

A RAND NOTE

Mature Women's Kin Availability and Contact

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This project was supported by Grant No. P50-HD-12639, awarded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, National Institutes of Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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Published by The RAND Corporation
1700 Main Street, P.O. Box 2138, Santa Monica, CA 90406-2138

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N-2695-NICHD

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The RAND Corporation

Social resources, and the social support that comes from them, may have important effects on individuals' health, including a lowered probability of physical illness and mortality (Wills, 1985; House et al., 1982), and increased psychological well-being (Donald and Ware, 1982). Policymakers are concerned about the social resources available to the nation's increasing numbers of elderly. This concern stems from the belief that if aging adults have few social resources, especially in the form of co-resident or nearby kin to provide care, they may require nursing home or home health care because they have no one to help care for them at home.

The importance of social contacts with kin--both inside and outside the household--rests on the family's central role as a source of resources for its members. The family, particularly adult children, have traditionally provided emotional, social, and financial support for their aging parents. Ample evidence exists that they continue to play this role (Fischer, 1982; Shanas, 1979). However, this support function seems restricted to certain categories of kin; a study by Lopata (1978) finds that widows frequently receive support from children and--in the case of younger widows--from parents, but not from siblings, cousins, nephews, nieces, or grandchildren.

This paper examines the availability of kin resources of women aged 44-59 and the contact that they have with the kin that they do have available. We focus especially on those groups of older women most at risk of inadequate kin resources: the unmarried; those living in households without relatives; those who are not employed; and, those whose health limits their activities. We also compare kin availability and contact by race. Our definition of kin comprises children, parents, in-laws, and siblings; we examine availability and contact with each of these kin categories separately, and with kin in all categories combined. This exercise allows us to pinpoint those groups of older women with few kin resources, and those with resources who do not make use of them. Our results will aid researchers and policy makers concerned about the wellbeing of the older population.

Data and Methods. The data for this study come from the National Longitudinal Study of Mature Women, a longitudinal survey of approximately 5,000 women ages 30 to 44 in 1967 when the panel began. The survey was designed by the Center for Human Resource Research, Ohio State University and fielded by the U.S. Bureau of the Census. Information on kin contact was collected in 1981 when the NLS Mature Women were between 44 and 59 years of age. The 3,677 women who were interviewed in 1981, and were thus able to respond to the questions on kin contact provide the data used in this paper.

Kin contact questions generally took the form "How often do you see or telephone your.?" The respondent then chose one of 7 responses: daily, at least weekly but not daily, at least monthly but not weekly, several times a year, about once a year, less than once a year, and not at all. Only respondents who had relatives in a particular category currently living outside their household provided information about contact with those relatives. In addition, only those currently married were asked about availability of and contact with inlaws. Although the survey actually asked about contact with each child who resided outside the household, we used the response only for the one with whom the respondent had the most contact. Also, the question on siblings simply asked about the sibling with whom the respondent had the most frequent contact. We have data only on the frequency of contact; we do not know anything about the quality of the contact or the respondent's satisfaction with the contact.

This paper uses the term "kin" to refer to children, parents, siblings, and inlaws. We subsume contact with spouses in our measure of marital status, and have no information on relatives outside the household other than those listed above. Because of the structure of the NLS data therefore, we cannot distinguish respondents living completely alone from those living with nonrelatives. Thus "living alone" means that the respondent does not live with a spouse, kin, or other types of relatives. Our measure of health limitation is based on the respon-

dent's report that her health limited her work outside or inside the home in some manner.

Findings. Table 1 gives the reader an overall picture of the data. The figures clearly show a uniformly high level of available kin living outside the woman's household. They also suggest that a higher percentage of women without co-resident kin--the unmarried and those living in a household with no relatives--also have no kin outside the household. But the percentage without kin is quite low--5 or 6 percent-- even for those groups least likely to have relatives outside the household. Few differences appear by race, employment status, or the presence of health limitations.

Table 2 gives the percentage of the mature women who have relatives living in and outside their households. These figures will help us identify those groups of older women with kin most likely to provide social resources and those least likely to have this advantage. White and non-white respondents have noticeably different kin availability patterns; probably because of the higher fertility of black than white women in the past, more non-white than white women share a household with some of their children, and more have children outside their household. More non-white women have extended family households, which they share with parents or siblings. However, higher mortality rates and higher rates of permanent singleness and marital disruption for blacks also mean that non-white women in their 40s and 50s less often have living parents and much less often have living in-laws than white women the same age.

