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## Entitled to Cheat: An Examination of Incoming Freshmen at a Small Regional University

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## Entitled to Cheat: An Examination of Incoming Freshmen at a Small Regional University

### Cover Page Footnote

1. A version of this paper was presented at the 2011 Georgia Sociological Association's Annual Meeting in Savannah, GA. 2. Please address all correspondence to Dr. Paul D. Shapiro, Associate Professor of Sociology, Department of Psychology/Sociology, Georgia Southwestern State University, 800 GSW University Drive, Americus, GA 31709. (229) 931-6996. Paul.Shapiro@gsw.edu

## Introduction

College and university students in the United States have been accused of displaying academically entitled attitudes (Achacoso, 2002; Greenberger et al., 2008; Lippmann, Bulanda, & Wagenaar, 2009; Lombardi, 2007; Twenge, 2006). Achacoso (2002) identifies two distinct areas of perceived academic entitlement. *Entitlement Expectations* are the beliefs that a student either expects to earn a high grade without putting much effort into the work, or perceives him or herself as deserving special treatment. *Entitlement Negotiations* are the beliefs that the student is entitled to debate a grade with an instructor or demand a certain grade.

Twenge (2006) hypothesizes that students are increasingly inundated with self-inflating messages throughout grade school. Accordingly, Mansfield (2001) and Greenberger (2008) posit these students then enter college with a sense of academic entitlement, which has likely been reinforced by a history of grade inflation. Lombardi (2007) argues that students who are about to attend college often believe that they are entitled to attend college, and that schools are obligated to ensure their success towards graduation. In an ever more competitive marketplace, when state and federal spending is on the decline, Edmunson (1997) argues that universities are catering to students to boost enrollment numbers. As students are increasingly marketed to and recruited as 'consumers' (Edmunson, 1997; Sosteric, Gismondi, & Ratkovic, 1998) they may be internalizing this privileged status and taking it into the classroom.

Cheating has become a major concern on many college campuses (Alschuler & Blimling, 1995; Anderman, Cupp, & Lane, 2010; Davis & Ludvigson, 1995; Jordan, 2001; McCabe & Bowers, 2009; Robinson et al., 2004; Tibbetts, 1999; Volpe, Davidson, & Bell, 2008; Whitley, 1998). As higher education becomes more of a business, with schools aggressively competing for the same students, McCabe and Trevino (1996) posit that if students are coming to college simply to get a credential, how these students get that credential becomes less-and-less important.

Whitley's (1998) review of over 40 studies found that 70.4% of college students report cheating. Of these, 43.1% report cheating on exams, and 40.9% report cheating on homework assignments. Davis et al.'s (1992) large-scale study of high school and college students found that 76% of students reported that they had cheated on at least one examination. In McCabe and Trevino's (1996) study of 6,000 students at 31 selective colleges and universities, the authors found that 70% of students admit to cheating on exams, 84% admit to cheating on written

papers, and nearly 50% of the students admit to inappropriately collaborating with others on assignments.

According to Whitley (1998) feeling pressure to achieve high grades correlates positively with cheating behaviors. Additionally, the more pressure students report feeling, the more likely they are to cheat (Whitley, 1998). Research also supports the claim that students who have a desire to learn or master a particular body of information are less likely to cheat than are students motivated by extrinsic factors such as 'getting a better job' (Anderman, Cupp, & Lane, 2010; Davis & Ludvigson, 1995; Jordan, 2001; Robinson et al., 2004).

Perceived cheating tolerance by fellow students also seems to induce more cheating behaviors. McCabe and Trevino (1993) provide evidence that cheating is most prevalent among students who believe their peers are cheating, and where the climate of peer disapproval is low. Robinson et al. (2004) report that cheaters are convinced that most of their friends and acquaintances tolerate or condone academic dishonesty. However, one explanation for this might be that cheaters tend to seek out peers who do not expressly disapprove of their cheating (McCabe & Bowers, 2009).

