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Communication with Kin in the Wake of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

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Keywords

kinship, COVID-19, family communication, extended family relations, New York City, pandemic, social capital, crisis, family

Disciplines

Communication | Demography, Population, and Ecology | Family, Life Course, and Society | Social and Behavioral Sciences | Sociology

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Abstract

This study investigates patterns of communication among non-coresident kin in the aftermath of a crisis – the COVID-19 pandemic – focusing on a representative sample of New York City residents from the Poverty Tracker survey. Over half of New Yorkers spoke to their non-coresident family members several times a week during the pandemic and nearly half reported that their communication with non-coresident kin increased since March 2020. Extended kin proved to be important with 27.57% of respondents reporting that they increased communication with at least one extended family member. However, the kin type that New Yorkers were most likely to report increased communication with were siblings, revealing the importance of these ties during times of crisis. Communication with kin varied by sociodemographic characteristics. Women spoke with family members outside of their household more frequently and had higher odds of reporting that their communication increased. There was little support for the oft-stated premise that disadvantaged families by race or social class display greater patterns of kin engagement. In fact, the findings point to the opposite conclusion that families with greater economic resources generally engage with both their nuclear and extended kin more frequently, illuminating patterns of inequality in access to kin resources that may extend well beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, this study sheds light on an important yet oft-neglected driver of intra- and inter-generational inequalities, namely access to kin ties as a form of social capital to be activated and leveraged when need arises.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past several decades the boundaries of family systems have been pared down across most advanced societies (Furstenberg, 2020). As material and non-material exchanges and scholarly attention have concentrated on the nuclear family and its immediate upward and downward extensions, kinship maps have also increasingly taken the form of beanpoles rather than bushes. Working within this framework has often obscured the ways in which families rely on kin outside of the nuclear household for companionship and support. Extended and collateral kin also take on important ceremonial roles and functions (Furstenberg, 2020; Furstenberg, Harris, Pesando, & Reed, 2020; Nordqvist, 2015; Whiteside, 1989). Despite evidence of their importance for family life, little research to date has examined the extent to which such kin are activated as resources, perceived as forms of social capital, and relied upon in times of crises.

In this study we investigate patterns of communication among non-coresident kin in the aftermath of a crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on a representative sample of New York City (NYC) residents. We contribute to the family and kinship literature in two ways. First, we describe the extent to which individuals reach out to family members beyond their household in a crisis and to whom they reach out, re-assessing prior statements that individuals draw little support outside of their nuclear family, in line with some claims made in previous research on the topic (Furstenberg, 2020; Gamache, 1997; Grady, 2016; Mazzucchelli, Bosoni, & Medina, 2020). Second, we categorize the extent to which communication with extended kin varied by groups that have been identified in the literature as differing in their deployment of kinship resources, namely by gender, social class, immigrant status, and race. Our focus in this study is not on pre- versus post-COVID patterns of interactions but on who individuals turn to when confronted with a sudden stressor, such as COVID-19. In our framework, the COVID-19 pandemic provides a scenario – “a once in a lifetime international social experiment about family life,” as defined by Lebow (2020, p. 309) – to investigate the extent to which individuals draw on their kinship networks for support during a time of extreme upheaval. Furthermore, this study illuminates inequality in access to kin

resources that may extend beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, thus contributing to a better understanding of the manifold layers of inequality that pervade US society, many of which originate within the family (Gibson-Davis & Hill, 2021; Western, Bloome, & Percheski, 2008; D. T. Williams & Baker, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to dramatically affect people's lives, including relationships within communities, families, households, and workplaces. As of May 2022, COVID-19 has spread to 230 countries and regions worldwide, with over 525 million infections and 6.3 million deaths attributable to the disease (John Hopkins University 2022). This has left millions of families trying to figure out how to balance the competing economic and health demands associated with the virus, while also facing physical isolation from extended family and support systems (Lebow, 2020; Mikucki-Enyart & Maguire, 2021). Millions of people have lost what were their normal ways of interacting with others, as they try to keep each other safe and protected through physical distancing. Even as restrictions are easing around the world, the implications of the pandemic will be long-lasting, as families attempt to adapt to the changes and cope with the uncertainty that may surround family life in the future. For many people, one of the most important resources in facilitating resilience through this crisis has been family ties and the material and immaterial resources that families can provide, including simple contact and communication (Lebow, 2020). Even when the pandemic forced most relationships to a virtual mode of contact, recent evidence suggests that families continued to play an important role in the lives of people globally (Mikucki-Enyart and Maguire 2021). Family ties and communication help individuals understand, cope, and adapt to changes which, more generally, help foster resilience (Gayatri & Irawaty, 2022; Theiss, 2018). Nonetheless, we know little about the extent to which family ties are drawn on in times of crisis and who activates these kinship resources.

Scholars and media outlets typically feature the experiences of nuclear families, especially those with young children (Mikucki-Enyart & Maguire, 2021). We ask the question of whether kinship ties in the U.S., beyond the nuclear family, are as inconsequential as some of the literature

suggests. Evidence from South Africa and the UK has recently highlighted the crucial role of extended family ties in those countries as families had to navigate extended time periods without in-person family support, such as childcare (Cantillon, Moore, & Teasdale, 2021). These challenges were exacerbated when life-course transitions such as childbirth or marriage occurred in the context of the pandemic, amplifying the absence of extended family, thereby severely restricting opportunities for family connection and support (Davis-Floyd, Gutschow, & Schwartz, 2020). Moreover, although many individuals relied on digital technologies to narrow the social gap resulting from physical distancing, technology was not always a successful substitute and, at times, contributed to exacerbating feelings of isolation, loneliness, and estrangement (Curran & Seiter, 2021). In Mikucki-Enyart and Maguire's words (2021), "it is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic has had and will continue to have profound implications on family life" (p. 146). Family sociologists are well positioned to contribute to our understanding of these crucial shifts in family dynamics. Therefore, delving into patterns of contact and uncovering how communication is used as a form of social capital to help family members deal with sudden stressors is essential not only to assess the extendedness and strength of family systems, but also to shed light on systemic and population-level inequality patterns that may arise if specific groups have more widespread access to kin resources than others.

This paper focuses on family communications by relying on measures of frequency and intensity of kin contact during the first year of the pandemic (i.e., since March 2020) using the Robin Hood Poverty Tracker survey of poverty dynamics in NYC, which includes a COVID-19 module. We report on the amount of and perceived changes in communication with non-coresident family members and describe how patterns of communication vary across social and demographic groups. New York City is an important site to study the impact of the pandemic because it was the epicenter of the first wave of COVID-19 infection in the United States, leading to major repercussions on the lives of New Yorkers. In the first few months of the pandemic, it is estimated that 20% of the city's population was infected with the virus leading to the deaths of over 22,000

New Yorkers (Do & Frank, 2021; Irons & Raftery, 2021). In addition to the health impacts, the lockdown and economic shocks that came with the pandemic increased material hardship and psychological distress (Poverty Tracker Research Group at Columbia University, 2022; M. Williams, 2021). The health and economic impacts of the pandemic were experienced unequally across New York City's diverse neighborhoods, and poor and non-White areas have been found to be impacted the most severely (Do & Frank, 2021; Poverty Tracker Research Group at Columbia University, 2022). This study builds on the existing COVID-19 literature and expands our understanding of how kin resources can exacerbate or ameliorate other inequalities by quantifying how much the city's diverse communities reached out to family during the pandemic.

