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Documenting the Health, Well-being, and Experiences of Older Workers in the Senior Community Service Employment Program

Topline Results of SCSEP Respondents in Massachusetts

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Introduction and Methodology

This report documents descriptive data of SCSEP respondents within Massachusetts from the project, *An Interdisciplinary Evaluation of the Health Benefits of Participating in a Federally Funded Community-Service Employment Program for Low-Income Older Adults: A Pilot Study*.

Purpose

The Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP), which started as a pilot project in 1965, is the only federal job-training program for older adults and annually serves more than 50,000 people who live at or below 125% of the federal poverty level and experience long-term unemployment, disability, and other employment barriers. Yet few studies have been conducted that assess the attributes and experiences of its participants. **Our survey asked SCSEP participants about their experiences in the program as well as six dimensions of health and well-being: physical, cognitive, psychological, social, financial, and interpersonal.**

Survey development and fielding

The survey instrument was developed using feedback from seven feasibility interviews with SCSEP program managers throughout Massachusetts and in consultation with members of this study's team, who, combined, have expertise on SCSEP and all six dimensions of health and well-being assessed in this study. Attribution of survey items from existing measures is indicated next to the survey questions with a full reference list at the end of this document. All other items were developed for this study or used, in their original or adapted forms, from the Health and Retirement Study, the interRAI® Check-Up Assessment, and the interRAI® Wellness Assessment.

We translated our survey, developed in English, into five languages to increase inclusion: Spanish, Portuguese, Vietnamese, and both traditional and simplified Chinese. We also offered our survey online and on paper.

Reporting

This report provides descriptive ("topline") results for respondents (N=91) throughout Massachusetts. For open-ended questions, we provide a brief summary of the findings. Some percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Please reach out to the study's principal investigator, Dr. Cal Halvorsen, with any questions at cal.halvorsen@bc.edu.

Part 1: Demographic Questions

	Mean (Range)
1. Age	66 (57-82) years old
	Percent
2. Do you have an email account?	Yes: 90% No: 10%
3. [If yes:] How often do you use your email account?	Not at all: 6% Once a month or less: 13% A few times a month: 12% A few times a week: 23% Basically every day: 45%
4. About how long have you been in SCSEP? (An estimate is ok.)	1 year or less: 37% 1 year to 2 years: 27% 2 years to 3 years: 23% 3 years to 4 years: 11% 4 years to 5 years: 3%
5. What is your gender?	Female: 74% Male: 25% Non-conforming: 1%* <i>* Participant's term</i>
6. What is your current marital status?	Never married: 18% Married / Partnered: 36% Widowed: 13% Separated: 3% Divorced: 30%
7. Do you live alone?	Yes: 53% No: 47%
8. [If no:] Do you live with any of the following people? <i>Percentages include all who said "yes" to one or more of the following groups of people.</i>	Your spouse / partner: 63% Your children: 44% Someone else's children: 2% Your parent / guardian(s): 2% Sibling(s): 2% Other relative(s): 2% <i>Non-relatives identified: 2%</i>
9. Is English the language you usually speak at home?	Yes: 56% No: 44%

10. [If no:] What is the language you usually speak at home?
Adds up to more than 100% due to rounding and because of households where more than one language is spoken.
- Cantonese: 38%
Mandarin: 8%
Taishanese: 8%
Undefined Chinese: 18%
Vietnamese: 28%
Spanish: 3%
Crioulo: 3%
Russian: 3%
11. Were you born in the United States?
- Yes: 55%
No: 45%
12. [If no:] In what country were you born?
- Mainland China: 56%
Hong Kong: 7%
Macau: 2%
Vietnam: 29%
Cabo Verde (Cape Verde): 2%
Russia: 2%
13. [If no:] In about what year did you first come to live in the United States?
- 1980 to 1989: 5%
1990 to 1999: 10%
2000 to 2009: 22%
2010 to 2020: 63%
14. Do you consider yourself Hispanic or Latino?
- Yes: 0%
No: 100%
15. What race(s) do you identify most closely with? (Select all that apply.)
Others include Irish, Cape Verdean/Jewish, Cape Verdean American, Nubian.
- White: 33%
Black: 14%
Asian: 43%
Others: 4%
More than one: 5%
16. [If Asian:] What Asian subgroup(s) do you identify with?
- Chinese: 72%
Vietnamese: 28%
17. What is the highest grade of school or year of college you completed?
- 6th grade or below: 10%
7th to 11th grade: 16%
High school or equivalent: 26%
Some college or above: 47%

Part 2: SCSEP Experiences

18. Overall, what is the main reason you enrolled in SCSEP?

Summary of responses: To learn job skills, look for a job, get back to work, earn money, get work experience, socialize, learn English, and kill time.

