

Couples' social networks took long-lasting hit during COVID

June 1 2023, by Holly Ober



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Following the lockdowns and restrictions on public gatherings in the early days of COVID-19, the social networks of white, Black and Latino couples all shrank, UCLA psychologists report. But these networks

shrank most significantly among lower-income and Latino and Black couples and didn't fully recover even after vaccines became available and the most severe restrictions were lifted.

The UCLA study, published in the journal *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, is the first to examine the pandemic-related loss of connections with family, friends and colleagues among diverse couples recruited from lower-income neighborhoods—a population at particular risk from COVID-19. The findings, they say, highlight the vulnerability of marginalized groups to the consequences of certain public health measures.

"Limiting social interactions may well have reduced the spread of infection," said lead author Benjamin Haggerty, a doctoral student in the UCLA Marriage and Close Relationships Lab, "but this policy also had unexamined and potentially lasting social costs."

Psychologists with the lab followed hundreds of mixed-gender couples before and after COVID-19 struck and found that when the pandemic began, face-to-face interactions declined overall by 50%, with little recovery over the next 18 months. Black and Latino couples and those with lower incomes, they discovered, maintained even fewer of their relationships than white couples and those with higher incomes.

And while many people attempted to compensate for a lack of in-person gatherings through increased use of technologies like Zoom and FaceTime, the researchers found that among the couples they studied, even virtual interactions declined during the first months of the pandemic. Significantly, these declines weren't restricted to particular types of relationships—they affected connections with family, friends and co-workers alike.

"What happened to those lost relationships?" asked study co-author

Benjamin Karney, co-director of the lab and a professor of psychology at UCLA. "One answer is that some simply could not be sustained for so long without frequent interactions to nourish them."

In general, for white couples and for wealthier couples, the picture was a bit rosier. Partly due to fewer initial decreases in social interactions in the earliest months of COVID-19 and partly because of greater recovery in interactions over the subsequent year, the networks of these couples contracted less than those of lower-income and Latino and Black couples.

The UCLA Marriage and Close Relationships Lab was in a unique position to measure the effects of COVID-19 lockdowns on social networks. Since 2009, the researchers had been conducting a long-term study of social interactions among couples. Their cohort, drawn from primarily lower-income neighborhoods, included a spectrum of income levels and races and ethnicities. Most participants were Latino.

As social isolation became a common concern during the lockdown, Haggerty and his colleagues realized they had the tools in place to track COVID-19–related changes in the social lives of these couples. Their study analyzed five sets of detailed interviews conducted before the outbreak and during the pandemic's first 18 months with 243 husbands and 250 wives. In each interview, spouses discussed the nature of their relationship with 24 of their social network members.

The psychologists discovered that not all participants were equally affected by the lockdowns and restrictions. When lockdown orders were put in place in March 2020 and many Americans began to work from home, 73% of the husbands and 48% of the wives interviewed continued to work in person. In-person workers experienced smaller declines in face-to-face contact, but when it came to virtual interactions, husbands who worked in person experienced greater declines than all those who

didn't work outside the home.

Declines in virtual interactions may have been due to work schedules may have left many [couples](#) less time to catch up with family and friends virtually, the researchers said.

The study findings suggest that to prepare for future disease outbreaks, there is a need to develop ways to limit pathogen transmission without harming the in-person interactions necessary to sustain meaningful relationships.

"In the future," Haggerty said, "techniques of limiting infection that also allow for social interactions, such as masking, might be a way of threading this needle."

As an example, Karney pointed to high-quality masks and air filtration systems that were shown to be successful at slowing transmission.

"Perhaps we can use lessons learned during COVID-19 to plan public health measures for future pandemics that don't cause such long-lasting damage to [social ties](#)," he said.

More information: Benjamin B. Haggerty et al, Lasting Declines in Couples' Social Network Interactions in the First Years of COVID, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/01461672231169591](https://doi.org/10.1177/01461672231169591)

Provided by University of California, Los Angeles

Citation: Couples' social networks took long-lasting hit during COVID (2023, June 1) retrieved 29 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2023-06-couples-social-networks-long-lasting-covid.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.