Married women by definition have at least one close relative--their husband--available. Also, one subset of the currently unmarried--those who never wed--much less often have children than the ever married. So, unmarried women face a structural deficit of kin. But unmarried women seem to make up for this lack of children, husband and in-laws by more contact with the kin they do have available; almost nine percent of unmarried women but only 2 percent of married women have a parent living with them. And 4.4 percent of unmarried women share a household with siblings compared to less than 1 percent of married women.

Women who live alone (at least according to our definition) constitute a subset of currently unmarried women, since all married women live with at least one relative. These women might be most in need of the contacts and resources provided by non-resident family but they have fewer kin in any category outside the household than do women who live with kin. This may be a selection problem because if some of the

women had relatives they might have chosen to share a household with them, but this finding still points to a group of women who are relatively disadvantaged in their potential access to resources from kin.

We examined kin availability for employed and not-employed women because we reasoned that women who work have access to social contacts on the job, so perhaps kin contacts provide for fewer of their social needs than they do for the not employed. Table 2 shows that employed women differ from their not-employed counterparts very little in the availability of kin. More of the not-employed respondents have children outside their households, and but fewer have parents. Women with health limitations, who like those not employed may have less access to social contacts, are less likely to live with their children and more likely to live with siblings than are the non-limited. They are also less likely to have parents and in-laws, the latter probably because they are less likely than the healthy to be married.

Since one of the primary purposes of studying kin contact is to find the ramifications on isolation of the elderly, we are particularly concerned with whether the respondents have some minimum amount of contact with their available kin. We define minimum contact as a visit or telephone call once a month or more. By definition, women have at least minimal contact with kin who live in the same household. Table 3 gives the percentage of respondents who either had contact with kin who reside outside their home or who had kin in their households. We define those without kin in a particular category as having no contact. So this table combines kin availability with the level of contact with the kin that the woman does have.

We find that 89% of our sample has at least monthly contact with at least one of their children. Less than half of the respondents have monthly contact with their parents; one-quarter had monthly contact with their in-laws; and over 60% had monthly contact with at least one sibling. These figures reflect the relatively high proportions of the sample without living parents or in-laws. Overall, virtually all the mature women had at least some minimal level of contact with some family member.

Next we ask which women were most likely to be isolated from kin, either because they didn't have them or because they didn't speak to or visit those they had. Table 3 shows some racial differences; whites are slightly more likely to have monthly contact with at least one kin member, and with all of the individual categories except for siblings where non-whites are

more likely to have monthly contact. Similarly, married women are more likely to have monthly contact with children, parents, with inlaws and with all kin, while non-married respondents were more likely to have monthly contact with siblings. Women who did not share a household with a spouse or other relatives were much less likely to have monthly contact with all categories of kin. Almost 10% of those women had no monthly contact with any kin. So, women with few structurally connected kin do not appear to make up for this lack by spreading their kin networks widely, although they may have more intense contact with the kin that they do have.

Women who were employed were more likely than those not working to have monthly contact with all types of relatives except children where not-employed women had the higher likelihood. Respondents with health limitations were less likely to have contact with kin except for an equal chance of having monthly contact with siblings.

Since our population is not quite old enough to be considered elderly, we can expect that our results would tend to overestimate kin availability if they were generalized to the aged. As these mature women age, some of their relatives will die, and they will experience a shrinking of their kin networks. Since we expect availability to decline with age, it would be helpful to know how much contact our respondents have with available kin. Table 4 shows, of the respondents who had kin outside the household in a particular category, the percentage who had spoken to or visited them at least monthly.

Our results show a very high level of contact among family members; this closeness includes both nuclear and extended kin. Almost 95% of the women who had children residing outside their household had monthly contact with at least one child. Four-fifths of the respondents with parents living outside the household had at least monthly contact with them. Slightly less than four-fifths of those with siblings or inlaws outside the home have contact with them monthly. White respondents and married respondents were both more likely to have contact with all categories of available kin except for siblings. Employed women and non-limited women were more likely to have monthly con-

tact with all categories with the exception of children. Those women living in households with no relatives were more likely to have monthly contact with available siblings, but less likely to have contact with available parents. Clearly, most mature women who have kin keep in relatively close contact with them. If we rank kin by the level of contact we conclude that children outside the household are closest, with parents contacted frequently but less often than children. Siblings and inlaws together seem to comprise a category of relatives who require (or provide) lower levels of contact.

