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“Showing Everybody’s True Colors”: Informal networks of low-income single mothers and their young children during the COVID-19 pandemic

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A B S T R A C T
Extensive evidence suggests low-income mothers depend upon their families and friends for emotional, practical, and economic support in times of need. This is the first study to examine the operation of low-income mothers' informal support networks and the impact of such networks on maternal well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. We interviewed low-income, single mothers of young children (<12 years; N = 34) twice over Summer 2020 to consider mothers’ decisions around network engagement and how their interactions contributed to their well-being. Consistent with the social capital framework and previous studies, most mothers turned to their networks and exchanged support. Thematic analysis uncovered 4 inter-related themes of mothers’ experiences: (1) discovering emotionally-available networks, (2) navigating resource-limited networks, (3) reassessing network member relationships, and (4) establishing boundaries for in-person contact. Although emotionally valuable, networks could not meet increased economic and child care needs. The COVID-19 pandemic’s economic impact and its impact on time use tested network relationships with some relationships strengthening and others dissolving. Widely-available emotional support was essential to mothers adapting to the pandemic. Safe, affordable child care options coupled with accessible, economic supplements can promote well-being among single mothers and their children.

1. Introduction

As of March 2022, the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV2 (COVID-19) pandemic has infected over 450 million people worldwide, including almost 80 million Americans. It has caused over 6 million deaths, including almost nearly 1 million deaths in the U.S. (New York Times, 2022). In addition to direct impacts on health and mortality, the COVID-19 pandemic abruptly disrupted basic daily activities, including employment, child care, schooling, and social interactions (Calarco, Meanwell, Anderson, & Knopf, 2020). To help families economically, in 2020, U.S. food banks distributed 6 billion meals and served 55% more people than prior to the pandemic (Morello, 2021). In combination with community organizations, government safety net programs can prevent against dire socioeconomic outcomes, including food insecurity and homelessness, during times of emergency, such as COVID-19. The U.S. government responded in part with The Families First Coronavirus Act and the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. These acts provided cash payments to individuals, families, and small businesses (e.g., paycheck protection program, economic impact payments) and expanded eligibility in government programs (e.g., unemployment insurance program, supplemental nutrition assistance program). Despite community and government intervention, the pandemic and subsequent shutdown have resulted in increased financial stress and poverty (Parolin et al., 2020; Saloner et al., 2020). Low-income, single mothers have experienced disproportionate economic hardship and childcare burden as primary earners and care providers (Power, 2020).

Extensive evidence suggests low-income mothers turn to their families and friends to get by in times of need (Edin & Lein, 1997). Their high need during COVID-19 coupled with their reliance on informal networks during non-pandemic times raises an important question: how are low-income single mothers’ informal networks operating in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic? This study provides the first empirical study of the role of low-income mothers’ informal networks during the pandemic. We used qualitative interviews with 34 low-income single mothers interviewed twice over Summer 2020 to consider mothers'
decision-making around network engagement and how their interactions contributed to their well-being during the pandemic.

2. The impact of COVID-19 for single-mother families

Evidence suggests that the pandemic has disproportionately impacted those facing marginalization prior to COVID-19 (Kantamneni, 2020). Low-income single mothers face multiple disadvantages related to their gender, income, marital status, and parental status. Women are overrepresented in disrupted service sector positions (e.g., hospitality, retail, childcare; Alon, 2020). They were more likely than men to lose their jobs as a result of the pandemic (Boesch & Phadke, 2021). Women are also overrepresented in essential service positions, and for mothers, these positions generally do not accommodate simultaneous work and childcare (Bobrow, 2020). If mothers in these and other positions lacked supportive partners, closed schools and limited childcare arrangements meant negotiating often-conflicting roles including employee, mother, teacher, and housekeeper (Calarco et al., 2020; Power, 2020).

Negotiating multiple roles has the potential to undermine the well-being of single mothers. Preliminary evidence suggests that multiple responsibilities led mothers to lose more jobs and job hours than men and their non-parent peers during the pandemic (Kalenkoski & Pabilo-nia, 2020). Moreover, pandemic-related job loss without replacement income was positively associated with mothers’ depressive symptoms, anxiety symptoms, stress, and negative interactions with their children (Hibel, Boyer, Buhler-Wassmann, & Shaw, 2021; Kalil et al., 2020). Also, evidence suggests that mothering during the pandemic has taken an emotional toll. Regardless of job loss, mothers substantially increased their time caring for their children and reported greater increases in stress, anxiety, and frustrations in childrearing compared to fathers (Calarco et al., 2020). Although few studies have focused on single mothers specifically, emerging evidence suggests that the pandemic has been particularly difficult for single mothers who have less reprieve from work, child, and family responsibilities than their married counterparts (Hertz, Mattes, & Shook, 2020; O’Reilly, 2020).

