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**FELICIA K. YOUNGBLOOD**

Western Washington University

**JOANNA BOSSE**

Michigan State University

**CAMERON T. WHITLEY**

Western Washington University

# How can I keep from singing? The effects of COVID-19 on the emotional wellbeing of community singers during early stage lockdown in the United States

## ABSTRACT

*This study investigates the emotional wellbeing of community choral musicians during the early lockdown stage of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States. In an effort to understand participant wellbeing and document lived experiences in rapidly changing circumstances, the researchers gathered quantitative and qualitative data from almost 400 self-identified musicians in May–June 2020. Responses*

## KEYWORDS

music  
COVID-19  
coronavirus  
singing  
community choir  
wellbeing

1. In recognition of the dangers of communal performance, many governments began prohibiting choral activities in order to protect their citizens, such as in Washington State where the Skagit Valley Chorale is located.

*from community choir members indicated decreased wellbeing as a result of cancelled rehearsals and performances, unfamiliar online musicking practices and loss of community. Other themes included sadness, worry and grief concerning separation from fellow ensemble members and, in the case of ageing choristers, fear that they might not sing with others again in their lifetimes. Ultimately, this article sheds light on the complexity and necessity of sustaining community choirs during the COVID-19 pandemic while addressing the decreased wellbeing of singers as they were isolated in an effort to prevent viral spread through aerosolized means.*

## INTRODUCTION

Soon after the widespread outbreak of the novel coronavirus among the Skagit Valley Chorale – resulting in 52 illnesses, including three hospitalizations and two deaths – conversations among vocalists and scientists began to focus on the potential deadly effects of aerosols during the act of singing (National Association of Teachers of Singing, Inc. et al. 2020; Hamner et al. 2020; Bahl et al. 2020; Gregson et al. 2021). Choirs transformed from being spaces of artistic creation, wellbeing and community care to banned musical gatherings of ‘aerosol super spreaders’ that could cause illness and death (Governor.wa.gov 2020).<sup>1</sup> Contrary to the health and wellbeing that choristers had previously referenced in connection to their communal musicking experiences, singing became a place of worry, fear, dissatisfaction and sadness. Further concerns about the inability to participate in choral singing after conditions returned to ‘normal’ also pervaded the thoughts and practices of musicians. As one chorus member relayed, ‘I’m aware singers are super spreaders and that choral singing may never be the same for the kind of large, age diverse chorus in which I sing’. Another respondent shared, ‘I feel depressed listening to music now because I am grieving the loss of multiple musical programs in my life. In the past music has always been therapy for me. Now it depresses me’.

This article is concerned with the negative impacts of COVID-19 on the health and wellbeing of musicians, particularly those that were involved in choirs, during the first US lockdown in the spring and early summer of 2020. In response to rapid changes across all musical realms during this time, the authors – a sociologist and two ethnomusicologists – collaborated to study the implications of the pandemic on music and musicians in the United States. We utilized a mixed-methods approach, employing a survey that included both quantitative and qualitative measures and participant observation to assess the health and wellbeing of the self-identified musicians in our study. After receiving 397 responses, we noted that several participants mentioned their involvement in community music organizations and that a large portion of these participants discussed the negative impacts of the pandemic on their wellbeing in relation to their vocal practices. In the quantitative assessment, we included the Kessler et al. psychological distress scale (2002), a short-form survey that is widely used in wellbeing assessments, including in the US National Health Interview Survey. While this scale is designed to measure emotional wellbeing, the qualitative survey results also include indicators of physical and psychological wellbeing, such as commentary on depression, anxiety and chronic illness.

In the following pages, we explain our methodology and results in more detail to reveal how these findings contribute to our general understanding of the state of musician health and wellbeing in the early lockdown stage of the coronavirus pandemic in the United States. In particular, we discuss three key themes that emerged: the negative impacts of the pandemic on the health and wellbeing of community choral musicians in relation to cancelled and altered rehearsals and performances; the sadness, dissatisfaction and lack of motivation that were felt as a result of being isolated from community music ensembles; the grief and loss that singers experienced with the decline of community choral activities. We conclude with a broader analysis of our findings and with recommendations for future research.

