

[COVID Information Commons \(CIC\) Research Lightning Talk](#)

Transcript of a Presentation by Emily Wiemers (Syracuse University), December 9, 2024



Title: [Tracing the Health Consequences of Family Support during the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)

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Thank you so much. We're going to shift gears here and think about some of the secondary effects of the pandemic and how families helped one another during that time. This is research from a larger project that looks at family support during the pandemic. It's joint work with folks at Syracuse University, Bowling Green State University, UCLA, and the Harris School at Chicago.

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To give everyone a little bit of context - families are incredibly important in terms of caring for older adults. The care that family members give to adults with activity limitations is worth about \$600 billion a year. Adult children are a big part of this system of family care. They're about half of the primary caregivers for community dwelling older adults who receive care. While kids are very good about giving their parents time help, they also give them money. In general, parents tend to give their kids money for most of their lives, but when parents get old, and particularly when they have declining health or when they face some sort of economic distress, there is evidence that adult children do step in and provide their parents with monetary help.

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When we think about this in the context of the pandemic, the pandemic increased the need for help among older adults and among everyone, right? While the economic impact of the pandemic on older adults was actually smaller than it was for younger adults, it was longer lasting. Also, older adults faced additional challenges. In particular, they faced logistical obstacles for things like getting food, partially because of the safety of going to the grocery store,

for example, but also because things like apps for grocery delivery were more difficult for older adults to use. As a consequence, in the first few months of the pandemic, food insecurity increased a lot among older adults. In fact, it increased by 75% compared to pre-pandemic levels.

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Usually, when these bad things happen to older adults, their adult children step in to help them. But as you know, especially during the first year of the pandemic, bad things were happening to everyone. So while older adults were more needy, their adult children were also more needy. On the one hand, we know that adult children did step in to provide unpaid care when paid care became difficult to obtain for older adults with lots of health difficulties. For example, older adults moved in with their children to avoid going to nursing homes and things like that. On the other hand, middle-aged adults had lots of challenges, including the fact that many of their kids weren't in school, which may have limited their ability to provide care that was not absolutely medically necessary. Also, if you remember back to that time, we were very nervous about infecting our grandmothers and parents with the illness. So we tried to maintain physical distance whenever possible. That could make it difficult for kids to provide the things they would normally do because of the need for physical distancing.

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This project looks at how responsive kids were with money and time help during the pandemic, including whether they were responsive to specific needs - that is, did they give money when their parents needed money and did they give time when their parents needed time? We've also been interested in whether kids were more responsive to their parents needs during the pandemic than they had been in the past. One reason this is interesting is to try and think about whether this is something that we might expect to see more of going forward or whether this is part of what kids always do for their parents.

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So we're going to use data from the Health and Retirement study to answer this question. The Health and Retirement study is a nationally-representative longitudinal study of older adults. It's been ongoing since 1992 and it is the gold standard for studying the health and well-being of older adults in the United States. In 2020, they conducted a special module for respondents who were interviewed after May 2020 in which people were asked about transfers of time and money that were given to and received from people outside their household because of the pandemic.

I'll talk to you a little bit about what they were specifically asked for later, but this is a longitudinal study, so it's been going on every year. The people who were interviewed in 2020 were also in the study in 2016 and 2018, so we also use information from the past to ask this question about whether kids were more responsive now than they had been in the past. This comes from the regular core interview, which includes a lot of demographic, economic, family, and health characteristics as well as questions about time and financial help received from adult children in the context of needing help with the active activities of daily living or the instrumental activities of daily living (including help providing and preparing food).

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It's hard to figure out exactly how to nail down exactly what caused what during the pandemic, because if you remember, everything was happening at once. What caused what is a big chain that is difficult to unravel. We use these complimentary strategies where we look at different ways of examining this question to see if we get the same answer. We then use those different ways of looking at the question to triangulate a conclusion. The two ways I'm going to talk about today are: first, we use what parents say they needed and what they got from their kids during the pandemic. Second, we look at what happened in the past and examine the change over time from 2016 to 2020 answer this question about whether kids became more responsive during the pandemic than they had been in the past.

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We use a sample of about 6,000 older adults who participated in the 2020 COVID-19 module but were also interviewed in the 2016, 2018, and 2020 core study. We used people who were aged 55 and older, because the cohort itself aged and we wanted to keep the age group consistent. We included people who have at least one non-co-resident child, because the questions that were asked concerned people outside your household.

