

**Has Social Distancing During the Pandemic Made People Touch Starved?**

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## Introduction

There is the pandemic, and then there are side effects of the pandemic itself. With government-mandated lockdowns to safeguard the public from the coronavirus, the world was forced into home isolation and mandates enforcing social distancing became the new normal. While this posed to be an inconvenience for many, a luxury for others, we have failed to consider the ramifications for those living alone, be it in a nursing home or preference, that isolation will have on their wellbeing and mental health.

Touch is often vilified in our puritanic culture, contextualized by sexual violence, prostitution, and shame. Yet touch is essential to our survival individually and as a species. From the time we are in our mother's womb, we develop touch as our first sense, before seeing, hearing, and smell. Reaching for sustenance is our first attempt at communicating our basic needs to our mother and requires reciprocity to feel safe and loved (Hammond, 2020). Touch is scientifically proven to boost serotonin levels, strengthen the immune system, regulate the nervous system, and release dopamine in the brain, all essential mechanisms for health and wellbeing daily. Studies have shown the highly adverse effects in babies, children, and adults in the absence of touch. The side-effects range from hindered cognitive development, delayed growth, lack of empathy, depression, raised heart rate, and anxiety. You name it, touch or lack thereof affects every part of our being throughout our life's entirety.

Touch starvation is a condition that happens when you don't get as much physical touch as you're used to or any touch at all. You crave contact but can't interact with others for some reason. It's also known as touch deprivation or skin hunger (WebMD, 2021). Sound familiar? Not only has a fear of the pandemic been challenging to manage, but in 2020, there were an estimated 34.75 million single-person households in the U.S (Statista, 2021.) That is an

excruciating large percentage of people assumingly living in isolation during the most severe months of the lockdown.

Has social distancing during the pandemic made people touch starved?

At the heart of my curiosities was the concern for people who have experienced extreme loneliness and emotional discord during the pandemic. While inundated with media surrounding the virus and politics during an election year, had we underestimated the side effects of extended lockdowns and strict social distancing measures? Were these side effects more dangerous than the virus itself? I decided to conduct a poll and a demographic survey to get some complex data. I wanted to understand how social distancing has affected individuals during the pandemic depending on their age, ethnicity, income bracket, remote or onsite office, with or without children, and relationship status.

I hypothesize that there will be a large percentage of individuals who have experienced moderate touch hunger during the pandemic with a higher-than-expected rate of individuals who have experienced extreme touch hunger with an equal ratio of people who have experienced smothering. I expect this to depend on their relationship status and if they have children or not.

This topic is under-researched by scholars and by what we consider to be "professionals." At the same time, many modalities such as massage, somatic experiencing, and various others have known the benefits and the hierarchy touch plays in our experience as human beings. Our primitive ancestors knew best of all, displayed in social grooming behaviors and affection. I have included works from various scholars and experts in addition to my expertise on the topic of touch. I am a Certified Advanced Rolfer and have practiced touch and embodiment for over 15 years, both in clinical practice and teaching at the Dr. Ida Rolf Institute for Structural Integration.

Recently, the BBC commissioned a study in collaboration with the Wellness Collection and led by Professor Michael Banissy from the Goldsmiths University of London known as The Touch Test. The Touch Test is the most extensive study of touch conducted thus far in the world in which 40,000 people from 112 countries chose to participate in a survey referred to as The Touch Test (2020). The Touch Test survey began the last week in Jan 2020 and went until the end of March. Notice these dates coincide with initial revelations of the virus and the beginnings of lockdowns in the U.K. The results of this test revealed that 43% of typical adults feel that society does not enable us to touch enough, and this was before people had been in lockdowns for months and before the pandemic hit full steam. In addition, 79% of people liked being touched by a friend or stranger, while people who don't like touch were more likely to be people who find it difficult to form trusting relationships (BBC, October 5, 2020).