## **BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY**

This article capitalizes on a mixed-methods approach by utilizing quantitative survey data, open-ended survey responses and participant observation to assess the wellbeing of choral musicians during the first US coronavirus lockdown. The survey included a combination of Likert and open-ended questions on musician background, experience and identity, as well as standard Likert and multiple-choice questions to measure psychological wellbeing and socio-demographics. As highlighted later in the article, our statistics reveal particularly negative impacts on the wellbeing of older and disabled musicians. As the average age in community choirs has increased over the past several decades (Bell 2004: 42), these findings are significant within the parameters of this project. While the quantitative data do suggest some interesting trends, the complexity of individual wellbeing could be more accurately discerned from the open-ended questions. These questions addressed each participant's experience with practice, performance and listening.

In terms of survey design and participant recruitment, the study was formulated to assess 'how musicians engaged with music during the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak'. While participants were required to be living in the United States and 18 years or older, there were no restrictions as to their ensemble involvement, yearly earnings or amount of training. Rather, in acknowledgment of the vast array of roles that musicians fill within our society, they were simply asked if they self-identified as a 'musician'. Responses were anonymous and no compensation was offered. Recruitment took place between 18 May and 6 June 2020, with a sampling that was directed at both professional and non-professional musicians across the United States. In total, 397 musicians took the survey. As individuals were not required to answer every question, our analysable sample for the quantitative data was 251 participants. All open-ended survey responses were analysed using deductive hand coding, in which the collected data were analysed for content, including categorization and identification of common themes. The sample for hand coding constituted responses from all participants ( $n = 397$ ). For this article, our analysis focuses on qualitative questions while referring to quantitative data for a more informed view of participant identity, musical roles and base measures of health and wellbeing.

We also engaged in participant observation during the early stages of the pandemic. As musicians and/or avid listeners, we, like many others, were immersed in watching streamed concerts, collaborating with fellow performers over Zoom and creating strategies that would guide the online rehearsals

2. This series of workshops was offered to five US community choirs and one community orchestra in 2020–21. The session mentioned in this article was the first of its kind and was originally designed as a one-time event (these circumstances changed when members of other community performance groups learned about the workshop).

and performances of ensembles. It is also important to note that the concepts mentioned in the qualitative responses were sometimes reflective of our personal experiences. While we strive to present our data as objectively as possible, we would be remiss not to recognize that our lived experiences intersect with this project. Below, we detail three key themes regarding the negative impacts of the pandemic on the health and wellbeing of community choral musicians in relation to cancelled and altered rehearsals and performances; the sadness, dissatisfaction and lack of motivation that were felt as a result of being isolated from community music ensembles; the grief and loss that singers experienced with the decline of community choral activities.

### **CANCELLED/ALTERED PERFORMANCES AND ONLINE COLLABORATION: ‘IT’S SAD BUT IT’S ALL WE HAVE’**

In late August 2020, roughly five months after the US lockdown, one of our authors sat with a laptop propped on a cardboard box and interacted with a community choir, each member in an individual Zoom square (Youngblood 2020).<sup>2</sup> From social gatherings to vocal workshops, the choristers had been meeting online since early March with the hopes of maintaining their musical and interpersonal relationships, in spite of the COVID-19 pandemic. Latency issues with Zoom and similar platforms deterred their ability to sing synchronously, so their online gatherings often consisted of singing to pre-recorded tracks with their microphones muted. Stark facial expressions become a means of sharing seemingly silent voices.