How, if at all, has your participation in SCSEP influenced your:
On a scale from 1 = "Worsened a lot" to 3 = "No Change" to 5 = "Improved a lot". **Higher** average scores mean that the average respondent experienced more improvement in that area.

	Mean
19. Personal finances	4.3
20. Physical health	3.8
21. Mental health	4.1
22. Social engagement	4.2
23. Family life	3.9
24. Technological skills (such as using computers and email)	3.9
25. Self-confidence	4.2
26. Abilities to find paid work	3.9

The next two questions ask you about your supervisor at the host agency where you are working. Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements:

	Percent
27. My supervisor understands the goals of SCSEP	Strongly disagree: 5% Disagree: 1% Agree: 53% Strongly agree: 41%
28. My supervisor is supportive of me	Strongly disagree: 4% Disagree: 2% Agree: 47% Strongly agree: 47%

After your participation in SCSEP ends, what is the likelihood that you will search for:

- | | |
|--|---|
| 29. A paid job? | Not at all likely: 0%
Not very likely: 11%
Somewhat likely: 36%
Very likely: 53% |
| 30. A volunteer role? | Not at all likely: 4%
Not very likely: 22%
Somewhat likely: 49%
Very likely: 24% |
| 31. Through your SCSEP participation, did you learn about services or supports to help you financially, such as SNAP benefits ("food stamps"), housing assistance, home energy ("fuel") assistance, or others? | Yes: 73%
No: 27% |
| 32. [If yes:] Have you told friends, family members, or acquaintances about these services or supports? | Yes: 97%
No: 3% |
| 33. Through your SCSEP participation, did you learn about services or supports to help you understand your health insurance options, such as for Medicare, Medicaid, MassHealth, or others? | Yes: 64%
No: 36% |
| 34. [If yes:] Have you told friends, family members, or acquaintances about these services or supports? | Yes: 91%
No: 9% |
| 35. Through your SCSEP participation, have you learned about free or low-cost classes you can take to increase your skills or knowledge, such as computer classes or English-language classes? | Yes: 90%
No: 10% |
| 36. [If yes:] Have you told friends, family members, or acquaintances about these classes? | Yes: 88%
No: 12% |
| 37. Have you encouraged friends, family members, or acquaintances to sign up for SCSEP? | Yes: 87%
No: 13% |

Indicate how often, if at all, you have generally felt that way about your work over the last month:

From the Thriving from Work Questionnaire (short form), Peters et al. (2021). Answer options: 1 (Never), 2 (Rarely), 3 (Sometimes), 4 (Usually), 5 (Almost always), 6 (Always). Higher average scores indicate higher levels of thriving.

- | | Mean |
|---|-------------|
| 38. I love my work | 5.0 |
| 39. I am treated fairly at work | 5.1 |
| 40. I can achieve a healthy balance between my work and my life outside of work | 4.8 |

41.	I am paid fairly for the work I do	4.7
42.	I am happy with how much input I have in decisions that affect my work	4.9
43.	I can easily manage the demands of my work	5.0
44.	I feel psychologically safe at work	5.1
45.	I can voice concerns or make suggestions at work without getting into trouble	4.6
46.	Overall, what do you see as the major benefits of participating in SCSEP?	The common benefits were being healthy and joyful, earning income, having a job, learning English and culture, contributing to society, participating in community activities, and building confidence.
47.	Overall, what do you see as the major drawbacks to participating in SCSEP?	Most participants mentioned "no drawbacks" to participating in SCSEP. However, some individuals mentioned that they would feel disappointed after ending their training in a familiar working environment. Some others mentioned inflexible working hours and relatively low income, limited choices of work as well as limited training.
48.	If you weren't participating in SCSEP, what would you be doing instead?	Most common answers included looking for suitable jobs (although they stated this may bring more stress), unknown, nothing, and staying at home and waiting for assistance. Some others mentioned doing housework, volunteer work, charity activities, and taking care of children after school.