BACKGROUND

Kin Contact

Most of the existing research on communication between kin in the U.S. centers on the nuclear family, which is believed to be the center of the Western kinship structure. This idea has been supported by some findings suggesting that there is an “implicit” order to kin relationships. Individuals tend to have the most contact with partners, followed by non-resident parents (Thomson, 2017; Waite & Harrison, 1992). In a cross-country comparative study, Höllinger and Haller (1990) found that one predominantly seeks support from a spouse first, for both emotional and instrumental support, only after which do individuals seek support from parents (mostly mothers), then sons or daughters (for instrumental, rather than emotional support), and lastly, siblings. Friends are usually sought for emotional but not instrumental support. Supporting this hierarchy of support-seeking, older parents have been found to be in the most contact with their children, and then their siblings (Jallinoja & Widmer, 2011).

Though it has received limited attention in recent literature, sibling relationships have been found to be important well past adolescence. Using National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) data, White and Riedmann (1992a) found that 30% of adults with siblings would first call

a sibling in case of emergency, though actual rates of exchange (in terms of contact, affection, and social support) were low. Even step- and half-siblings kept in contact, though they saw each other half as often as full siblings. In line with other research, full, half, and stepsiblings were more likely to see each other when siblings were female, Black, younger, or geographically closer (L. B. White & Riedmann, 1992b). Additionally, gender, marital status, and parenthood mattered in sibling closeness. Sibling sets that included a sister, single siblings, and those without children were often found to be closer and have more contact than brother-only sibling sets, married, divorced, or widowed siblings, and those with children (Connidis & Campbell, 1995; L. B. White & Riedmann, 1992b). When it comes to material support, however, African Americans and those with lower education or income levels were less likely involved in sibling exchanges (L. B. White & Riedmann, 1992b). Sibling relationships were also found to be unstable throughout the life course. Research suggests that proximity, contact, giving help, and receiving help decline during early adulthood, with proximity and contact leveling at mid-life and exchange rising again after age 70 (L. White, 2001). Overall, relationships between siblings tend to be closer and contact greater than previously assumed, yet additional – and more up to date – research is necessary.

Physical proximity has been identified in the literature as important in maintaining kin relationships. Studies have found that part of the reason individuals have more frequent communication with their immediate family members is geographic location (Höllinger & Haller, 1990; L. B. White & Riedmann, 1992b). Many family members establish a residence close to kin, thus helping to strengthen those ties. Mok, Wellman, and Basu (2007) similarly found that increased distance between network members led to less frequent face-to-face and non-face-to-face interaction. How the pandemic's restrictions on physical contact may have impacted kin relationships remains unclear.

Age and life stage also contribute to the strength and types of kinship ties. Individuals tend to be closer to grandparents, aunts/uncles, and cousins before middle age and with nieces/nephews during middle age (Daw, Verdery, & Margolis, 2016; Leigh, 1982; Mulder, 2018). Relationships

with full and half siblings also taper off, but more slowly. Connections to spouses and children are highest throughout middle age and taper off at a later age (Daw et al., 2016). One's position in the intergenerational kinship network may change reports of contact. Raley and Rindfuss (1999) found that American children-in-law underreport contact with their parents-in-law, while Japanese daughters and sons-in-law underreport contact with the paternal father and mother, possibly reflecting cultural norms and expectations.

Communication and contact frequency have often been used to proxy for closeness or strength of ties (see, for instance, Terhell, Broese van Groenou, and van Tilburg, 2007). Research in this area has consistently shown that communicating more often is connected to more emotionally strong relationships (Hill & Dunbar, 2003; Mok et al., 2007). Roberts and Dunbar (2011) studied the communication patterns in women's social networks, as measured by time since last contact, and found that this was related to the emotional connectedness of that relationship. Those who were more emotionally close had shorter times between contact, particularly for kin. There was one caveat related to the size on kin networks in Roberts and Dunbar's study; those in larger kin networks reported having greater time between each contact. In addition, though a lack of contact is connected to relationship decay (Oswald & Clark, 2003), research shows that this is a slower process for kin as compared to friends (Burt, 2000).

Socio-demographic Variation in Family Contact

Research on kinship networks, contact, and exchange has largely focused on racial differences though the results have been mixed (Raley, 1995). Earlier research found that Black families had stronger extended kin ties (Aquilino, 1990; Hogan, Eggebeen, & Clogg, 1993; Silverstein & Waite, 1993), had more extensive kin networks than White families (Raley, 1995), and were more likely to contact kin (Raley, 1995). More recent studies are less conclusive. Other scholars found kinship ties might be just as strong for White families as they are for Black families (Aquilino, 1990).

Part of the inconclusiveness may be based on family size, as Black Americans tend to be embedded in larger households (Kamo, 2000; Peek, Koropecykj-Cox, Zsembik, & Coward, 2004). Daw, Verdery, and Margolis (2016) found that the types of family members vary by race, with White respondents having more older kin (parents, grandparents, spouses, full siblings, and aunts/uncles) and Black respondents having more younger kin (children, halfsiblings, grandchildren, cousins, and nieces/nephews). The authors assert that studying kin availability from a purely demographic standpoint – rather than kin contact – may provide clarity to these conflicting results by determining if greater kin contact is due to the number/availability of kin, the intensity of those relationships, or both – a challenging research endeavor which is well underway yet far from being fully realized.

More recent research has illustrated that there are nuances to the question about race and kinship contact and exchange. Sarkisian and Gerstel (2004) found that the type of support exchanged varied by race. Black families more often provided practical support, such as transportation or childcare. White families more often provided financial and emotional support, including tighter communication, with kin.

As for gender, existing studies suggest that women tend to maintain tighter relationships with kin, often demonstrated in the form of higher care provision or more frequent patterns of communication. For instance, David-Barrett et al. (2016) found that women play a more central role in holding together different generations of a family as they are more likely to keep cross-generational communication than men, especially from the middle of the young adulthood phase. In a study of adult sibling relations, Lee, Spitze, and Logan, (2003) also found that sister pairs of siblings phone and exchange advice more often than do other sibling pairs (either brother-brother or brother-sister). In general, the authors found that women are more likely than men to report feeling close to or getting along with their siblings, suggesting that giving and receiving help appear to reflect gendered forms of intimacy and of household labor. Sarkisian and Gerstel (2004) and Raley (1995) also found that intersectionality matters when it comes to gender and race –

Black women had more frequent contact with kin than did White women, while Black men had less frequent contact with kin than White men.