Twenge (2009) believes this generation scores significantly higher on extraversion, self-esteem, and narcissism measures than previous generations. However, for the high school student who derives self-worth from being near the top of his or her class, being somewhere in the middle, or not succeeding at all in college can be a crushing blow (Stewart, 1998). In fact, being overconfident may lead to greater failure, perhaps because overconfident people do not recognize when they are doing badly and need to improve (Robins & Beers, 2001). There are conflicting reports that self-esteem influences cheating behaviors. Ward (1986) and Iyer and Eastman (2006) found that students with low self-esteem are more likely to cheat. However, other studies have found that perceptions of self-esteem did not predict unethical behavior (Tang & Zuo, 1997; Buckley, Wiese, & Harvey, 1998).

### **Research Objectives**

This research has three objectives: (1) to examine the association between college students' sense of entitlement and their tolerance of cheating behaviors; (2) to examine the association between the students' sense of superiority and their tolerance of cheating behaviors; and (3) to determine if a student's senses of entitlement and superiority have co-predictive value when holding constant a wide assortment of control variables.

In addition to the traditional demographics (such as sex, race, age, living in a dorm, political orientation, etc.) this exploratory study expands upon previous research by simultaneously taking into account several new control variables including the student's high school background, how the student is paying for college, the students' parent's education levels, perceived parental pressure to obtain high grades, and whether or not the student is planning to play varsity sports or join a fraternity/sorority.

## **Methods**

The data discussed here were collected as part of a larger cross-sectional study of incoming freshmen attending a small regional state university in the fall of 2009. Students voluntarily completed a self-administered pen-and-paper survey on campus, in two large group settings, near the end of their Freshman Orientation Day, one day prior to the start of their fall semester classes. In addition to the questions and demographic items specifically pertaining to this study the more inclusive instrument also gathered data on the students' previous high school experiences, insight into their decision to attend this university, their interests in joining various student organizations, and their perceptions of professors, classroom behavior, studying, grades, and on-line courses. This inaugural incoming freshmen survey project was, in part, designed to address a variety of institutional reaffirmation topics. Additionally, data from this project was used in a faculty-student gap analysis which compares pertinent student and faculty responses across a wide assortment of research questions.

A majority (78.6%) of the university's fall 2009 incoming freshman class agreed to participate (n=363). Some international and non-traditional students are known to have been absent, as were a few last minute enrollees. However, for the most part, this sample of incoming freshmen accurately reflects the overall student characteristics for this university. A majority (61%) of the incoming students are female. The respondents in the sample range in age from 17 to 27 and average 18.1 years old. As a group, the incoming freshmen are racially diverse with 54.4% describing themselves as White/Caucasian, 35.9% identifying as Black/African American, and 9.7% self-identifying as some other category or multiracial. Most of the freshman in the sample (77.5%) are living in a dorm their first semester. One third (33.8%) expect, or hope, to play varsity sports, and just over half (52.1%) hope to join a fraternity or sorority.

Independent variables:

*Sense of Entitlement.* Students' sense of entitlement [see Table 1] is assessed using an abridged instrument adapted from Greenberger et al. (2008). Utilizing a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), subjects responded to twelve different short statements such as: "If I attend class every day (or almost every day) I deserve at least a 'B' for the course" or, "A professor should be willing to loan me his/her course notes if I ask for them." A composite entitlement score (where a higher number reflects a greater sense of student entitlement) was constructed by adding together the scores from each of the scenarios (Range = 17-56, Mean = 36.4, SD = 6.2, Cronbach's alpha = .736).

TABLE 1.

Means, Standard Deviations, and Percent *Agree/Strongly Agree*, for 12 Items Reflecting Student Sense of Entitlement (1-5 point scale, higher score reflects greater student sense of entitlement.)

