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The OT/OTA student response to COVID-19: A cross-sectional survey of occupational therapy student roles during crisis management

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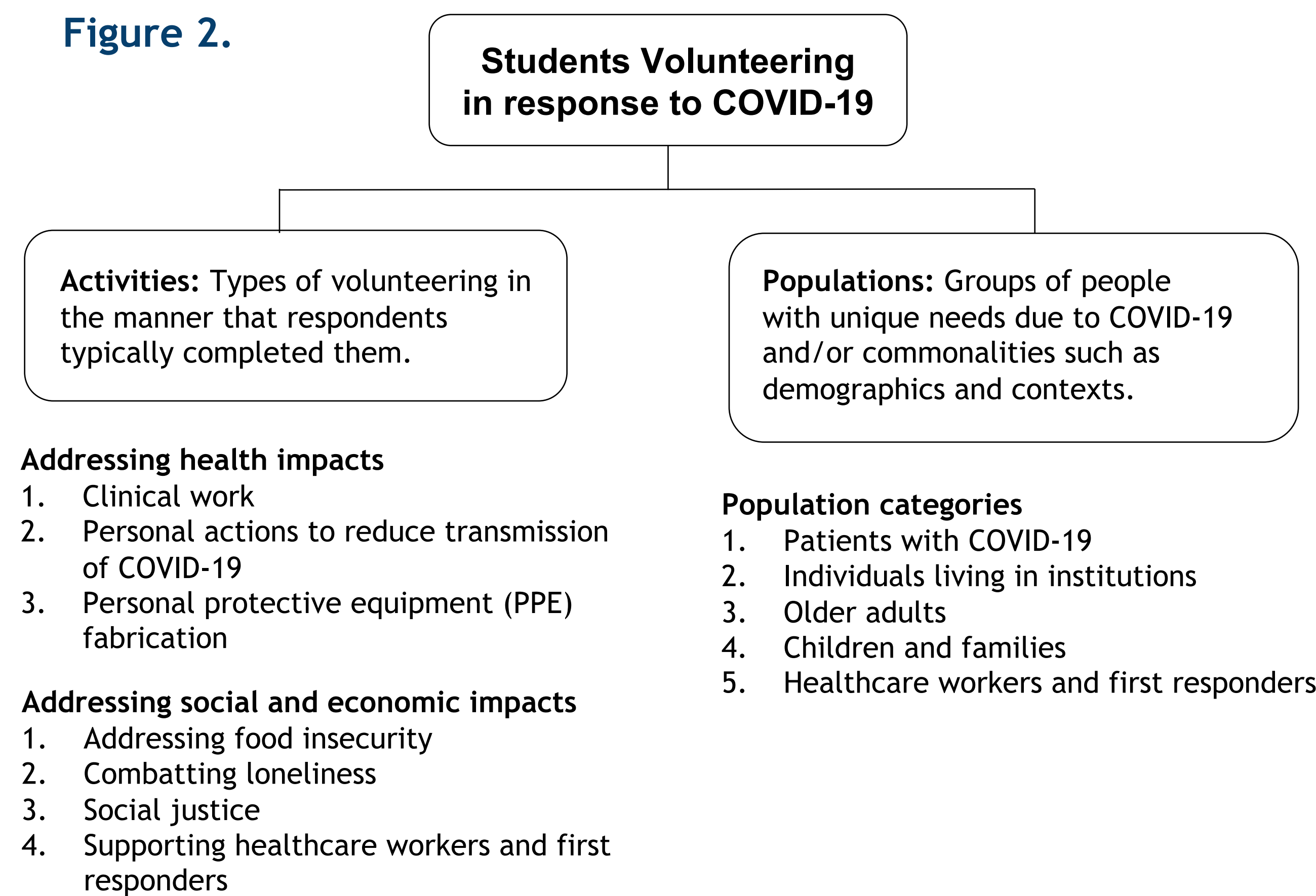
Purpose & Methods

This exploratory cross-sectional survey study sought to understand OT/OTA student use of time and/or volunteerism efforts as a result of immediate and unexpected role changes brought on by COVID-19 as students were required to abruptly transition from in-person to virtual learning in every program in the United States (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2020a). The survey was deployed via Qualtrics to online professional networks in spring 2020 and closed after 5 weeks. Quantitative data was analyzed in SPSS and open-response data was categorized and analyzed in Excel. The alpha value was set to 0.05.