Contact with kin may also vary by social class (Hogan et al., 1993), though many studies addressing how social class impacts kinship contact and exchange often entwine class and race or findings are not consistent across studies (Furstenberg, 2020). However, some studies do disentangle the two. Sarkisian and Gerstel (2004) found regardless of race, higher socioeconomic position correlated with greater financial and emotional, but not other practical, types of kin support. Others have utilized education as a proxy for class, finding those with more education have a higher probability of having living parents, grandparents, and spouses, but a lower probability of having two or more children, half siblings, grandchildren, or cousins, as compared to those with less education (Daw et al., 2016), meaning those with more education may have more kinship ties who are more economically established on which to call for support. The literature on kinship ties has primarily focused on poor families of color, and so research comparing families across the economic spectrum is needed (Cooper & Pugh, 2020; Furstenberg, 2020).

Family Ties during COVID-19 and Main Contributions of the Study

With the nuclear family at the center of Western kinship systems, most of the literature focuses on spouses, parents, and children. Little is known about the contact and support systems of extended kin despite the potential importance of these relationships (Daw et al., 2016; Furstenberg, 2020). Moreover, most research asks what type of support individuals received recently, again from a limited list of family members – very often only those who reside with the respondent. A more accurate and thorough study would measure communication across the full extent of a kinship network, beyond the nuclear family. The NSFH provides some of the only information on interactions within kinship networks, yet this dataset is outdated and only asks about parents, children, siblings, and “other relatives,” a broad category which greatly obscures the varied layers embedded in more complex kin relations (Furstenberg, 2020). This shortcoming has led

researchers to resort to other sources of data, often not nationally representative, yet arguably richer when it comes to a careful depiction of kin dynamics. This research addresses some of these issues by investigating patterns of nuclear and extended kin contact. Specifically asking respondents about non-residential kin, including siblings, aunts/uncles, cousins, nieces/nephews, grandparents, grandchildren, and others ensures these kin relationships are not obscured. Furthermore, the study leverages the COVID-19 pandemic as a sudden stressor in family life that may have significantly shifted individuals and families' patterns of contact and communication.

Research on the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and family ties has so far focused mostly on the extent to which stronger family ties (or tighter intergenerational relationships) may explain more severe outbreaks or diffusion of the virus across different populations (e.g., Arpino, Bordone, and Pasqualini 2020; Dowd et al. 2020). Our interest here goes in the opposite direction. We ask the question of whether and how patterns of kin contact and communication have changed in the wake of systemic crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and, if so, with whom. To the best of our knowledge, little or no research exists on the topic to date. While it is undeniable that the pandemic has exacerbated within-couple dynamics leading, for instance, to higher family instability (Manning & Payne, 2021) and spikes in intimate partner violence (Bullinger, Carr, & Packham, 2021; Lindberg, VandeVusse, Mueller, Kirstein, & Mariell, 2020), the general perception in the media is that the pandemic could also be seen as an opportunity to strengthen familial bonds with relatives, both closer and distal ones.

Empirical analyses are, however, lacking. One exception is a survey conducted by StandAlone in collaboration with the University of Cambridge and Edge Hill University in May 2020 which found that during the COVID-19 pandemic 55% of respondents in the United Kingdom felt more alone and less connected to family members (Blake, Bland, Foley, & Imrie, 2020). Respondents reported that they had thought about their estranged family members 56% more often, 41% the same, and 3% less often. Similarly, 78% maintained the same amount of contact with family members, while 16% increased contact and 6% reduced contact. Finally,

respondents reported that they had thought about contacting their estranged family members 48% the same as usual, 40% more than usual, and 12% less than usual. This study seeks to broaden research in this important area of family studies, highlighting patterns of communication with nuclear and extended kin in a large metropolitan area in the United States.

DATA AND METHODS

This study uses data from the Robin Hood Poverty Tracker. Launched in 2012, the Poverty Tracker surveys a representative sample of New York City contacted every three months, providing critical information on the dynamics of poverty and other forms of disadvantage. The third and fourth panels of the Poverty Tracker, recruited to participate in 2017 and 2020, were used for this analysis. An adult in each of the followed household was contacted every three months via online, phone, or paper surveys. For this study, we use data from the COVID-19 kinship module which was completed between August 2020 and September 2021. The bulk of responses (62%) were collected in September and November 2020 and therefore reflect respondents' experiences up to that point in the pandemic. The authors tested whether responses were different depending on when the respondent was surveyed and only found limited evidence of changes over time. In analysis not shown, it was found that variation over time did not significantly impact the core results of the paper. The initial sample size was 2,397 respondents. The sample was reduced to 2,363 for the analysis through listwise deletion by excluding 34 cases (1.4%) with missing data on one or more variables used in the regression analysis.

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics on the variables used in the analysis. Frequency of communication with relatives who live outside of one's household since March 2020 was measured using a categorical question with different levels of frequency. The question did not specify the format of communication and therefore it could include a variety of methods from phone calls, text messaging, and in-person meetings. Since so many respondents gave the first option, this variable was transformed into a dichotomous measure of whether the respondent

reported speaking to family several times a week (the highest frequency) or not for use in the regression analyses. Respondents were also asked whether their communication with family members living outside of their home increased since the beginning of the pandemic. If the respondent indicated that their communication with non-coresident family increased, they were then asked a series of questions to indicate the type of relatives with they had increased communication.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics

Measures of communication with kin	Percent
Communicate with family several times a week since March 2020	55.70%
Increased communication with family since beginning of pandemic	48.65%
<i>Increased communication with...</i>	
Siblings	31.03%
Upward kin (parents, grandparents)	22.31%
Downward kin (children, grandchildren)	15.63%
Collateral kin (aunts, uncles, cousins)	20.00%
Nuclear (parents, children, siblings)	42.64%
Extended kin (aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, grandchildren, other)	27.57%
Demographic characteristics	Percent or mean
Female	53.40%
Age (mean)	48.13
Foreign born	45.07%
College educated	39.05%
Below poverty line (using Supplemental Poverty Measure)	21.89%
<i>Race/ethnicity</i>	
Non-Hispanic White	33.11%
Non-Hispanic Black	21.85%
Asian	14.93%
Hispanic	26.59%
Other race/ethnicity	3.52%

Notes: Total sample size for analysis is 2,363. Analytic weights applied.

Source: Robin Hood Poverty Tracker, 2020-2021

Table 1 also displays data on the demographic characteristics of the sample. These demographic variables are used in regression analyses. The gender variable is an indicator of

whether the respondent reported their gender as female (53.40%). The remainder of respondents reported that they were male or that they had some other gender (less than 1%). The mean age of a respondent in the year 2020 was 48.13 years old. In addition, 45.07% of the sample was born outside of the United States. Respondents who had completed a Bachelors' degree or higher were classified as college educated. The Robin Hood Poverty Tracker also collects extensive data on income to measure the burden of poverty in New York City. The Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM) defines income more broadly than the official poverty measure, capturing resources that come to families through the tax system or in the form of near-cash benefits like food stamps or housing assistance. Data on poverty status used in this analysis came from the most recent survey wave collected by the Robin Hood Poverty Tracker. For some respondents, their poverty classification is from before the beginning of the pandemic in early 2020. Finally, the Poverty Tracker has a five-category measure of race/ethnicity including non-Hispanic White, non-Hispanic Black, Asian, Hispanic, and other races (or multiple).