Conclusion. Our findings may reduce the concern sometimes expressed by policy makers and researchers about a lack of family support among our next generation of elderly. Virtually all of the older women we studied had monthly or more frequent contact with at least one member of their immediate or extended family. However, we want to note that contact with the types of kin we study here will probably decline as our sample ages, since the women will lose kin to death. The process of losing relatives will probably lead to a focus on children, grandchildren and perhaps siblings, rather than parents and inlaws. Fortunately, the women in our sample were more likely to have monthly contact with children than with any other available kin category.

NOTES

The research reported here was supported by Center Grant No. P-50-HD-12639 from the Center for Population Research, NICHD.

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Manuscript was received April 3, 1987 and reviewed April 4, 1987.

Tables start on the following pages.

Table 1. Kin availability inside and outside the household by respondent characteristics

		Percent without any kin	
		outside household	in or out of household
ALL	100.0%	2.9%	1.3%
White	71.6	3.0	1.7
Nonwhite	28.4	2.7	1.1
Married	70.1	2.0	0.8
Not Married	29.9	5.2	2.3
Lives Alone	10.7	6.3	6.3
Lives with Relatives	89.3	2.5	0.7
Employed	57.4	2.8	1.0
Not Employed	42.6	3.1	1.6
Health Limitation	35.3	2.6	1.1
No Limitation	64.7	3.1	1.4

Table 2. Percent with Kin Available.

	<u>Children</u>		<u>Parents</u>		<u>In-laws</u>		<u>Siblings</u>	
	In	Out	In	Out	In	Out	In	Out
ALL	58.2%	76.4%	4.0%	51.4%	0.7%	32.1%	1.8%	78.8%
White	55.1	75.6	3.8	53.5	0.8	36.9	1.6	77.6
Nonwhite	66.1	77.7	4.5	46.0	0.7	19.8	2.4	81.9
Married	60.0	78.6	2.0	54.1	1.0	45.8	0.7	79.7
Not Married	53.9	71.1	8.6	44.8	0.2	0.0	4.4	76.3
Lives Alone	0.0	67.3	0.0	47.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	73.9
Lives with Relatives	65.2	77.5	4.5	51.9	0.8	35.9	1.8	79.4
Employed	58.3	74.3	4.3	53.5	0.9	32.1	1.9	78.8
Not Employed	58.0	79.2	3.5	48.8	0.5	32.0	1.7	79.0
Health Limitation	54.9	80.4	3.9	46.9	0.9	25.6	2.2	80.0
No Limitation	60.0	74.2	4.0	53.8	0.7	35.6	1.6	78.2

Table 3. Percent in Contact with Kin once a Month or More.

	<u>Children</u>	<u>Parents</u>	<u>In-laws</u>	<u>Siblings</u>	<u>Any kin</u>
ALL	89.0%	46.0%	25.6%	61.2%	97.8%
White	89.5	48.0	29.7	59.0	98.0
Nonwhite	87.9	41.0	15.1	66.7	97.3
Married	92.5	47.1	36.4	60.3	98.4
Not Married	80.8	43.5	0.0	63.2	96.4
Lives Alone	64.0	37.6	0.0	60.7	90.4
--with Relatives	92.0	47.0	28.6	61.3	98.7
Employed	88.5	49.2	26.7	62.5	98.3
Not Employed	89.7	41.7	24.1	59.5	97.1
Health Limitation	88.3	40.9	19.9	61.2	97.6
No Limitation	89.4	48.8	28.7	61.2	97.9

(figures include those with kin in the household, and those without kin)

Table 4. Percent in Contact with Available Kin Once a Month or More.

	<u>Children</u>	<u>Parents</u>	<u>In-laws</u>	<u>Siblings</u>	<u>Any kin</u>
ALL	94.6%	82.1%	77.6%	77.0%	96.8%
White	95.8	82.8	78.6	75.4	97.1
Nonwhite	92.8	80.2	73.2	80.8	96.3
Married	94.9	83.5	77.5	75.4	97.1
Not Married	94.2	78.6	---	81.4	96.3
Lives Alone	95.1	80.0	---	82.1	96.5
--with Relatives	94.7	82.3	77.4	76.4	96.9
Employed	95.4	84.3	80.4	77.7	97.4
Not Employed	93.7	78.5	73.8	74.8	96.1
Health Limitation	94.9	78.9	73.8	76.0	96.6
No Limitation	94.6	83.6	78.9	77.5	97.0

(calculated as number in contact divided by number with available kin)

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