Results

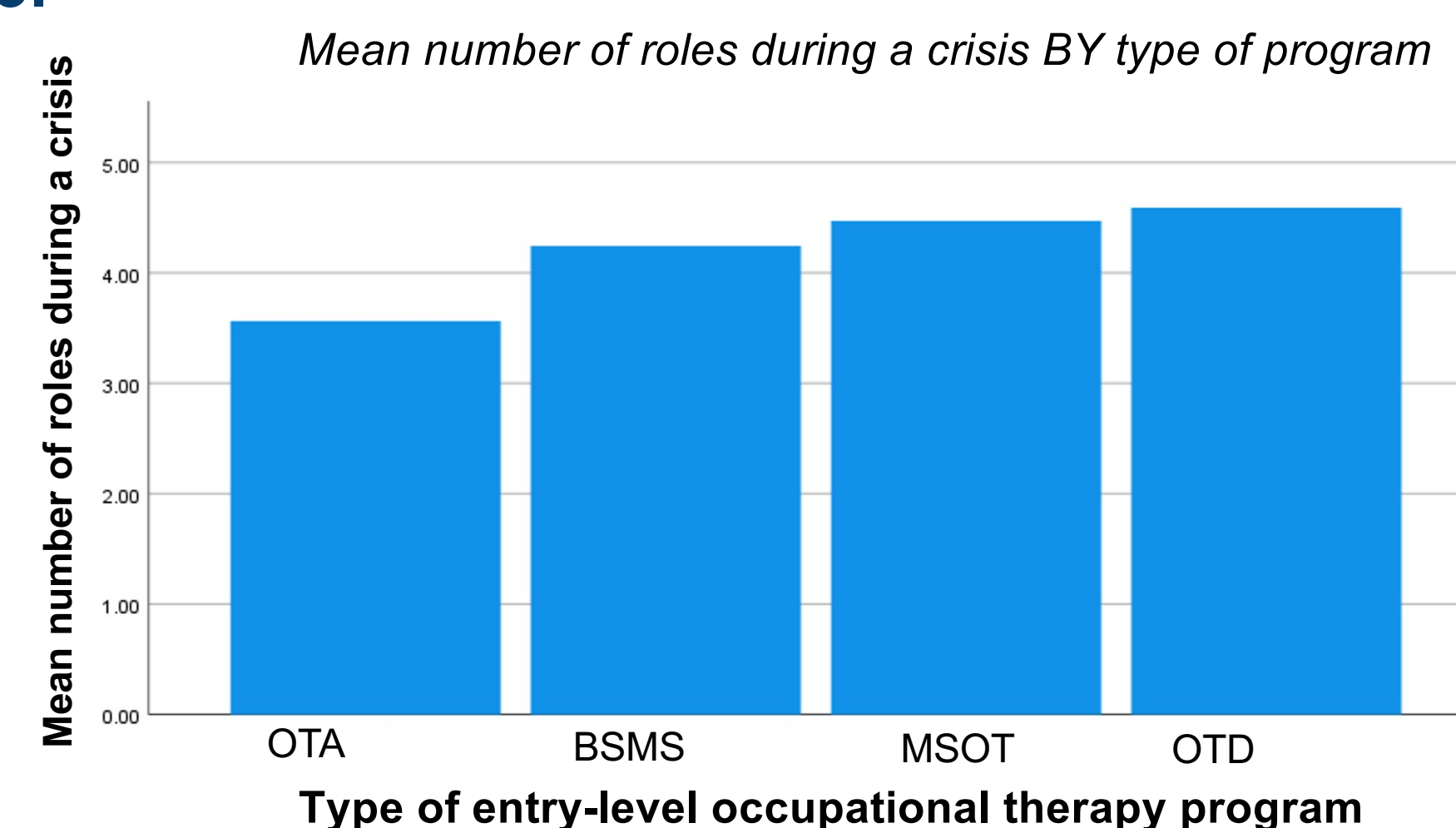
Participants represented a **national sample of students** from each type of entry-level OT program ($n = 851$), and a small number of students were **volunteering in response to COVID-19** (6.9%, $n = 59$). Reasons for volunteering included altruism, justice, personal responsibility, and calls to action from personal networks. The frequency of students in each entry-level program volunteering in response to COVID-19 did not differ significantly (Figure 1). Volunteer activities and populations served are depicted in Figure 2. OTA students selected significantly fewer professional roles of OT professionals during a crisis such as COVID-19 compared to students from all other entry-level programs (Figure 3), while OTA students selected significantly fewer roles of OT professionals after a crisis such as COVID-19 compared to only MSOT and OTD students (Figure 4).