3. The role of social capital

Given the disproportionate risk for pandemic-related adversities among low-income single mothers, it is critical to identify factors that could either enhance or mitigate risk. One such factor could be the strength of informal support networks. Social capital, defined as “access to and use of resources embedded in social networks” (Lin, 1999, p. 30), can shape low-income mothers’ experiences during COVID-19. Although sociologists differ in how social capital is defined (e.g., Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988), the basic premise offers that social capital is a surplus value and an investment with expected returns. It includes three elements: economic resources, cultural capital, and relationships (Coleman, 1988). Network members offer resources with the expectation of reciprocity in some form in the future. In this way, the framework underscores the importance of relationships, both in amount and quality, that allow members to fulfill their needs. Therefore, given our focus on how low-income mothers negotiate their networks during COVID-19, this study examined the availability and strength of mothers’ network relationships and how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced these relationships.

Longstanding evidence suggests the power and contribution of relationships to mothers’ daily survival and well-being (e.g., Edin & Lein, 1997; Radey, 2018; Stack, 1974). Importantly, relationships do not automatically yield resources. Social capital requires collective assets, including network culture, norms, trust; relational assets, including individual interactions between individual members; and mobilization, including use of resources (Lin, 1999). For network functionality, mothers need norms that promote requests in given circumstances (collective), access to network members that have the desired resources (relational), and the comfort and ability to activate resources in times of need (mobilization). Perceived resources will be of little use if mothers do not call upon their networks in difficult times. In their qualitative analysis of low-income mothers in three large U.S. cities, for example, Mazelis and Mykyta (2020) found while mothers commonly discussed access to informal support, they activated help much less frequently, even when faced with high need. In addition, network norms can exact costs (e.g., expectations of food sharing, childcare) that exceed the received benefits, particularly in limited-resource environments (Belle, 1983). The failure to follow reciprocity norms can lead to social fragmentation in which network members exclude the neediest members or the neediest members withdraw because they cannot meet network expectations (Offer, 2012).

The COVID-19 pandemic may influence how social capital operates among low-income mothers. Economically, the shutdown disproportionately hurt low-income populations (Kantamneni, 2020). Limited economic opportunity coupled with limited formal childcare options for single mothers may have changed network norms for support, at least in the short-term. Mothers may feel more comfortable turning to others, given the unanticipated and largely uncontrollable onset of COVID-19. Alternatively, economic or practical resources previously available may have disappeared. Network members may have lost jobs or the threat of COVID-19 spread may limit family and friends stepping up to help one another through practical favors such as childcare or transportation. This study provides the opportunity to examine low-income single mothers’ informal support networks during a long-lasting worldwide pandemic.

4. Informal networks of single mothers

Ethnographic accounts of low-income mothers provide evidence that networks step up to help mothers in their times of need, but that networks come with limits and costs (Belle, 1983; Domínguez & Watkins, 2003; Edin & Lein, 1997; Offer, 2012; Stack, 1974). Mothers can often piece together resources to meet their basic necessities. Yet, reciprocity norms commonly translate to costs of informal support. While single mothers may have the option to “double-up” or share households, for example, the housing may come with expectations of contributing to the household in other forms (e.g., food, benefits, childcare). In an ethnography of Hispanic immigrants in low-resource networks, the reciprocity costs of networks often outweighed the benefits creating conflict and disrupted living arrangements (Domínguez & Watkins, 2003). Prioritizing essential needs of the network also may extend time in poverty because mothers cannot accumulate resources; resources go to network survival rather than individual investment in mobility (Pilkuskaas, Campbell, & Wilmer, 2017; Stack, 1974).

While the give and take of low-income mothers’ networks is well-documented, the operation of networks during a pandemic is less clear. The fear of virus spread, particularly salient among mothers of young children (Fitzpatrick, Harris, & Drawve, 2020), may limit opportunities for face-to-face interactions (Myers & Emmott, 2020) and, at the same time, fewer face-to-face responsibilities may increase time for virtual connections that can protect mental health (Pancani, Marinucci, Aureli, & Riva, 2020). Minimal research examines the availability of informal networks among low-income single mothers during COVID-19. However, initial evidence suggests that increased COVID-19 health concerns for older adults (e.g., grandparents) meant that middle- and upper-income single mothers’ “villages” were not available to meet their increased childcare demands (Hertz et al., 2020). Similarly, few mothers in a sample of largely middle-income mothers in Indiana turned to their networks for childcare (Calarco et al., 2020). Thus, without network support for childcare, the COVID-19 pandemic created exhaustion, stress, and guilt over failing to meet increased daily demands (Calarco et al., 2020; Hertz et al., 2020).

Little is known about how support networks have operated during the pandemic, however. One study (McConnell et al., 2021) indicated that informal networks served as a key resource. In an examination of
governmental, non-profit, and informal support, the authors found that the majority of their sample of rural residents in the Western U.S. participated in informal support networks for financial support or housing during the pandemic, making it the most widely-used resource. In most instances of participation, respondents gave or received financial support, with the doubling up of households much less common. Studies examining informal networks in the immediate aftermath of disasters also suggest an instrumental role in survival (Litt, 2008). Following the rule of relative need, network members tend to help disaster survivors, particularly those most affected (Kaniasty & Norris, 2008). Examining low-income mothers before and after Hurricane Katrina, for example, Lowe et al. (2015) found that 62% of mothers were resilient, defined largely as having strong networks of family or friends to counteract psychological distress as they dealt with the disaster. The examination of the process of evacuation for Hurricane Katrina also indicated the importance of kin networks to promote connection to resources and safety (Litt, 2008).

