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Journal

Journal of Marriage and Family, 85(4)

ISSN

0022-2445

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Publication Date

2023-08-01

DOI

10.1111/jomf.12911

Peer reviewed

HHS Public Access

Author manuscript

J Marriage Fam. Author manuscript; available in PMC 2023 November 02.

Published in final edited form as:

J Marriage Fam. 2023 August ; 85(4): 962–986. doi:10.1111/jomf.12911.

Keeping kin close? Geographies of family networks by race and income, 1981–2017

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Abstract

Objective: This study examined changes in geographic proximity to family members among race and income groups in the United States from 1981 to 2017.

Background: Close geographic proximity to family members can facilitate mutual support and strengthen family bonds. Some scholars argue that institutional sources of support have replaced many core family functions, which might mean that households are likely to live increasingly farther away from family. Advancing technology and changing labor market opportunities might reinforce this pattern. Yet, the ongoing cultural and emotional salience of family might curtail the effects of these factors on the increasing distance to family.

Method: We conducted a quantitative analysis of longitudinal data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID). We utilized the multigenerational structure of the PSID and restricted-use geocodes to map kin proximity at every interview from 1981 to 2017. We cross-classified our sample by race and income, focusing on Black and White respondents across income quartiles (n = 171,501 person-periods).

Results: High-income White respondents showed the greatest increases in distance from kin over time, whereas proximity to kin among other race-income groups was relatively stable.

Conclusion: Proximate kin has become less central in the lives of high-income White households over time, whereas close proximity to kin has been the norm over time for other racial and income groups. These results have implications for racial and income differences in kin relations over time.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

Keywords

demographics; family dynamics; family structure; intergenerational relationships; longitudinal research; race

INTRODUCTION

Living close to kin is a major feature of residential patterns in the United States. Nearly three-quarters of adults live within 30 miles of a parent or adult child (Choi et al., 2020). Having family nearby decreases the chances of an individual leaving a neighborhood, sometimes even when there are other compelling reasons to move (Spring et al., 2017). For movers, destination neighborhoods closer to kin are more attractive than comparable neighborhoods farther from kin (Spring et al., 2017). Immediate family and, to a lesser extent, extended family serves as geographic pull factors. The tendency to stay close to kin is most apparent among parents and children, but grandparents and grandchildren, aunts/uncles and nieces/nephews, cousins, and siblings more often live in the same state than in different states (Daw et al., 2019).

Family members are often important sources of emotional and instrumental support, and geographic proximity enables and intensifies support-exchange behavior (Silverstein & Bengston, 1997; Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2004). Some families are also characterized by strong familial bonds and cultures that promote staying close (Reyes et al., 2020). Nonetheless, there are reasons to suspect that the geographies of family networks have changed over time. For instance, some scholars have suggested that family support is less instrumental today than in the past, as people come to rely on institutions to serve functions that used to be fulfilled by family (Cichy et al., 2013; Cherlin & Seltzer, 2014).

In this paper, we investigate changes in families via changes in living close to kin over time in the United States. We scrutinize not only *whether* geographic distances to kin are increasing, but *for whom*. Kin dynamics vary substantially by social group; Black and Latino/a households are more likely than White households to reside near family (Ackert et al., 2019), and low-income households are more likely to have parents or adult children residing nearby and are less likely to move away from family than high-income households (Spring et al., 2017; Choi et al., 2020). These race- and income-specific dynamics suggest that family is an enduring force in the daily lives of some households—although patterns could still be changing over time even for these groups. The evidence about this topic is extremely sparse; little is known about how family geographies are changing for Black and White families across the income spectrum.

This study draws on longitudinal data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) from 1981 to 2017 to investigate changes in kin proximity over time by race and income. We leverage the unique multigenerational structure of the PSID and restricted geocodes to map spatial relationships among sample respondents who were connected to the same core household. In this way, we can construct the kin networks of Black and White respondents across income groups and describe the geography of those networks at every interview from 1981 to 2017.

Previous studies have used the PSID to assess proximity to parents and adult children (Choi et al., 2020), proximity to immediate versus extended family (Daw et al., 2016; Daw et al., 2019), and associations between proximity to kin and residential mobility (Spring et al., 2017; Ackert et al., 2019). This work builds on these prior studies in several ways. First, this study provides a temporal perspective, evaluating *changes* in proximity to nuclear and extended kin among various sociodemographic groups over the last four decades. Second, we pay specific attention to stratification in these trends across racial and income groups. Third, we consider multiple dimensions of family geography, including overall network dispersion versus distance to the closest relative. This study thus provides insights into changing spatial patterns of kin networks over time. In doing so, this work informs questions of whether (and for whom) close family proximity remains relevant and meaningful and how the geographies of kin networks may relate to broader patterns of, and efforts to address, social inequality.

BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Despite theoretical and empirical reasons to expect that proximity to kin has changed over time, questions linger about the extent of and reasons for such changes. Changes in kin proximity and variations within are shaped by a complex set of structural and cultural forces operating across levels of the social ecology. A prominent explanation for changes in kin proximity centers around changes in family support-exchange behavior. However, this explanation is inter-twined with other family changes and broader socioeconomic changes including demographic change, technological change, and the changing geography of labor market opportunities. Rather than attempt to isolate these trends, we describe below how these entangled forces may lead to changes in the geographies of family networks.

Explanations for changing geographies of kin

One hypothesis is that distances to kin are increasing over time because family support (and thus family proximity) is less instrumental today than in the past. As far back as 1938, Ogburn wrote that six of the family's seven basic functions (economic, status giving, education, religious, recreational, and protective) had been mostly transferred to other social institutions (see also Thornton & Fricke, 1987). Only affectional ties, Ogburn (1938) wrote, have grown because of changes in the family. The institutionalization of family functions implies that households are able and likely to live increasingly farther away from their family networks as they come to rely on schools, daycares, churches, workplaces, and the government to fulfill roles once fulfilled by family.

Yet, prior empirical evidence, although limited, does not find that kin social support has declined over time. Verdery and Campbell's (2019) study of time trends in access to family support asked respondents, "If you had a problem with which you needed help (for example, sickness or moving), how much help would you expect to get from family living nearby?" The researchers found little to no population-level change in social family support from 1993 to 2011, or change disaggregated by race and socioeconomic status. This result would imply stable levels of family support and thus family proximity.

Nonetheless, there are still other reasons why family support and proximity could be changing over time. First, the number of kin providing support may be shrinking, with an increased reliance on a smaller number of physically proximate kin. As Verdery and Campbell (2019) observe, strong support can be provided even by only one family member living nearby. Second, in some circumstances, the balance of support families receive is changing, with a move towards support that is less dependent on physical proximity (Ho, 2015). Because Verdery and Campbell (2019) asked specifically about help during a "problem" event from a family "living nearby," it is unclear how other types of nonemergency support are changing, such as the balance of financial, emotional, instrumental, and informational support (Henly et al., 2005; Harknett & Hartnett, 2011). Third, even without changes in family support, there have been changes in how support is delivered. Advances in technology mean that people can more easily stay connected to family over long distances, reducing the salience of geographic proximity for certain types of kin support, including financial and emotional support (Peng et al., 2018; Fingerman et al., 2020).

Broad demographic and economic trends could also prompt changes in family geography. High rates of divorce, delayed first marriage, mass incarceration, and financial difficulty associated with the Great Recession have all influenced intergenerational ties in ways that also shape family geographies (Seltzer & Bianchi, 2013; Fingerman et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2021). Families also face a changing landscape of labor market opportunities, whereby those with higher levels of education and specialized degrees frequently end up at greater distances from their parents (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1997; Molloy et al., 2017).

The ongoing cultural and emotional salience of family might curtail the effects of these factors on the increasing distance to family. Affectionate relationships, frequent interactions, and shared culture among family provide psychological benefits (Taylor et al., 2020) and can also improve physical health (Kana'iaupuni et al., 2005), although there is also evidence to the contrary (Ryan & Willits, 2007). The reported strength of family bonds and the desire to fulfill family obligations have changed little over time or with younger generations (Antonucci et al., 2011). The ongoing importance of family aligns with Bengston and colleagues' *family solidarity model* (McChesney & Bengtson, 1988; Bengtson et al., 2002), which conceptualizes family cohesion as being reinforced across multiple dimensions including contact, support, and proximity. Aligned with the family solidarity model is evidence that physical proximity is an important correlate of contact frequency (Hatchett & Jackson, 1993; Jayakody et al., 1993; Lawton, Silverstein, & Bengston, 1994) and that subjective closeness is positively associated with family support-exchanges (Taylor et al., 2021). Thus, some people choose to live near family because they are invested in a mode of family solidarity that they find compelling or emotionally fulfilling.

For whom is kin proximity changing?

In addition to focusing on *whether* kin proximity has changed over time, we scrutinize *for whom* kin proximity is changing. Many factors shape access to kin and how individuals utilize their family networks, including income, education, wealth, gender, and race, among others. We focus on two overlapping factors—race and income—and explore the

differentials in kin proximity that potentially lie at their intersection. In doing so we answer recent calls to explore intragroup diversity within kin dynamics (Taylor et al., 2021). Most research on family geographies explores race and income as separate factors and is based on cross-sectional evidence or pooling years (Compton & Pollak, 2015; Spring et al., 2017; Ackert et al., 2019; Reyes et al., 2020; Choi et al., 2021; Schoeni et al., 2022). This research shows that Black, Hispanic, and lower-income households are more likely to have family living nearby than White and higher-income households, but within-group heterogeneity and change over time have been underexplored.