The "Longing for Interpersonal Touch Picture Questionnaire (LITPQ)," a survey developed to understand the psychological complexities between touch and humans, conducted similar research amongst 110 participants over the age of 18 years old (Bebler, 2020). Findings show that 72.7% of the participants wish they received more touch than they do and found a high correlation between frequency of touch and positive mood. Research also showed that a higher percentage of people longed for close interactive touch versus casual touch.

Over the past 15 years, my work as a Rolfer has employed touch as the primary agent for thousands upon thousands of hours making the skin-to-skin contact as part of my therapeutic modality. The sudden halt to my work due to the pandemic was far more shocking to my nervous system and general state of wellbeing than I could have ever imagined. After approximately three weeks into not working, my heart rate had increased dramatically. In addition, I experienced racing thoughts and sleeplessness as side effects of the sudden loss of touch. The

nights I slept with my mother helped tremendously with sleep and allowed me to experience relief from the aching loneliness I was experiencing on a physiological level.

Research shows that touch stimulates neuroreceptors of the skin, sending messages to the parietal lobe of the brain and releasing hormones in the hypothalamus, dopamine, a feel-good hormone, and serotonin, which is the rest and relax hormone. Studies suggest that exercise is the second-best substitute for touch due to friction on the surfaces of the skin and vibration that stimulates neuroreceptors in the body's tissues (BBC, 2020.) Digital or nonliving things cannot replicate the absence of touch; the nervous system allows us to co-regulate with other living things and existentially informs consciousness and awareness of our primordial existence.

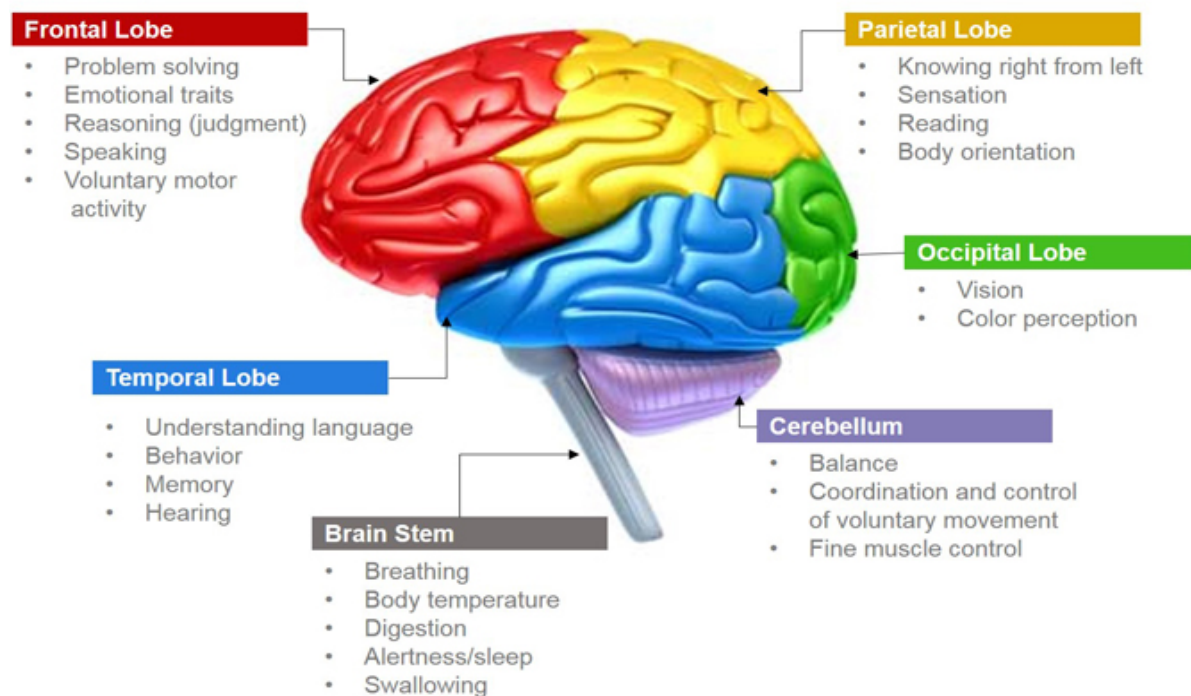


Figure 1. Touch receptors and brain functions (<https://braindrain3.wordpress.com>, 2015)