Previous studies of time-limited disasters suggest network support and activation (e.g., Litt, 2008). The unique attributes of a pandemic, such as its person-to-person contagion and its duration, however, may change network flow and availability, particularly for low-income mothers and their networks. Fear of COVID-19 as well as business closures, school closures, local curfews, store shortages of supplies, and limited public services (e.g., bus systems) may heighten families’ need to turn to family and friends. In addition, the unique state of prolonged emergency may change network behavior. For example, job loss due to closure may elicit network support that may not have been available during times of non-emergency. Face-to-face practical support, such as childcare or transportation, may be less available or expected given the fear of virus spread.

5. Study contribution

Low-income, single mothers often rely on informal networks for daily survival. Yet, we know little about how their networks have operated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Preliminary evidence suggests increased need for economic and childcare support, particularly for low-income single mothers who often lack live-in childcare support or work-from-home jobs (Power, 2020). To our knowledge, this study provides the first empirical study of the role of low-income mothers’ informal networks during the pandemic. Using qualitative interviews with low-income, single mothers in one mid-sized city (N = 34 mothers; N = 67 telephone interviews), this study’s purpose was to understand how mothers navigate their informal networks and how network operation contributed to well-being in Summer 2020 in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

6. Methodology

6.1. Sampling

We interviewed low-income, single mothers of children under 12 years old in a mid-sized county in North Florida during June and July of 2020. We recruited mothers from social service organizations and the local food bank. Social service providers distributed electronic flyers to their clients, and food bank personnel included paper flyers in food bags at school and public housing distribution sites. One organization specializing in providing material and emotional support to low-income, single mothers posted the flyer on Facebook. Purposive sampling through multiple outlets allowed us to reach a diversity of mothers while following local ordinances to avoid physical contact with others. Study eligibility criteria included that mothers: (a) were parenting a resident child under 12 years old, (b) were not married, (c) earned less than $45,000 (although most earned much less), and (d) lived in the county. Mothers interested in the study completed a screener questionnaire online or by telephone (only one participant used the telephone option). Eligible participants provided demographic information, informed consent, and convenient interview times. Recruitment lasted for two weeks. At that time, 476 people completed screener questions, 274 met eligibility criteria, and 272 provided informed consent. With overwhelming interest in the study, we purposively selected a diverse sample based on race, education level, and whether the mother had a significant decrease in income due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The first author and additional trained graduate research assistants completed 67 telephone interviews with 34 mothers. We conducted first interviews in June 2020. To follow up on potential themes in the data and consider stability and change in mothers’ lives during the onset of COVID-19, we conducted second interviews in July 2020 approximately one month later. All study participants completed both interviews except for one mother who did not have access to a telephone to complete the interview in July 2020.

6.2. Sample

The sample included 34 low-income, single mothers who were parenting a child under 12 years old. Through our purposive sampling approach, mothers were demographically diverse. They were on average 35 years old, with the youngest mother 21 years old and the oldest 63 years old. In terms of race and ethnicity, mothers were Black (n = 20, 59%), and White (n = 12; 35%), with a small number of Hispanic mothers (n = 2, 6%). Approximately one-half of mothers had a high school diploma or less, 23% had some college, and 29% had a college degree or more. These racial/ethnic and education distributions largely reflected the broader population of single mothers in the county (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). With a range of 1 to 5, most mothers had one (38%) or two children (24%). The median child age was 5 years old. More than two-thirds of mothers lost income due to COVID-19, with one-fourth of mothers meeting the study’s low-income threshold of $45,000 solely due to their recent income loss. Approximately one-third of mothers (35%) felt that they were or were caring for someone at high risk of severe consequences from COVID-19 (e.g., children, mothers, extended family members). Participants’ referral sources indicate widespread study advertisement: social services agencies (n = 11), food bank (n = 4), Facebook post (n = 11), child’s school (n = 2), friends (n = 2), and housing complex management (n = 2). Although we recruited only four mothers from the local foodbank, 13 (38%) had visited a food bank since the local onset of COVID-19 (March 2020), indicating a high level of need among the sample.