One reason to expect differences in kin proximity by social group is that access to nonfamily sources of support is highly stratified by race and income. Dual-earner middle- and upper-class households are increasingly likely to rely on nonkin individuals for housekeeping and caregiving like nannies, home health aides, and housekeepers (Macdonald, 2011) or institutions like daycare centers and assisted living facilities (Damaske, 2011). Working-poor and working-class families are more likely to rely on relatives for these same tasks (Hofferth, 1995; Jarrett, 1998). According to some studies on childcare, this pattern is not because low-income families prefer family-provided assistance, but because of constraints related to availability, cost, subsidies, and quality of programs (Hofferth, 1995; Zangger & Widmer, 2020). Black families in particular are frequently located in neighborhoods with fewer organizations to support families, like childcare centers, grocery stores, and pharmacies (Small & McDermott, 2006). Over time, these structural deficiencies have been exacerbated by a weak and declining social safety net that has reduced access to affordable housing and childcare (Kingsley, 2017; Tach & Edin, 2017).

Research on kin support-exchange behavior across Black, Hispanic, and White families yields mixed findings, which researchers attribute to differences in how family support is operationalized and the sociodemographics of the samples under investigation (Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2004; Taylor et al., 2014). However, a common finding is that Black and Mexican-American families tend to provide more practical support like transportation and childcare, whereas White families report more financial and emotional kin support—which are less dependent on physical proximity (Hogan et al., 1990; Hao, 1996; Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2004; Sarkisian et al., 2007). However, recent research indicates that African American and Black Caribbean households exchange financial support more frequently than White households, but the amounts received by White households are larger (Taylor et al., 2022).

Research at the intersection of race and income reveals that reciprocal support is a major feature of African American family networks (Cross et al., 2018). Research focusing on poor African American families underscores the importance of reciprocal exchange networks for daily well-being and survival (Stack, 1975; Jarrett, 1994; Burton & Clark, 2005; Garrett-Peters & Burton, 2016). Research on middle- and upper-income Black families reveals that these families give financially to their extended family more than their White counterparts (Chiteji & Hamilton, 2002; O'Brien, 2012; Taylor et al., 2022). And, among Black women, increased education is negatively correlated with using relative-provided childcare, but the correlation with income is the opposite (Brewster & Padvic 2002). Brewster and Padvic (2002) assert that women of color who can afford to do so spend their childcare dollars on family members' services in order to provide them with economic resources (see also

Uttal, 1999). Among Mexican-origin families, as the number of immediate kin members increases, there is a reduced likelihood of low-income relatives receiving financial support, but increases in the number of extended kin members improve the chances of receiving such support (Kana'iaupuni et al., 2005). Combined, this research suggests that families of color with greater means give frequently to family members needing assistance, a trend that researchers note can add to families' financial strain and their difficulties in building wealth (Chiteji & Hamilton, 2002; Kana'iaupuni et al., 2005; O'Brien, 2012; McKinley & Brown, 2020), and may also influence residential location decisions.

In support of the family solidarity model, Black and Hispanic families are frequently described as having strong extended family bonds. Cross (2018) notes that 57% of Black children and 35% of Hispanic children ever co-reside with extended family (defined as grandparents, aunts, or uncles) compared with 20% of White children. Reyes et al. (2020) note that Black and Hispanic populations are more likely than White populations to have the concept of close geographic proximity between generations built into their family structure, and Taylor et al. (2013) found that African Americans reported more frequent contact with family members than White Americans. An obligation to a close family structure and maintenance of family relationships may further influence whether individuals move away from their family networks. But family closeness is also patterned by socioeconomic status. Taylor et al. (2021) note that African American individuals experiencing material hardship (defined as unable to meet basic expenses like rent and utilities) reported lower levels of subjective family closeness and family contact, although the same discrepancies were not present by education or income.

Factors beyond a need for kin support that vary by race/ethnicity and income could also influence changes in proximity to kin over time. The geography of labor market opportunities is a case in point. For example, higher-income tech sector jobs tend to be geographically concentrated in a few key cities (Muro & You, 2022), and White individuals are over-represented in tech sector jobs relative to Black and Latino/a individuals (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2022). Higher income White individuals may have been more likely to move away from kin over time to pursue these jobs relative to higher-income Black and Latino/a individuals. Interstate migration has been declining across racial/ethnic and income groups (Foster, 2017; Molloy et al., 2017), suggesting a decline in distance to kin over time among all groups. However, younger college-educated and White individuals have consistently been more likely to engage in interstate migration than those without a college degree and Black and Latino/a individuals (Foster, 2017). Therefore, distances from kin could have increased over time for younger, higher-income White individuals relative to other race-income groups. However, recent increases in college enrollment among Black students could alter these trends (Baker et al., 2018).

The broad structural and cultural forces shaping changes to family geographies are difficult to disentangle, but there are reasons to suspect that these forces are felt differently by race and income. Race-income groups may adjust kin proximities based on specific family support needs, family obligations, labor market opportunities, and cultural beliefs about living near or farther away from kin. By documenting trends in kin proximity over time, the present study aims to shed further light on the changing roles of family at the intersection

of race and income and inform opportunities to support families in addressing inequalities therein.

DATA AND METHODS

Data

Data for this study came from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), a nationally-representative, longitudinal survey of families in the United States that began in 1968 and has continued to follow individuals from the core sample as well as their descendants over time (PSID, 2017). The initial 1968 panel was made up of approximately 5,000 families (approximately 18,000 individuals). Sample members include all persons living in original panel families plus anyone subsequently born to or adopted by a sample person. New families have been added to the panel as children and other members of original panel families leave to form their own households. Sample members were interviewed annually from 1968 to 1997 and biennially thereafter. The PSID has maintained a reinterview rate between 95% and 98% across virtually all survey waves (PSID, 2017). For consistency in the time between successive interviews, we analyze only odd years, from 1981 to 2017. We limited our analyses to interview years after 1981 to allow time for the initial 1968 families to branch and grow through split-off families. Prior to 1981, the number of nonresident family members of the original panel families was too small for analysis.

The PSID has now collected data for 50 years, with as many as seven generations of families now included in the sample (PSID, 2017). The PSID includes the most comprehensive data on kinship structures in the United States available for a long period of time. Despite its strengths, there are some drawbacks of the PSID for our analysis. The core sample is made up of 1968 families (including an oversample of poor families) and then followed over time. Thus, the PSID sample has not been continually representative of the larger United States population, especially as the population has been transformed through post-1968 immigration. To address these issues, the PSID has added several “refresher” samples over time and provides sampling weights to account for differential probabilities of selection due to the sample design and subsequent sample attrition (PSID, 2017). However, there are limitations with the sample weights prior to 1993 (Gouskova et al., 2008). These limitations, our adjustments to the weights, and the comparability of results under different weighting schemes are described below in the Analytic Strategy and Results sections.

Individual and household characteristics in the analysis came from the main PSID data files. Kin relationships were measured based on the supplemental Parent Identification file. Geographic locations of respondents and their kin came from the restricted, geocoded files, which link PSID respondents to their census tracts. We appended the latitude and longitude of tract centroids to the data to calculate distances between respondents and kin.

Measures

Race and income—We drew race from the PSID household file for household reference persons and spouses. We cross-classified race with the “Spanish descent” variable to arrive at the two racial/ethnic groups we utilized in this analysis: non-Hispanic Black respondents

and non-Hispanic White respondents. We omitted multiracial respondents, which constituted approximately 1%–5% of the PSID sample across the survey waves used in our analysis. We acknowledge that our rigid categorization of race comes with some limitations. Race is socially constructed and fluid, making our categorization of race overly deterministic. Furthermore, our analysis only pertains to Black and White populations, to the exclusion of Latino/a, Asian, and other racial/ethnic groups. Unfortunately, the PSID does not yet contain large enough samples of groups other than Black and White respondents to assess changes in family proximity over time during our study period, particularly when we further divided the sample by income.

The family income measure came from the PSID household file and included all sources of income for adult members of the household. For analytic purposes, we operationalized family income into quartiles, calculated annually, based on income in the entire PSID sample for the given wave. We constructed the income quartiles from the full sample, rather than within race, so that income levels were comparable across racial groups. We chose quartiles instead of two other frequently used quantiles—quintiles and deciles—to avoid categories with small sample sizes. We opted to focus on income instead of other socioeconomic indicators like education or wealth because it more directly reflects the immediate resources households have at their disposal to pay for items like housing, childcare, and transportation. Education and wealth, on the other hand, represent stocks of financial and human capital that may provide the resources and personal safety net to move farther from family. Therefore, we controlled for education and wealth in our investigation of the immediate resources associated with income. We cross-classified respondents by race and income to arrive at eight race-income groups for analysis (see Table 1).

Kin proximity—The PSID's unique multigenerational structure allowed us to locate respondents within their broader kin networks. In the PSID, sample members included individuals living in the original family unit during the first interview in 1968 and all lineal descendants born after 1968. As a result, those born to a sample member automatically became sample members and were followed over time as they aged and formed their own households. Individuals who were not born into a study family but moved in later, such as a spouse marrying a sample member, also became sample members and were followed over time. As PSID kin networks branched out over time, they grew continually so that individual respondents could be linked not only to nuclear kin such as parents, children, and siblings, but also to extended kin, such as grandparents, grandchildren, aunts/uncles, nieces/nephews, and cousins.