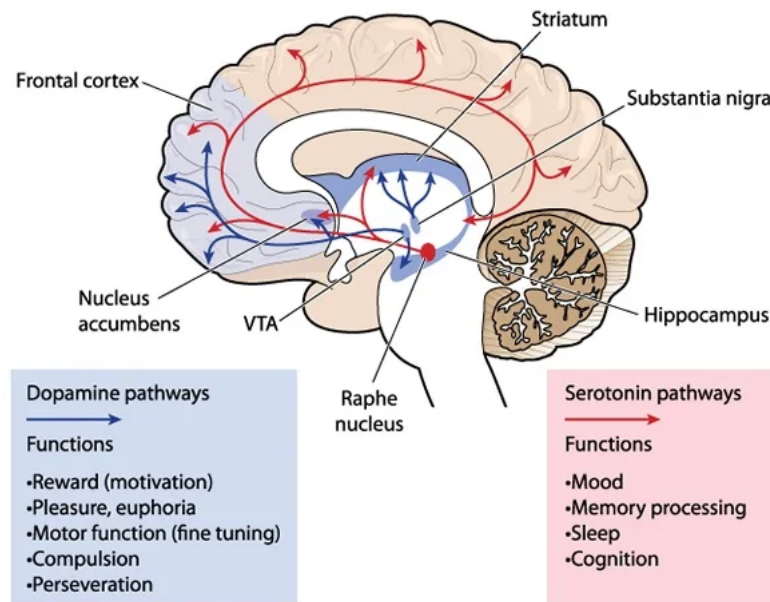


Figure 2. Hormones released during (<https://www.news-medical.net/health/Role-of-Dopamine-in-Pain.aspx>, 2018)

## Methods

To collect data, I created a 23-question mixed demographic/opinion poll survey on SurveyMonkey and posted a link to the survey on Facebook, and distributed it via text to close friends and family. I included questions that would help answer my research the question, "Has Social Distancing During the Pandemic Made People Touch starved?"

Some of the questions included age, ethnicity, do you own pets? And questions regarding the frequency of giving and receiving touch. I left all the questions optional to answer if individuals felt any information too sensitive to share. The survey was conducted over six days, and twenty-one people participated in total.

This survey was tricky because I needed to ask semi-to personal questions to get the information I was seeking. Additionally, I intended to offer a thought-evoking experience for those taking the survey.

## Results

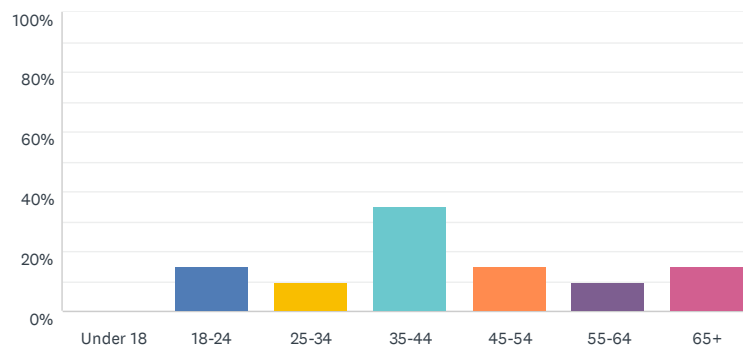
I analyzed the data by getting a general sense of the age and gender of the participants and included the entire United States as the geographical region studies.

I was primarily interested in how people felt social distancing had impacted their wellbeing and how that correlated with the living situation. I began testing my hypotheses by comparing percentages of individuals living alone, physical touch frequency, and the general sense of satisfaction and understanding of loneliness due to social distancing restraints.

Below is the fascinating data I collected from all the lovely, brave participants.