6.3. Data collection

The trained study team conducted and audio-recorded semi-structured telephone interviews. The pandemic restrictions did not allow us to consider any face-to-face data collection methods. The purpose of the interview guide was to understand mothers’ lives before and after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The guide covered five main areas: daily life; relationships with family and loved ones; employment and education experiences; COVID-19 fears and exposure; and maternal and child health. The guide itself had 72 questions, and interviewers were instructed to be flexible, asking follow-up questions to encourage mothers to expand upon their responses or omitting questions that had already been covered in prior responses. Regarding informal networks, we asked about who mothers turn to for support and who they support (i.e., ‘Now I’d like to discuss your support network—people in your life that step in to help you when you need it and those who depend on you.’). We also asked about mothers’ interactions with family and friends. To consider the influence of COVID-19, in the first interview, we asked about networks and interactions both before (February 2020) and after the onset of COVID-19 (i.e., the month prior to the interview). In the second interview, we asked mothers to consider the time since the first interview. Interviews lasted between 38 and 138 min, averaging about 75 min. As compensation for their time, participants received $40 for the first interview and $60 for the second. The study was approved by the
6.4. Data analysis

We implemented Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis to consider patterns and themes across interviews. To begin, the first and third authors became familiar with the data by reading both transcripts from the same six participants. We then separately generated initial codes using theory (Patton, 1999) and the study’s purpose to understand the impact of COVID-19 on the lives of low-income single mothers to guide the coding process. A colleague not involved in initial coding read sample transcripts to access fit, potential biases, and potential oversights to increase data trustworthiness. Through discussion, we deleted, revised, and generated codes through consensus. Next, two interviewers used the codebook to code all transcripts. After coding was complete, the first author generated themes related to mothers’ social networks and examined themes by race, age, and number of children. The prevalence of themes did not vary by demographic characteristics. All authors discussed and revised themes to ensure that themes achieved saturation and clearly reflected the data. Finally, we defined the themes, named the themes, and selected data extracts that exemplified the themes or theme exceptions.

7. Findings

The study’s purpose was to understand the functionality of low-income mothers’ informal networks in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and how networks contributed to mothers’ well-being. The analysis uncovered four central themes when mothers discussed their experiences: (1) discovering emotionally-available networks, (2) navigating resource-limited networks, (3) reassessing network member relationships, and (4) establishing new boundaries for in-person contact. Table 1 provides a summary of findings for each theme. In the discussion, we consider how these attributes contributed to the functioning of mothers’ informal networks.

7.1. Discovering Emotionally-Available networks

Mothers overwhelmingly felt emotional support from their friends and family during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Most mothers received support through increased video calls (e.g., FaceTime) and telephone calls since the onset of the pandemic. Also, mothers commonly discussed how fear of COVID-19 led them to recognize the value of their relationships, particularly with family. The following comment illustrates this experience:

Check-ins brought mothers comfort. One mother of a 7-year-old child explained that after the start of the pandemic she: “got more of those calls, which was nice, just to know that I felt like if I really needed, if I was really at rock bottom…I knew that there were people I could reach out to.”.

Mothers who included extended family members in their limited face-to-face circles also discussed more emotional support through spending more time together because of COVID-19 business closures and travel restrictions. One mother of a 10-year-old child explained how her contact with family increased “because prior to COVID, people had their own families, and sometimes family did things with their family, immediate family. But now with traveling less, going less places, we’re all more close knit.” Similarly, another mother of children ages 3, 4, and 6 years explained how increased time together brought them closer and more accessible: “Honestly, if anything, the pandemic actually brought us all a little bit more closer…than we usually were…Like time spent. And time around each other. And phone calls. And us not being afraid to ask each other for help.”.

Although most mothers discussed increased emotional support, a couple of mothers expressed less of this form of support. Changed routines or schedules—for themselves or network members—created less availability for a couple of mothers. For example, one mother’s main source of emotional support—her mother—was a nurse. Her mother’s long work hours meant that the mother-daughter duo did not have time for their pre-pandemic, almost daily multiple-hour telephone conversations. She felt “very stressed out” and missed her mother’s “re-assurances” that she was a good mom, particularly with the changes and uncertainty of COVID-19. Another mother, who also expressed high levels of stress, described less emotional support from her mother since moving in with her due to economic need in the beginning of the pandemic. Therefore, although most mothers benefited from emotional support in the midst of the pandemic, a couple of mothers lost support and missed its presence.

7.2. Navigating Resource-Limited networks

Although most mothers expressed that the pandemic highlighted the emotional availability of their networks, they also noted how it also illustrated the limited capacities of networks. Most mothers and their network members experienced decreases in income due to the...
pandemic. Mothers discussed how lost job hours or jobs often meant that they could not turn to their informal networks for money. Describing a common scenario, one mother of children ages 1, 4, and 8 years explained how “before, the pandemic, if I needed my sisters…you know, like I fell behind on a bill, you know, I could get that from them. But being that money is so tight with everybody like I can’t even, you know, lean on them for that type of – that support specifically.” Similarly, another mother described how the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted her “village”:

We all provide each other with emotional support or mental or physical support. I would try to always help my mom. She had been injured while on the job and so I would try to help her as best I could monetarily or just being there, helping her or transporting her, giving her a ride to different places. Same with any of the other people in my village; we just kind of always helped each other—of course if we were able to. So, of course, that has changed since the pandemic because everyone’s income has changed so we’re not always able to assist each other. So it’s definitely changed. (Mother of a 7-year-old child)