We leveraged the PSID's built-in multigenerational structure by linking all members of the same nuclear and extended family using their shared original 1968 Family Identification number. Starting with the initial parent/child relationship defined in the Parent Identification file, we mapped additional relationships, including siblings, grandparents, grandchildren, aunts/uncles, nieces/nephews, cousins, and all other kin. The resulting database includes relationship indicators between every sample member and every member of their nuclear and extended kin network contained in the PSID in every survey year from 1981 to 2017. Other studies have utilized a similar kin-mapping method with the PSID (Daw et al., 2016; Spring et al., 2017; Ackert et al., 2019; Daw et al., 2019). A limitation is that our analysis

does not depict respondents' entire kin networks because the PSID kin networks were constricted to kin who traced back to a core sample family. Daw et al. (2016) described this as the "missing half" problem and demonstrated that the omission of some kin is unlikely to be systematic in ways that would bias our results. As a further step, we accounted for differences in the availability of kin across respondents and over time by controlling for the number of kin in the respondents' networks.

The availability of geographic identifiers for PSID respondents and their kin in the restricted-use data further allowed us to characterize several spatial proximity measures, such as the respondent's closest distance to any kin and average distance to all kin. We calculated distance in miles based on the centroid of the respondent's census tract to the centroid of each kin member's tract. We focused on two categories of kin—nonresident nuclear kin (parents, children, and siblings) and nonresident extended kin (everyone else)—and calculated the spatial proximity measures within each category. Nonresident nuclear kin in our analysis was inclusive of biological parent/child, adoptive parent/child, current step-parent/child, full- and half- sibling, and current step-sibling relationships. The choice to categorize siblings as nuclear rather than extended kin was motivated by studies documenting differential mortality by race, education, and age that results in a lack of access to parents (Daw et al., 2016) and therefore closer sibling bonds (Ray, 2016) among some social groups. Extended kin in our analysis were those that shared the same 1968 Family Identification number and were nonresident but who did not meet our criteria of nuclear family.

PSID respondents needed to have at least one nonresident kin member in the survey wave to be included in our analytic sample. In this study, 22% of Black person-periods and 25% of White person-periods did not have a nonresident nuclear kin member, and 4% of Black person-periods and 5% of White person-periods did not have a nonresident extended kin member. We excluded these person-periods from the applicable analyses. Supplementary analyses revealed that the availability of nonresident nuclear kin was correlated with race, income, year, and the covariates listed in the next paragraph. Although these characteristics do a fairly good job of predicting the availability of kin (here and in other studies, including Daw et al., 2016), there may be unobserved characteristics that also determine the availability of kin and therefore selection into our sample.

Covariates—To help account for differences among respondents with and without nonresident kin, we controlled for wealth, age, years of education, sex, marital status, children in the household, co-residence with kin, and nativity. Wealth is measured as the sum of all assets (including home equity) minus all debts and is standardized to adjust for inflation. Co-residence with kin is defined as living with extended family members or with adult children, siblings, or parents after having lived separately from them for any period. Missing values were imputed with multiple imputations, using all predictor and outcome variables from our analysis in the imputation model following White et al. (2011). Table 2 reports summary statistics for our sample.

Analytic methods

We analyzed changes in kin proximity among race-income groups from 1981 to 2017. We operationalized kin proximity with two measures: (1) median distance to kin in miles, and (2) distance to closest kin in miles, which we estimated separately for nuclear and extended kin. Utilizing both measures of kin proximity tells us about the overall spatial distribution of individuals' nuclear and extended kin networks (i.e., are networks geographically tight, or dispersed?), and the extent to which nuclear or extended kin was accessible at a short distance (i.e., how far would the respondent have to travel to access at least one kin member?). Both considerations may be important for how people utilize their kin networks. About 17% of person-periods in our sample had only one nonresident nuclear kin member and 6% had only one nonresident extended kin member. For these person-periods, the median and the closest distance are the same.

Other factors likely determine kin proximity in addition to race and income, including wealth, age, education, gender, marital status, parental status, nativity, co-residence with kin, and the number of kin in the respondents' network. These sociodemographic factors changed within our sample over time, contributing to any changes in kin proximity that we observed. Thus, we adjusted for these factors in multilevel linear models estimated in Stata/MP 17.0.

We estimated separate models for Black and White respondents. We treated kin proximity as a repeated cross-sectional measure and accounted for nonindependence by utilizing multi-level models that nested observations within respondents and respondents within their extended family networks. We included a cubic term for year to allow for nonlinear changes in kin proximity over time. We included interactions between income quartile and cubic year to compare how kin proximity has changed over time across income groups within race. It is important to note that many of the group differentials that our covariates were intended to adjust for, such as differential rates of education, marriage, and childbearing, have also been influenced by the same historical processes and discriminatory practices that have produced racial disparities in income (Williams, 2019). This is in part why we opted to estimate race-stratified models rather than a single model with interaction terms. Thus, our results are not positioned to "explain" racial disparities in kin proximity because many of the "explanations" (including some not captured here) are at their core already racialized (and classed). Instead, our results aim to clarify whether differences in kin proximity by race and income have converged or widened over time.

All of our results are weighted by inverse probability of sampling (IPS) weights, which we constructed using procedures described below. Although the PSID provides longitudinal and cross-sectional sample weights, there are limitations with the weights prior to 1993. The PSID changed the process for assigning longitudinal sample weights to respondents who left the sample and then re-appeared (Gouskova et al., 2008). Prior to 1993, the "re-appearers" were assigned a longitudinal sample weight of zero, causing them to be dropped from analyses that apply the longitudinal weights (Gouskova et al., 2008). Cross-sectional sample weights were not made available until 1997, making them unsuitable for the time period of our analysis. The PSID recommends that researchers conducting longitudinal data analysis check how many cases are excluded due to zero weights and undertake their own

adjustments, such as propensity models, to address the missing weights problem (Gouskova et al., 2008).

We investigated the distribution of zero longitudinal sample weights for the race-income groups in our analysis and found that a large portion of our sample (32%) had a longitudinal sample weight of zero, primarily for years prior to 1993. We also found that rates of zero sample weights were similar for Black and White respondents but increased with income for both racial groups. Thus, if we used the longitudinal sample weights, we would omit more higher-income than lower income cases, potentially biasing the results to a greater extent for higher-income versus lower income groups. Our weighting strategy was to essentially treat the sample weights as missing data, following De Silva et al. (2021), and then estimate IPS weights using available data, following Buchanan et al. (2018). To construct the IPS weights, we calculated the probability of sample inclusion (i.e., of having a nonzero longitudinal sample weight), where we predicted sample inclusion with the PSID design strata (race, income) and other covariates (age, sex, children in the household, marital status, years of education, adjusted wealth, co-residence with kin, foreign-born, and number of kin in the network). We then calculated the inverse logit of those predictions to arrive at the IPS weight. We truncated the IPS weights at the 1st and 99th percentiles following usual procedures to mitigate the influence of outliers (see Cole & Hernan, 2008). We then applied the IPS weight to all analytical models. We conducted supplementary analyses comparing the IPS weights to the longitudinal weights (with listwise deletion of respondents with zero weights) for the period from 1993 to 2017. Results were consistent, providing some assurance that the IPS weights successfully capture salient aspects of the PSID sampling design. We also conducted supplementary analyses comparing weighting strategies for the full-time period (1981–2017) and note in the Results section where findings differed. For ease of interpretation, the Results section displays the average predicted values of our proximity outcomes derived from the multilevel models applying the IPS weights and holding covariates at their sample means. Full model results are available in Tables S1 and S2.

RESULTS

Proximity to kin over time: Black respondents

Figure 1 shows average predicted values of median distance to nuclear kin for Black respondents. In Figure 1 and subsequent figures, the dark-shaded areas represent the 95% confidence intervals for the average predicted values for each year, and the light-shaded areas represent the 95% confidence interval for the 1981 predicted values—the base year for comparison. Where the dark and light shaded confidence intervals do not overlap, the predicted values for the observed year were statistically significantly different from the 1981 predicted values (with a confidence level of 95%).

In 1981, the average median distances from nuclear kin ranged from 85–106 miles for Black respondents of various incomes. By 2017, the average median distances from nuclear kin had increased to a range of 137–182 miles, a percentage increase ranging from approximately 34%–77%. The change over time was statistically significant only for low-income Black respondents. In other words, the results in Figure 1 provide evidence that

low-income Black respondents lived significantly farther from their nuclear kin networks, on average, in the later years of our study. For higher-income Black respondents, the change in median distance to nuclear kin over time was not statistically significant.

Median distance to extended kin did not significantly increase over time among Black respondents (Figure 2). In 1981, the average median distance from extended kin ranged from 108–133 miles for Black respondents across income groups. By 2017, distances had increased to 163–216 miles, a percentage increase that ranged from 35%−88% across income levels but was not statistically significant. For all income groups, there was no evidence of living significantly farther from extended kin networks in the later years of the study.

