

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 136 992

RC 009 770

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 TITLE Intensity of Aspirations in Adult Households and Its Relation to Household Status Attainment.  
 INSTITUTION Alabama Agricultural Experiment Station, Auburn.; Auburn Univ., Ala. Dept. of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology.  
 SPONS AGENCY Cooperative State Research Service (DOA), Washington, D.C.  
 REPORT NO ALA-AES-H-316; USDA (CSRS)-S-79  
 PUB DATE Feb 77  
 NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southern Association of Agricultural Scientists (Atlanta, Georgia, February 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.83 HC-\$1.67 Plus Postage.  
 DESCRIPTORS \*Adults; \*Aspiration; \*Economically Disadvantaged; Family Income; Females; Followup Studies; Heads of Households; Housewives; Males; Occupations; \*Research Methodology; \*Rural Areas; \*Sex Differences; Social Relations; Southern States

ABSTRACT

In an effort to construct a quantitative aspiration measure for adults, a hypothetical situation with job related conditions was presented to a stratified sample of 21 counties in 5 southern states randomly selected from a 7-state regional sample of low-income county household heads and homemakers in 1960. Resulting data were tested for scalability, and two independent Guttman scales were constructed. The household head scale consisted of seven conditions and the homemaker scale of six conditions. A restudy of the same 21 counties was conducted in 1972 with the objective of determining changes which had occurred in counties classified as low-income in 1960 (no effort was made to contact the same households, but 190 of the same households were interviewed again). Three social and economic factors describing household status attainment (occupation of household head, family income, and social participation) were considered in terms of differentiated aspiration levels. Findings indicated use of a hypothetical goal situation to measure the aspirations of adult females was valid; however, it was concluded that aspiration projected by the homemaker for her husband was a less appropriate procedure in the context of the 1970's than it was in the 1960's. (JC)

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ED136992

The Department of  
**AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS  
AND RURAL SOCIOLOGY**

INTENSITY OF ASPIRATIONS IN ADULT HOUSEHOLDS  
AND ITS RELATION TO HOUSEHOLD STATUS  
ATTAINMENT

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**PRESENTED PAPER**

INTENSITY OF ASPIRATIONS IN ADULT HOUSEHOLDS AND ITS  
RELATION TO HOUSEHOLD STATUS ATTAINMENT<sup>1/</sup>

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During the last several decades, much effort has been directed toward measuring and examining aspirations of individuals and groups. Sociologists have focused upon cross-cultural and inter-strata differences, while the concentration of social psychologists has been on the origin and complexity of achievement motivation (Atkinson and Feather, 1974). Although there is ample literature on motivation and aspirations in general, there has been little attention specifically to aspirations among adults. Aspirations research has been confined almost completely to adolescent males (Kuvlesky and Reynolds, 1970). One may interpret this neglect as an indication of the social scientist's desire to monitor aspirations during a formative age against which later attainments may be compared rather than with the ungoing process of aspirations over a lifetime.

A review of the aspiration literature reveals few studies of adult aspirations and none utilizing a longitudinal perspective which tracks aspirants through time. One obvious reason for this is the inherent difficulty associated with panel studies extending over a long period. In addition, there is the view held by some social scientists that aspirations are not reliable predictors of future attainment. Kuvlesky and Bealer (1967) arrived at this position based on findings involving occupational aspirations of young males and their subsequent occupational attainments in young adulthood. Further support for such a contention is perhaps best expressed by Featherman (1972), when he states that:

"there has been no support for the assertion by some social psychologists that achievement orientations are highly relevant to status attainment processes in industrialized society."  
(p. 131)

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<sup>1/</sup>Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Rural Sociology Section, Southern Association of Agricultural Scientists, Atlanta, Georgia, February, 1977. The data were collected and analyzed as part of Alabama Hatch Project 316 and contributing to Southern Regional Research Project S-79, Alabama Agricultural Experiment Station.

### Problem Statement

This analysis is an exploratory effort to determine levels of aspiration among adults. Special attention is given to household aspiration configurations involving the male household head and homemaker. Because aspiration studies have tended to focus almost exclusively on males, serious questions exist concerning whether the aspirations of adult and particularly adult females can be meaningfully measured and, if so, what procedures should be utilized.