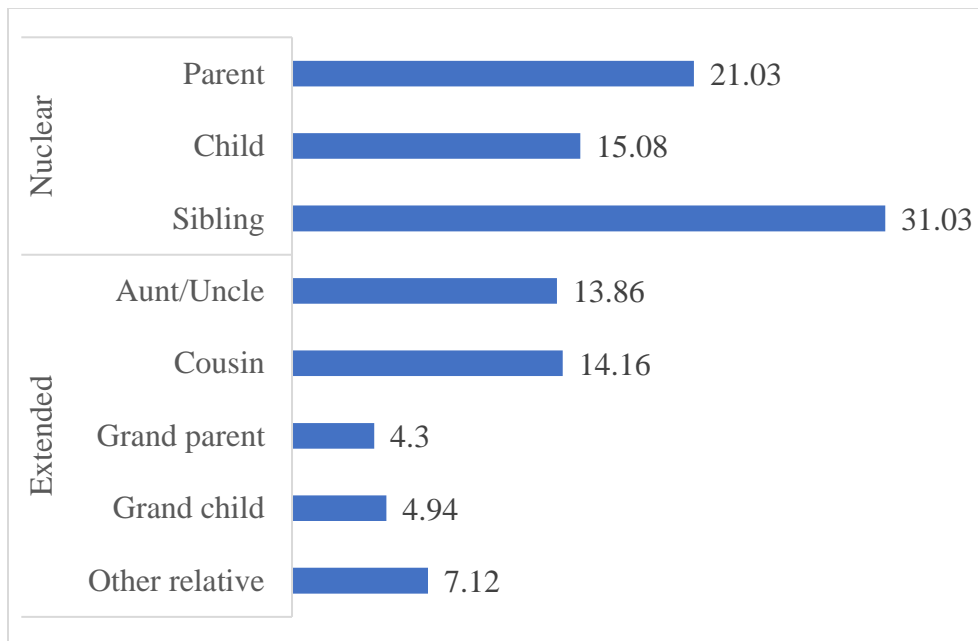
The analysis that follows presents both descriptive and regression results. Logistic regressions are used to identify the association between sociodemographic factors and the dichotomous dependent variables of whether the respondent spoke to their family several times a week during the pandemic and whether that frequency of communication constituted an increase since before March 2020. Analyses not shown revealed almost identical results when the frequency of communication variable was kept as an ordinal measure and an ordered logistic regression was used. This is most likely because two-thirds of the sample reported the highest level of frequency of communication. For ease of interpretation, only the logistic regression results have been presented. Results from logistic regressions are presented as odds ratios.

RESULTS

Patterns of Frequency of Communication and Changes in Communication

The descriptive results from the Poverty Tracker COVID-19 module reveal important trends in family communication during the pandemic not captured in any other study to date. Respondents were asked how frequently they spoke with non-coresident family members since the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020. The majority of respondents (55.70%) indicated that they spoke with family members outside of their home several times a week, the highest response option given on the survey. In addition, 21.68% said that they spoke to their family about once a week, 9.76% said they spoke with family 2 or 3 times a month, and 6.83% spoke with family about once a month. Only 3.14% of respondents said that their contact frequency was less than once a month. A further 2.89% reported that they had no contact with family members. These findings suggest very frequent communication with kin during the pandemic, despite physical distancing restrictions limiting face-to-face meetings.

Figure 1: Percent of respondents who reported that they increased communication with different types of non-coresident family members



Notes: Total sample size for analysis is 2,363. Analytic weights applied.

Source: Same as for Table 1.

This high frequency of contact with kin reflects an increase since before the pandemic. As shown in Table 1, 48.65% reported that they increased communication with non-coresident family

members since March 2020. Figure 1 depicts the results on which non-coresident kin categories respondents reported increased communication. Siblings were at the top of the list; nearly a third (31.03%) reported increased communication. Siblings were followed by parents, cousins, children, and uncles and aunts. In total, 42.64% of New Yorkers surveyed reported that they spoke more with at least one non-coresident *nuclear* family member (defined as parents, children, and siblings). In addition, nearly a third (27.57%) reported that they increased communication with at least one *extended* family member (defined as cousins, aunts/uncles, grandparents, grandchildren, and other type of kin).

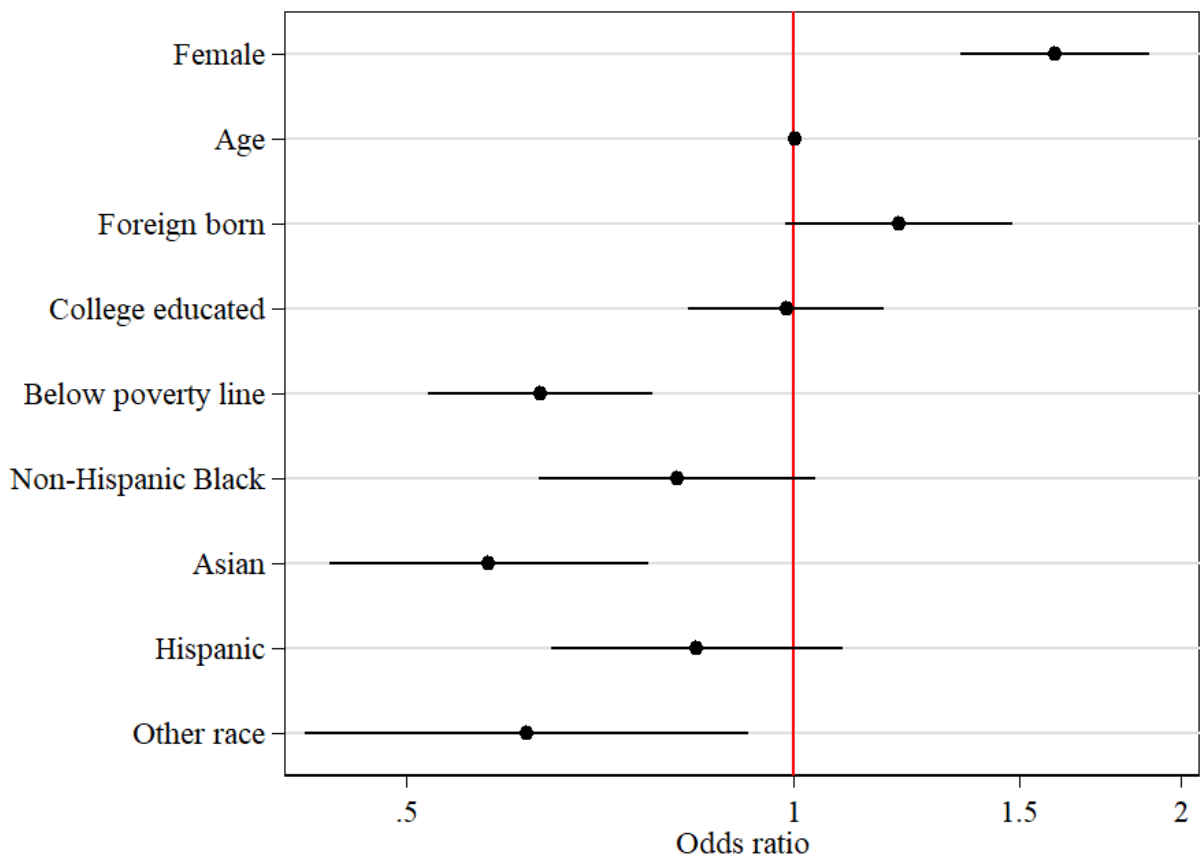
There are three important caveats to consider when examining the results related to increases in communication. First, responses to this question are affected by the availability of kin. For example, some older people may not have any living parents or grandparents. Second, many respondents may already have been in very frequent contact with some family members even before the pandemic. This may explain why fewer respondents reported that their communication increased with their parents and children, the groups they may be in the most frequent contact with even before the pandemic. Finally, the question was asked only regarding kin who do not live in the respondent's home. Those living with several of their family members in multigenerational households may not have reported increased communication for this reason.