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In terms of what they were asked in the COVID module, they were asked if, because of the pandemic, anyone living outside your household (such as a parent, adult child, or other relative or friend) helped you with money or by paying bills? If so, who was that? And did they help you with shopping for groceries, errands, rides, or chores? If so, who was that? People were also asked about challenges that they faced - if they got help with missed any regular payments on their rent, mortgage or other bills. They were asked if they couldn't pay medical bills or if they didn't have enough money to buy food. We considered someone to have experienced economic hardship if they report any of those. About 13% of the sample did report that they had some economic hardship. Respondents were also asked if they had trouble buying food even though they had money. We're going to think about them as having trouble buying food for non-financial reasons. A similar percentage of about 14% of the sample reported that they had trouble buying food for non-financial reasons.

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In the core survey, they were asked slightly different things. The concepts are the same, but the exact measurement is a bit different, which I actually think helps us in terms of this triangulation approach because we don't want our conclusions to be based on exact question wording or types of help that was received. In the core survey, people were asked if they received money from their children and if they received \$500 or more over the past two years. They're also asked if they received time help for things like meal preparation and shopping for groceries. That's our measure of time help from the core survey.

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They're also asked about need - we code someone as experiencing hardship if they report missing rent or mortgage payments or not having enough money to buy food. We record them as having trouble buying food for non-financial reasons if they have difficulty shopping for groceries because of health or memory problems. You can see that this is linked to a health problem, whereas in the COVID-19 module, it's not linked to that health problem.

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The survey, of course, is very big and gives us lots of controls that I'm not going to talk about. What I'm going to show you is the net of those controls. Because we have interviewed people over time, we're able to use prior waves of information about your income and health so that we're not looking at things that are happening at the same time - we're controlling for your prior circumstances.

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I'll show you some of the results. Here, this shows the coefficients on models that predict money and time help that older people receive from their adult children. What these show on the left hand side is that when parents reported that they had economic hardship, they were 6.4% more likely to report that they receive money from their kids. If they reported economic hardship, they weren't more likely to receive time help from their kids. That's the 0.1%. Similarly, if they reported that they had trouble buying food for non-financial reasons, they were 7.7% more likely to say that a child helped them. If they reported that they had trouble buying food, they weren't more likely to get money help from their kids. This shows us that kids were responsive to the needs of their parents have - that is, they gave money for money problems and time for time problems.

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But that doesn't really say anything about whether this changed over time. Here, what we're looking at is the same thing - we're looking at how having hardship affects the probability that you get money from your kid. We're looking at that in three different waves - 2016, 2018, and 2020. Similarly for food, we're looking at how having trouble buying food for non-financial reasons affects the probability that you get money from your kids in 2016, 2018, and 2020. What we can see on the left is that only in 2020 does having economic hardship predict getting money from your kids. In earlier waves, having economic hardship does not increase the probability that you get money from your kids. So here, we can conclude that the kids were more responsive to financial needs during the pandemic than they had been in the past. In none of the ways did they respond to having trouble buying food by giving their parents money.

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In time help, we have something similar. On the left hand side, we're looking at whether having economic hardship predicts your kids giving you time help. You can basically see in all of the years there's a very small association between having economic hardship and getting time help

from your kids. You can see on the right hand side that in every wave, having trouble buying food for non-financial reasons increases the probability that you get help from your kids. If you compare the 2016, 2018, and 2020 data, we see that in 2020, trouble buying food for non-financial reasons increases the probability that you get time help from your kids by 20%, compared to only about 10% in earlier waves. This shows that kids were more responsive to their parents time needs in 2020 than they had been in the past.

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To summarize, what we find is that adult children were quite responsive to their parents' specific pandemic-related needs. That is, they gave parents money when they needed money, and they gave parents time help when they needed help for non-financial reasons. We also showed that adult children were more responsive to their parents' needs during the pandemic than they had been in the past. I think that runs contrary to a lot of the concerns during the pandemic that older adults would be abandoned and alone. In fact, we find that their kids were more responsive.

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There are lots of limitations and our research is looking at just the first year of the pandemic, we're relying on parents' reports, but this is a gold standard survey and we feel these are pretty robust findings.

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I'll just acknowledge that this was funded by the NIA and the grant number is there on the slide. We're very grateful to the funders. This has been published recently in the Journal of Marriage and Family. The citation is below. Thank you very much and I appreciate your time.