A second focus is on the question of the relationship between status attainment indicators and aspirations. One aspect of this concern is the association that exists at any given point in time between attained statuses and existing levels of aspiration. A further aspect here is the relevance of adult aspirations in predicting subsequent status attainment. Both of these questions are addressed using the household as the relevant unit of study. The household is assumed most appropriate for adults constrained by spouse and family responsibilities.

### Theoretical Framework

Zetterberg (1965) states that man behaves in ways designed to realize his self image and is primarily concerned with preservation of his own self evaluation. Such a conceptualization of human motivation has evolved within the realm of ego-psychology, which itself emerged in the wake of psychoanalysis. Several postulates and theorems about subjective motivation have been developed from this ego-psychology perspective.

One such theorem is that of "rank motivation," which Zetterberg describes in the following way:

"Persons are likely to engage in those actions within their repertoire of actions which maintain them in the ranks they hold." (p. 130)

The term "rank" is used to indicate the evaluation or value assigned to each stratum within a stratification system and to the myriad of roles held by persons in any given stratum. Accompanying each role are expected behaviors, attitudes, and attributes. These are acknowledged not only by the individuals occupying various stratum, but also by the public which observes the person in various roles. Zetterberg postulates that individuals behave in a manner consistent with that which is expected of them, and that their aspirations are more or less aligned with those of their peers. All this is done in order to avoid arousing the disapproval of others, be it blatant or subtle, and to maintain one's security or self esteem within rank.

It logically follows from the rank motivation theorem that an important goal of ego is to maintain a sense of personal security. The potential for ego disappointment resulting from a desire for unrealistic

goals is to be avoided. Toward this end, adults who have already attained various ranks set their future goals in terms of perceived feasibility for further attainment, given their physical, social, and psychological potentials.

Sneden (1974) builds on this theorem by suggesting that it is necessary for the less successful members of a culture to devalue high ranking goals in favor of lower ranking substitutes in order to retain a healthy sense of self-esteem. These lower ranking goals often are institutionalized and passed on from one generation to the next. Through such a process, the "repertoire of ones rank" is developed and legitimized.

This decline in the adult's desire for advancement and ultimate resignation to his or her attained rank finds support in the work of Berelson and Steiner (1964). These authors contend that the less successful individuals become disenchanted with the dream of upward mobility so prevalent in a technological society. Disillusioned they are left isolated and lacking faith in their potentials for improvement.

Sneden's study of mobility orientations among the poor revealed that high evaluation of middle-class status models, mass media use, general spatial mobility, and the desire for contact with middle-class referents were the most significant factors associated with high social mobility aspirations. Yet the author adds that although psychic mobility lays a foundation for upward social mobility, vicarious intersystemic contact alone is probably not enough to allow one to develop a clear perception of paths to upward social mobility. Such a perception of possible social ascent appears related to the acquisition of basic coping skills which come from actual involvement in a stratum of high social rank.

A different theoretical orientation is expressed in Merton's (1957) "status-frustration hypothesis". This theorem holds that the lower the socio-economic class, the greater is the status frustration. In this conceptualization, the person of lower class rank would experience the most intense frustration. On the other hand, Berelson and Steiner (1964) counter this contention by indicating that those suffering most acutely from status frustration are the achievers; those persons who have accomplished some degree of advancement, and who, finding achievement satisfying in higher ranks, desire more.

This discussion is in no way offered as a definitive statement of aspiration theory as it applies to the existence and function of aspirations among adults. Disagreement exists between theoretical perspectives, especially over Merton's contention that unrealized aspirations lead to status frustration. Our feeling is that the frustration theory is less useful in analyzing adult aspirations and status attainments than motivation theory and its accommodation mechanism.

### Measuring Adult Aspirations

As discussed in the previous section, there have been few efforts to measure aspirations among adults. One exception is found in the work of Reissman (1953), who attempted to measure aspirations in terms of opportunities for attaining an occupational advancement. This technique employed a hypothetical situation which offered the respondent "an opportunity to make a substantial advance in a job or occupation." Responses of "might stop me from making the change, would be a serious consideration, but wouldn't stop me, and wouldn't matter at all" were presented for each of 11 specific conditions that might be encountered in the new job.