Variation by Sociodemographic Characteristics

Logistic regressions are used to examine how frequency of communication with kin and whether communication increased varied by sociodemographic variables of interest. The first logistic regression results, presented in the odds ratio plot in Figure 2, reveal significant variation across the population in frequency of communication with family members during the pandemic. The lines on the graph represent the 95% confidence intervals. The odds ratios are also presented in more detail in Appendix Table 1. Women had over 50% higher odds than men of reporting that they spoke to their relatives several times a week since the pandemic began in March 2020. Those whose incomes placed them below the poverty line were less likely to report that they spoke

frequently with relatives living outside of their home. Controlling for all other variables, there was no significant difference in reported frequency of communication with family by college attainment, age, or foreign-born status. Finally, the results suggest significant variation by racial/ethnic group, even after controlling for other sociodemographic variables. Asian respondents and those who had another racial/ethnic identity had significantly lower odds of speaking with their family members several times a week during the pandemic relative to Non-Hispanic White respondents.

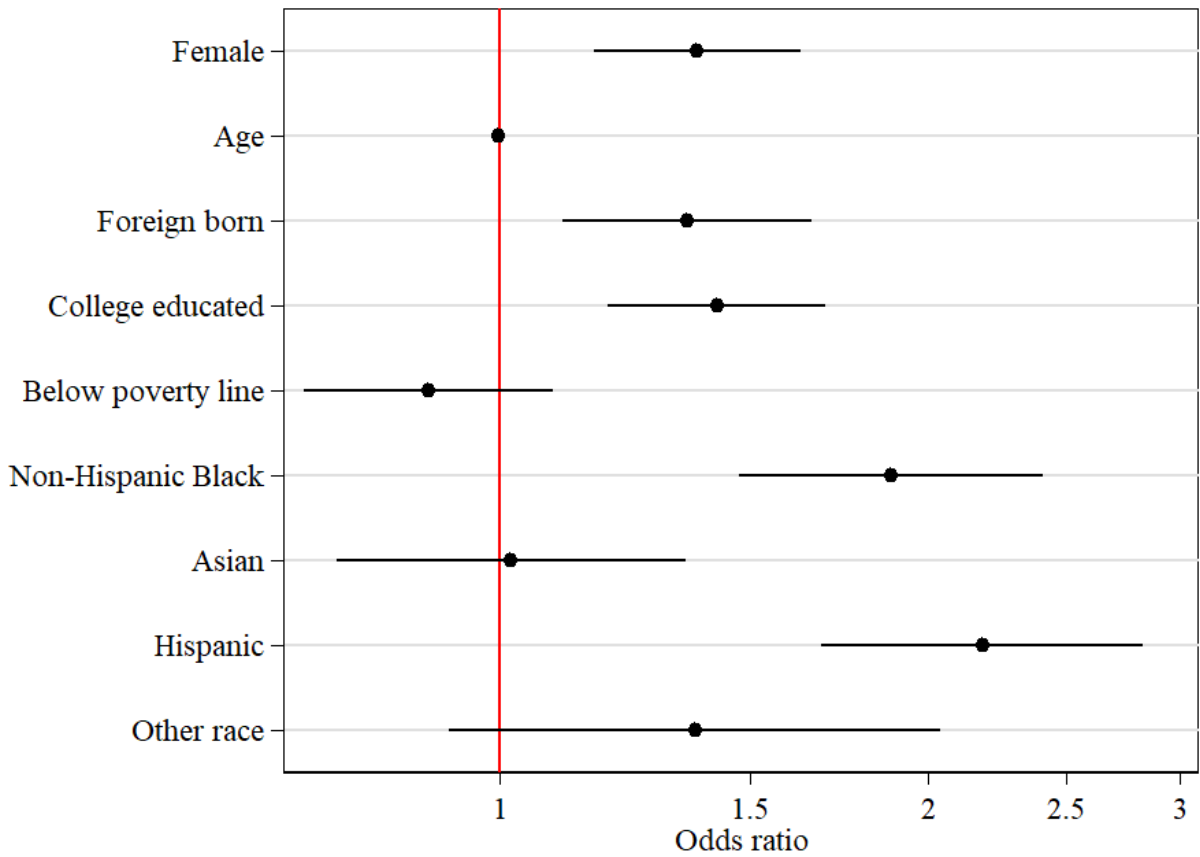
Figure 2: Odds ratios from a logistic regression showing whether the respondent reported that they spoke to their non-coresident family several times a week since the beginning of the pandemic



Notes: Total sample size for the logistic regression is 2,363. Age is a continuous variable. The race/ethnicity variable is categorical. Non-Hispanic White is the reference group for all racial/ethnic groups. 95% confidence interval depicted in the lines.

Source: Same as for Table 1.