At this particular workshop, the chorus was gathered to learn about deep listening and experiment with unfamiliar methods of communal musicking. Deep listening is a concept that was coined by Pauline Oliveros in 1989 and was later categorized by Oliveros as, ‘[l]earning to expand the perception of sounds to include the whole space-time continuum of sound, encountering the vastness and complexities as much as possible’ (Oliveros et al. 1989; Oliveros 2015). During the workshop, the choir engaged in one of Oliveros’s *Sonic Meditations*, the ‘Tuning meditation’ (Oliveros 1974). One of the great advantages of this and similar abstract compositions is that sonic synchronicity is not required. Instead, vocalists sing one sustained tone at a time, alternating between a pitch of their choosing and a pitch from the other singers. These tones are not rhythmically timed but rather sung at the pace of each individual, which often results in a complex soundscape of various textures, pitches and dynamics.

Performing the ‘Tuning Meditation’ on Zoom also meant that the choir was able to sing together, unmuted, for the first time in five months. While the experimental style of musicking and the more dissonant soundscape were less familiar to the choir, the singers embraced the activity, sharing their voices and listening deeply as they produced vocal responses to each other. At the conclusion, the choristers were asked to share their thoughts and the Zoom room fell silent. Finally, someone explained that she was in shock, in gratitude and covered with chills because she was finally able to hear the singing voices of her fellow choir members. The others began nodding and jumped into the discussion in rapid succession. They shared how it felt meaningful when they sang a note and someone else adopted their pitch. They laughed at how awkward and odd it sounded at first. They cried and reflected on how difficult it was to have not heard everyone’s voices in so long. They explained



a pre-recorded track, either from their own ensemble, another choir or popular artist, or an accompanist track that was recorded for rehearsal purposes. Choir members then sing along with the track while their mics are muted. While everyone is technically making music together, the choristers are unable to hear anyone's voice but their own. There is an element of community musicking still present in this format; however, it is much more akin to solo singing while observing a sea of moving faces. If an ensemble is lucky enough to have their own live or studio recordings, choristers can listen to and sing along with the recording of their peers' voices. However, these tracks are not always current to the membership or to those in attendance at the online meeting. They are also from an isolated moment in the past and do not cultivate the real-time experience of synchronous, in-person musicking in the present. As one of our participants shared, 'I am a member of a women's chorus. We can't sing together to hear each other. We rehearse and gather on Zoom, but we can only sing alone. Not nearly as satisfying or interesting'.

Not all groups have the means, desire or enough of a history to have recorded a pre-pandemic album. For these ensembles, they are even more isolated from their peers as they sing along to tracks of voices that are not their own and arrangements that are potentially unrepresentative of their sound. For example, the feeling and sound of a 40-person choral ensemble arrangement that was adapted from a pop song is not sufficiently captured while singing along with the original solo artist track. In an attempt to create newer and more relevant recordings, some choirs have followed suit with Eric Whitacre's *Virtual Choir* projects, using DAWs to create individual tracks and mix them together post-production (Whitacre 2010). Nonetheless, this approach still requires solo singing – as opposed to synchronous group singing – and many ensemble members and directors do not have the required technology or editing skills to manufacture such large-scale projects. One director of a barbershop chorus stated, 'I have to gather recordings and spend hours listening to check in on how my singers are doing'. Another participant remarked, '[g]roup singing has become impossible. We gather on Zoom, play a recording, and sing while muted. It's sad but it's all we have'.

Some participants also responded to the general state of music during the first stage of lockdown and noted how this further affected their sense of well-being. For example, one musician wrote,

But humans desperately need music, especially in times of distress. So we do what we can. It is not fulfilling, and we cannot learn equally well online. Music teachers are now tasked with being video editors and IT experts. Many of my friends that are professional musicians are worried about how they will eat for the next few months. It's beyond depressing.

Decreased income as a result of the lockdown and cancelled performances has been pervasive across the entire music industry (Americans for the Arts 2020; Anon. 2020). Community choirs need funds to cover operational costs and director stipends, at the very least, and are not immune to these difficulties. Hence, the increased number of pandemic relief fundraising and adaptation resources that have been created since 2020 (Levine 2021; GALA Choruses 2021; Voss and Robinson 2021).