Reissman contended that respondents who indicated they "would not favor" a condition were reflecting a stable commitment which predictably removed that condition from their value system. A favorable response across a number of conditions was interpreted as reflecting different degrees or levels of aspiration. By using this type of hypothetical constraints, the respondent is required to make a realistic assessment based on an existing status referent. Therefore, the aspirations revealed are realistic expressions of a person's desire for change. Although Reissman clearly indicates that he visualized these questions forming an aspiration scale, no published work has been located in which he attempted to construct such a scale.

In a later study, utilizing a variation of this technique, Fliegel (1959) constructed a simple aspiration index employing the hypothetical goal of "a lot of money" and 10 limiting conditions especially designed for farm operators. Weights of 1 for a negative response of "would stop me" and 0 for a neutral or positive response were assigned to each condition. An 8-point index was constructed in which level of aspiration was defined operationally "as the degree to which the items are perceived as obstacles to a chance to make more money". When relatively few obstacles are perceived as limiting factors, then the respondent places greater value on the goal and aspires more intensely to its attainment.

The present study continues the efforts to construct a quantitative aspiration measure for adults. Using available data for male household heads and homemakers and considering each as independent adult samples, two Guttman scales were constructed.<sup>2/</sup> The question format was similar to that used by Reissman, except for slight modification as seemed necessary for rural respondents and especially for homemakers. The hypothetical situations for both male and female respondents were as follows with homemaker adaptations in parentheses:

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<sup>2/</sup>Louis Guttman, "The Cornell Technique for Scale and Intensity Analysis." Educational and Psychological Measurement. 7, 1947, p. 247-279.

"Suppose you (your husband) were (was) offered a chance to make twice as much as you (he) now make (makes). Would you or wouldn't you favor (his) making the change if it meant (that: . . . You (he) would have to work at night instead of in the daytime?"<sup>3/</sup>

This hypothetical situation and job related conditions were administered to a 7-state regional sample of household heads and homemakers in 1960. The resulting data were tested for scalability, and two independent Guttman scales were constructed. The household head scale consisted of 7 conditions and the homemaker scale of 6 conditions.<sup>4/</sup> The array of all 11 conditions from least to most favored revealed considerable similarity in the ordering of the conditions between rural residents in the South and Reissman's residents of Evanston, Illinois.

### Sample

A sample of "low-income" counties throughout the Southern region was obtained statistically using data from the 1954 Census of Agriculture. The primary factor considered in determining the population of low-income counties was the 1954 Farm Operator Family Level of Living Index.<sup>5/</sup> There were 196 counties classified either "substantially or moderately low-income", based on the average index rating. A stratified sample of 21 counties in 5 states was randomly selected from among these low-income counties.

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<sup>3/</sup>This item was substituted for the Reissman item "learn a new routine." The remaining conditions are the same as those used by Reissman:

- . . .You (he) would have to be away from the family for some time.
- . . .You (the family) would have to move around the country a lot.
- . . .You (you) would have to leave your community.
- . . .You (he) would have to give up your (his) spare time.
- . . .You (you) would have to keep quiet about your political views.
- . . .You (you) would have to keep quiet about your religious views.
- . . .You (you) would have to leave your friends in this community.
- . . .Your (his) health would be endangered.
- . . .You (he) would have to work harder than you do (he does) now.
- . . .You (he) would have to take on more responsibility.

<sup>4/</sup>For a discussion of the scale construction procedures, see John E. Dunkelberger, "Measures of Job Mobility or Financial Aspirations", in *Scaling Social Data*, Charles L. Cleland, Ed., Southern Cooperative Series Bulletin No. 108, Tennessee Agricultural Experiment Station, 1965.

<sup>5/</sup>Margaret J. Hagood, Gladys K. Bowles and Robert R. Mount. Farm Operator Level of Living Indexes for Counties of the United States, 1945-1950, and 1954. Statistical Bulletin No. 204, USDA, Agricultural Marketing Service, Washington, March, 1957.

County sampling segments were identified using an area probability procedure. The ultimate study units were rural, open-country and farm households. Interviews were conducted during the summer of 1960 with both the male head of household and homemaker.