Figure 3: Odds ratios from logistic regression showing whether the respondent reported that the increased communication with non-coresident family during the pandemic



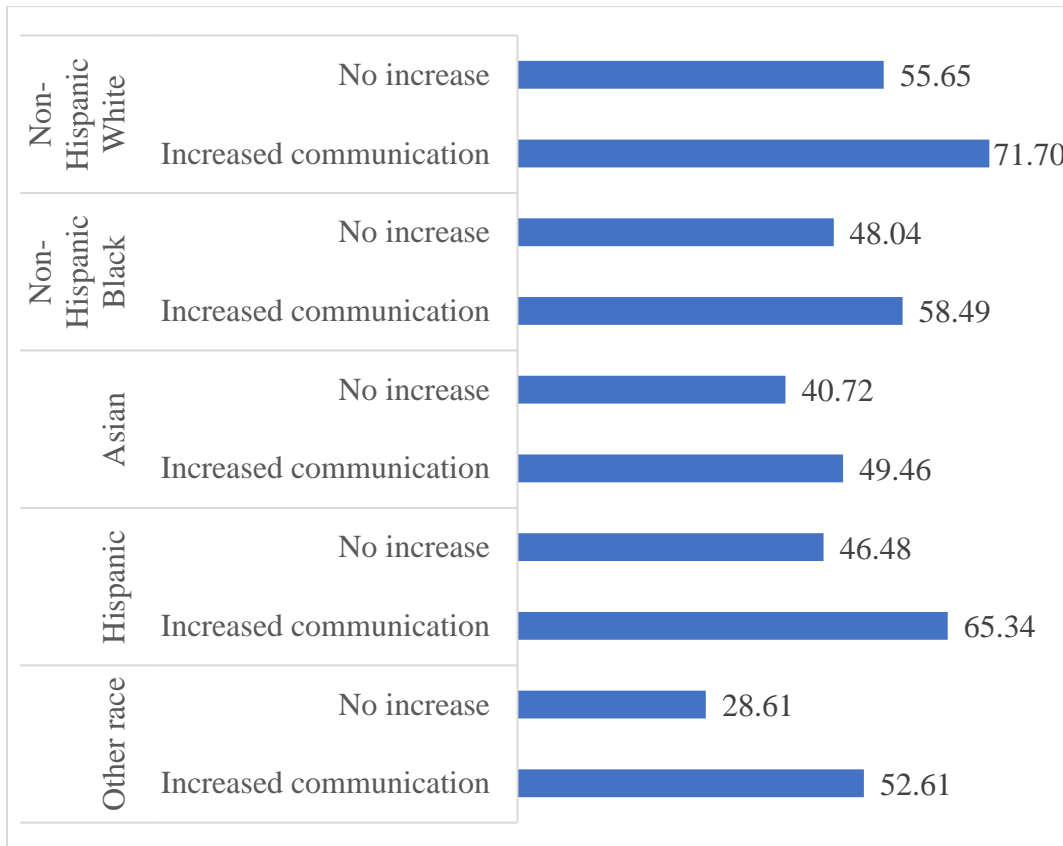
Notes: Total sample size for the logistic regression is 2,363. Age is a continuous variable. The race/ethnicity variable is categorical. Non-Hispanic White is the reference group for all racial/ethnic groups. 95% confidence interval depicted in the lines.

Source: Same as for Table 1.

Next, we examined how changes in communication associated with the pandemic varied by socio-demographic characteristics. Figure 3 displays odds ratios and 95% confidence intervals from a logistic regression predicting whether the respondent reported that they increased communication with non-household family members since March 2020. Some of these results are similar to those in Figure 2, while others are different. Controlling for the other variables in the analysis, women and the foreign-born had higher odds of reporting that they increased communication with family members during the pandemic. There was no statistically significant

association by age. The results by the two social class measures are different from those presented in Figure 2. There was no statistically significant difference in the odds of increasing communication with family members by poverty status. However, those who were college-educated had higher odds of reporting that they increased communication during the pandemic.

Figure 4: Percent of respondents reporting that they spoke to their non-coresident family several times a week by race/ethnicity and whether they increased communication with family during the pandemic



Notes: Total sample size for analysis is 2,363. Analytic weights applied.

Source: Same as for Table 1.

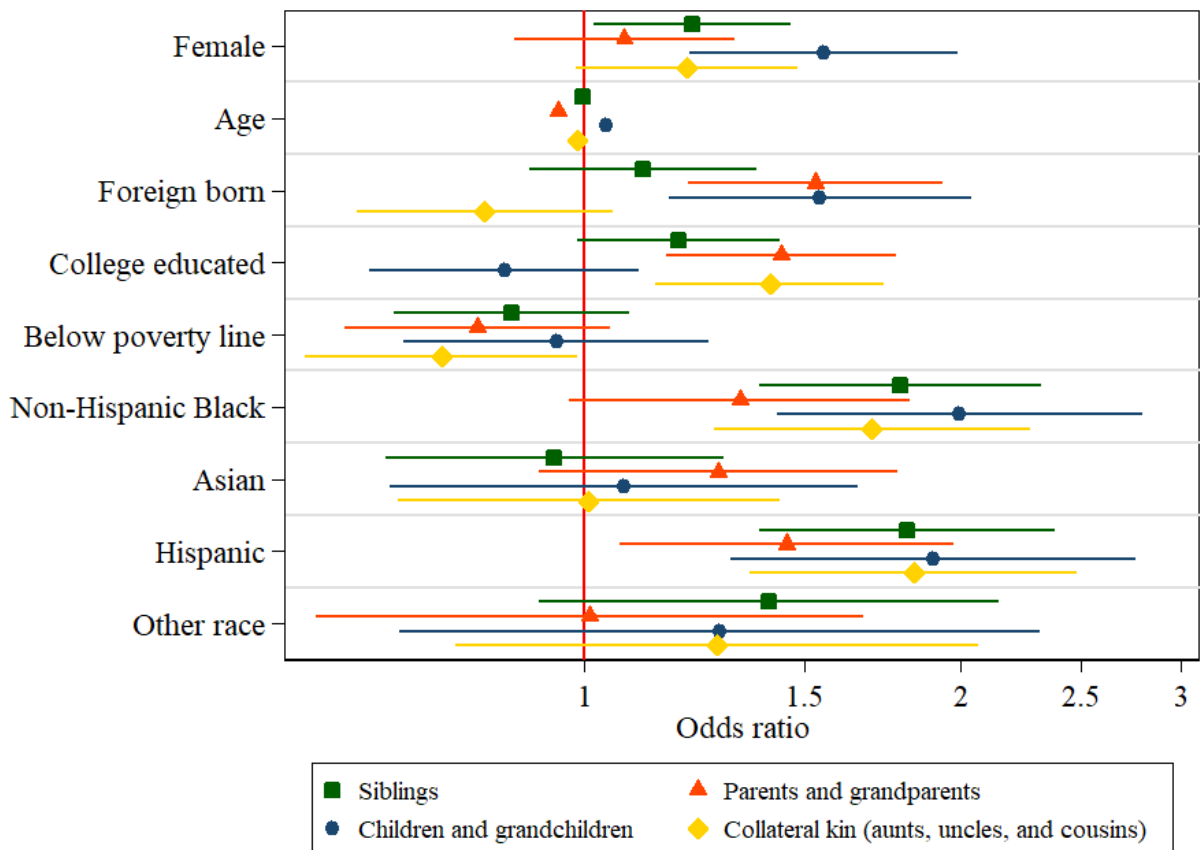
The results by race/ethnicity deviated most dramatically between Figures 2 and 3. While non-Hispanic White New Yorkers had greater odds of reporting high frequency of communication with their family members, it was non-White groups who were more likely to report that their communication with kin increased during the pandemic. Non-Hispanic Black respondents had