We next considered an alternative measure of kin proximity: respondents' distances to their closest kin. Figures 3, 4 show the average predicted values for the closest distance to nuclear and extended kin among Black respondents. Until recently, distances to the closest nuclear kin remained relatively stable among Black families of all income groups (Figure 3). In 1981, the average Black respondent lived 65–72 miles from their closest nuclear kin member, across income categories. By 2017, distances to the closest nuclear kin had increased to 105–147 miles, a percentage increase that ranged from approximately 46%–110%. This increase was statistically significant only for low-income Black respondents, and then only in the last 2 years of the study. The change over time was not statistically significant for higher-income Black respondents.

Even more stable were the predicted distances to the closest extended kin member among Black respondents (Figure 4). In 1981, the average predicted distance to the closest extended kin member ranged from 65–128 miles across income groups. By 2017, the range had shifted to 77–116 miles, reflecting a percentage change that ranged from a 27% decline to a 27% increase. These changes over time were not statistically significant for any income group.

Distance from kin estimates for Black respondents were somewhat inconsistent across sample weighting strategies (results available upon request). The IPS-weighted estimates shown here reflect a middle ground between estimates utilizing the PSID-provided longitudinal sample weights (with listwise deletion of respondents with zero weights) and unweighted results. We found no significant distance changes for Black respondents utilizing the longitudinal sample weights. Unweighted estimates revealed a more substantial increase in median distance to nuclear kin among low-income Black respondents that began earlier (in 2005) and recent, significant increases for lower-middle and upper-middle Black respondents as well. Unweighted estimates also revealed significant increases in median distance to extended kin among Black households of all incomes in the last few years of our study. For closest distance, unweighted results showed statistically significant increases in distance to the closest nuclear kin for lower-middle and upper-middle income Black respondents in later years. Results of unweighted models were consistent for closest distance to extended kin, revealing no significant changes over time. Our application of IPS weights tempered the statistical significance of many of these increases compared to the base year.

Although the IPS-weighted standard errors were larger, the estimated coefficients from the unweighted and IPS-weighted results were similar.

Proximity to kin over time: White respondents

Figures 5, 6 show average predicted values for median distance to nuclear and extended kin among White respondents. Results demonstrate that White respondents lived farther from their kin, in general, than Black respondents of comparable income. Increases over time in distances to kin far outpaced increases among Black respondents, particularly when comparing the high-income groups. In 1981, the average median distance from nuclear kin ranged from 142–206 miles for White respondents across income groups. By 2017, distances from nuclear kin had increased to 251–285 miles. Among low- and lower-middle-income White respondents, the changes reflected an approximately 24%–28% increase. For upper-middle-income White respondents, the change reflected a 46% increase, and for high-income White respondents, a 99% increase. The changes over time for upper-middle-income White respondents were steady and statistically significant since 2005, and for high-income White respondents since the early 1990s. These findings suggest that patterns of living farther from nuclear kin have been operating for a decade or more among higher-income White households.

White households of all incomes have also increased their average median distance from extended kin over time (Figure 6). In 1981, the average median distance to extended kin ranged from 209–231 miles across White respondents of various incomes. By 2017, the distances had increased to 327–335 miles, reflecting a percentage increase that ranged from 42%−60%. The change over time was statistically significant for all income groups but was earlier and more pronounced for high-income White respondents. These findings indicate that White families, especially those with high incomes, experienced increasing distances from extended kin over time.

Figure 7 presents the corresponding results for the closest nuclear kin member for White income groups over time. Results demonstrated relative stability in the distance to the closest nuclear kin member among White respondents, except for high-income White respondents. In 1981, the average distance to the closest nuclear kin ranged from 109–168 miles across income groups. By 2017, distances to the closest nuclear kin had increased in the range of 27%–36% among low-, lower-middle-, and upper-middle- income White respondents and 99% among high-income White respondents. Only among high-income White respondents was the change over time statistically significant.

Distances to the closest extended kin member were stable over time for all White income groups (Figure 8). In 1981, distances to the closest extended kin ranged from 192–219 miles across income groups. In 2017, distances had changed little, ranging from 161–182 miles. Differences over time in median distance to closest extended kin were not significant for any income group, further illustrating stability in distances to closest extended kin over time among White households. Of note, however, is that distances to closest extended kin in both 1981 and 2017 were significantly higher among White respondents than among Black respondents of comparable income. In both years, White respondents generally lived 1–2 times farther from their closest extended kin member than Black respondents of comparable

income. All estimates for White respondents were substantively similar across sample weighting schemes.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study investigated changes in geographic proximity to kin over time to understand the changing role of families in American life. To the extent that family has become less salient today than in the past, we anticipated a decline in proximity to kin over time. However, we also noted the potentially enduring impacts of family solidarity, reinforced in stable levels of kin support exchange. We examined these various propositions for White and Black income groups.

Our results documented the transformation of geographic networks of kin over the last four decades among Black and White families. We found relatively stable distances to kin among Black families, which underscores other work on the importance of extended family relationships for Black households (Taylor et al., 2013; Cross, 2018; Cross et al., 2018). Where there were increases in distance over time, the increases were a relatively recent development. Low-income Black individuals were living farther from their nuclear kin members in 2017 compared to 1981, based on median distance to all nuclear kin, and distance to their closest nuclear kin member. These increases had materialized only in the last few years of our study, around 2015.

We are unable to fully assess why distances to kin have recently increased for low-income Black respondents, but several possibilities merit further investigation. This result could be due to increasing suburbanization among Black residents over time (Timberlake et al., 2011; Massey & Tannen, 2018), which may have increased distances to kin within Black families in metropolitan areas between those living in suburbs versus urban cores. Given the timing of the distance increase, it may also be the case that the Great Recession and commensurate housing crisis caused income and housing disruptions within Black kin networks that increased distances to kin.

Notably, middle- to high-income Black families, who presumably have the greater resources to move away from kin and a lower need for kin support, have nonetheless maintained relatively close distances to both nuclear and extended kin. These findings run counter to expectations derived from recent increases in college enrollment among Black students, because college enrollment often plays a role in increasing distances to family (Baker et al., 2018). However, stable distances could be driven by family solidarity dynamics that promote staying close (Taylor et al., 2013; Reyes et al., 2020) or the involvement of upper-income Black households in supporting less well-off family members (Chiteji & Hamilton, 2002; O'Brien, 2012; Taylor et al., 2022). These results could also be driven by the psychosocial importance of support from family for buffering against the negative effects of racism-related stress (Brody et al., 2006). In sum, for Black households, if there is a trend towards a declining role of family, it is only very recent, generally only applies to lower income groups, and reflects dispersion from nuclear but not extended kin.

The results for White respondents point to increasing distance to kin, especially for upper-middle- and high-income White families. Upper-middle- and high-income White individuals lived farther from their collective nuclear and extended kin networks in 2017 than in 1981. High-income White individuals also lived farther from their closest nuclear kin member in 2017 than in 1981. Only distances to their closest extended kin remained stable over time. Low- and lower-middle-income White households experienced less change, but they were still living farther from their collective extended kin networks over time. Among White households, we find some support for the idea that the institutionalization of family functions has weakened geographic ties to family, but we cannot disentangle this explanation from others like changing labor market opportunities.

White respondents were in general living farther from their kin than Black respondents of comparable income on each measure of distance to kin and in every period. Previous research has also found this trend of more geographically-distant kin networks among White families versus Black families (Ackert et al., 2019). White respondents also diverged in distance to kin more substantially by income than Black respondents. Low- and lower-middle-income White respondents maintained relatively stable distances from their kin over time. Although their extended kin networks have become more distant overall, low- and lower-middle-income White respondents maintained a similar distance to their closest extended kin member over time. There is little evidence that nuclear and extended kin are less important in the daily lives of lower-income White families today than in the past. Future research might be able to explain this finding by investigating income heterogeneity in family solidarity and family support exchange within White families.

What do these trends mean for broader patterns of racial and income inequality and family relations? Scholars have long posited that family structure is related to geographic and economic mobility. Historically, husbands' ability to follow job opportunities was seen as imperative for modern industrial society and was used to argue for the superiority of the single-earner nuclear family (Bales & Parsons, 1956; Goode, 1963). Recent research on relocation decision-making among dual-earner couples confirms the family-relatedness of work decisions, but with a needed focus on competing priorities and trade-offs that shift over the life course (Challiol & Mignonac, 2005; Greenhaus & Powell, 2012). However, family structure alone does not explain the values attached to work or family, nor does it fully predict who relocates (Clark & Lisowski, 2017). Gender and the co-resident nuclear family have been a major focus in this line of research, but extending this research to race, class, and nonresident kin is critical.

Based on our work, we see several avenues for understanding the impacts of the kin proximity trends observed here on broader patterns of racial/ethnic and income inequality. That geographic ties to kin are breaking down primarily among upper-income White families might foretell a further widening of the economic gap between these and other households, since long-distance moves away from family are often made for employment or educational opportunities (Chan & Ermisch, 2015). Such moves may come at the expense of extended family relations such as subjective closeness or contact frequency. The closer proximity to family among Black and lower income White households must also be understood within this matrix of trade-offs. The costs and benefits of moving towards or

away from family are not clear (Mulder, 2018), because living near family can also provide employment benefits (if family helps with childcare, for example), and living farther away does not always imply weak relationships. Families frequently resolve competing priorities in creative ways, such as by negotiating employment conditions to stay close to kin, or by finding ways to maintain family closeness over long distances. All groups may try to maximize beneficial relations with kin, regardless of location.