| Item   | M    | SD   | % SA/A |
|--|------|------|--------|
| If I do all the homework for a class I deserve at least a 'B' for the course.  | 3.54 | 0.95 | 57.0%  |
| If the professor knows I worked hard this semester I deserve at least a 'B' for the course.  | 3.58 | 0.98 | 55.5%  |
| If I participate in class every day (or almost every day) I deserve at least a 'B' for the course.   | 3.35 | 0.98 | 48.1%  |
| If I attend class every day (or almost every day) I deserve at least a 'B' for the course.   | 3.10 | 1.07 | 36.6%  |
| If I'm not happy with my final grade for a course, the professor should allow me to do an extra credit assignment to bring my grade up.                                  | 3.13 | 1.01 | 34.7%  |
| A professor should be willing to lend me his/her course notes if I ask for them.   | 3.03 | 0.99 | 29.3%  |
| A professor who won't let me take an exam at a different day or time because of my personal plans (e.g. a vacation or other trip that is important to me) is too strict. | 2.59 | 1.11 | 19.8%  |
| A professor should let me turn in an assignment late if the due date interferes with my scheduled vacation plans.  | 2.26 | 1.02 | 12.5%  |
| A professor should be willing to meet with me at a time that works best for me, even if it's inconvenient for the professor.   | 2.28 | 0.98 | 11.8%  |
| If my cell phone rings (goes off) in class I deserve to have my final grade lowered*.  | 3.67 | 1.13 | 15.6%  |
| If I frequently come to class late I deserve to have my final grade lowered*.  | 2.96 | 1.08 | 35.4%  |
| If I hand in my homework assignments late I deserve to have my final grade lowered*.   | 2.92 | 1.01 | 37.0%  |

\* Reverse Coded.

*Sense of Superiority.* Students' sense of superiority [Table 2] is assessed by adapting one section of an incoming freshman survey utilized by the University of Central Arkansas (see Frana, 2006). Respondents are asked to compare themselves to the average person in their age and peer group, and to indicate on a scale from 1 (*much less*) to 5 (*much more*) how they compare across ten parameters measuring different types of skills such as creativity, and drive to succeed. For example, "Compared to your peers, how would you rate your computer abilities?" For this scenario, a 1 response would reflect *much less competent*; and a 5 response would reflect *much more competent*. A composite superiority score (where a higher number reflects a greater sense of superiority) was constructed by adding together the scores from each of the comparisons (Range = 20-45, Mean = 32.4, SD = 4.6, Cronbach's alpha = .633).

TABLE 2.

Means, Standard Deviations, and Percent *More/Much More* for 10 Items Reflecting Student's Self Assessed Sense of Superiority (1-5 point scale, higher score reflects greater student sense of superiority.)

| Item  | M    | SD   | % More/Much More |
|---|------|------|------------------|
| Compared to your Peers:                               |      |      |                  |
| Rate your "drive to succeed".                         | 3.83 | 0.88 | 63.7%            |
| Rate your levels of self confidence.                  | 3.46 | 1.01 | 47.8%            |
| Rate your levels of creativity.                       | 3.38 | 0.97 | 46.3%            |
| Rate your overall academic ability.                   | 3.39 | 0.67 | 41.5%            |
| Rate your computer abilities.                         | 3.41 | 0.79 | 40.5%            |
| Rate your writing abilities.                          | 3.27 | 0.91 | 38.1%            |
| Rate your mathematical abilities.                     | 3.17 | 1.03 | 37.1%            |
| Rate your artistic abilities.                         | 2.73 | 1.17 | 27.9%            |
| Rate your public speaking ability.                    | 2.88 | 1.11 | 24.9%            |
| Rate your knowledge of current news and world events. | 2.90 | 0.91 | 22.2%            |

Dependent variable:

*Cheating Tolerance.* To measure cheating tolerance [Table 3] respondents indicated on a scale from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*) whether they agreed or disagreed with four different short statements about cheating behaviors such as: "A student caught cheating for the first time deserves to be expelled from the university" or, "It is cheating if a friend helps you do a homework assignment that you are supposed to do on your own." A composite cheating tolerance score

(where a higher number reflects greater tolerance of cheating) was constructed by adding together the scores from each of the statements (Range = 4-20, Mean = 12.7, SD = 2.9, Cronbach's Alpha = .609).

TABLE 3.

Means, Standard Deviations, and Percent *Agree/Strongly Agree*, for 4 Items Reflecting Student's Tolerance of Cheating (1-5 point scale, higher score reflects greater student tolerance of cheating.)

| Item  | M    | SD   | % SA/A |
|---|------|------|--------|
| A student who is caught cheating for the <u>first time</u> deserves to be expelled from the university.                         | 3.86 | 1.04 | 9.2%   |
| A student who is caught cheating for the <u>second time</u> deserves to be expelled from the university.                        | 2.99 | 1.17 | 35.2%  |
| It is cheating if a friend gives you the answers to a homework assignment you could have done correctly if you had enough time: | 2.69 | 0.95 | 40.3%  |
| It is cheating if a friend helps you do a homework assignment that you are supposed to do on your own:                          | 3.10 | 1.05 | 27.5%  |

#### Control Variables:

In many of the previously noted studies, multiple control variables are often included in the analyses. In addition to the "standard" demographic predictors this exploratory study incorporates a wide range of variables not typically examined that may show a correlation to the incoming freshmen's perceived senses of superiority, entitlement, and cheating tolerance.