## **DISCONNECTION WITH COMMUNITY MUSIC AND LACK OF MOTIVATION: 'IT SOMETIMES FEELS POINTLESS'**

In response to our question on practice and performance, ensemble members mentioned their decreased sense of wellbeing when they referenced words such as 'sad' and also pointed to their lack of motivation to practise solo without having regular ensemble rehearsals and performances. Additionally, directors and members of church choirs and similar groups remarked on their lack of motivation because of how disconnected they felt from other singers. One participant that has a job playing piano and singing at their local church wrote,

I don't want to sing or practice at all [...] I haven't even wanted to screw around and do silly ukulele songs or anything. Haven't sung along with the radio. Did a few small recordings for a church gig and live-streamed Holy Week. That's it. Very disconnected and sad.

This lack of motivation to rehearse or practise outside of pre-pandemic circumstances (read: in-person with other human beings), along with mentions of dissatisfaction or lack of fulfilment in alternative modes of musicking, was also particularly notable in participant responses.

In spite of the more negative answers, some participants did mention benefits to 'keeping the music alive' during the early stages of the pandemic in the United States. For example, the opportunity to see several fellow musicians in live-streamed concerts when one might have been otherwise excluded due to touring schedules or personal finances. The generosity of these performing artists also helped to unite people during a painful and difficult time and, in some cases, to educate them on COVID-19 safe practices. Broadcast programmes such as *One World: Together at Home*, organized live-streamed concert series such as those sponsored by Pickathon in April 2020, and databases of upcoming streamed performances by organizations such as NPR supported musicians by guiding listeners to live music in the early US lockdown stage of the pandemic (Global Citizen and World Health Organization 2020; McDowelle 2020; Gotrich 2020). However, while featured musicians were able to serve as a uniting force and promote healthy behaviours, they too were suffering from cancelled gigs, limited social interaction and a dissatisfaction with these alternative platforms for musicking. One of the survey participants, a musician in a barbershop chorus, remarked on this in relation to their newly scheduled Facebook live performances. While they mention that it was 'fun' to put together a weekly show, they go on to explain,

Personally, the musical experience is a poor substitute for singing with a chorus. I've found it difficult to stay motivated to learn new chorus music, not knowing if, or when, I will perform with them again. I've had some very sad days accepting the enormity of that statement, but try to make music, even if it's not barbershop.

Other participants seemed less keen to even attempt musicking, stating, 'I do not enjoy rehearsing for my choir via Zoom and therefore if I return to the choir, will not be a member until rehearsals resume in person'. While others attempted to make music with their ensembles, they often remarked on their general dissatisfaction. One participant wrote,

Difficult to rehearse with my choir on Zoom. Not near as satisfying as in person. Zoom rehearsals can be exhausting and boring. I am very sad that the nature of singing means my choir will be unable to sing together in person until we have all been vaccinated against COVID-19.

Another stated, '[m]y women's chorus now rehearses on Zoom with everyone muted. It helps keep the community together but is of limited value musically'. Yet another remarked on this dissatisfaction, saying, 'I sing in an acapella chorus. We rehearse weekly through Zoom. We do not get to sing together it is only marginally satisfying'.

As seen in some of the above paragraphs, lack of satisfaction with alternative methods of vocal musicking during the early stages of the pandemic also led to a lack of motivation in some of our participants. While individual practice and collaborative rehearsals help to develop technique, coordinate various parts and develop skills over the long-term, not having a performance to work towards has been discouraging for many. While creating music is valuable in rehearsal as well as performance, most musicians expect to perform for a live audience. Losing these opportunities in combination with being separated from fellow community chorus members can have dire consequences for one's motivation and sense of purpose in the solo practice and rehearsal phases. One show chorus member explains,

Practice: my show chorus has Zoom rehearsals where we sing along to a recording, individually. There is no hearing harmonies or getting actual feedback from another person on your singing, since all participants are muted. PERFORMANCE: We've had regional and international contests cancelled and shows cancelled. Without a performance to prepare for, I'm not really motivated to put in the time.