A restudy of the same 21 counties was conducted in 1972, with the objective of determining changes which had occurred in counties classified as low-income in 1960. The original 1960 county sampling segments were again used, but no effort was made to establish a longitudinal design by including the same households in both samples. Nevertheless, in using the same counties and segments, some households were interviewed in 1972 that had also been interviewed in 1960. After completion of the survey, a subsample of 190 households in 5 states was identified by surname and demographic characteristics as having been interviewed in both time periods. In every case the household had consisted of both a male head younger than 65 years of age who was able to work and a homemaker in 1960.

### Findings

#### Head & Homemaker Aspiration Scale

The array of items along the latent aspiration continuum for the 190 matched households differed only slightly from that obtained for the total 1960 sample. Overall, this 1972 matched subsample had somewhat lower aspirations. Condition by condition the proportions of favorable male head responses were approximately 10 percent fewer. This difference was very consistent across every scale condition. A similar but less consistent difference was observed for the subsample of homemakers. Proportional differences ranged from 2 to 10 percent.

A profile of somewhat lower aspirations for the matched subsample used in this study is a reasonable finding. The fact that these households represent a sedentary grouping that continued to live in these low-income counties over this 12-year period (1960-1972) suggests either a better socioeconomic adaptation (that is, being relatively better off than others) or adaptation to their existing socioeconomic situation by reducing their aspirations for higher ranking goals.

Comparisons between the aspirations male household heads held for themselves and those held by homemakers for their husbands also revealed differences. Using data for the matched subsample shown in Table 1, 2 conditions reflected large differences between the conditions that male household heads were willing to accept in order to obtain job advancement and what homemakers favor. Homemakers were much less willing than the males to have the husband "work harder than he does now" (32 percent) or "take on more responsibility" (14 percent). Conversely, there were similar proportions of male heads and homemakers favoring the male making the job change given 6 of the 11 conditions. In no instance was a larger proportion of homemakers in favor of accepting a condition to a better job than was true for husbands. The



conclusion may be drawn that homemaker aspirations are somewhat lower than are those of male household heads and that this could serve to depress or restrict the behavior required for the household to realize higher ranking goals.

This subsample of 190 households included a sizeable proportion of both heads and homemakers who had moderate to high aspirations-- 54 percent of the males and 45 percent of the homemakers. Aspiration scores ranged from 0-7 on the male head scale and 0-6 on the homemaker scale. The higher scores represented the most intense aspiration. In order to test for the degree of aspiration consistency within household units, a matrix was developed by cross tabulating the aspiration scores of male heads and homemakers. This matrix was separated into quartile approximations by dichotomizing the two scale ranges into low and high aspiration components. Scores of 0-2 were low and 3-6 or 7 were high. Ranked with greatest weight given to the aspiration of the male household head, this procedure resulted in the following distribution of households by aspiration level:

	<u>Percent</u>
Low head and Low homemaker -	32
Low head and High homemaker -	14
High head and Low homemaker -	23
High head and High homemaker -	31

What was the nature of the existing social and economic situation in 1960 with these household aspiration levels? And, what predictive value do these aspiration levels have relative to how the households fared over the 12-year period from 1960 to 1972? It is to these two questions that the remainder of this analysis is addressed.

#### Household Aspiration Level and Status Attainment

Three social and economic factors describing household status attainment were considered. These include the occupation of the male head, family income and the couple's social participation. Analysis was made of the relationship between household aspiration level and each factor to determine the extent to which aspiration levels are differentiated. 1960 Status Attainment, Table 2.

Occupation of Head. Measurement of this factor was made using 8 occupational categories. These categories were subsequently reduced to three broad types - agriculture related, white collar and blue collar.

The findings revealed that a larger proportion of the households where a low level of aspiration existed were in agriculture and this proportion declined at each higher aspiration level. By comparison, households with high levels of aspiration were most likely to be those in which the head had a blue collar job. White collar occupations represented smaller proportions generally, but the relationship to aspiration level revealed a steadily increasing proportion of households at each higher aspiration level from 22 percent of the low-low level to 38 percent to the high-high level.

Family Income. Rural areas in which these households lived were low-income in 1960. During the early 60's, a family income of less than \$4,000 was defined as below the "poverty line". Only 28 percent of these sample households had incomes of more than \$4,000 including all earned and nonearned sources.

