

White, high-income people more likely to move farther from family, study finds

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While most people have continued to live close to family as they pursue educational and job opportunities, high-income white people have moved farther from family over time, according to a recent study from

Georgia State University.

The research challenges common perceptions about the breakdown of American families and how individuals choose where to live.

Amy Spring, lead author and an associate professor of Sociology at Georgia State University, says that the notion that people are increasingly moving far away from their families is not as universal as commonly believed.

"That narrative is so often a white narrative and a high-income narrative that we accept society-wide," Spring said. "But for most people, that's not even close to true."

Spring and her research team—including graduate students Sarah Roche and Dionne Parris—are among the first to analyze long-term shifts in family networks using a nationally representative sample and look beyond nuclear family ties.

They found that apart from white, high-income families, other racial and income groups tend to live near at least one family member.

The team analyzed data collected over 40 years from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, a long-term study started in 1968, to determine how race and income affect familial proximity.

"We broke it down by race and income—looking within those groups—because we understand that [racial groups](#) are not a monolith and there is variation within them," Spring said.

While previous research has focused on closest kin members, such as parents and adult children, Spring looked at the entire family network.

"There's a lot of good evidence that people have different relationships with their extended kin—grandparents, cousins—that varies by race," Spring said. "So, the focus on [adult children](#) and their parents might miss an important part of the story."

The study found notable differences across racial and income groups. While white, high-income respondents increased their distance from [family members](#) over time, other race-income groups' distance from family remained relatively stable. The findings suggest that family proximity is an important component of choosing where to live, even while institutions such as schools and daycares take over roles once held by family members.

According to Spring, these results also combat a commonly held bias that equates success with geographic mobility. The findings suggest that people who stay close to family are not merely unable to leave, but actively choose to do so.

"Black, high-income families were still living close to their families. They presumably have the resources and education to move away from family, but they may stay living near family for many different reasons that relate to family bonds, family culture, norms and expectations to stay close, or the racism they face in the wider society," Spring said.

The implications of Spring's findings extend beyond proximity to family, highlighting the need for more research on inequality and the differences between white, high-[income](#) families and other groups.

"We need to think very critically about what it means when this group is on a different trajectory from everybody else and what it foretells about inequality," Spring said.

The work is published in the *Journal of Marriage and Family*.

More information: Amy Spring et al, Keeping kin close? Geographies of family networks by race and income, 1981–2017, *Journal of Marriage and Family* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/jomf.12911](https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12911)

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