Participants provided demographic information that, except for age, was converted into Dummy variables. Sex is coded (Male = 1). Race is coded (White = 1, Non-White = 0). If both of the respondents' parents are college graduates; if the student graduated from a regular public high school; if the incoming freshmen plans on joining a fraternity or sorority; if he or she plans (or hopes) to play varsity sports; if the respondent is living on campus this semester, and if the respondent perceives a lot of parental pressure to attain good grades are all coded (Yes = 1, No = 0). The students' political leanings are recoded into two multiple dummy variables (respectively, Conservative = 1, and Moderates = 1, when



compared to Liberals = 0). Lastly, how the student is primarily paying for school is measured (Self or Family Paying = 1, Not Self or Family Paying = 0). Self or Family Paying may include loans, but does not include non-reimbursable funding sources such as scholarships or grants.

## Results

Descriptive analyses suggest this 2009 incoming freshman cohort demonstrates a high sense of academic entitlement. A majority (57%) of the incoming students *agreed* or *strongly agreed* with the statement: “If I do all the homework for a class I deserve at least a ‘B’ for the course.” Likewise, 55.5% *agreed* or *strongly agreed* with the statement: “If a professor knows I worked hard this semester I deserve at least a ‘B’ for the course.” Nearly half (48.1%) of the students believe that if they “participate in class every day (or almost every day) [they] deserve at least a ‘B’ for the course.” Alternatively, only 37% of the incoming cohort believes they should get their final grade lowered if they hand in their homework assignments late.

Interestingly, this sample of incoming freshmen does not often report feeling superior to their friends and peers. In only one of ten scenarios: “Compared to your peers, rate your ‘drive to succeed’” did a majority of the students (67%) rank themselves as *more* or *much more* driven. In the next closest scenarios, less than half (47.8% and 46.3%) rated themselves higher than their friends and peers when it came to their “levels of self confidence” and “levels of creativity” respectively.

In measuring cheating tolerance, two survey questions address punishment, and two address definitions of cheating behavior. Only a small percentage of freshmen (9.2%) believe a student caught cheating for the first time deserves to be expelled from the university. The percentage endorsing expulsion increases to 35.2% when a student is caught cheating for the second time. When presented with cheating scenarios (that are essentially described in the Student Bulletin), only 40.3% of the incoming freshmen *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that it is cheating “If a friend gives you the answers to a homework assignment you could have done correctly if you had enough time.” Additionally, only 27.5% *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that it is cheating “If a friend helps you do a homework assignment that you are supposed to do on your own.”

The data presented in Table 4 shows there is a significant positive correlation between sense of entitlement and cheating tolerance. Students who have a greater sense of entitlement demonstrate a higher tolerance towards cheating behavior. Inversely, there is a significant negative association between sense of superiority and cheating tolerance. Students who have a greater sense of superiority appear to be less tolerant of cheating behaviors.

TABLE 4.

Single Order Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations of Cheating, Entitlement, and Superiority Scores, Plus Control Variables.