No patterned relationship was observed between household aspiration level and family income. Households in which the head and homemaker shared low aspirations for job change were similarly represented on all income levels, as were those households where both the head and homemaker held high aspirations. Any tendency for higher family income to be associated with level of household aspiration was slight.

Social Participation. A composite social participation score was used involving the average organizational participation of the household head and homemaker in 1960. Included in the index were weights for organizational membership, attendance, and leadership. The resulting range of scores was 0 through 9, with 44 percent of the households having medium scores of 3 through 6 and 30 percent having high scores.

Here again, aspiration levels revealed no patterned association with the extent of social participation by household heads and homemakers. Percentage differences did exist for the distribution of social participation scores among households with different aspiration levels, but these differences suggested little support for any contention that households with high aspirations were more socially active in the organizational life of their communities.

1972 Status Attainment, Table 3

Occupation of Head. By 1972, some of the 190 household heads had become disabled or retired. In fact, one-third (32%) of the recontacted households were headed by a male no longer employed. This fact was noted by including a fourth occupational category for these households.

It was found that the proportions of households at each aspiration level were comprised of fewer households in which the male head's occupation was in agriculture or where he was unemployed. The converse (a direct pattern) was observed for heads in white and blue collar occupations.

Since unemployed household heads were no longer in specific occupations and represented a group of unique households in terms of economic goal attainment, the same relationship was considered for only households with employed male heads. This reduced the sample to 129 households. It also revealed the heavy loading of agricultural occupations within the low aspiration households. Blue collar workers, on the other hand, were clearly predominant at both aspiration levels where high aspirations characterized the male heads.

Family Income. No attempt was made to measure change in family income over time because of the inherent problems in making such comparisons. The incomes used were unadjusted gross dollars received in 1972

from all family sources. Income levels were developed to reflect an approximation to a quartile distribution and resulted in a wider income range within levels. These data clearly revealed that many households had more income than 12 years earlier; however, they also showed that a sizeable number of households still had very low incomes. Sixty percent of the households had incomes of less than \$6,000, and one-third had less than \$3,000.

An erratic pattern was observed for the relationship between household aspiration levels and family income. No distinct pattern predicting which households would attain high income levels could be made based on the pre-existing level of household aspiration. Households with the highest aspirations had the smallest proportion of households with high family incomes. However, there did exist some tendency for levels of attained family incomes to conform to a predictable pattern for households of the remaining aspiration types. Generally, the lower the household aspiration level the less likely the household was to realize an improvement in family income over time.

Social Participation. The same social participation measure was used here as in 1960. It was found that the range of scores was more varied in 1972, with several scores above 9 and one as high as 20. In addition, the pattern of social participation scores associated with aspiration level also varied in another respect.

The findings revealed a bimodal relationship. Households with the lowest and highest levels of aspiration were relatively similar in the proportions involved in formal organizations. Both of these household groupings were predominantly at the medium participation level. In contrast, households where the male heads and homemakers held dissimilar aspirations, household social participation scores were much more polarized. This may reflect accelerated participation by the family member possessing the higher aspirations. Further testing of this possibility needs to be made.

### Conclusion

From the data presented in this analysis we find support for using a hypothetical goal situation for measuring the aspirations of adult females. Specifically, in attempting to measure aspirations for family socioeconomic attainment among wives and homemakers in 1960, the methodological technique of projecting the goal attainment to the husband and expressing the limitations in terms of the family and household does provide an acceptable scale. Yet it is reasonable to speculate that aspiration projected by the homemaker for her husband is a less appropriate procedure in the context of the 1970's than it was in 1960. During the last 17 years we have witnessed what some consider a woman's revolution. The strength of the Women's Movement has heightened awareness among women throughout the U.S. and, along with other factors, has brought about a subsequent increase in female participation in nearly all dimensions of social and economic life.

A replication of this study using the same hypothetical conditions in which the homemaker projects goal attainment aspiration to her husband would be highly questionable today. Despite the fact that low-income rural women are perhaps least influenced by the feminist literature and by the press given to the Women's Movement, it would be erroneous to assume they are not at least partial participants in the evolutionary process of women's consciousness. A request to female respondents in 1977 for their aspirations projected to their husbands might well be met with resentment.