There are several important limitations to this study. First and foremost are limitations related to the PSID sample and study design. Our analysis was limited to Black and White respondents due to sampling size limitations for other racial/ethnic groups, and is therefore not representative of the entire United States population. Furthermore, the PSID measures of race combine, for example, African Americans, Afro-Caribbeans, Black Africans, and others of African descent living in the United States into one “Black” category, thus ignoring potentially meaningful distinctions between these groups. Analysis of Latino/a, Asian, and other racial/ethnic groups and sub-groups could shed further light on for whom kin proximity is changing. Analyzing other racial/ethnic groups would also be important for confirming the exceptionalism of increasing kin distance among upper-income White households. In addition, factors related to the PSID study design and our sample selection mean that individuals in our study are perhaps a selective group. Researchers have demonstrated the importance of age, education, and race for determining the availability of nonresident nuclear and extended kin, but also note the potential for unobserved factors (Daw et al., 2016). Additional research on the determinants of kin availability would help researchers understand the “opportunity structure” for kin functions like contact and support. Finally, results for Black respondents were somewhat sensitive to sample weighting strategies. Future inquiry should compare the PSID sample results to other nationally-representative datasets for consistency.

A second limitation is that our analysis pertained to race and income to the exclusion of other important intersecting statuses and identities. Changes in kin proximity over time might vary by gender, age, education, immigrant status, urban/rural location, and other factors. Although we controlled for many of these factors in our analysis, we did not consider the influential ways they might further interact with race, income, or each other. Lastly, kin relationships in our data were not self-defined, and we cannot speak to the issue of relationship quality among kin members. In other words, the biological and legal relationships we observed may or may not be meaningful for the respondents. And, despite their high level of importance for some families, fictive kin were not identified or incorporated in this analysis.

Despite these limitations, the results presented here provide some good starting points for further analysis. We see at least three important avenues for extending this research. First, future research should further explore the consequences of the racial and economic stratification of kin proximity, including the financial, mental, and physical well-being benefits and drawbacks to living near kin versus living farther away. Second, future research should examine how increasing distances to kin (for some groups) may change how they utilize their family networks and the meaning that they ascribe to “family.” For some families, increasing geographic distance to kin may correlate with weaker bonds. For other

families, increasing distances might transform how they view their family networks, from localized sources of immediate support to (potentially) diffuse sources of emotional support. Relatedly, the closest distances to kin reported in our study were on average still too far to provide day-to-day support with practical needs like transportation and childcare. Future analyses should look at the changing share of each race-income group that has access to kin within a short distance, and how this access to kin shapes their experiences with employment, physical and emotional health, and family solidarity. Third, changes in the geography of kin networks will be important for future research on racial and economic residential segregation. Because family networks have been developed within existing systems of residential segregation created by United States governmental policies, family geographies have had to adapt to structural constraints imposed by segregation (Krysan & Crowder, 2017). At the same time, heightened mobility and loose geographic ties among high-income White households have fueled trends like gentrification and exurbanization. Further research should continue to explore how enduring and changing family geographies reflect these broader patterns of segregation and urban sprawl.

We have shown that relatively close proximity to kin remains an enduring part of family life for Black families of all incomes and lower-income White families. In fact, for nearly four decades, these groups have, on average, lived within 300 miles of their collective nuclear and extended kin networks and even closer to their closest nuclear and extended kin members. In contrast, upper-income White households appear to be pulling away from these groups in their distance to kin and could experience further increases if past time trends continue. As the COVID-19 pandemic accelerates aspects of “the end of geography,” such as teleworking, online education, and suburbanization, we may see a further loosening of kin proximity; although the pandemic has also exacerbated many facets of social inequality that we observed, to some degree, in kin proximity across race-income groups. Overall, our results suggest that spatially proximate kin networks are normative and may persist for many groups well into the future. Leveraging and further supporting the beneficial elements of these relationships may be an important avenue for ongoing social policy-making to improve well-being.

Supplementary Material

Refer to Web version on PubMed Central for supplementary material.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work was supported by the National Science Foundation under award number 1949003. The collection of data used in this study was partly supported by the National Institutes of Health under grant numbers R01 HD069609 and R01 AG040213, and the National Science Foundation under award numbers SES 1157698 and 1623684.

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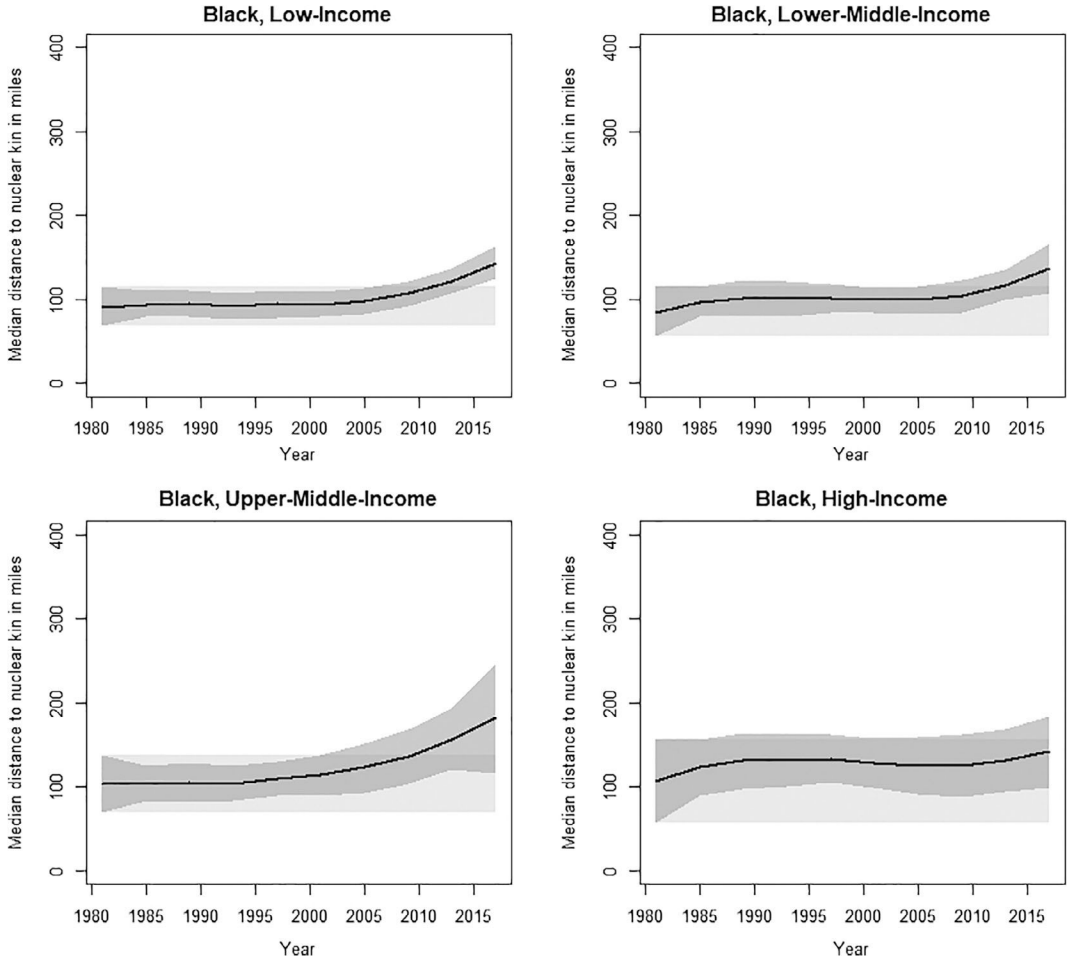

FIGURE 1. ***Average predicted values of median distance to nuclear kin among Black respondents*** **(*N* = 46,172).**

Dark shading represents the 95% confidence intervals of the average predicted values. Light shading represents the 95% confidence intervals of the 1981 average predicted values. Estimates are net of wealth, age, years of education, sex, marital status, children in the household, kin co-residence, nativity, and number of nuclear kin in the respondent's network, and are weighted by inverse probability of sampling weights. Full results are in Table S1.