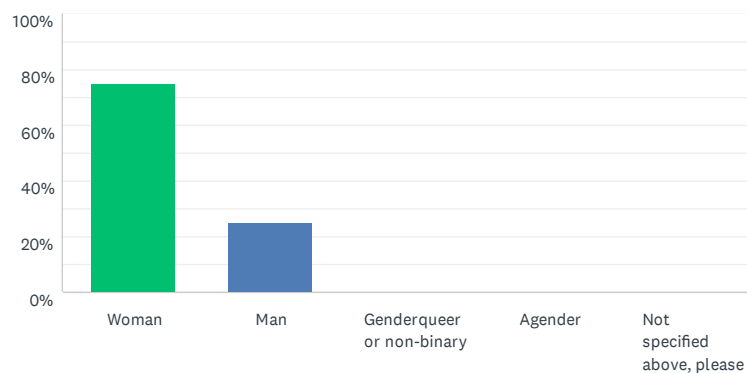
### Q1 What is your age?

Answered: 20 Skipped: 1



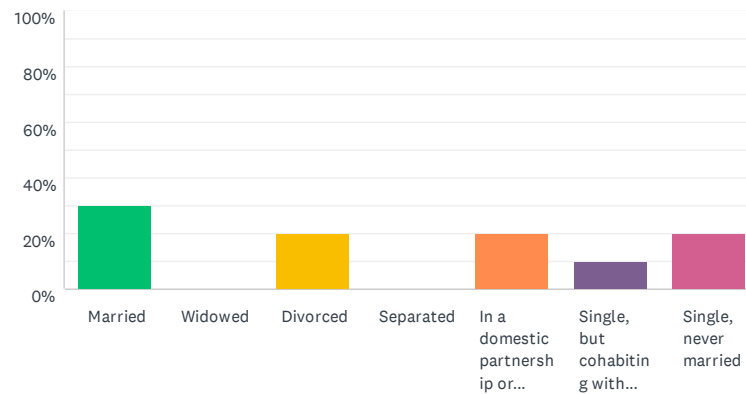
### Q3 What is your gender identity?

Answered: 20 Skipped: 1



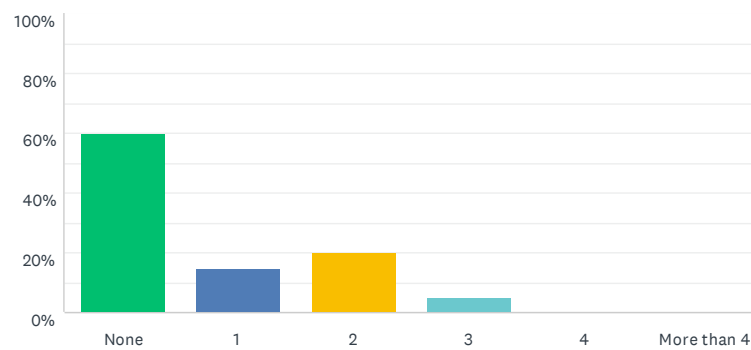
### Q5 Which of the following best describes your current relationship status?

Answered: 20 Skipped: 1



### Q6 How many children live in your household (aged 17 or younger only)?

Answered: 20 Skipped: 1





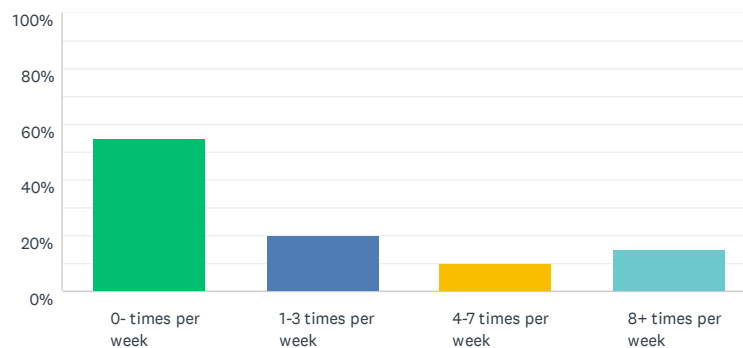
### Q8 How many people, including children, currently live in your household?