| Variables                    | 1.      | 2.    | 3.     | 4.      | 5.      | 6.     | 7.      | 8.      | 9.     | 10.    | 11.   | 12.   | 13.   | 14.   | M (SD)      |
|------------------------------|---------|-------|--------|---------|---------|--------|---------|---------|--------|--------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------------|
| 1. Cheating Score            | --      |       |        |         |         |        |         |         |        |        |       |       |       |       | 12.7 (2.85) |
| 2. Entitlement Score         | .197**  | --    |        |         |         |        |         |         |        |        |       |       |       |       | 36.4 (6.24) |
| 3. Superiority Score         | -.164** | -.010 | --     |         |         |        |         |         |        |        |       |       |       |       | 32.4 (4.62) |
| 4. If Male                   | -.095^  | .096^ | .051   | --      |         |        |         |         |        |        |       |       |       |       | 0.40 (0.49) |
| 5. If White                  | .040    | -.026 | -.111* | .092    | --      |        |         |         |        |        |       |       |       |       | 0.54 (0.50) |
| 6. Age                       | .005    | .028  | -.093  | .078    | -.059   | --     |         |         |        |        |       |       |       |       | 18.1 (0.74) |
| 7. If Moderate               | .113*   | .071  | -.076  | -.099   | -.226** | -.063  | --      |         |        |        |       |       |       |       | 0.38 (0.49) |
| 8. If Conservative           | -.049   | .069  | .026   | .000    | .254**  | .059   | -.670** | --      |        |        |       |       |       |       | 0.43 (0.50) |
| 9. If Reg. Public HS         | .050    | -.080 | .103^  | -.151** | -.249** | -.011  | .159**  | -.187** | --     |        |       |       |       |       | 0.79 (0.41) |
| 10. If Living in Dorm        | .063    | .053  | .026   | -.056   | -.293** | -.005  | .024    | -.122*  | .248** | --     |       |       |       |       | 0.77 (0.42) |
| 11. If Self/Family Pay       | -.003   | .099  | -.063  | .133*   | -.076   | .163** | -.040   | .028    | -.069  | .152** | --    |       |       |       | 0.40 (0.49) |
| 12. If Parents Col Grads     | -.058   | .036  | -.009  | .123*   | .054    | .010   | .047    | -.075   | -.112* | .042   | .120* | --    |       |       | 0.25 (0.43) |
| 13. Plan Join Frat/Sorority  | -.069   | -.031 | .143** | -.071   | -.134*  | .022   | .010    | -.107^  | .105*  | .094^  | .052  | -.037 | --    |       | 0.52 (0.50) |
| 14. Plan Play Varsity Sports | -.027   | .088  | .135*  | .262**  | -.113*  | .054   | -.016   | .022    | .069   | .117*  | .025  | .089  | -.050 | --    | 0.34 (0.47) |
| 15. A Lot of Parent Pressure | -.046   | -.042 | .175** | .046    | .089    | -.125* | -.009   | -.024   | -.079  | -.058  | -.080 | .006  | .005  | -.002 | 0.67 (0.47) |

^ p < .10, \* p < .05, \*\* p < .01,

It is worth noting that while both of the primary independent variables show significant correlations with cheating tolerance, there is no correlation between sense of entitlement and feelings of superiority. Furthermore, not a single control variable is significantly correlated to the students' sense of entitlement score. However, when it comes to the students' sense of superiority, four separate relationships are noted. Minority students, students who plan (or hope) to join fraternities or sororities, students who plan (or hope) to play varsity sports, and those students who perceive a lot of parental pressure to attain good grades all report a higher sense of superiority.

Table 5 presents the Standardized Beta coefficients for each of the six OLS regression models. Model #1 replicates the significant bivariate positive effect of entitlement on cheating tolerance. Likewise, Model #2 reports the significant bivariate negative effect of sense of superiority on cheating tolerance. Model #3 omits the two primary independent variables and presents the influence of all the control variables regressed concurrently on cheating tolerance. Supporting the correlational findings, this regression model does not show any significant demographic influences on cheating tolerance. Model #4 combines the students' sense of entitlement score and the control variables to substantiate a statistically significant moderate positive association between entitlement and cheating tolerance. Holding the influence of all control variables constant, the higher the students' sense of entitlement score, the greater their tolerance towards cheating behavior. Model #5 substitutes the sense of superiority score for the sense of entitlement score, and now shows that while the negative direction of the association remains consistent, the influence of the control variables reduces the independent effect of superiority on cheating, and it is now statistically insignificant ( $p = .092$ ). Finally, Model #6 combines both the sense of entitlement and sense of superiority independent variables with all of the control variables to clearly confirm that a student's sense of entitlement continues to significantly and positively predict a greater cheating tolerance.

TABLE 5.