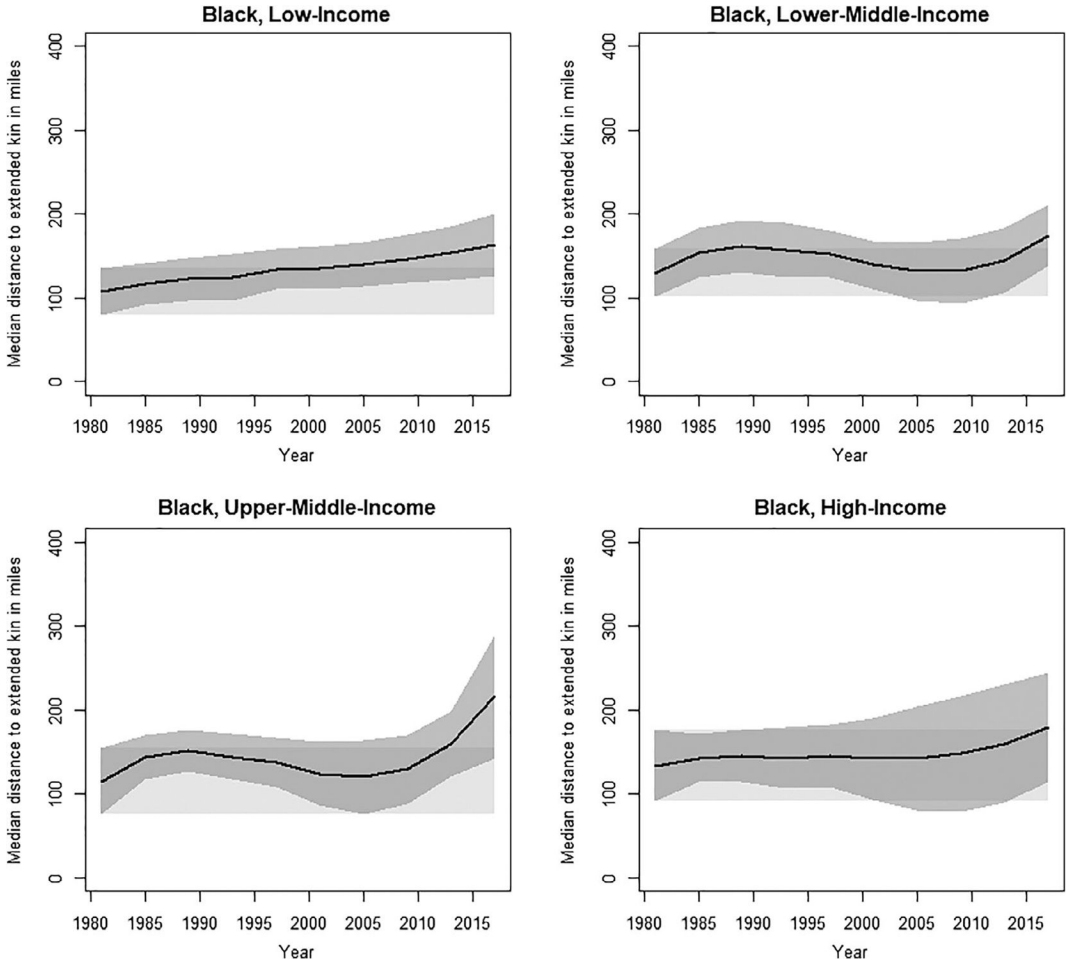

FIGURE 2. ***Average predicted values of median distance to extended kin among Black respondents (N = 56,231).***

Dark shading represents the 95% confidence intervals of the average predicted values. Light shading represents the 95% confidence intervals of the 1981 average predicted values. Estimates are net of wealth, age, years of education, sex, marital status, children in the household, kin co-residence, nativity, and number of extended kin in the respondent's network, and are weighted by inverse probability of sampling weights. Full results are in Table S1.

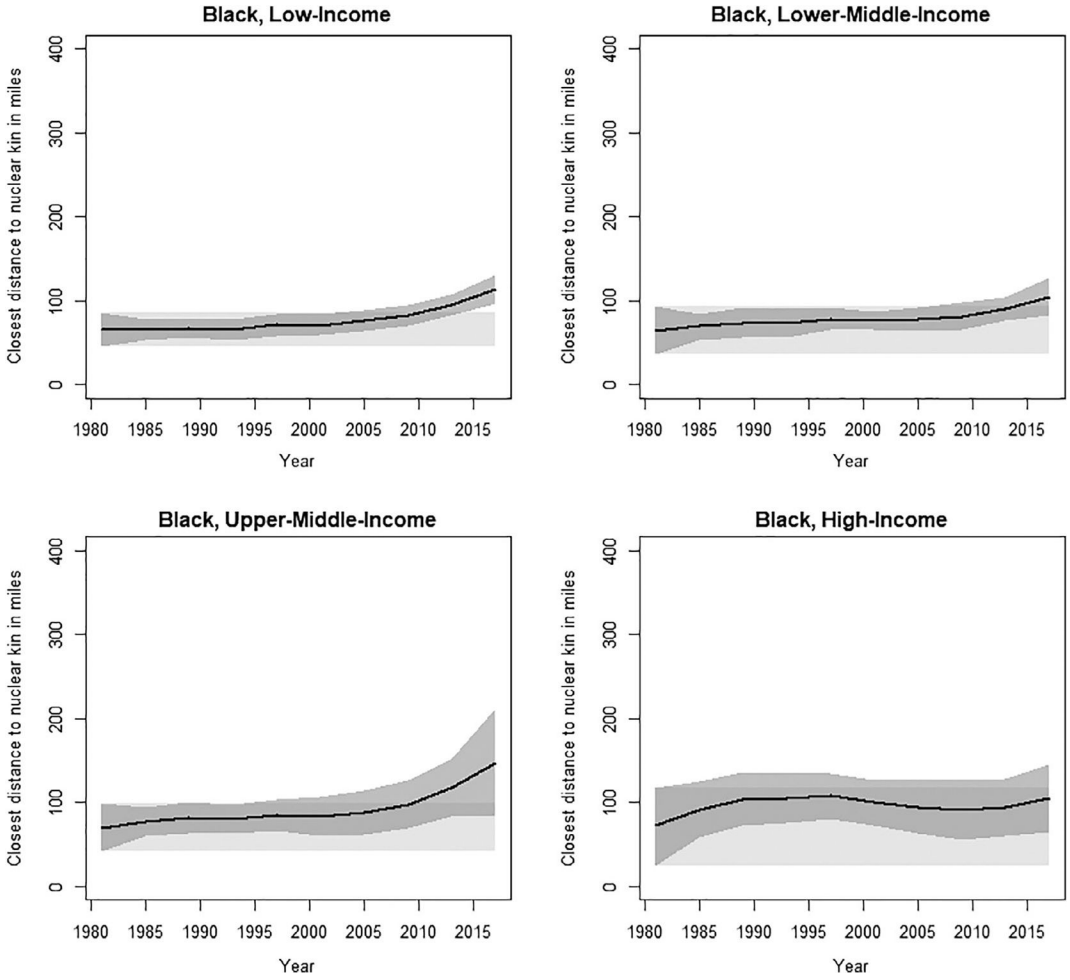

FIGURE 3. ***Average predicted values of closest distance to nuclear kin among Black respondents*** **(*N* = 46,172).**

Dark shading represents the 95% confidence intervals of the average predicted values. Light shading represents the 95% confidence intervals of the 1981 average predicted values. Estimates are net of wealth, age, years of education, sex, marital status, children in the household, kin co-residence, nativity, and number of nuclear kin in the respondent's network, and are weighted by inverse probability of sampling weights. Full results are in Table S1.

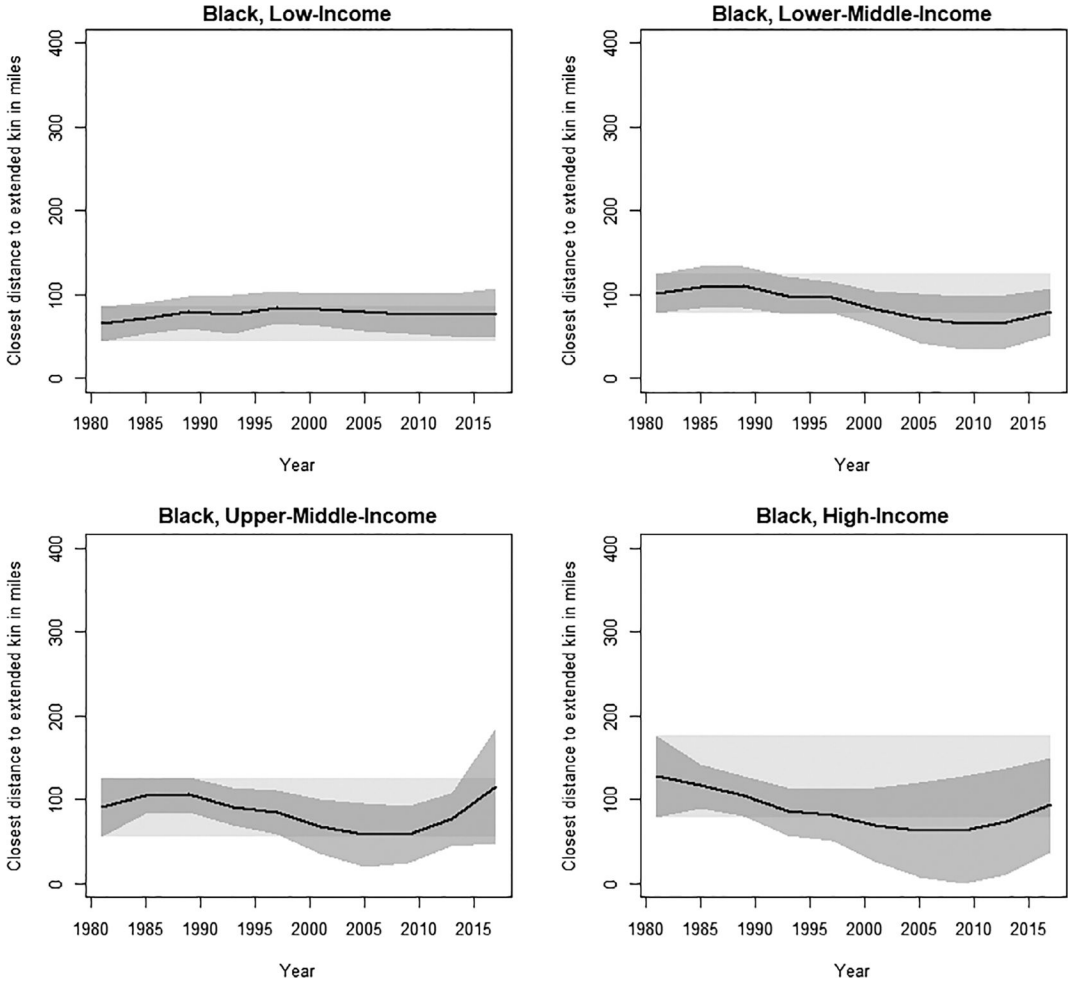

FIGURE 4. ***Average predicted values of closest distance to extended kin among Black respondents*** **(*N* = 56,231).**

Dark shading represents the 95% confidence intervals of the average predicted values. Light shading represents the 95% confidence intervals of the 1981 average predicted values. Estimates are net of wealth, age, years of education, sex, marital status, children in the household, kin co-residence, nativity, and number of extended kin in the respondent's network, and are weighted by inverse probability of sampling weights. Full results are in Table S1.

