

Stress, Connection, and the American Dream: Exploring the Relationship Between Americans' Stress Levels, Sense of Connection, and Faith in the American Dream

Max Feldstein-Nixon | Wesleyan University | May 4, 2021

Introduction

- The relationship between stress, psychological health, economic security, and trust in institutions is well established within the literature by scholars of public health and psychology (Santiago et al., 2011).
- Since the Great Recession, socioeconomic inequality has increased as the digital revolution accelerated. After a year in which millions of Americans suffered and/or had to radically alter their social lives due to the Covid-19 pandemic, more people are reporting increased levels of stress and lower levels of psychological connection (Wang et al., 2020).
- Less attention has been placed on how the variables of concern relate to the public's overarching attitudes regarding the United States and their belief in the *American dream*, roughly the idea that everyone has a fair shot at getting ahead.

Methods

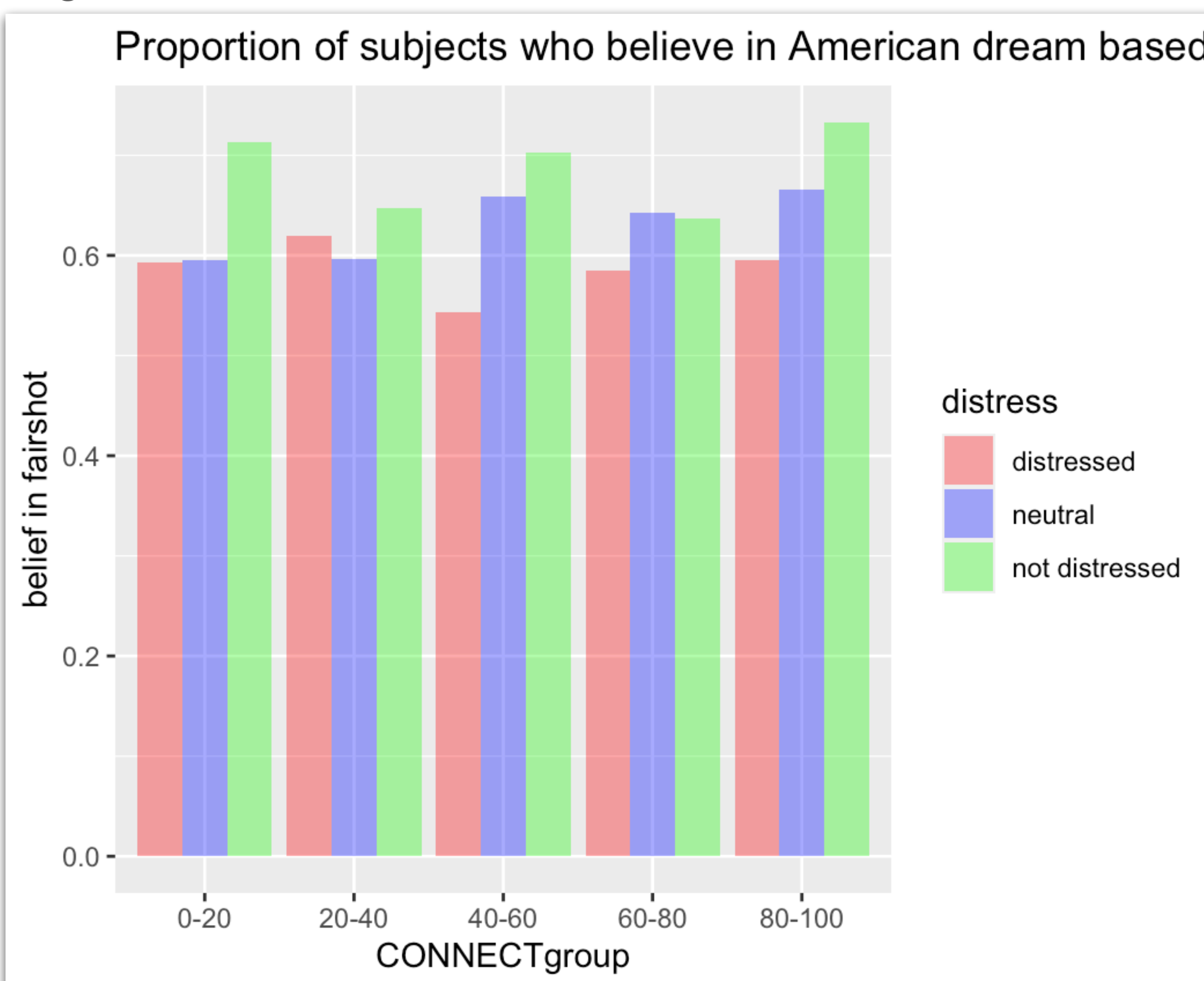
Sample:

- Adults from the United States, representative of the broader public. The survey was conducted in English and Spanish between October-December 2016. In total, 6,394 respondents participated, with an oversample of 999 adults aged 62 and older (FWB Codebook).

Measures:

- Psychological connection was measured as a quantitative response variable from 0 to 100 (low connection to high connection).
- Reported stress was measured as an ordered categorical variable from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).
- Faith in the American dream was measured as an ordered, categorical variable from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The variable was collapsed into a binary response variable (agree or disagree).

