this question did not have a statistically significant relationship to the

	Assessments of Personal Well-Being		
	Worse	About the same	Better
*All things considered, do you think you are better or worse off than you were five years ago?**			
Low pandemic impacts	7%	41%	53%
Medium pandemic impacts	7%	38%	56%
High pandemic impacts	18%	33%	49%
*Satisfaction with general quality of life**	Dissatisfied	No opinion	Satisfied
Low pandemic impacts	3%	8%	89%
Medium pandemic impacts	5%	7%	87%
High pandemic impacts	13%	15%	72%
*All things considered, do you think you will be better or worse off ten years from now than you are today?**	Worse	About the same	Better
Low pandemic impacts	21%	37%	42%
Medium pandemic impacts	15%	36%	50%
High pandemic impacts	22%	31%	48%
Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Life has changed so much in our modern world that most people are powerless to control their own lives.	Agree	Undecided	Disagree
Low pandemic impacts	29%	22%	49%
Medium pandemic impacts	31%	24%	46%
High pandemic impacts	36%	22%	43%

* Statistically significant at the .05 level.

pandemic impacts scale.

In summary, lower perceived pandemic impacts for rural Nebraskans are related to positive well-being assessments of their current situation, how they view they are doing compared to five years ago, and their satisfaction with their general quality of life. While these relationships do not imply causation, most would agree that it makes sense that persons who believe they haven't seen many negative impacts from the pandemic would offer more positive assessments of their current situation. Or, conversely, that it might be expected that people who believe they have experienced many negative impacts might have more negative reports of how they are doing currently. What doesn't seem to make as much sense is the positive relationship between pandemic impacts and expected future well-being. One possible explanation is that if persons believe they are at a low point in their life because of the pandemic, they may expect that the future can only get better. Furthermore, one could argue that those who haven't experienced many negative pandemic impacts would have less reason to expect to be better off ten years from now. In fact, we do see persons experiencing lower levels of pandemic impacts to be more likely to say they expect to be about the same ten years from now. Another surprising finding is that there is no relationship between pandemic impacts and perceived powerlessness. I would have expected that those who experienced many negative impacts from the pandemic would be more likely to agree that people are powerless to control their own lives. The data did not support this hypothesis. More research is needed to attempt to explain these relationships.

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