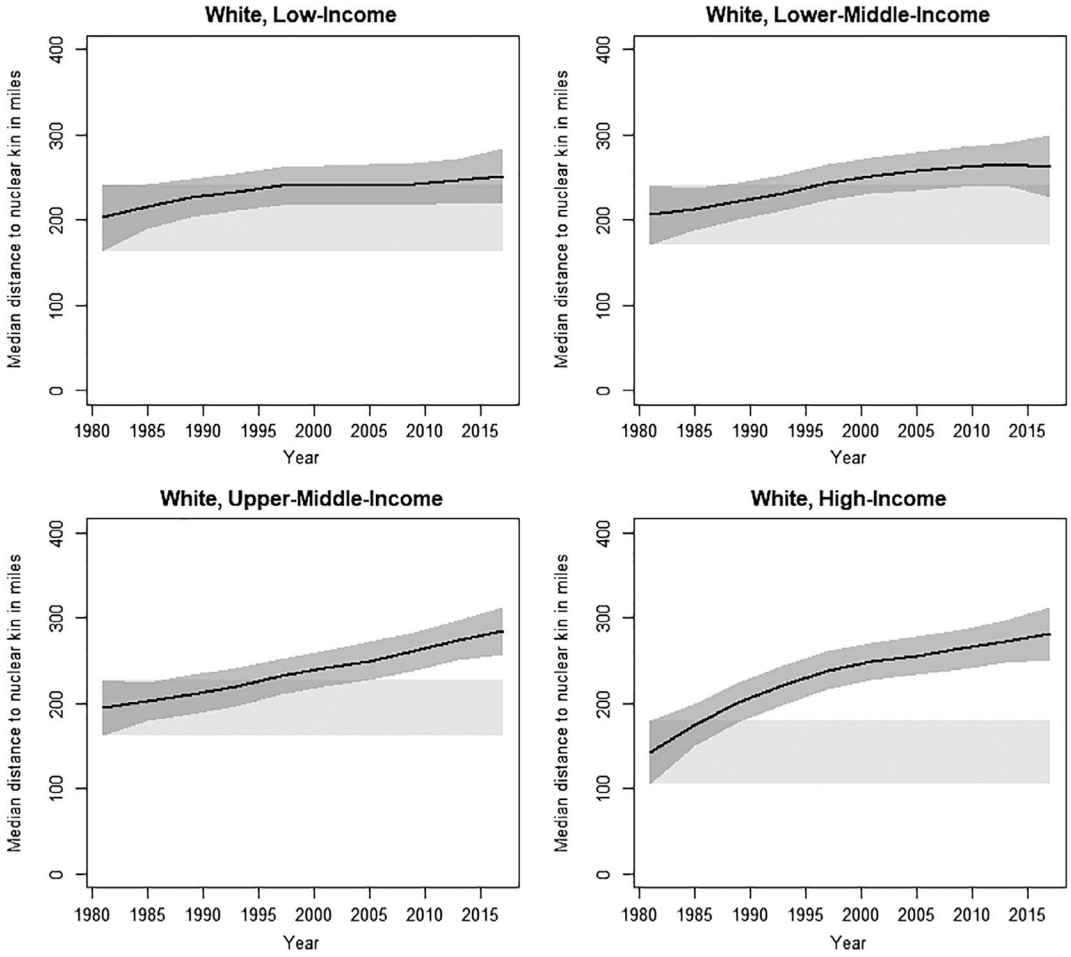

FIGURE 5. ***Average predicted values of median distance to nuclear kin among White respondents* (*N* = 83,756).**

Dark shading represents the 95% confidence intervals of the average predicted values. Light shading represents the 95% confidence intervals of the 1981 average predicted values. Estimates are net of wealth, age, years of education, sex, marital status, children in the household, kin co-residence, nativity, and number of nuclear kin in the respondent's network, and are weighted by inverse probability of sampling weights. Full results are in Table S2.

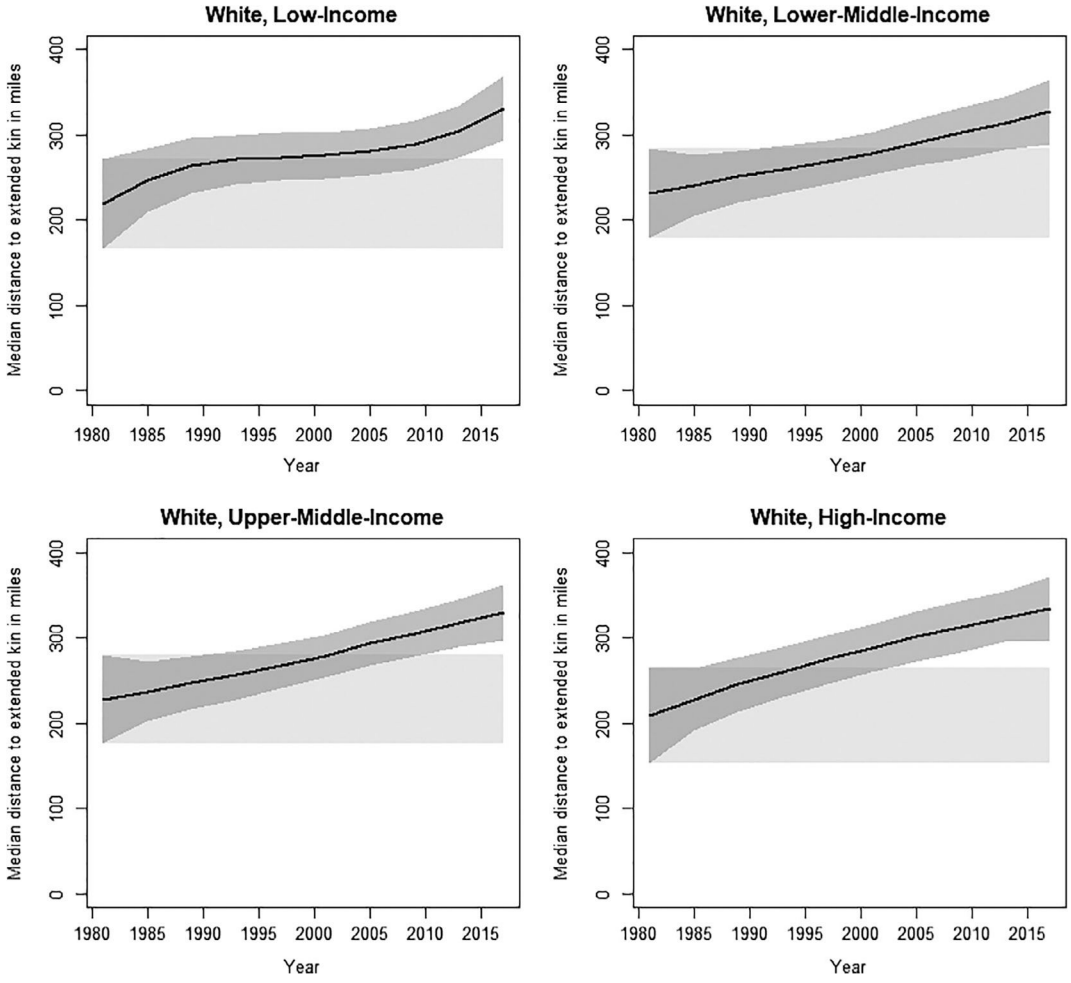

FIGURE 6. ***Average predicted values of median distance to extended kin among White respondents (N = 105,986).***

Dark shading represents the 95% confidence intervals of the average predicted values. Light shading represents the 95% confidence intervals of the 1981 average predicted values. Estimates are net of wealth, age, years of education, sex, marital status, children in the household, kin co-residence, nativity, and number of extended kin in the respondent's network, and are weighted by inverse probability of sampling weights. Full results are in Table S2.