This lack of incentive is palpable among several of our other participants that have variously remarked, 'I lack motivation to practice because it sometimes feels pointless since we may not be able to perform again for a long time', and 'I practice less, I have less motivation, I have no concerts or rehearsals to prepare for and feel as if I have nothing worthwhile to play for'. One of the most interesting factors in these responses is that participants were simply asked to explain how their practice and/or performance had changed since the start of the pandemic. They were not prompted to discuss motivation, or lack thereof, but many of them did.

A final trend found was commentary on the shared values and experiences of singers in relation to the communal aspects of their ensembles and other musical collaborations. There are benefits to joining a community music group that are tied to the music and are also extramusical, such as developing a network of care and support among members and in service to the broader population of a local living community, township, county or region. In a previous research project on a women's community choir, for example, Youngblood (2013) found that members often described their experiences with the group in terms of health and wellbeing, positive self-worth, free expression and unconditional care. One can only imagine how these elements decline when members are banned from gathering with each other and, further, told that the one element that united them all – singing – could lead to the serious illness and death of their fellow ensemble members.

Considering both the musical and extramusical benefits of community ensembles, it is no surprise that many of our participants commented on their lack of inclination to practise or rehearse in the absence of their colleagues. As one musician remarks, '[s]o much of music for me is in-person collaboration. I have felt very little impulse to practice or perform. It is frustrating to be alone from start to finish'. Another further expands on these decreased incentives in relation to their sense of wellbeing, stating,

It has been tough to get motivated to practice when it is becoming increasingly clear that we will not be able to rehearse or play in person for quite some time. I derive joy from the community of people around me (as fellow musicians and audience members) in a way that online anything can't replicate.

Participants further mention the frustration, sadness and loneliness that resulted from their isolation during the first stages of the pandemic. They often pointed to the lack of communal musicking as a key factor in this decreased wellbeing with brief but informative statements like, '[i]t is very difficult to focus. It makes me sad to play, missing making music with others'; '[n]o joy in the music because it cannot be performed collaboratively'; '[a]ll choral activities have ceased. Very sad'. One participant explained in more detail,

I am principally a choral singer, and choral singing is very difficult now. It will continue to be very limited in the near future. It is my life and blood to sing with others, and it makes me very sad that I won't be able to.

### **LOSS, GRIEF AND LONGEVITY: 'I GRIEVE THE LOSS OF COMMUNITY THAT IS CHORAL MUSIC'**

Another important element to consider, which was often mentioned in survey responses, was the general interpretation of COVID-19 longevity. This affected how participants conceived of their new rehearsal and performance circumstances in the earliest lockdown stage of the pandemic in the United States. It was apparent that some participants expected things to return to 'normal' in short order while others were on the opposite end of the spectrum, wondering if they would ever have the opportunity to sing with their choirs again. Either way, many community musicians remarked on their future in addition to their present. For example, one choir member wrote, '[we are] meeting on Zoom and "rehearsing" with the leader singing and others singing muted. Better than nothing but may not be sustainable for months and months'. A self-identified member of the Toledo Community Chorus also remarked on their current circumstances and potential future choral activities, stating,

No choir rehearsals, no performances. It was supposed to be our 100th anniversary concert next month. We're just starting to do virtual choir stuff. Our director says we'll do the *Messiah* this way before Christmas if necessary, since the Toledo Choral Society has sung it for the community every year for 100 years now. We won't let COVID stop us, although who knows how long it will take before it's safe to sing together again.

A follow-up study with participants beyond the early lockdown stages would help in assessing how various factors, such as online practice, have progressed in the long-term. This data set, however, reveals some common themes in community musician health and wellbeing in relation to practice and performance in the early stages of the pandemic.

While many ensembles attempted alternative methods of gathering and/or singing online during this time, other choirs stopped meeting and practising altogether, such as this participant describes, 'I am mainly a choral singer. Our volunteer church choir is putting together some virtual anthems, but the community chorus I am in will be on hiatus for several months'. We predict that, for some, this altogether lack of contact – either from rehearsals and performances being cancelled or from technological barriers due to structural inequalities – would further exacerbate feelings of grief and hopelessness when combined with the fear and worry that community ensembles might never meet again.

