INTRODUCTION
The 5-year observed survival rate for a stage IV non-small cell lung cancer patient is one percent. Such a small survival rate begs the question of how these survivors might feel. Society implies that these now “survivors” should feel relieved; lucky; even, ecstatic, but many survivors feel a deep-seated sense of guilt. This feeling of objective guilt is a phenomenon known as survivor guilt.

People diagnosed with lung cancer experience high levels of distress and greater unmet emotional needs than those diagnosed with other cancers due to lung cancer stigma. Little research has been conducted to identify the existence of survivor guilt among any group of cancer patients, and no research has examined the associations between survivor guilt and potential burdens in survivorship.

The goal of the present study was to identify the prevalence of survivor guilt among lung cancer patients.

METHODOLOGY

108 lung cancer survivors completed an online survey via Survey Monkey of their experience with lung cancer survivorship. Outcomes assessed focused on examining demographics, survivor guilt, and general feelings toward surviving lung cancer when others did not.

MEASURES
1. Demographic and clinical information was assessed via patient self-report.
2. Survivor guilt was assessed using the 22-item “Survivor Guilt” subscale of the Interpersonal Guilt Questionnaire (IGQ-47). This 22-item subscale asks participants to rate their level of agreement with questions assessing the degree to which they feel guilty about surviving their cancer.
3. A single-item question was used to assess whether an individual felt as if the described survivor guilt symptoms were first given a brief definition of survivor guilt and then asked to explain (open-ended).
4. 20 respondents were also interviewed via telephone to expand on their experience with survivor guilt.

ANALYSIS

Descriptive statistics were calculated for demographic variables and measures of survivor guilt. T-tests and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) were conducted to examine if there were group differences in the levels of survivor guilt across demographic variables.

RESULTS

The majority of those who completed the survey were females (86%) between the ages of 50-59 years old when diagnosed with lung cancer (47.2%), had been diagnosed with non-small cell lung cancer (85%), and were former smokers (69.4%).

55% of lung cancer survivors reported experiencing survivor guilt as indicated by the single-item measure.

63.9% of survivors scored above average in the IGQ-67 Survivor Guilt Scale.

CONCLUSIONS
This study demonstrates the prevalence of survivor guilt among individuals diagnosed with lung cancer. The rates of self-report of survivor guilt are high (65.2%), and these rates are even higher when utilizing a valid, reliable measure (83.9% average). Furthermore, those who report not experiencing survivor guilt still scored fairly high on the measure of survivor guilt.

FUTURE RESEARCH
Future research directions must examine survivor guilt more thoroughly to understand what predicts it and what outcomes it is associated with (distress, social support, etc.) so that effective coping mechanisms may be developed for individuals who suffer. This study can also be used as a pilot to measure survivor guilt across other cancer types.