In addition to financially-constrained networks, mothers’ increased childcare and transportation needs due to disrupted services led several mothers to realize the limits of in-kind assistance as well. One mother of a child with cerebral palsy described that even though she did not want to “put [childcare] on [my mom] or push that on her,” the lack of childcare support was overwhelming. She explained: “I need it because I find myself sometimes going into a deep depression…a nervous breakdown, especially when I’m alone and just with [my child].” Another mother recognized the limits of her network when she asked her formerly-abusive ex-partner to watch her children. She explained her desperation:

I asked [my child’s father] to sit in the car in the parking lot at the grocery store so I could run in one time last month because I’m not going to leave [my children] somewhere with him, but I just had to run in for two things. So that was unexpected…I don’t really trust him to watch them for a long period of time, though. So that was really not ideal. (Mother of children ages 2, 6, and 8 years)

She feared for her children’s safety when they were with their father, but had no other options for care. In another less dire circumstance, a mother who relied on public transportation and family members prior to the pandemic turned to ride-sharing services during COVID-19 to get to and from work, an additional cost particularly concerning given her reduced hours in the fast-food industry. For these mothers, and others like them, their increased childcare and transportation needs during the pandemic highlighted the limits of their informal networks. Although these mothers did not place blame on their network members or feel surprise in their limitations, they found the bounded capacities of their networks stressful.

In addition, the threat of COVID-19 infection led several mothers to recognize their limited networks available to step in to parent their child should they get sick. One mother summarized her concerns:

And what happens if I get it? What happens to my son if something should happen to me, you know, and I have to go into the hospital, and they don’t allow him in there, and, you know, he’s not going to be able to understand any of this? And I don’t have family here…So it is a very, very scary thought. (Mother of 11-year-old child)

Another mother’s fears for the care of her daughter should she get infected with COVID-19 caused her to move cross-country between the two interviews to be closer to family.

Resource-limited networks also influenced mothers’ levels of giving time and resources. Perhaps expected with the high level of reduced incomes among sample participants, mothers discussed that they gave less money to their networks after the onset of COVID-19. Commonly, mothers explained that others did not expect them to give money due to their situations of being low-income, single mothers facing income loss and uncertainty in a pandemic. However, despite their few resources, several mothers served as the “glue” in their networks. One mother of an 11-year-old child, for example, explained how when her mother’s boyfriend lost his car, she became her mother’s “go to person.” For another mother of three teenagers and a six-year-old child, due to the risk of COVID-19 spread, she stopped visiting her uncle who drinks alcohol and “does other things that he shouldn’t do.” The absence of her weekly visits almost turned deadly. On her first visit after two months, she described a “traumatizing” experience: her uncle “passed out…stopped breathing, and I had to call, you know, the ambulance, and I had to do CPR on him.” She later explained that she blamed herself for the incident because if she “woulda been checking on him, then I would have known that, you know, he wasn’t really taking good care of himself.”

Contact restrictions and increased economic need with the onset of COVID-19 often delayed face-to-face contact and meant that mothers asked for money only if they really needed it. However, many mothers prioritized giving the little they had—commonly their time or emotional support—because COVID-19 highlighted the importance of informal support. If not already, they realized that they could become network-reliant at any point. The following comment summarized common sentiment about prioritizing others despite limited resources:

Everybody seems a bit more needy. And supporting one another can be a stressful task. But if you want your ends to meet, you definitely have to help someone else at some point in order for their needs to be met to help you. So we try to reach each other’s goals. (Mother of children ages 7 months, 1 year, and 5 years)

7.3. Reassessing relationships with network members

The COVID-19 pandemic tested the strength of many mothers’ networks and illustrated their network’s “true colors”—for good or bad. In these tests, some mothers recognized negative relationships, while others were pleasantly surprised by how relationships “stepped up” in their times of need. For several mothers, the economic stress of COVID-19 was the final precipitating factor that led to ending a relationship. For example, one mother described her rationale in kicking her child’s father out:

I felt like I didn’t have enough money and I wasn’t getting help and, like I said, I was in the negative and [child’s father] wasn’t helping either. So, yeah, I was pretty stressed out…Well, I got rid of [child’s father]. [Laughs] I got rid of him because that was an extra expense. Honestly, that was an extra expense and I had to re-manage my funds and put it towards things that were the most important. (Mother of child age 2 years)

The mother then described how she continually gave money to her child’s father and his family members throughout their relationship—money she could not afford to lose during the pandemic. After she kicked him out, other family members gave her money unsolicited—an indicator to her that her family supported her decision. Other mothers recognized relationships were contingent on their incomes. Once they lost income, partners left. For example, one mother described her loss of “a person that you actually love” due to the pandemic because “the person I was with felt like I had no money.” (Mother of children ages 6, 4, and 3 years).