49. Is there anything else you would like us to know about your experience in SCSEP?

"Nothing" was mentioned by most participants. Some gave direct praise to their host agencies. Others mentioned considerate leaders in the workplace, unfriendly treatment in the workplace, learning more knowledge and skills, meeting old friends, not being bored and lonely, not worrying about the income sources, understanding society more, the need for improved organizational communication, having alternatives to SCSEP, being cared for about their disabilities.

Part 3: Physical Health

	Percent
50. Would you say your health is excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor?	Poor: 4% Fair: 23% Good: 39% Very good: 30% Excellent: 3%
51. How many total hours of physical activity or exercise did you complete in the LAST 3 DAYS?	None: 7% Less than 2 hours: 28% Less than 3 hours: 20% Less than 4 hours: 17% 4 hours or more: 29%
52. Do you currently have any of the following conditions? <i>Percentages add up to more than 100% because some participants reported more than one condition.</i>	No chronic conditions: 14% High blood pressure: 45% Diabetes: 18% Cancer: 3% Chronic lung disease: 5% Heart problems / disease: 7% Chronic kidney disease: 2% Arthritis or rheumatism: 51% Other chronic conditions: 26%
53. How well do you see in adequate light (with glasses or a vision aid, if you use one)?	I have no vision: 0% I can only see light, colors, or shapes. I can track movement but cannot identify objects: 0% I cannot see newspaper headlines, but I can identify objects: 3% I can see large print but not regular print in newspapers or books: 17% I can see regular print in newspapers or books: 80%

54. How well do you hear (with hearing aid, if you use one)?

I have no hearing: 0%
I have difficulty in all situations
(for example, others have to
talk loudly or speak very
slowly; all speech is mumbled):
0%

I have problems hearing
normal conversation. I need a
quiet setting to hear well: 3%

I have difficulty in some
settings (for example, when
person speaks softly or is
more than 6 feet [2 meters]
away): 17%

I have no difficulty in normal
conversation, social
interaction, listening to T.V.:
80%

55. In the last 3 days, how many hours in total did family members,
friends, or neighbors help you with tasks of daily life like dressing,
bathing, shopping, or housework?

0 hours: 84%
Up to 1 hour: 7%
More than 1 hour: 10%

Part 4: Cognitive Health

	Percent
56. How well do you make decisions about daily tasks (for example, when to get up or have meals, which activities to do, when to take medications)?	Others make all decisions for me: 1% I need help at all times: 1% I have difficulty in specific repeating situations: 1% I have some difficulty in new situations: 6% No problem: 91%
57. How often is memory a problem for you (for example, forget appointments, get lost, repeat yourself)?	Never: 36% Rarely: 37% Sometimes: 24% Most of the time: 2% Always: 1%
58. How well do you make yourself understood verbally or nonverbally?	I am rarely or never understood: 1% I can only make simple requests: 3% I have difficulty finding words or finishing thoughts AND I usually need prompting: 2% I have difficulty finding words or finishing thoughts, BUT I am understood if given time: 12% I can express ideas without difficulty: 81%

59. How well do you understand others
(with hearing aid, if you normally use one)?

I rarely or never understand
others: 0%

I can only respond to simple
conversation: 2%

I miss some part or meaning
BUT often understand
conversation with repetition or
explanation: 4%

I miss some part or meaning
BUT understand most
conversation: 13%

I have no difficulty
understanding others: 80%

Part 5: Psychological Health

In the last 3 days, how often have you	Percent
60. Had little interest or pleasure in things you normally enjoy?	Not in last 3 days: 81% Not in last 3 days, but often feels that way: 7% In 1–2 of last 3 days: 4% Daily in last 3 days: 8%
61. Felt anxious, restless, or uneasy?	Not in last 3 days: 78% Not in last 3 days, but often feels that way: 15% In 1–2 of last 3 days: 2% Daily in last 3 days: 5%
62. Felt sad, depressed, or hopeless?	Not in last 3 days: 86% Not in last 3 days, but often feels that way: 8% In 1–2 of last 3 days: 3% Daily in last 3 days: 2%
63. How often do you feel lonely? <i>No participants mentioned "I feel lonely frequently, but less than daily".</i>	I do not feel lonely: 62% I only feel lonely in specific situations or events (for example, anniversary of my spouse's death): 11% I feel lonely occasionally, but less than weekly: 20% I feel lonely every day: 7%
64. Does stress have a negative effect on your quality of life?	Yes: 50% No: 50%
65. Do you feel valued? (e.g., through role within community, relationships)	Yes: 81% No: 19%
66. How satisfied are you with your life as a whole in the last 3 days? (e.g., in terms of your physical health, emotional and psychological well-being, social life, participation in recreational activities, and other personal issues)	Unhappy: 1% Mostly dissatisfied: 1% Mixed: 12% Mostly satisfied: 31% Pleased: 36% Delighted: 19%
67. Do you find meaning in day-to-day life?	Yes: 94% No: 6%