These data do not provide any test of this validity question. Nevertheless, the fact that male household heads and homemakers respond similarly to the limiting conditions and that a high proportion of couples hold generally similar attitudes suggest that both heads and homemakers are responding to the same motivation for goal attainment.

These findings involving the relationship between general indicators of status attainment reveal little support for any consistent patterning of household aspiration levels that might serve to suggest subsequent status attainment. This lack of association for adult households may represent a reasonable outcome. The broad range of ages and resources present in the sample suggests the need for further analysis holding such factors constant. Nevertheless, the one result that does seem clear is the limited predictive value of aspirations in terms of future attainment. Those households with high aspiration levels represent nonmobile households living in low-income rural areas, where for many, the incentives for migration were considerable.

Table 1. Favorable Aspiration Responses of a Sample of 190 Male Household Heads and Homemakers to Eleven Conditions Associated with a Hypothetical Opportunity to Change Jobs in 1960.

Conditions	Favorable responses						Difference
	Household heads			Homemakers			
	Number	Percent	Rank	Number	Percent	Rank	
Working at night instead of daytime	108	56.8	(1)	105	55.3	(1)	-1.5
Leave friends	97*	51.1	(3)	87	45.8	(3)	- 5.3
Leave present community	95	50.0	(4)	89*	46.8	(2)	- 3.2
Taking on more responsibility	99*	52.1	(2)	72*	37.9	(6)	-14.2
Giving up spare time	83	43.7	(7)	83	43.7	(4)	0
Keeping quiet about political views	89*	46.8	(5)	74*	38.9	(5)	- 7.9
Working harder than now	86	45.3	(6)	44	23.2	(10)	-22.1
Leaving family for some time	64	33.7	(9)	64	33.7	(7)	0
Keeping quiet about religious views	67*	35.3	(8)	53	27.9	(8)	- 7.4
Moving around country a lot	52	27.4	(10)	47*	24.7	(9)	- 2.7
Endangering health	15	7.9	(11)	8*	4.2	(11)	- 3.7
Total	190	---		190	---		

\*These conditions were eliminated from the scales developed using the entire 1960 sample of male household heads and homemakers representing low-income rural counties in seven Southern states.

Table 2. Household Aspiration Level and Status Attainment in 1960

Situational indicators	Level of household aspiration type			
	Lo-Lo	Lo-Hi	Hi-Lo	Hi-Hi
<u>Occupation of head</u>				
Agriculture related	50.0	45.8	29.5	22.4
White collar	21.7	29.2	29.5	37.9
Blue collar	28.3	25.9	41.0	39.7
<u>Family income</u>				
\$1-749 (low)	11.7	27.3	13.6	10.3
750-1499 (low middle)	25.0	22.7	20.5	24.1
1500-3999 (high middle)	33.3	40.9	29.5	37.9
4000 or more (high)	30.0	9.1	36.4	27.6
<u>Social participation</u>				
0-2 (low)	27.9	40.7	25.0	20.7
3-6 (medium)	37.7	33.3	56.8	44.8
7-9 (high)	34.4	25.9	18.2	34.5

Table 3. Household Aspiration Level in 1960 and Attained Status in 1972

Situational indicators	Level of household aspiration type			
	Lo-Lo	Lo-Hi	Hi-Lo	Hi-Hi
<u>Occupation of head</u>				
Agriculture related	27.9	22.2	15.9	12.1
White collar	3.3	22.2	9.1	12.1
Blue collar	32.8	22.2	45.5	46.6
Retired, disabled, unemployed	36.1	33.3	29.5	29.3
<u>Family income</u>				
\$0-2999 (low)	39.0	30.8	25.0	31.0
3000-5999 (low middle)	30.5	38.5	18.2	27.6
6000-8999 (high middle)	13.6	11.5	31.8	32.8
9000 or more (high)	16.9	19.2	25.0	8.6
<u>Social participation</u>				
0-2 (low)	16.4	29.6	25.0	27.6
3-6 (medium)	59.0	37.0	38.6	50.0
7-9 or above (high)	24.6	33.3	36.4	22.4

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