nearly twice the odds of reporting that their communication increased with family members during the pandemic. Hispanic respondents were over twice as likely to report that they increased their communication. To further examine this relationship, Figure 4 depicts the proportion of respondents reporting that they spoke to their family several times a week by race and whether they increased communication with their family during the pandemic. Figure 4 reveals that, even among those who did not increase communication, non-Hispanic Whites had very frequent communication with their family members. For example, Asian New Yorkers who increased communication with their family members spoke to their family less frequently (49.46% several times a week) than non-Hispanic White New Yorkers who did not increase communication during the pandemic (55.65% several times a week). The patterns were similar, though less dramatic for the non-Hispanic Black, Hispanic, and other race groups. These findings suggest that, even after experiencing an increase in communication with family members during the pandemic, many people of color in New York City were still only speaking with their family members at a frequency similar to non-Hispanic White people before the pandemic.

The final set of results, presented in Figure 5, shows odds ratios from logistic regressions of whether the respondent reported that their communication increased during the pandemic with four different kin types. For the purpose of this analysis, we group seven different questions on communication with family members into four categories: 1) collateral kin which includes aunts, uncles, or cousins; 2) upward kin which includes parents and grandparents; 3) downward kin which includes children and grandchildren; and 4) siblings. The results from all four logistic regressions are presented on the same figure. Female respondents had significantly higher odds of reporting increased communication during the pandemic only with their siblings and children/grandchildren. Women had over 50% higher odds of reporting that communication increased with their children and grandchildren relative to men/other gender respondents. Age was associated with increased communication with kin in expected ways. Being older was associated with higher odds of reporting increased communication with children/grandchildren and lower odds of reporting

increased communication with collateral kin and parents/grandparents. This result is likely driven by availability of different kin types for people at different life stages since, for example, only older adults have grandchildren. Those who were born outside of the United States had higher odds of reporting increased communicating with their upward and downward kin compared to the native born. College-educated respondents had significantly higher odds of reporting increased communication with collateral kin and parents and grandparents. Those who were below poverty line had lower odds of increasing contact with collateral kin than those who were not poor.

Figure 5: Odds ratios from four separate logistic regressions showing whether the respondent increased communication with different types of kin during the pandemic



Notes: Depicts results from four different logistic regressions each with a sample size of 2,363. Age is a continuous variable. The race/ethnicity variable is categorical. Non-Hispanic White is the reference group for all racial/ethnic groups. 95% confidence interval depicted in the lines.
Source: Same as for Table 1.

There were differences in increasing communication with kin by race/ethnicity. Relative to White respondents, Hispanic respondents had higher odds of reporting increased communication with all kin types. In fact, Hispanic New Yorkers had nearly twice the odds of reporting increased communication with siblings, collateral kin, and children/grandchildren. This was one of the largest associations measured in the regression analysis and points to large changes in kin relations for Hispanic respondents as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, non-Hispanic Black respondents had higher odds of increasing communication with all kin types during the pandemic except for parents/grandparents relative to non-Hispanic White respondents.

DISCUSSION

This study has made an important contribution to the family literature by documenting how family communication is impacted by a major period of social disruption, in this case the COVID-19 pandemic. New descriptive results from the New York City's Poverty Tracker study reveals the extent to which family relations were altered by the pandemic. First, we find that New Yorkers were in very frequent communication with a wide network of family members during the pandemic, a frequency that was significantly higher than we had anticipated when designing the survey questions. Over half of respondents indicated that they spoke to family members not in their household several times a week since March 2020, the highest category offered in the multiple-choice question. Furthermore, nearly half of respondents said that this high frequency of contact reflected an increase since before the pandemic. These results suggest that the pandemic dramatically altered people's relationships with their family members as they reached out to kin much more frequently.

Our results show that the pandemic impacted family communication across a wide and complex family network. While nearly half of respondents said that they increased communication with at least one member of their nuclear family, 27.57% also said that they increased communication with at least one extended family member. The existing literature has paid less

attention to extended kin relations, but this study suggests that relationships with cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and grandchildren form an important part of people's family life, especially in times of crises. Surprisingly, the group that respondents were most likely to increase contact with was their siblings. Nearly a third of respondents reported that the pandemic had led them to speak with their brothers and/or sisters more frequently. In addition, 14.16% of respondents increased communication with their cousins. Siblings and cousins are unique kin relationships because the individuals are usually of a similar age and life stage. As respondents sought comfort and advice in the face of uncertainty and loss, these lateral kin relations with one's peers appeared to be especially important.

Our results provide more evidence of the gendered nature of kin relationships. Women both had higher odds of reporting that they spoke to their family members frequently during the pandemic and were more likely than men to say that communication had increased during the pandemic. These results fit with other studies which have shown that women maintain tighter relationships with kin, often demonstrated in the form of higher care provision or closer communication (David-Barrett et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2003).

The results from this study reveal how family communication can serve as a social resource with the potential to exacerbate other social inequalities. Privileged groups such as non-Hispanic White people and those with higher income had more frequent communication with their relatives during the pandemic. Less privileged groups may speak to their family members less frequently for a number of reasons including lack of leisure time, financial reasons, limited availability of kin, and strained family relations.

Changes to frequency of communication with family, however, was found more in the marginalized populations most directly impacted by COVID-19. Relative to White New Yorkers, Black and Hispanic New Yorkers were significantly more likely to report that they increased communication with their family members during the pandemic. Foreign born respondents also had higher odds of reporting increased communication with family. This could be due to the fact

that the Black, Hispanic, and immigrant communities of New York were especially impacted by both COVID-19 illness, as well as by the economic and social impacts of the lockdown (Clay & Rogus, 2021; Do & Frank, 2021; Tai, Shah, Doubeni, Sia, & Wieland, 2021). In addition, college-educated respondents were more likely to report that they increased communication during the pandemic. This result is surprising since college-educated populations were less impacted by COVID-19 directly, yet it may be related to other findings that show that college-educated populations were most worried about their safety during the pandemic (Chai, Zhang, & Chang, 2020; Ciancio et al., 2020; Rattay et al., 2021). Despite the fact that non-White populations were more likely to increase family communication during the pandemic, the data reveal that their frequency of communication was often still less than the White population's. This again provides evidence that family ties may end up being "social assets" enjoyed most by privileged populations.

There are a few limitations of this study which also point to areas for future research. First, this survey did not include a measure of frequency of communication before the pandemic. While we do know whether respondents felt that their communication increased after March 2020, we do not have an exact measure of how much it increased. In addition, this study draws from a random sample of residents of New York City at a specific point in the pandemic (primarily, fall 2020, i.e., following the first wave). How the pandemic impacted kin relations in other regions and at other periods of the unfolding pandemic is an important area for future research. Finally, it remains to be seen whether the changes in family communication documented by this study represent a lasting change in American family life or if they, instead, only constitute a temporary response to the COVID-19 crisis. Documenting how family bonds have been altered by the pandemic and the ways in which they can promote resilience in the face of challenges is an important agenda for scholarship on the family.