Answered: 19 Skipped: 2

#	RESPONSES	DATE
1	2	7/7/2021 9:00 PM
2	5	7/7/2021 10:08 AM
3	2	7/7/2021 6:58 AM
4	6	7/6/2021 2:03 PM
5	2	7/4/2021 8:10 PM
6	3	7/4/2021 9:19 AM
7	4	7/3/2021 8:57 PM
8	2	7/2/2021 10:54 PM
9	2	7/2/2021 6:14 PM
10	1	7/2/2021 4:45 PM
11	2	7/2/2021 3:01 PM
12	3	7/2/2021 2:13 PM
13	3	7/2/2021 2:13 PM
14	2	7/2/2021 1:52 PM
15	2	7/2/2021 1:48 PM
16	2	7/2/2021 1:46 PM
17	4	7/2/2021 12:03 PM
18	2	7/2/2021 11:41 AM
19	4	7/2/2021 11:26 AM

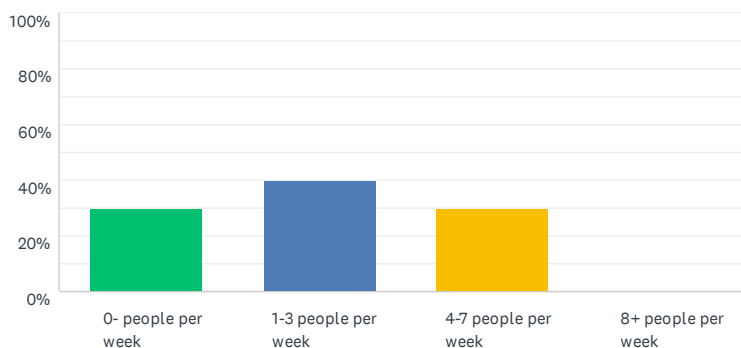
### Q11 On average, how often do you make physical contact at work (do you make physical contact as part of your profession)?

Answered: 20 Skipped: 1



Q12 On average, how many people do you make casual physical contact with, NOT including family (hugs, handshakes, casual encounters and exchanges)?

Answered: 20 Skipped: 1



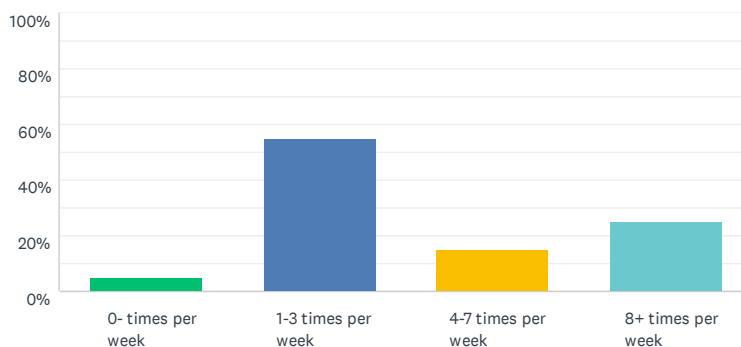
Q13 On average, how many family members do you make casual physical contact with (hugs, pats, non-sexual contact)?

Answered: 20 Skipped: 1

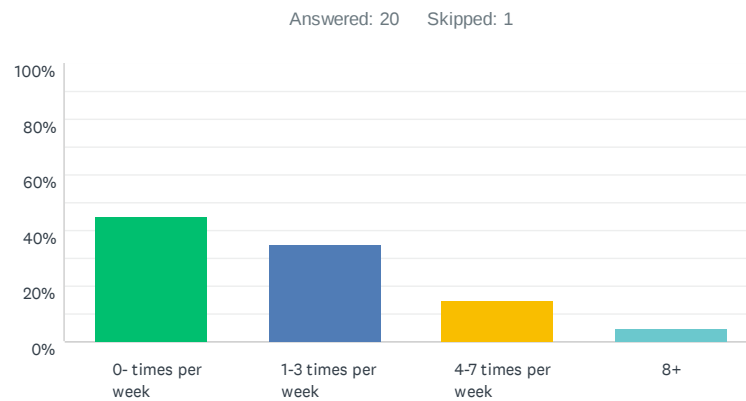


Q14 On average, how often do you self-touch?