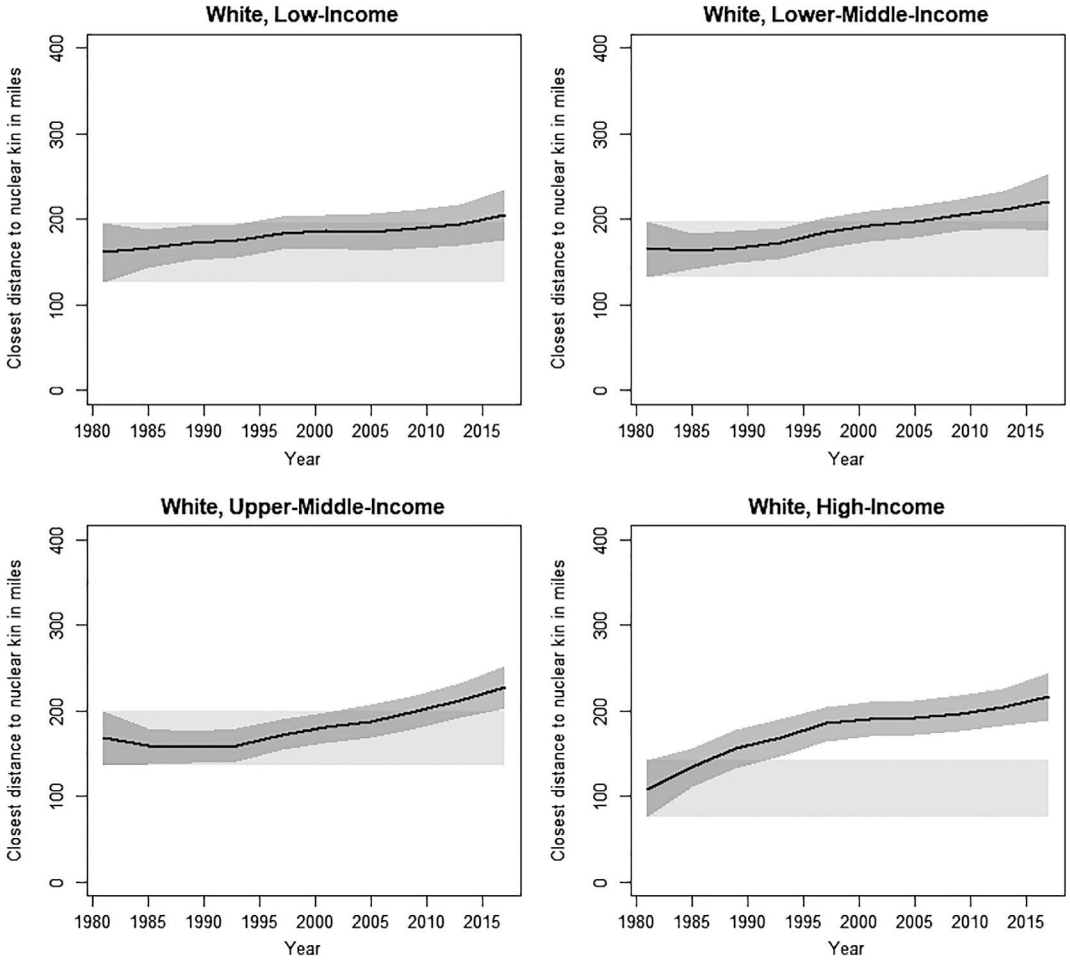

FIGURE 7. ***Average predicted values of closest distance to nuclear kin among White respondents*** **(*N* = 83,756).**

Dark shading represents the 95% confidence intervals of the average predicted values. Light shading represents the 95% confidence intervals of the 1981 average predicted values. Estimates are net of wealth, age, years of education, sex, marital status, children in the household, kin co-residence, nativity, and number of nuclear kin in the respondent's network, and are weighted by inverse probability of sampling weights. Full results are in Table S2.

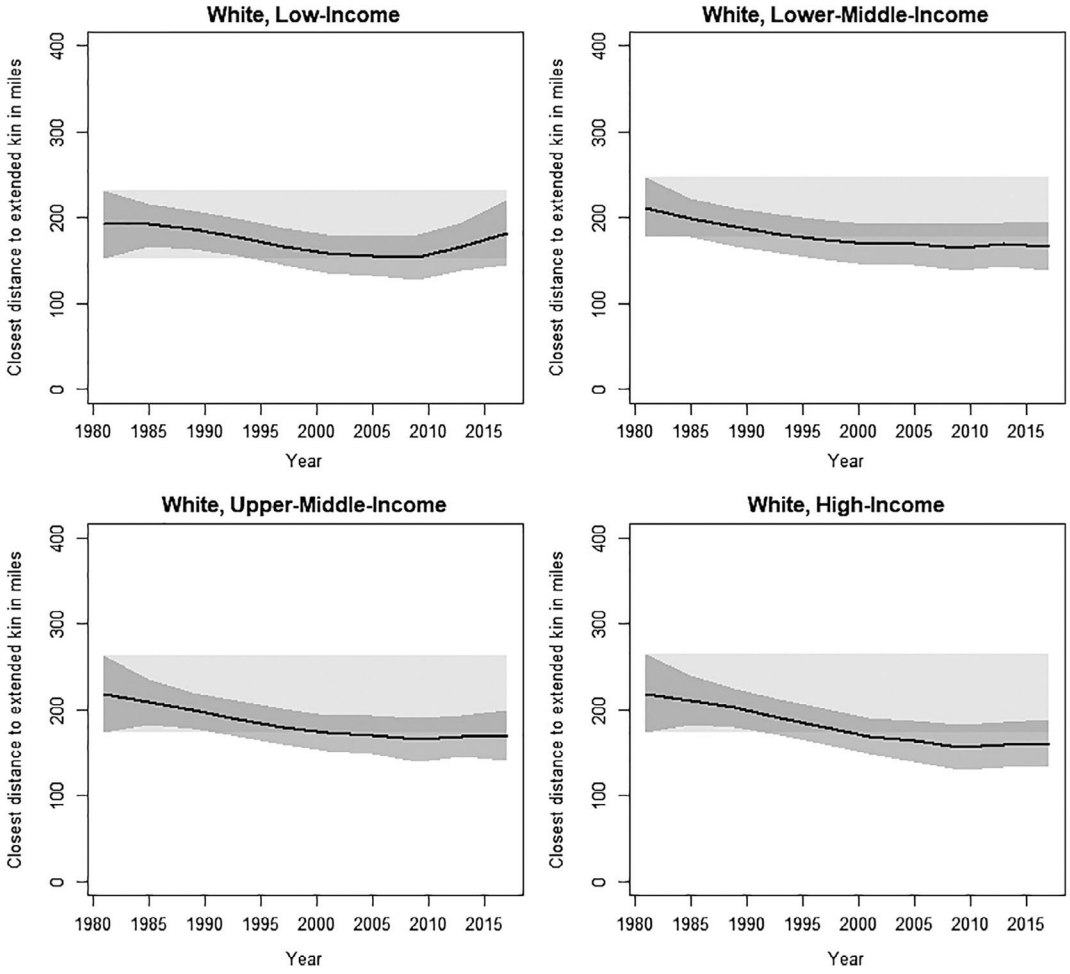

FIGURE 8. ***Average predicted values of closest distance to extended kin among White respondents (N = 105,986).***

Dark shading represents the 95% confidence intervals of the average predicted values. Light shading represents the 95% confidence intervals of the 1981 average predicted values. Estimates are net of wealth, age, years of education, sex, marital status, children in the household, kin co-residence, nativity, and number of extended kin in the respondent's network, and are weighted by inverse probability of sampling weights. Full results are in Table S2.

TABLE 1

Analytical Sample of Race by Income Quartile.

	Black	**White**
1st income quartile	Black, low-income (*N* = 24,749)	White, low-income (*N* = 17,833)
2nd income quartile	Black, lower-middle-income (*N* = 16,265)	White, lower-middle-income (*N* = 26,261)
3rd income quartile	Black, upper-middle-income (*N* = 11,393)	White, upper-middle-income (*N* = 31,550)
4th income quartile	Black, high-income (*N* = 6,476)	White, high-income (*N* = 36,974)

Note: *N* = person-years.

TABLE 2

Weighted Summary Statistics, by Race.

	Black			*White*		
	Mean/%	**(sd)**	**Median**	**Mean/%**	**(sd)**	**Median**
Income (in 000 s of year 2000 dollars)	49.79	(35.04)	43.99	80.29	(80.49)	65.00
Wealth (in 000 s of year 2000 dollars)	50.55	(263.11)	14.26	219.87	(832.41)	62.06
Age	38.26	(11.53)	36.00	38.87	(11.84)	36.00
Years of education	12.59	(2.49)	12.00	14.02	(2.97)	14.00
Sex (1 = female)	51.1%			48.16%		
Marital status (1 = married/cohabiting)	83.97%			94.91%		
Children <18 in household (1 = yes)	72.95%			68.67%		
Co-reside with kin (1 = yes)	23.32%			12.06%		
Foreign-born (1 = yes)	1.02%			2.10%		
Median distance in miles to nuclear kin	115.73	(323.60)	7.35	226.69	(463.40)	21.57
Median distance in miles to extended kin	135.43	(335.83)	13.20	285.27	(501.13)	50.88
Distance in miles to closest nuclear kin	90.62	(304.07)	4.06	168.72	(419.79)	10.71
Distance in miles to closest extended kin	73.65	(273.98)	3.04	141.02	(364.12)	9.18
Number of nuclear kin in network	0.83	(1.79)	0.00	0.58	(1.35)	0.00
Number of extended kin in network	24.73	(16.40)	23.00	19.38	(15.39)	15.00
N (person-periods)	58,883			112,618		

Note: First of 10 imputed data sets and weighted by inverse probability of sampling weights. Variables with missing values (% missing) included: income (0.47%), wealth (6.5%), education (1.7%), and foreign-born (2.5%).