Part 6: Social Health

	Percent
68. When was the last time you participated in social activities that are of long-standing interest to you?	Never: 8% More than 30 days ago: 22% 8–30 days ago: 25% 4–7 days ago: 12% In last 3 days: 33%
69. Do you participate as a volunteer in the community?	No, not interested: 21% No, would be interested: 48% Yes, < 3 hours/week: 18% Yes, > 3 hours/week: 13%
70. Do you have a close friend in the community where you live?	Yes: 81% No: 19%
71. In the past month or so, how has your participation in social activities been impacted by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic? <i>For context, surveys were completed in late April 2022.</i>	Reduced by a lot: 34% Reduced a little bit: 32% Hasn't changed: 22% Increased a little bit: 7% Increased by a lot: 4%

Part 7: Financial Health

Percent

72. Because of limited funds, during the last 30 days have you made trade-offs among purchasing any of the following: adequate food, shelter, clothing, prescribed medications, sufficient home heat or cooling, or necessary health care or home care?
- Yes: 44%
No: 56%

How well does this statement describe your situation?

Questions from the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau Financial Well-Being Scale

73. Because of my money situation, I feel like I will never have the things I want in life
- Not at all: 17%
Very little: 12%
Somewhat: 46%
Very well: 16%
Completely: 10%

74. I am just getting by financially
- Not at all: 13%
Very little: 12%
Somewhat: 43%
Very well: 18%
Completely: 13%

75. I am concerned that the money I have or will save won't last
- Not at all: 8%
Very little: 10%
Somewhat: 36%
Very well: 20%
Completely: 27%

How often does this statement apply to you?

Questions from the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau Financial Well-Being Scale

76. I have money left over at the end of the month
- Never: 11%
Rarely: 30%
Sometimes: 37%
Often: 10%
Always: 12%

77. My finances control my life
- Never: 9%
Rarely: 16%
Sometimes: 39%
Often: 21%
Always: 16%

78. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, did anyone living outside your household, such as a parent, adult child, other relatives, or friends, help you with money or by paying bills?

Yes: 28%

No: 72%

Part 8: Interpersonal Health

	Percent
79. Do you provide care to someone UNDER the age of 18?	Yes: 13% No: 87%
80. [If yes:] For how many people under the age of 18 do you provide care?	1 child: 42% 2 children: 42% 3 or more children: 17%
81. Do you provide care to someone OVER the age of 18?	Yes: 11% No: 89%
82. [If yes:] For how many people over the age of 18 do you provide care?	1 adult: 60% 2 or more adults: 40%

The following statements are from the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support by Zimet et al. (1998).

Response options range from 1 (Very strongly disagree) to 4 (Neutral) to 7 (Very strongly agree). Answers closer to 7 indicate more perceived social support.

	Mean
83. There is a special person who is around when I am in need	4.9
84. There is a special person with whom I can share joys and sorrows	5.4
85. My family really tries to help me	5.1
86. I get the emotional help and support I need from my family	5.2
87. I have a special person who is a real source of comfort to me	5.5
88. My friends really try to help me	4.9
89. I can count on my friends when things go wrong	4.6
90. I can talk about my problems with my family	5.1
91. I have friends with whom I can share my joys and sorrows	5.1
92. There is a special person in my life who cares about my feelings	5.4
93. My family is willing to help me make decisions	5.0
94. I can talk about my problems with my friends	5.0

Summary

A total of 91 SCSEP participants responded to this study. Respondents ranged in age from 57 to 82 years old, with an average age of 66 at the time of the survey. Over one-third of respondents (37%) had been in SCSEP for 1 year or less, while only 14% for 3 or more years. Most respondents were female (74%) and married or partnered (39%). Almost half of respondents (44%) spoke a language other than English at home. Of those, Cantonese and Vietnamese were the most common. Almost half participants (45%) were born outside of the U.S., mostly coming from mainland China (56%) and Vietnam (29%); of those, most (63%) came after 2010. The largest racial group represented in this study were Asian older adults (43%), followed by White (33%) and Black (14%) older adults. Additionally, about one-quarter (26%) had less than a high school education or its equivalent, and nearly three-quarters (73%) had an education level of a high school degree or above.