Mothers also reassessed relationships with family members. For example, one mother discussed how she decided to cut her sister out of her life after COVID-19. Similar to the mother who kicked out her child’s father, this mother described how she felt her sister took advantage of her over the years and she could not handle the “negativity” anymore:
So I would be, you know, going to buy groceries and stuff for her. I would be, you know, helping...at one point, had to put some stuff on my credit card to try to help her. And she was always negative, negative and bringing me down and bringing my morale down. I’m like, “I already go through enough with my child. You know, I’m not trying to go through that with you.” So I cut her off. You know? I was like, “I just can’t talk to you. I can’t handle dealings with you. You’re stressing me.” (Mother of a child age 11 years)

While some mothers ended relationships, others lost trust or respect for network members. Some ex-partners were bitter about forfeiting their stimulus or unemployment checks to the child support system or their children. One mother explained the bitterness she observed in her network as well as the bitterness of her child’s father:

[The government] started sending out that stimulus...it just shows a lot about a person’s character. And I didn’t realize, like, how many family members would, like, turn against each other over just $1,200, or how much that...would, like, ruin and cause so much havoc in homes...[W]ith my girls’ dad, when [Department of Children and Families] sent him a letter and told him that they were gonna take his stimulus and pay it toward back pay that he owed towards the kids...it made him bitter, even more bitter. You know, if it didn’t give him even an excuse then, or then not to be around or do for his kids...[W]e argued for, like, two weeks straight because of that. And I have noticed since COVID, yeah, it’s just bringing out a lot of selfishness in people. (Mother of 2-year-old child)

While this mother was lenient with her child’s father about child support payments and child contact in the past, she expressed that COVID-19 conditions including stimulus payments and unemployment benefits took away his “excuses” from stepping up to his fathering role. In other instances, mothers lacked support that they had anticipated from family members. For example, several mothers discovered that people they thought would provide childcare in an emergency failed to do so. One mother of children ages 4 and 1 years explained how family members disappointed her when they would not watch her children for her to go to the store because she knew “the person doesn’t really have much to do; they just [won’t] watch your kids.”

Alternate to some mothers’ disappointment, some mothers described how their child’s father, family, or friends provided unexpected support during COVID-19, which caused them to recognize the value of some relationships. While COVID-19 led some fathers to disengage, others increased their participation and contributions to their children. Several mothers mentioned that their children’s father showed up with time or money during the pandemic. With fewer work hours or the loss of a job, some fathers spent additional time with their child. Others capitalized on COVID relief or unemployment funds to contribute financially. For example, the following mother’s comment encompasses common feelings among those receiving support from their children’s fathers: “[H]e actually gave me his unemployment check benefits so I could take care of all three kids. And that was just a blessing, a total surprise.” For others, family and friends also stepped in unexpectedly. For example, one mother of a child age 6 years explained how although “[i]t’s definitely been an issue for himself,” a COVID-19 infection at the time of the second interview led her to realize her available support because “then people started to actively look out and check on me and things like that, and make sure that I had food, had groceries and stuff like that.”

COVID-19 tested many informal networks. These tests highlighted support for some and a lack of support for others causing mothers to reconsider their relationships. Not surprisingly, the absence of network support typically created stress and distress while unexpected support provided much comfort. When asked if they expected network changes to continue, mothers generally expressed uncertainty. They recognized the extraordinary time of COVID-19 and that relationships may change over time.

7.4. New boundaries for in-person contact

The fear of COVID-19 spread and social distancing guidelines created new considerations for informal network interactions. The creation of rules—rather than the rules themselves—seemed to comfort mothers. Mothers had a range of rules from staying in the house with only household members to “counting heads” to make sure that no more than 10 people were in the house at one time. Although most mothers remained cautious and fearful of COVID-19 infections, rules offered them a mechanism to try to minimize the likelihood of infection.

Mothers commonly developed rules around in-person contact, generally differentiating between those allowed in their home and those who were not. In most instances, mothers voiced that they had stricter rules than their network members. One mother of children ages 1, 5, and 7 years who used her extended family for childcare, for example, explained that she had to “stay on my relatives about who they bring in their homes” because her children would be exposed to how they “operate.” Notably, mothers using relative care providers, about one in four mothers, discussed establishing rules of contact rather than changing care arrangements, despite the fact that many relative care providers were vulnerable to COVID-19 consequences due to advanced age. Although many mothers did not allow elective contact with older relatives, no mother mentioned that she lost her pre-COVID-19, regular, relative care arrangement out of protection for older adults. Mothers did not discuss contemplating other options; they turned to their family for care because they relied on employment for their economic wellbeing.

The level of closeness in network relationships did not dictate rules for contact. For example, one mother, who is also a grandmother, explained how she did not allow even close family members inside her house:

I feel terrible, but I’ve even refused to watch my grandsons because I don’t feel like their parents are doing what they need to do...I won’t even let my son in the door. I make him come out to the yard, and he has to leave. He can’t come inside. We don’t even talk to him [in person]. (Caregiver for grandchildren ages 11 and 8 years)

Similarly, multiple mothers who had college-aged young adults living away from home explained that when their children went out with friends, the mothers did not welcome them in their homes for a specified number of days.

Mothers also discussed rules about contact with siblings and other extended family members. For example, one mother explained that because she did not feel that her sister was cautious, she was not seeing her:

I love [sister]. We love each other. We just can’t be around each other like that. If she would change and wouldn’t have all those people around the house, it would probably be so different. But right now I can’t be around her. (Caregiver for nephew age 11 years)

As was the case with most mothers restricting contact with loved ones, this mother pointed out that not being around her sister does not change the love that she feels for her. Mothers with rules expressed that although they missed spending time with loved ones, their love and support for network members could withstand the pandemic. They prioritized avoiding COVID-19 infection over spending in-person time together.