Figure 2.



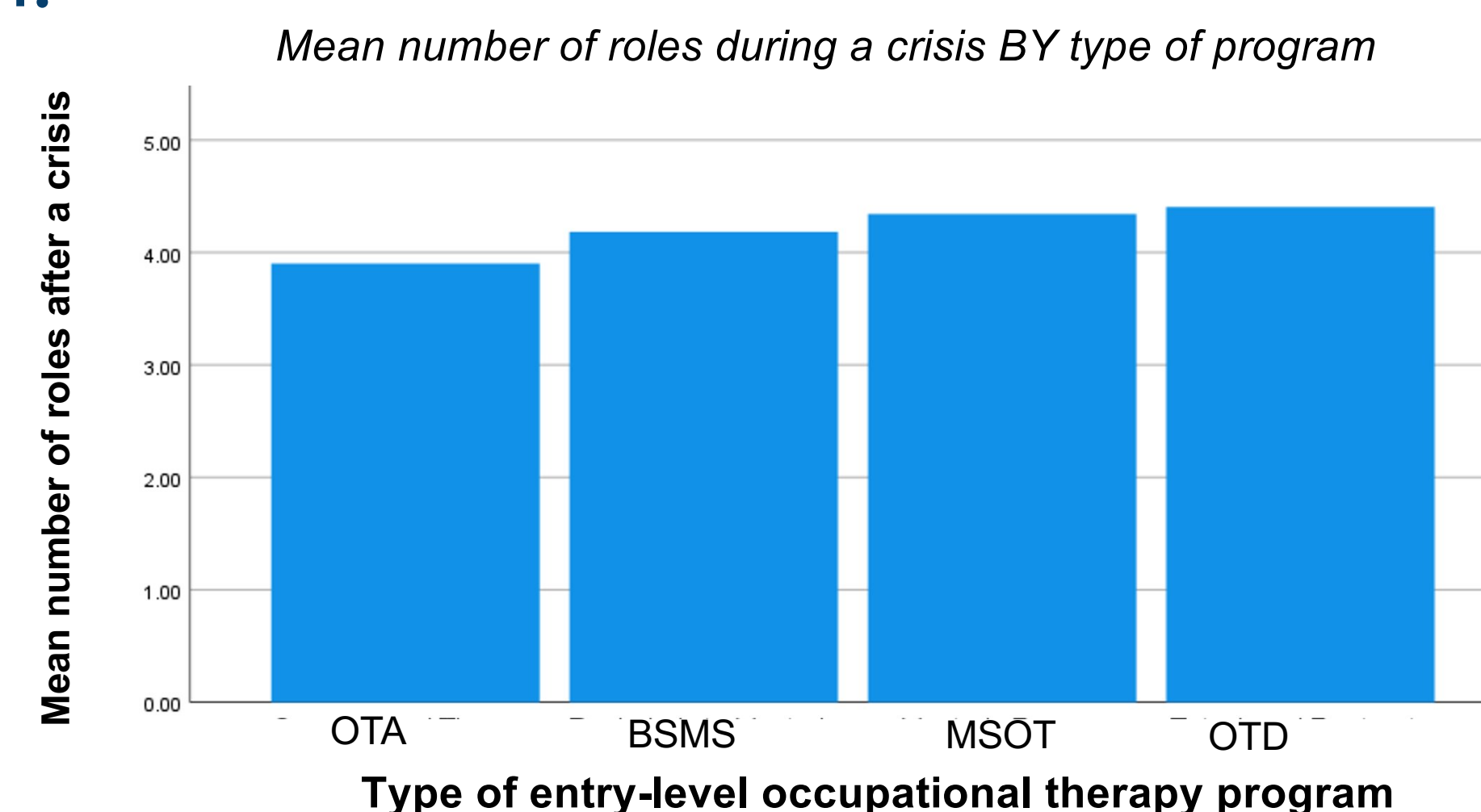
Note. This schematic depicts OT/OTA student volunteer activities and populations served by student volunteers. Activities addressed health, social, and economic impacts of COVID-19.