Respondents reported joining SCSEP to learn job skills, get work experience, and earn money, among other reasons. Among a list of outcomes, respondents were most likely to say that their personal finances, social engagement, and self-confidence improved as a result of SCSEP, and least likely to say that their physical health improved as a result of SCSEP. Further, most either agreed or strongly agreed that their supervisors understood the goals of SCSEP (94%) and that their supervisors were supportive of them (94%). While most say it is at least somewhat likely that they will search for a paid job after exiting SCSEP (53% very likely, 36% somewhat likely), they are less likely to say that they will search for a volunteer role (24% very likely, 49% somewhat likely). Notably, the vast majority of participants learned about services and supports to help them financially (73%), to help them understand their health insurance options (64%), and to help them find classes to increase their skills or knowledge (90%). They were also highly likely to tell their friends, family members, and acquaintances about these resources.

On a five-point scale from excellent to poor, respondents rated their health as somewhere in the middle. About four in five (86%) reported having at least one chronic condition; arthritis or rheumatism was the most common (51%), followed by high blood pressure (45%). In general, respondents reported few problems related to their hearing, vision, and cognitive health. While most (86%) did not report feeling sad, depressed, or hopeless, almost one in three reported feeling lonely occasionally (20%) or in specific situations or events (11%). Most reported finding meaning in their day-to-day lives (94%) and feeling valued (81%).

Three in 10 (30%) have not participated in social activities that are of long-standing interest to them in at least 30 days. While 31% already volunteered, an additional 48% were interested in doing so in their communities. Further, the majority (81%) have a close friend in their communities. Considering the month preceding this April 2022 survey, respondents reported that the COVID-19 pandemic had reduced their social activities (66%).

Regarding financial health, less than half (44%) had made trade-offs among purchasing important items and services (e.g., food, shelter, medications) in the past 30 days due to limited funds. Most participants (78%) stated that they sometimes (37%), rarely (30%) or never (11%) had money left

over at the end of the month. About one-quarter (28%) of respondents had received financial support from people outside the household because of the recent pandemic.

Only 13% of participants provided care for someone under the age of 18, a similar rate to those who provided care for someone over the age of 18 (11%). Respondents were most likely to say that they had a special person who was a real source of comfort to them and least likely to say that they could count on friends when things go wrong.

Since older Asian workers comprised the majority of respondents, we have also provided a summary of their responses. All Asian respondents (N=39) completed the survey on paper, while most responses by non-Asian participants in Massachusetts were completed online. Much of this is because one of our community partners and SCSEP grantees, the Greater Boston Chinese Golden Age Center, set up three workshops to complete the surveys in person (two in Chinese, one in Vietnamese) due to participants' preferences, limited access to the internet, and limited knowledge of using electronic devices. There were some differences between our Asian and all other respondents. For example, Asian respondents were more likely to report that their participation in SCSEP had influenced their family life and were less likely to state they would search for paid jobs but more likely to state that they would search for volunteer roles. Further, Asian respondents were more likely to report learning about additional services and supports through their SCSEP participation and report fewer chronic conditions than other racial groups. Asian participants were also less likely to participate in social activities that were long-standing interests. A report specific to Asian respondents can be found at this link: <https://dlib.bc.edu/islandora/object/bc-ir:109549>

Final Thoughts

As shown in this report, SCSEP participants reported that the benefits of the program encompass not only personal finances, but also social engagement and self-confidence. Overall, they reported strong support from their supervisors who had a strong understanding of SCSEP's goals. Although most planned to search for a paid job after leaving SCSEP, a sizable majority were considering searching for a volunteer role as well. Most respondents also reported at least one chronic disease. Beyond the program's primary purpose of on-the-job training, most participants reported that through their participation in SCSEP, they learned about services and supports to help them financially as well as free or low-cost classes to increase their skills or knowledge. They were highly likely to tell their family, friends, and acquaintances about these resources, too. Our sample highlights the incredible diversity of SCSEP participants in Massachusetts regarding race, language, nativity, and education, among other factors. Further, our findings suggest that while participants join SCSEP for help finding a job and the financial support that is a part of the program, they gain additional knowledge about additional financial, health, and training resources that they then share to their family, friends, and acquaintances.

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