Pressure from family led some mothers to adapt their rules. For example, one mother who rarely left the house in June 2020 mentioned in July that she had attended a 4th of July barbeque with her brother. She explained her rationale for doing so in the following exchange with the interviewer:

Interviewer: What led to your decision to be with family on the 4th of July?  
Mother: My brother. He honestly complained because he hadn’t seen us in months...I wouldn’t let him come to my house because he has
not stopped working through the whole pandemic. He does construction, so he couldn’t stop... So it’s just me and my kids and, you know, I just felt like it was never in our best interest. And he agreed to keep [the 4th of July outside gathering] small, his like immediate family, so I agreed to give it a chance. (Mother of children ages 10 and 12 years)

Similar to this mother, other mothers often adapted their rules for contact as the pandemic continued. Mothers commonly allowed modified visits with family. For example, pre-COVID-19 weekly Sunday dinners and afternoons gathered around a table turned into short, outside visits with the sharing of take-away food.

Although most mothers expressed rules around face-to-face contact and wanted physical distance between some network members, a couple of mothers were less cautious and wanted more contact with loved ones. For example, one mother of a child age 4 years did not see “eye-to-eye” with her friend when she could not cuddle, hold, hug, and kiss her friend’s daughter, the participant’s god-daughter. The mother, who works in the healthcare field, explained: ‘I’m like, ‘Oh, I’m fine. I get screened every day.’ We’ve been tested and I wear a mask and gloves and everything. [Friend]’s like, ‘No, I don’t want you to.’” In another instance, a mother wanted to go to the beach with a friend and her friend told her that she was not comfortable doing so. Both of these mothers wanted more contact with friends and felt isolated without contact.

8. Discussion

Using a qualitative sample of low-income single mothers of young children (n = 34), this study examined how mothers navigated their informal networks during the COVID-19 pandemic. Consistent with the social capital framework (Lin, 1999) and previous studies (Edin & Lein, 1997; Dominguez & Watkins, 2003), most mothers turned to their networks and exchanged support. Although poor economic conditions under the pandemic seemed to reduce norms for economic network support, mothers remained reliant on bidirectional exchanges of emotional and, to a somewhat lesser degree, practical support. For many mothers, available support was not enough to prevent high levels of stress and uncertainty. The study provides three central contributions to the literature in understanding low-income networks during the COVID-19 pandemic: (1) although emotionally valuable, networks could not meet increased economic and child care needs; (2) the COVID-19 pandemic tested network relationships—some relationships strengthened while others—at least temporarily—dissolved; and (3) rules about contact, regardless of stringency, comforted mothers in their decisions to engage with network members.

Complementing Pancani et al.’s (2020) findings in a sample of Italian adults, most low-income single mothers received emotional support from their networks. The disruption of activities coupled with the realization of how quickly illness could threaten life led many mothers to increase communication with close family and friends. As in times of other disasters (Litt, 2008; Lowe et al., 2015), emotional connection seemed to offer many mothers protection from stress and distress. Despite available emotional support, given the economic toll of the pandemic, few mothers turned to family or friends for financial support. Unlike people with higher incomes (McConnell et al., 2021), low-income mothers perceived the financial limits of their networks and typically withheld requests for money unless under dire circumstances (e.g., homeless, inadequate clothing for children).

Mothers’ exchange of practical support, including childcare or transportation, was mixed. Some mothers’ networks stepped in to help while others did not. Although studies of middle- and higher-income mothers suggest little or live-in childcare (Calanco et al., 2020; Hertz et al., 2020), relative care among low-income mothers in this sample was similar before and during the pandemic, albeit with more household rules about outside contact during the pandemic. Mothers’ relative providers, typically their mothers or aunts, became part of their circle of contact with most spending time with their providers outside of the hours that they needed care.

In the context of limited resources, similar to non-pandemic times (Lin, 1999; Offer, 2012; Pilkauskas et al., 2017; Stack, 1974), many networks also illustrated functional reciprocity. Although mothers were quick to voice their financial limitations, several mothers realized their contributions as the “glue” to their networks. Their support often translated to checking on older relatives through virtual, telephone, or face-to-face contact. They typically contributed their time and attention. For others, the pandemic highlighted their nuclear families’ fragility and the importance of helping extended family members to safeguard against future hardship.

Mothers’ increased financial and practical needs also tested the reciprocal nature of relationships. In instances in which mothers felt network members continued to drain their often-diminished resources, following the reciprocity component of social capital framework (Lin, 1999), some mothers cut ties, commonly with their child’s father or a partner, because they lacked excess emotional and financial bandwidth. When family members or partners did contribute—often unexpectedly—mothers welcomed the support. This finding supports earlier ones (Lowe et al., 2012) that natural disasters can serve as tests for relationships leading to stronger or dissolved relationships. Notably, leaving relationships may not be detrimental because evidence suggests that fathers under financial strain become more hostile and negative to their children (Elder, Conger, Foster, & Ardelt, 1992). Perhaps, COVID-19 conditions provided mothers information they needed to make informed decisions about creating the best network for their and their children’s livelihood.

