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# 2020 American Life Panel Survey on Impacts of COVID-19

## Technical Documentation

**T**he coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic is having unprecedented effects on society. Immediate and long-term interventions are needed to control the spread of the virus and mitigate the economic impact on families. For interventions to be effective, governments, businesses, and communities need up-to-date, reliable information about which individuals are most affected and how their health, employment, financial, and educational outcomes are changing during the rapidly evolving crisis. High-quality, transparent, objective information is essential for designing, targeting, and evaluating policies for those who need the most help in this dynamic landscape.

In this report, we describe a survey fielded through the RAND American Life Panel (ALP) to assess the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on individuals and households across a variety of topics. We provide a technical description of the survey that includes a description of the ALP, the objectives of the survey, and information about the fielding of the survey. A key strength of the ALP is our ability to collect longitudinal data about respondents: Not only can we survey respondents now and in the future to observe how the COVID-19 crisis has affected them, but we can use historically collected data as a pre-COVID-19 benchmark. This report applies to the survey conducted between May 1 and May 6, 2020; a follow-up survey will be fielded in late summer 2020.

### **The American Life Panel**

The ALP is a nationally representative internet panel that has been recruited almost entirely through random digit dialing. To ensure that the panel is representative, respondents who do not have access to the internet are provided with a netbook computer and an internet subscription free of cost. This allows the flexibility and lower cost of an internet panel while still representing the segment of the population that does not have internet access. Panel members are invited to participate in online surveys once or twice per month on average. They are compensated financially for each survey to increase response rates and representativeness. The ALP began in 2006; since then, almost 550 surveys have been fielded on a variety of topics, including financial decisionmaking, health behaviors, retirement decisionmaking, numeracy, long-term care use, elections, and subjective well-being.

Three times per year, all panel members are asked to complete a survey that contains demographic information and questions about their employment status, household composition, health status, well-being, and health insurance. The responses to these questions are automatically added to all data collected in the panel, saving time and reducing respondent burden. Additional information on the technical aspects of the ALP is provided in Pollard and Baird (2017).

## The May 2020 Survey on Impacts of COVID-19: Survey Design and Content

This survey was intended to measure the broad impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the general population. The survey was designed by a large group of researchers who were interested in assessing different impacts of the pandemic. Researchers from across the RAND Corporation were invited to submit research topics and questions. The questions and topics

were consolidated to avoid overlap across researcher interests. Table 1 lists the topics included in the survey, the number of questions, and the external sources of questions if they were drawn from other surveys. Some questions were newly developed for this survey or were drawn from past ALP surveys (the full text of the survey questions is included in the online appendix). The estimated length of the survey was 15 minutes. Some sections were not asked of all respondents. For example, questions about schooling were asked only of those with children in the household, and questions about employment were asked only of respondents who did work for pay or profit (including self-employment, independent contracting, and gig economy work).

## Sampling, Field Dates, and Response

We invited 2,622 panel members to participate in the survey. These invitees included all panel members recruited through probability sampling methods who

TABLE 1  
Survey Modules

Topic	# of Questions	Sources
Subjective well-being	4	Some questions were adapted from Diener et al. (1985) and Diener, Lucas, and Oishi (2018)
Mental health	6	K6 Scale (Kessler et al., 2002; Kessler et al., 2010)
Disruption to routine behaviors	1*	Adapted from Parks et al. (2018)
Health care	10	N/A
Experience with COVID-19	2	N/A
Information and trust	7*	Some questions were adapted from Pew Research Center (2020) and Allington and Dhavan (2020)
Common ingroup identity	1*	Adapted from Gaertner et al. (1994)
Financial well-being	6	Some questions were adapted from Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve (undated) and NORC at the University of Chicago (2020)
Online shopping and delivery	4*	N/A
Schooling	3*	N/A
Employment	16	N/A
Domestic conflict	2	Adapted from Rung et al. (2015)
Political affiliation	2	N/A

\* Indicates that the section includes questions in which a respondent is presented with a table and asked to choose a response for each item in the table. Each table is counted as one question. In cases where individuals were asked different questions based on their previous responses, the number of questions reflects the maximum number of questions that any one individual could answer.

had answered the most recent demographic survey fielded in February 2020, as of May 1, 2020. The survey was closed after 2,052 panel members participated, leading to a 78-percent participation rate by design. The survey went into the field on May 1 and was closed on May 6, 2020. Characteristics of respondents are provided in a table in the online appendix.<sup>1</sup>

## Weighting

Detailed documentation of the ALP's weighting methodology can be found in Pollard and Baird (2017). In brief, we used a raking algorithm to match the distribution of characteristics in our sample as of May 2020 to the estimates of the distribution of characteristics in the U.S. adult population, as measured by the March 2019 Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). We matched our sample to population proportions of interactions of gender and race/ethnicity, gender and education, gender and age groups, gender and household income, and household income interacted with household size. For some observations, there may be missing values for the variables used in calculating weights. To create weights for all observations, we used chained imputation to impute values where they were missing.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Because of a technical error, three questions asked of respondents who reported being married or living with a partner in the February 2020 My Household Survey were not fielded with the rest of the survey. They were fielded from May 11 to May 18, 2020. A total of 1,244 respondents were invited to respond to these three questions; 1,206 respondents accepted the invitation.

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## About This Report

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## RAND Education and Labor

This study was undertaken by RAND Education and Labor, a division of the RAND Corporation that conducts research on early childhood through postsecondary education programs, workforce development, and programs and policies affecting workers, entrepreneurship, and financial literacy and decision-making. More information about RAND can be found at [www.rand.org](http://www.rand.org). Questions about this report should be directed to Katherine Grace Carman at [kcarman@rand.org](mailto:kcarman@rand.org), and questions about RAND Education and Labor should be directed to [educationandlabor@rand.org](mailto:educationandlabor@rand.org).

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