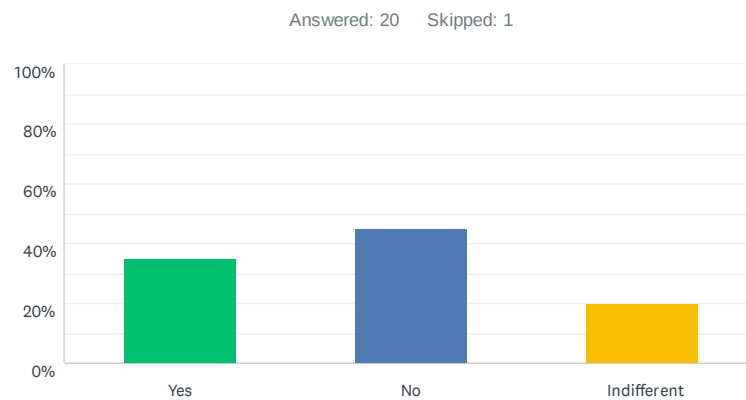
Answered: 20 Skipped: 1



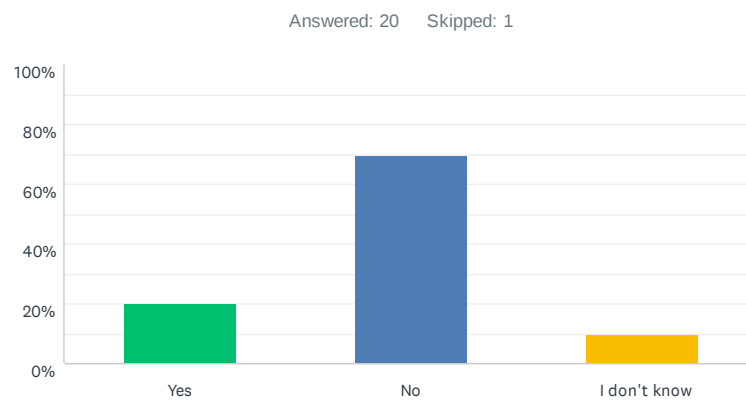
### Q15 On average, how often do you engage in intimate activities with another individual(s)?