Similar to the general population (Miller & Labich, 2020), low-income mothers often reduced contact with network members during the pandemic and felt comfort by making rules about the frequency and location of contact. However, mothers often disagreed with extended family members about the amount of safe contact. Mothers commonly voiced that they hurt family members feelings—and perhaps relationships—in order to prioritize their immediate family’s safety. The rules for safe contact have been controversial and politicized (Coppins, 2020). Our study indicates that this division occurs not only across diverse populations, but also within families and networks. Our data do not provide insight into the long-term consequences of these divisions, an important area for future research.

8.1. Limitations

The findings should be considering in the context of the study’s limitations. First, the convenience sample and qualitative nature of the study provided a first opportunity to examine how informal networks function for a group of single, low-income mothers. The sample may not represent mothers in the sampled locale or in other places. Second, we recruited mothers through social service agencies and the local food bank. Their informal networks may operate differently than less connected mothers. However, many participants learned of the study through other sources (e.g., landlord, social media), which suggests that study participation was not dependent upon service connection. Third, when we planned the study, we anticipated that a one-month interval between interviews could allow us to capture network changes over time. Although we did capture some changes, examining changes over a longer follow-up period, particularly with the dramatic increases in the Delta variant starting in the summer of 2021, is important for future work. Fourth, we employed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis to minimize the risk of subjectivity in the analysis; however, subjectivity remains a potential limitation.

8.2. Implications

Study findings on the operation of low-income mothers’ networks during the pandemic can inform practice and policy in meeting families’
needs during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. First, the COVID-19 pandemic taxed low-income single mothers’ support networks. Mothers who kept their jobs often lost job hours and wages due to childcare responsibilities. Even if mothers’ own earnings did not drop, almost all participants discussed the income loss for their networks. Mothers were largely unable to turn to informal sources for a financial safety net. Poverty, hardship, and income instability hurt child and family well-being (NASEM, 2019; Sandstrom & Huerta, 2013). Mechanisms to help mothers financially are critically important, particularly during a pandemic.

Financial help can come in various forms, such as childcare and economic stimulus payments. Safe, quality, accessible childcare options may provide mothers the opportunity to regain employment and income. In Florida, for example, the Office of Early Learning (2020) offered free and reduced cost child care for 24,000 children of health-care workers and first responders. Although need far outweighed availability, with slots filled within days, several mothers in the current study were eligible for the program. For mothers who do not feel safe sending children to outside care, a stronger financial safety net, including cash payments, during the COVID-19 pandemic may be one of few options to promote low-income families’ economic well-being (O’Reilly, 2020).

At the time of this writing, the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 was recently passed with several significant financial provisions (e.g., stimulus payments, childcare tax credits) that stand to be especially significant for low-income single mothers. Still, there are practical and temporal challenges for low-income individuals in receiving funds. For example, their income level may not necessitate tax filing, meaning they do not have a bank account on file with the Internal Revenue Service to quickly receive funds (Greenstein, 2021). The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities suggests financially vulnerable intended stimulus recipients be reached through other systems in which they might be engaged (e.g., Social Security Administration, Department of Veterans Affairs, SNAP, Medicaid; Greenstein, 2021). Future research should explore both the processes and outcomes of receipt of COVID-initiated financial supports among single mothers to guide future financial policy efforts.

Second, almost all mothers voiced concern about COVID-19 illness for themselves and their loved ones. However, they interacted with their networks differently with some staying in their homes without any outside contact and others “counting heads” to make sure that the number of people in their homes did not exceed a certain amount. Clear, accurate, public health information dissemination can help families follow appropriate protocols to decrease COVID-19 infection rates. Evidence suggests that clear government messaging on COVID-19 guidelines promote the adoption of recommended health behaviors and trust (Han et al., 2020). Dissemination efforts can also target low-income, single mothers, an underserved and disadvantaged population. In addition to juggling employment and childcare demands, we found that mothers are also juggling network needs. Appropriate messaging and dissemination can encourage informed decisions to promote family and population health (Betz, 2020).

8.3. Conclusion

Informal networks can be an excellent resource to meet families’ needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 abruptly changed lives around the world, exposing vulnerable groups, including low-income mothers. The study asked: how are low-income single mothers’ informal networks operating in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic? Is it the first study to examine low-income mothers’ informal support networks during the pandemic? Findings suggest that whereas mothers commonly found and benefited from emotional support, financial support was less available. Although some mothers were disappointed when network members did not offer assistance in their times of need, others were pleasantly surprised when members stepped up with financial contributions or childcare assistance. As such, the pandemic served as turning point for many mothers’ relationships and interactions as they navigated meeting their immediate families’ basic needs while also doing their best to minimize virus spread. Study implications include the need for safe, affordable child care options coupled with accessible, economic supplements to promote well-being among low-income single mothers and their children.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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