While responses to our more concentrated question on performance and practice were telling, the answers to our free response prompt at the end of the survey even further illuminated the experiences of vocal community musicians in the early lockdown stage of the pandemic. In this section of the survey, they were asked, '[a]s researchers, we are interested in your experience with music during the COVID-19 pandemic. Do you have anything else that you would like to share with us?' One-fifth of our participants self-identified as vocalists and many expanded upon their health and wellbeing in relation to this role. Some responses were brief, such as, 'I don't have enthusiasm for singing now', while others provided deep insight into the complexity of their community choral music experience. For example, one person wrote,

I grieve the loss of community that is choral music. I am singing with a major POPS orchestra and am at an age wherein an ability to return to this singing community is in jeopardy. I need to ask if I'll still have my voice in a year or two years or if I will be constrained by other issues. As a member of a high-risk group will I be excluded from joining my musical community when we return? I am no longer a solo performer and the loss of performing as a singer, something in which I've found joy since childhood, looms large because of the questionable future. COVID19 has taken so much away from us. Taking away our community of song is heartbreaking.

Other free responses reference concepts of sadness and depression that come from a disconnect with one's musical community and an associated lack of motivation. These statements are similar to what we observed in the practice/performance-based question. One participant writes, 'I miss music and grieve the awareness that it may be years before we can gather, sing, go to concerts, sing in church and with friends'.

Another vocalist relates their experiences with depression to the early lockdown stages of the pandemic and quarantine, explaining,

I have also been living with depression off and on for several years. Being under quarantine feels very much like my depression symptoms, which can be hard to differentiate which is the cause. My symptoms often rob me of things that bring me joy, such as my interest in music and my desire to sing.

This commentary touches on the physical and psychological aspects of singers and musicking, which are more intricate and complex than base measures of emotional wellbeing and/or happiness functioning. While this study was not designed to include more concrete measures of physical health, we recognize the interconnectedness of health and wellbeing and we would be remiss not to reference the numerous studies that indicate health benefits of musicking, such as gait rehabilitation for people with Parkinson disease (Pereira et al. 2019), facilitating non-nutritive sucking in premature infants with nipple feeding difficulties (Standley et al. 2019) and stimulating memory and recognition in Alzheimer's patients (Simmons-Stern et al. 2012).

Literature has also demonstrated benefits of health and wellbeing for community choir members, and especially for those that are ageing. A study on community choirs and singing in the United States found that the participation of community singers over the age of 40 in 1962 was 34 per cent. By 2004, this number had drastically increased, with choristers that were 46+ years of age comprising 58 per cent of participants (Bell 2004: 42). A decade later, a study on the wellbeing of older adults in community music revealed positive impacts to their general wellbeing (Hallam et al. 2014). In 2019, the Chorus Impact Study compared the experiences of 65+ choristers to those of the general public and concluded that, '[o]lder chorus members report both a better quality of life and better overall health than the general public' (Chorus America 2019: 16). If the wellbeing of older chorus members is increased by their musical activities, it would correlate that the opposite would be true in the early stage of the pandemic lockdown when choral activities ceased or were drastically changed to the aforementioned online formats.

In fact, our study revealed age to be one of the most dramatic factors in decrease of wellbeing. On the five-point Likert scale, musicians in their 60s reported a decrease of 0.419 points in their wellbeing and the wellbeing of those in their 70s was even further diminished at 0.536 points. In comparison with the other more significant findings on gender (0.204 decrease), education (0.112 decrease) and disability (0.353 decrease), age appeared to be the most significant factor in the loss of wellbeing among musicians during the early lockdown stage of the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, this does not account for the variable factors of intersectionality, such as the fact that the older members of our community are more likely to have developed a disability and/or illness-related disability later in life.