Figure 3.



Note. Roles of OT professionals during a crisis that participants could select on the survey included: 1) mental health and stress management interventions, 2) evacuation planning for people with disabilities, 3) clinical practice with people impacted by the crisis, 4) training and supporting first responders, 5) interprofessional teamwork, 6) addressing occupational deprivation, and 7) other (open response text box).

Figure 4.



Note. Roles of OT professionals during a crisis that participants could select on the survey included: 1) mental health and stress management interventions, 2) promoting return to meaningful routines, 3) supporting healthcare professionals and first responders, 4) advocating for healthcare policy change, 6) treating people that acquired injuries, conditions, or disabilities related to the crisis, and 7) other (open response text box).

Discussion

Most respondents were not volunteering, which may indicate time constraints, lack of PPE, and limited exposure to previous volunteering (Patel et al., 2017). Of the respondents that were volunteering, activities varied and reflected the versatility of the OT lens. Volunteer motivations also evoked similar language to the AOTA Code of Ethics such as justice and altruism (AOTA, 2020b). It is possible that volunteering students have internalized aspects of the Code of Ethics. It is hoped that the results of this study can serve as a call to action for future crisis-related volunteer activities and student exposure to information regarding OT's role in disaster management.

Future Directions

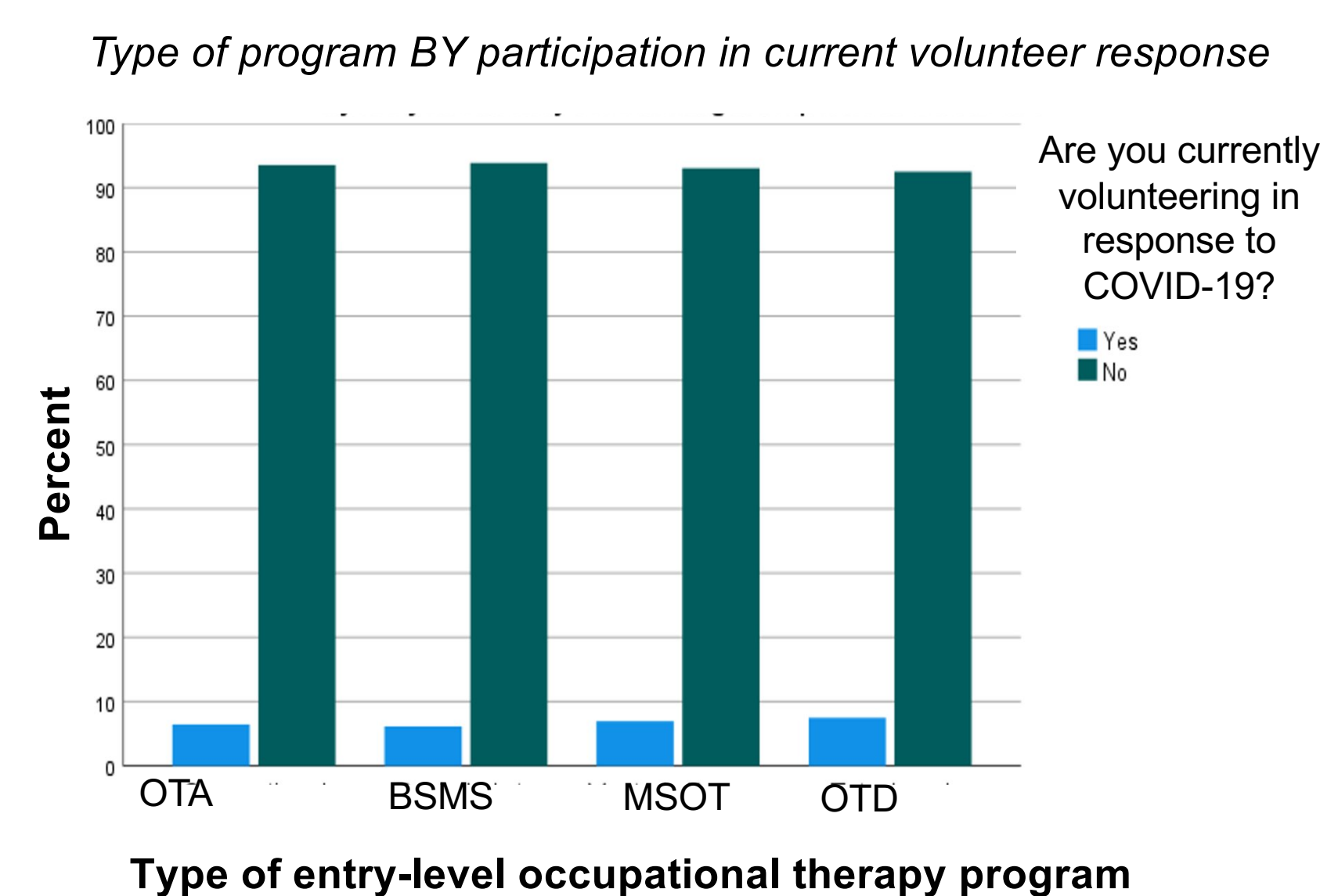
This study demonstrates that students' socialization to the profession may begin during their degree programs, expanding beyond academic settings and into personal and public volunteerism. To promote the scope of OT in future crisis-related activities, educators can:

- Increase student exposure to volunteer and service-learning opportunities
- Include academic literature regarding OT's role in crisis response in course curriculum
- Foster discussion regarding the applicability of OT's scope of practice to a wide variety of current events

References

- AOTA (2020a, March 19). A Message from AOTA on COVID-19. *AOTA.org*. <https://www.aota.org/Publications-News/AOTANews/2020/Leadership-Statement-Coronavirus-COVID-19.aspx>
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- Patel, R., Wattamwar, K., Kanduri, J., Nahass, M., Yoon, J., Oh, J., Shukla, P., Lacy, C.R. (2017) Health care student knowledge and willingness to work in infectious disease outbreaks. *Disaster Medicine and Public Health Preparedness*, 11(6), 694-700.

Figure 1.



Note. This comparative bar-graph shows the frequency of volunteering and non-volunteering students in each entry-level OT program. A chi-square test indicated no significant difference between the number of volunteers and non-volunteers in each type of entry-level program.



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