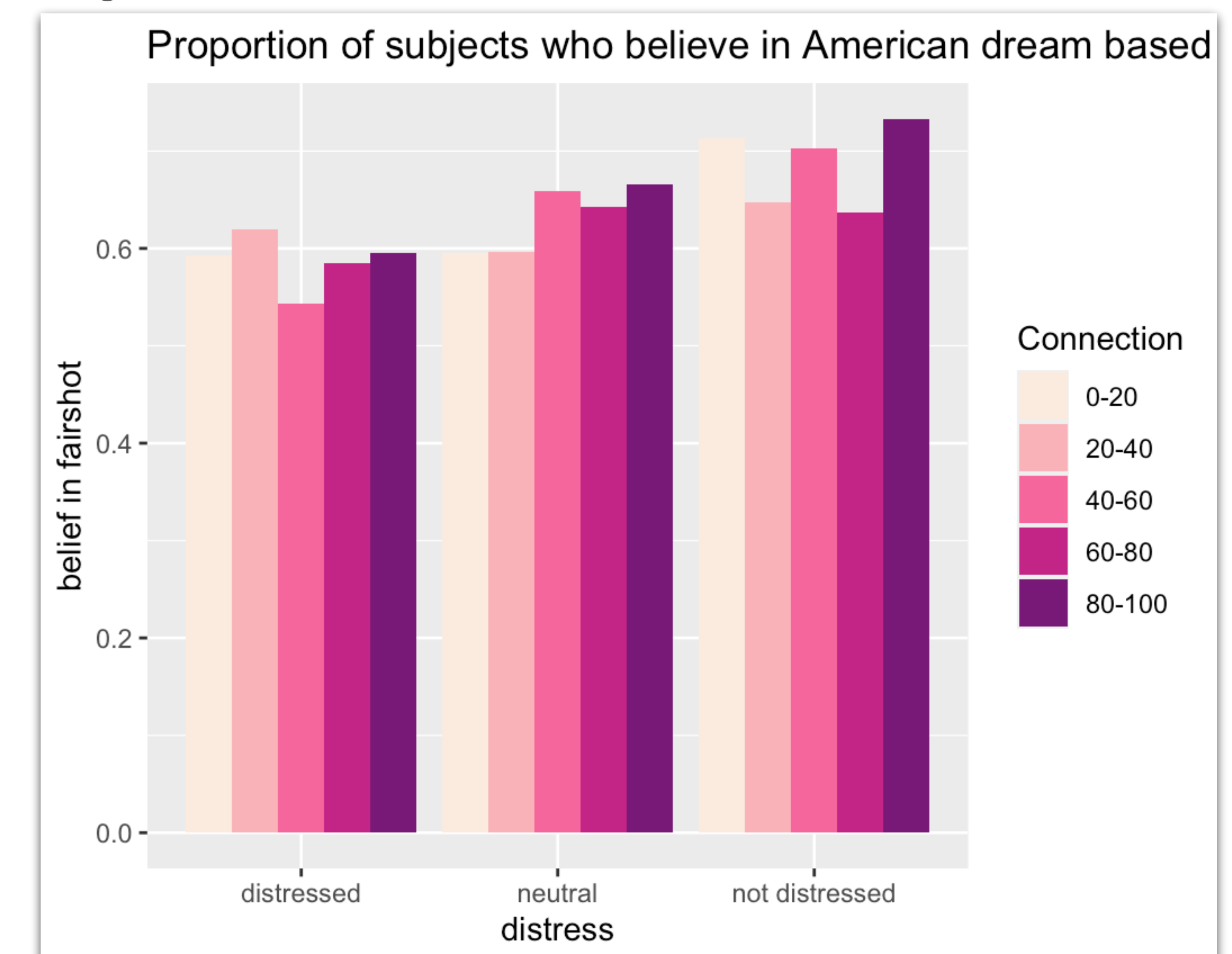
Figure 1.



Research Questions

- Is there an association between stress or psychological connection and belief in the American Dream (i.e. that everyone has a fair shot at economic advancement)?
- Does the association between variables change after controlling for confounding variables?

Figure 2.



Results

Univariate:

- 64% of respondents believed that everyone has a fair shot at economic advancement.
- 39% of respondents reported higher stress, 31% reported a neutral level of stress, and 30% of respondents reported no distress.

Bivariate:

- Chi-square analysis showed that stress and belief that everyone has a fair shot at economic advancement are significantly associated ($\chi^2=79.1$, $df=2$, $p\text{-val} < 0.001$).
- Logistic regression demonstrated that psychological connection and belief that everyone has a fair shot at economic advancement are significantly associated ($p\text{-val} < 0.001$).

Multivariate:

- Stress and belief that everyone has a fair shot at economic advancement are significantly associated after controlling for psychological connection.
- Psychological connection and the belief that everyone has a fair shot at economic advancement are significantly associated after controlling for stress levels ($p\text{-val}=0.01$).
- There was insignificant evidence to determine that distress was a moderator for psychological connection ($p\text{-val} > 0.05$).

Discussion

- While belief in the American Dream is sticky, people who report lower levels of psychological connection and/or higher levels of stress are less likely to have faith than others.
- This research relied on data that did not reflect the age of respondents or their income level.
- Further research could determine whether other variables like age or income level further complicate our understanding of the public's belief in the American Dream.

References

- Santiago, Catherine DeCarlo, Martha E. Wadsworth, and Jessica Stump. "Socioeconomic Status, Neighborhood Disadvantage, and Poverty-Related Stress: Prospective Effects on Psychological Syndromes among Diverse Low-Income Families." *Journal of Economic Psychology*, Special Issue on The Psychology and Behavioural Economics of Poverty, 32, no. 2 (March 1, 2011): 218–30. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joep.2009.10.008>.
- Wang, Cuiyan, Riyu Pan, Xiaoyang Wan, Yilin Tan, Linkang Xu, Cyrus S. Ho, and Roger C. Ho. "Immediate Psychological Responses and Associated Factors during the Initial Stage of the 2019 Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Epidemic among the General Population in China." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 17, no. 5 (January 2020): 1729. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17051729>.