The Chorus Impact Study also concluded that, '73% of singers age 62+ say being in a chorus has made them feel less alone or lonely' (Chorus America 2019: 19). It would reason that the isolation of early pandemic lockdown would greatly impact these numbers and act as a significant factor in the decreased wellbeing of older choral musicians. This decreased sense of wellbeing in relation to separation from fellow musicians is evident in the practice and/or performance responses that are accounted for in the previous section. However, many musicians chose to mention similar decreases in wellbeing in reference to their ages in the free response question, such as the 60-year-old barbershop chorister in the following:

I LOVE making music in a (barbershop) chorus and/or quartet. I am not someone who enjoys solo work; I crave being surrounded by, and part of, that group sound. I am making music now, alone with a ukulele, because I have to. It is not my area of expertise, so I feel inartful, nor

Table 1: OLS estimates of effect of external factors, positive life outlook and socio-demographics on the emotional wellbeing of musicians during the height of the first COVID-19 pandemic shutdown (n = 251).

Variables	Coeff.	Robust SE
External factors		
Lost revenue	-0.062**	0.027
Lost events/performances	-0.194**	0.091
Positive life outlook		
Life satisfaction	0.267***	0.071
Socio-demographics		
Woman and non-binary	-0.204*	0.099
Identifies as a performer	-0.159	0.093
Identify as a person of colour (compared to white)	-0.009	0.124
Increasing education	-0.112*	0.055
Increasing income	0.049	0.030
Political orientation (lib to con)	0.055	0.032
Have children under 18	-0.176	0.138
Age 30–39 (compared to 20–29)	-0.046	0.154
Age 40–49 (compared to 20–29)	0.329	0.182
Age 50–59 (compared to 20–29)	0.109	0.178
Age 60–69 (compared to 20–29)	0.419**	0.155
Age 70–79 (compared to 20–29)	0.536**	0.187
Married or living with partner(s)	0.121	0.101
Disabled	-0.353*	0.142
Queer spectrum	-0.067	0.103
Constant	3.080	0.353
$R^2$		0.372

This table was created and is owned by the authors.

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

my first choice. As a 60-year-old woman, I worry about my barbershop singing skills deteriorating the longer I am unable to sing with others. I worry about my future with an organization I love. And I just miss the community terribly; the singing, the HARMONY, dancing, laughter, tears, and hugs. The physical separation is painful.

We received more hopeful responses than this, but most were still tinged with sadness and references to loss. One of the most telling perspectives was evident in viewpoint shifts, in which some participants spoke of their community choir life as if it was already over. While one chorister mentioned that they found new avenues of musicking during the pandemic, their references to choral experiences were clouded in nostalgia:

I am grateful for the memory and lived reality of musical performance during my nearly 8 decades of life [...] With my groups on hiatus, I'm mainly a consumer of music rather than a maker thereof, though I do enjoy practicing my newly acquired recorder. Perhaps performing will not be a part of what's left of my life, but I have a treasure trove of recordings and memories. I am deeply grateful for music!

The tone of this musician is decidedly positive; yet, they have already begun to eulogize their community choral experiences. Information was released at the beginning of the lockdown that correlated age with increased risk. This was evident in the higher fatality rates of COVID-19 in elderly populations in the United States and around the globe (Bialek et al. 2020; Onder et al. 2020; Nanda et al. 2020). Simply becoming aware of this information can create a feeling of ambiguous loss, but such loss eventually became the reality for many older adults. Further, enduring the temporary separation from one's musical community, paired with the potential grief of this loss becoming permanent, appears to be a great factor in the decrease of health and wellbeing in these populations.

## CONCLUSION

Music plays an important role in the lives of musicians and is experienced in a multifaceted and meaningful way when shared with others, especially when applied to the practices of community choral ensembles. This is evidenced in survey responses when participants mention that it is their 'life and blood to sing with others' or when choristers describe their ensembles as their family. While it is discouraging to learn that musicians were having difficulty engaging with music and experiencing decreased wellbeing in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States, it is important to document their responses. These perspectives give us insight into the lived experiences of community musicians – and vocalists, in particular – and with this knowledge we can validate the importance of community music groups and demonstrate the need for more adequate methods of distanced singing, whether online or in-person.