### Q16 Are you satisfied with how much physical touch you receive?

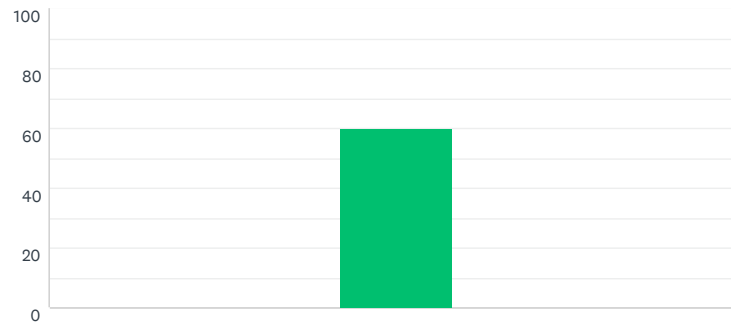


### Q17 Do you experience loneliness for periods longer than 10 days average?



### Q18 Has social distancing during the pandemic had an impact on your mental/emotional wellbeing?

Answered: 20 Skipped: 1

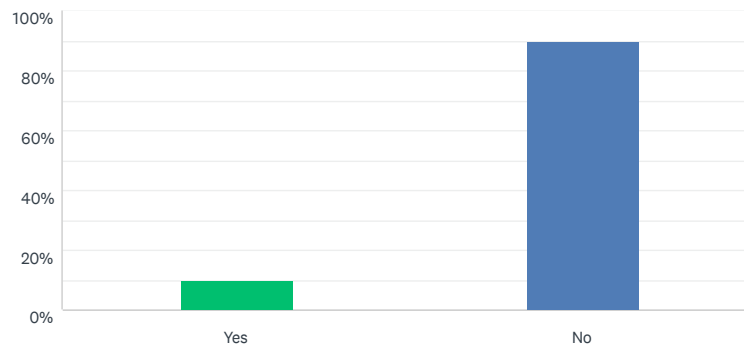


ANSWER CHOICES		AVERAGE NUMBER	TOTAL NUMBER	RESPONSES
		60	1,201	20
Total Respondents: 20				
#		DATE		
1	41	7/7/2021 9:00 PM		
2	14	7/7/2021 10:08 AM		
3	50	7/7/2021 6:58 AM		
4	80	7/6/2021 2:03 PM		
5	11	7/4/2021 8:10 PM		
6	67	7/4/2021 9:19 AM		
7	78	7/3/2021 8:57 PM		
8	0	7/2/2021 10:54 PM		
9	46	7/2/2021 6:14 PM		
10	56	7/2/2021 4:45 PM		
11	95	7/2/2021 3:11 PM		
12	100	7/2/2021 3:01 PM		
13	72	7/2/2021 2:13 PM		
14	30	7/2/2021 2:13 PM		
15	62	7/2/2021 1:52 PM		
16	100	7/2/2021 1:48 PM		
17	80	7/2/2021 1:46 PM		
18	60	7/2/2021 12:03 PM		
19	71	7/2/2021 11:41 AM		

\*Using a scale of 1-100. 1 being no impact 100 being severe impact.

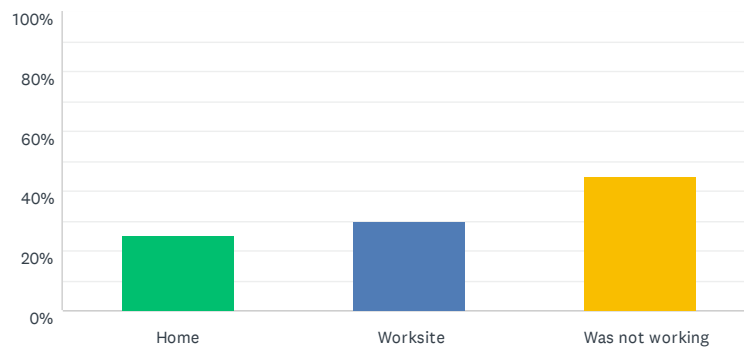
### Q19 Have you experienced receiving too much physical contact throughout the pandemic?

Answered: 20 Skipped: 1



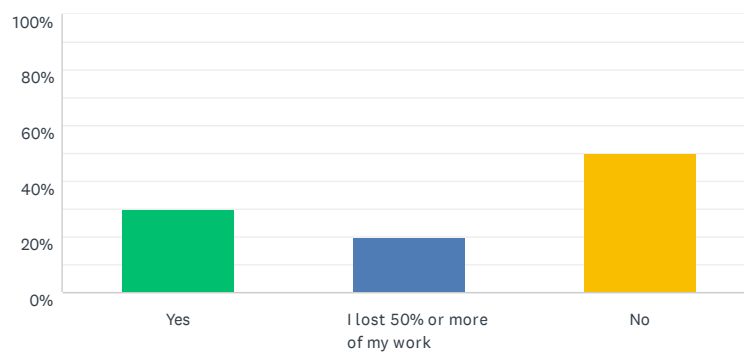
### Q20 Did you work from home or at worksite for the duration of the pandemic?