OLS Regression Models (Standardized Betas) Predicting Cheating Tolerance (Higher Score Reflects Greater Tolerance of Cheating.)

|                                 | <u>Model #1</u> | <u>Model #2</u> | <u>Model #3</u> | <u>Model #4</u> | <u>Model #5</u> | <u>Model #6</u> |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| <b>Sense of Entitlement</b>     | .197***         |                 |                 | .233***         |                 | .237***         |
| <b>Sense of Superiority</b>     |                 | -.164**         |                 |                 | -.117^          | -.112^          |
| <b>If Male</b>                  |                 |                 | -.044           | -.076           | -.018           | -.048           |
| <b>If White</b>                 |                 |                 | .043            | .063            | .047            | .071            |
| <b>Age</b>                      |                 |                 | .014            | .007            | -.006           | -.013           |
| <b>If Moderate</b>              |                 |                 | .167^           | .114            | .175^           | .122            |
| <b>If Conservative</b>          |                 |                 | .085            | .044            | .096            | .055            |
| <b>Regular Public HS</b>        |                 |                 | .006            | .048            | .010            | .055            |
| <b>Living in Dorm</b>           |                 |                 | .057            | .050            | .058            | .048            |
| <b>Self/Family Pay</b>          |                 |                 | .031            | .032            | .032            | .031            |
| <b>Both Parents Col Grads</b>   |                 |                 | -.027           | -.041           | -.042           | -.060           |
| <b>Plan Join Frat/Sorority</b>  |                 |                 | -.059           | -.079           | -.041           | -.065           |
| <b>Plan Play Varsity Sports</b> |                 |                 | .020            | -.008           | .034            | .007            |
| <b>A Lot Parental Pressure</b>  |                 |                 | -.045           | -.067           | -.024           | -.051           |
| R-Square                        | .039            | .027            | .028            | .081            | .046            | .100            |
| N                               | 347             | 345             | 245             | 238             | 238             | 232             |

\*\*\* p < .001, \*\* p < .01, \* p < .05, ^ p < .10

## **Discussion**

This study examines the relationship between a students' sense of academic entitlement and their tolerance towards cheating behavior. Data presented here clearly shows a moderate positive association. A greater sense of entitlement significantly increases one's cheating tolerance. The descriptive statistics also reveal that a large proportion of the incoming freshmen in this sample display both a very strong sense of entitlement and fairly tolerant attitudes towards cheating behaviors.

Although these findings are conceptually consistent with the results of other research, this study is important because it examines students at the very start of their college careers. Additionally, this study also incorporates a number of new control variables (such as political views, parental education, how students are paying for college, and perceived parental pressures to attain good grades) that are not usually examined.

As previously discussed, the influence of the students' sense of superiority and the other control variables did not significantly affect cheating tolerance. This may be related to the somewhat homogenized population from which the sample is drawn. The nonsignificant interactions could also suggest that either tolerance towards cheating has similar predictor effects for many of our incoming students or, logically, that the influence of a student's sense of entitlement appears to be consistent across a wide range of demographic categories.

It is important to remember that this data was literally gathered on the students first day at the university. These freshmen are clearly coming onto campus with these preexisting entitlement attitudes and cheating values. The findings from this study support Greenberger et al. (2008) who believe that students have already developed entitlement attitudes before they enter college. These results show there is a need to recognize that higher levels of student entitlement may act as precursors to possible cheating, or to the tolerance of cheating. The data presented also suggest administrators and faculty should consider implementing aggressive early intervention programs aimed at mitigating some of these disturbing findings.

## **Study Limitations and Future Research**

As previously noted, some international and non-traditional students are missing from this study. Moreover, the overwhelming majority (81.3%) of subjects in this sample are 18 years of age. Future research comparing older freshmen to more traditional-aged students, and national versus international

students would be insightful. Additionally, future analyses comparing different types of schools (public vs. private, teaching vs. research) and across varied geographic regions may be beneficial. Research, including in-depth qualitative data gathered from a series of focus groups, would further strengthen these findings as well as provide practitioners with greater insights into our incoming freshmen.

It should also be noted that due to selective item non-response there is a 33% reduction in sample size from the first to last regression model. Furthermore, the overall r-square for the most comprehensive model is somewhat low -- only explaining 10% of the variance. While this is not entirely unusual for individual level data, the finding indicates that some other key variables are still missing from our full understanding of this complex issue.

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