Most of our data capture sadness, dissatisfaction and lack of motivation, paired with grief at the loss of musical communities; however, we would be remiss not to mention a few of the more positive responses to the survey. These answers indicate the importance of choral singing and community musicking in the health and wellbeing of participants, in spite of the less-than-ideal circumstances that musicians faced early in the pandemic. For example, one person stated, 'I miss singing in a choir so very much but am finding virtual choral opportunities. That is helping'. Another simply remarked, 'Seeing persons and choirs performing on the Internet has been uplifting'. Though there were a select few participants that opted to decrease their ensemble involvement until after the pandemic, most responses indicated a desire and willingness to continue making music, no matter what. In one case, yet another musician disclosed concerns about their ability to participate in choirs post-pandemic because of the decline of their singing voice and their related grief and heartbreak; nevertheless, they shared, '[w]e don't know what the future holds. May we find new ways to continue the community that is making music together'.

This kind of tenacity and passion is necessary to continue community music programmes and is what musicians will need to get their lives and ensembles back on track after such difficult times. Further, just as our research indicates a decrease in the health and wellbeing of musicians during the early phases of the coronavirus lockdown, it would correlate that the opposite would be true once rehearsals and performances resume, with indicators pointing towards the increased health and wellbeing of musicians as a direct result of their involvement in musicking and especially in community groups. In this study, we were interested in exploring the experiences of musicians in the earliest part of the pandemic, but for future studies it would be useful to examine these experiences at different points within the pandemic, especially in light of technological advancements and adjusted methodologies for rehearsal and performance. A comparative analysis of the health and wellbeing of singers upon return to 'normal' musical activities would also provide further insight as to the effects of the pandemic on these musicians and their communities.

For the purposes of this project, we captured the immediate effects on the health and wellbeing of musicians due to the coronavirus pandemic in the early lockdown period in the United States. Three themes emerged: altered or cancelled rehearsals and performances; sadness and lack of motivation as a result of being disconnected from fellow musicians; the grief and loss that these singers felt with the decline of community choral activities. While choir directors should be commended for their flexibility and creative methods during these times, let us not forget the grave effects of the pandemic on their wellbeing and that of their ensemble members. Through personal narratives, what this study clearly shows is that there was no replacement for an active and supportive community nor could one be digitally replicated to elicit a holistic experience with everyone in a room singing simultaneously. While there are reasons to celebrate the health and wellbeing that are experienced in community choirs during typical conditions, the circumstances of the early lockdown phase of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States were anything but typical and this is evident in the responses of participants. As one musician wrote about their experience with music at the time, '[i]t's strange. It simultaneously saves my life, but I can hardly have the heart to do it'.

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## CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Felicia K. Youngblood is an assistant professor of musicology/ethnomusicology at Western Washington University. Her work is centred on music, healing and the voice. The majority of this research interrogates the intersections of gender, cultural heritage and communal musicking.

Contact: Department of Music, Western Washington University, 516 High Street, Bellingham, WA, 98225, USA.

E-mail: [youngbf@wwu.edu](mailto:youngbf@wwu.edu)

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2584-7219>

Joanna Bosse is a professor of ethnomusicology and dance studies in the Residential College of the Arts and Humanities at Michigan State University, where she also serves as an associate dean of academic affairs. Her research on participatory performance and partnership dance explores the value of performance in the everyday lives of amateurs and hobbyists.

Contact: Residential College in the Arts and Humanities, Michigan State University, 362 Bogue Street, East Lansing, MI, 48825, USA.

E-mail: [jbosse@msu.edu](mailto:jbosse@msu.edu)

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7915-4832>

Cameron T. Whitley is an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology at Western Washington University. His research largely focuses on how our relationships with others inform our decision-making processes. The majority of his work is in the realm of environmental perceptions and decision-making.

Contact: Department of Sociology, Western Washington University, 516 High Street, Bellingham, WA, 98225, USA.

E-mail: [whitlec@wwu.edu](mailto:whitlec@wwu.edu)

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5680-0598>

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