Answered: 20 Skipped: 1

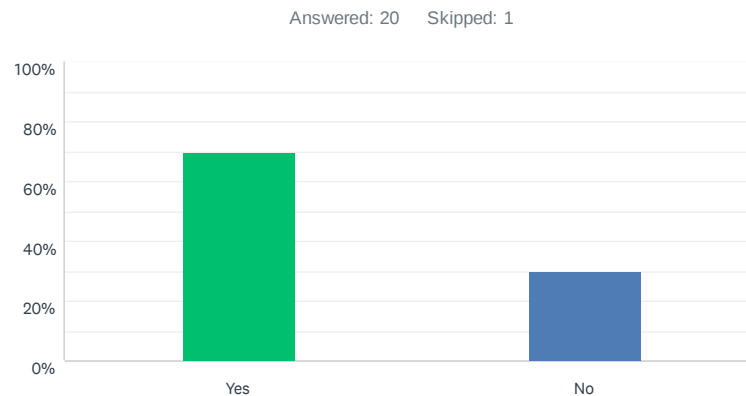


### Q21 Did you lose work during the pandemic?

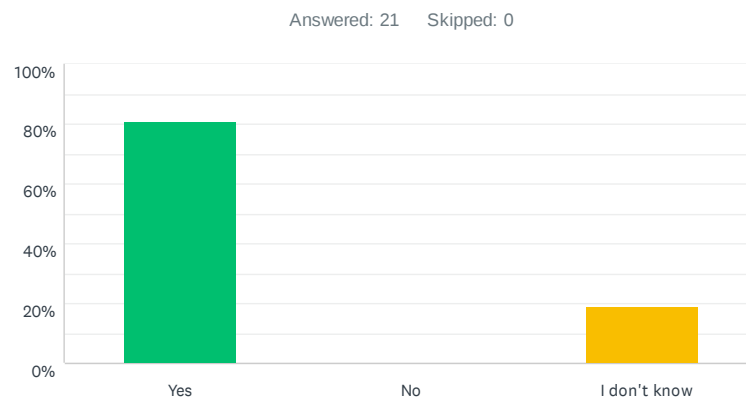
Answered: 20 Skipped: 1



**Q22 Did the pandemic effect how much physical contact you would receive under normal circumstances?**



**Q23 Do you think social distancing during the pandemic has made people touch starved?**



## Discussion

On average, there were 2.76 people per household, including children, with only one person living by themselves. This finding surprised me as I thought there would be more people living by themselves. Yet, while people reported cohabitating with pets and others, 20% experienced loneliness for longer than ten consecutive days, 48% were not satisfied with how much touch they were receiving, with 20% indifferent. Approximately 10% reported receiving too much contact during the pandemic, and 30% of people reported not making any casual

physical contact at all weekly. While not surprising, self-touch came first as the most frequent means of engaging in physical touch and coming in second was work-related physical contact.

Observing the data from an eagle's eye view, the lack of casual physical contact daily made the most significant impact on people's touch satisfaction and touch starvation. 75% reported the pandemic affected how much touch they would typically receive, while 25% said it had not. I found this particularly fascinating, being that 65% of people reported being either married or in a domestic partnership. Perhaps living in close quarters and work-related stress put a damper on this aspect? Data revealed 30% job loss due to the pandemic and 20% losing more than half of their typical workload. When asked if people believed social distancing during the pandemic caused people to be touch starved, 80% said yes, with 20% reportedly not knowing.

### **Conclusion**

As I have already stated, this area of social studies is in its infancy of investigation and exploration into the profound role touch plays within societies and individuals' wellbeing.

I believe my hypothesis was correct in that people have experienced touch starvation due to social distancing. Moreover, the results of the last question in the survey alone confirms my hypothesis. Therefore, the survey questions served their purpose as an investigatory inquiry into the social sciences of human touch and how physical contact impacts our daily life and emotional wellbeing. I suggest that further studies continue to investigate these same questions using regional and geographical considerations and a specific range of time versus using the pandemic as a general period.

It is easy to understand that we have perhaps taken the simple things for granted, such as smiling and glancing at strangers, exchanging monies with a cashier, or even waiting in a line of traffic.

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