CONCLUSIONS

Nearly all family historians agree that over the past five hundred years, the family's centrality as a social institution has diminished. In the 1980s, the loss of family functions and decline of parental influence became a prominent political issue, and it has remained so for nearly the past half century. Yet the family remains the primary support system for most Americans, especially in times of crisis. The findings in this paper show that family members reached out beyond the confines of the household during the advent of COVID to supply information and support to nuclear and extended kin.

Our results suggest several familiar patterns: women do more work in maintaining ties of communication with kin, a finding that reverberates through the ages. The advantaged communicate more frequently with family even though the less advantaged increased their communication by a greater measure. Ethnic and racial minorities demonstrate somewhat varied patterns, but we found little support for the oft-stated premise that disadvantaged families display greater patterns of kin engagement. Indeed, our findings point to the opposite conclusion that families with greater economic resources generally engage with both their nuclear and extended kin more frequently.

These general findings are only an invitation to further inquiry because they do not allow us to investigate a set of critical issues involving, for instance, whether patterns are affected by kin availability to start with (the so-called "demography of kinship"), or how the family operates as a system of actors who are bound together by assumptions of kinship. This implies a set of felt obligations among family members. Without a better understanding of how these obligations are enacted, we can only get a vague sense of the size and scope of the kinship network.

Some family sociologists have argued that the exclusive focus on the nuclear family leaves much out of the picture of how contemporary families function in nations with advanced economies (Furstenberg et al., 2020). We have speculated that the extended kinship system has both meaning and relevance as a ceremonial system into which the nuclear unit is embedded. It is

also, as this paper demonstrates, a protective system that can be mobilized for support and information when a crisis, such as one that has occurred in the era of COVID, arises.

Viewing kinship connections as an important social resource – a form of social capital – is hardly a new idea. But it is an idea that remains to be fleshed out in contemporary research on the family. Beyond the hints suggested by our findings, we have no idea of how these ties become activated when need arises. We know that it frequently does, but we don't know how exactly it happens.

Family structure (especially two-biological parents) have been studied extensively over the past century by family sociologists, but there has been notable inattention to kinship ties that thread households together in myriad ways. Notably in this study, we draw attention to relations between adult siblings who have gotten scant attention in the sociological literature (see, for instance, Kalmijn & Leopold, 2019; Spitze & Trent, 2006; Voorpostel & Blieszner, 2008; L. White, 2001 for exceptions). Even less is known about the relations between the children of adult siblings, first cousins who have been ignored except in regard to their eligibility for marriage.

Sociologists and demographers who estimate kinship availability can measure the likelihood that such ties could occur through modeling the potential scope of kinship over historical time. With decline of family size, we can be sure that the size of the kinship system has declined just as it has grown vertically through greater longevity. However, lacking studies of contact and communication among kin outside the household, we simply do not know when and under what circumstances kinship ties flourish and, when they do, what consequences they have for both welfare and well-being.

The Internet and the rise of social media, no doubt, make communication among family members notably easier. But we have little information about whether these systems strengthen the bonds of kinship. The results of this paper suggest that they may well lower the barriers to the exchange of information and support, but as yet we have inadequate evidence on when, to whom, and why kin reach out to each other.

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Appendix Table 1: Odds ratios from logistic regression results presented in Figures 2 and 3

	(1) Speaks to family several times a week	(2) Increased communication during pandemic
Female	1.60** (1.35 - 1.89)	1.38** (1.16 - 1.63)
Age	1.00 (1.00 - 1.01)	1.00 (0.99 - 1.00)
Foreign born	1.21 (0.99 - 1.48)	1.35** (1.11 - 1.66)
College educated	0.99 (0.83 - 1.18)	1.42** (1.19 - 1.69)
Below poverty line	0.63** (0.52 - 0.78)	0.89 (0.73 - 1.09)
Race/ethnicity <i>Reference group: Non-Hispanic White</i>		
Non-Hispanic Black	0.81 (0.63 - 1.04)	1.88** (1.47 - 2.41)
Asian	0.58** (0.44 - 0.77)	1.02 (0.77 - 1.35)
Hispanic	0.84 (0.65 - 1.09)	2.18** (1.68 - 2.83)
Other race	0.62* (0.42 - 0.92)	1.37 (0.92 - 2.04)
Constant	1.19 (0.85 - 1.67)	0.52** (0.37 - 0.73)
Observations	2,363	2,363

Notes: ** p<0.01, * p<0.05; 95% confidence interval of the odds ratio in parentheses.

Source: Same as for Table 1.

Appendix Table 2: Odds ratios from logistic regression results presented in Figures 5

	Increase communication with ...			
	(1) Siblings	(2) Collateral Kin	(3) Parents and grandparents	(4) Children and grandchildren
Female	1.22* (1.02 - 1.46)	1.21 (0.99 - 1.48)	1.08 (0.88 - 1.32)	1.56** (1.21 - 1.99)
Age	1.00 (0.99 - 1.00)	0.99** (0.98 - 0.99)	0.95** (0.95 - 0.96)	1.04** (1.03 - 1.05)
Foreign born	1.11 (0.90 - 1.38)	0.83 (0.66 - 1.05)	1.53** (1.21 - 1.94)	1.54** (1.17 - 2.04)
College educated	1.19 (0.99 - 1.44)	1.41** (1.14 - 1.74)	1.44** (1.16 - 1.78)	0.86 (0.67 - 1.11)
Below poverty line	0.87 (0.70 - 1.09)	0.77* (0.60 - 0.99)	0.82 (0.64 - 1.05)	0.95 (0.72 - 1.26)
Race/ethnicity				
<i>Reference group: Non-Hispanic White</i>				
Non-Hispanic Black	1.79** (1.38 - 2.32)	1.70** (1.27 - 2.27)	1.33 (0.97 - 1.82)	2.00** (1.43 - 2.80)
Asian	0.95 (0.69 - 1.29)	1.01 (0.71 - 1.43)	1.28 (0.92 - 1.78)	1.08 (0.70 - 1.66)
Hispanic	1.82** (1.38 - 2.38)	1.83** (1.36 - 2.48)	1.45* (1.07 - 1.98)	1.90** (1.31 - 2.76)
Other race	1.41 (0.92 - 2.15)	1.28 (0.79 - 2.07)	1.01 (0.61 - 1.67)	1.28 (0.71 - 2.32)
Constant	0.30** (0.21 - 0.43)	0.33** (0.22 - 0.50)	1.59* (1.06 - 2.37)	0.01** (0.01 - 0.02)
Observations	2,363	2,363	2,363	2,363

Notes: ** p<0.01, * p<0.05; 95% confidence interval of the odds ratio in parentheses.

Source: Same as for Table 1.