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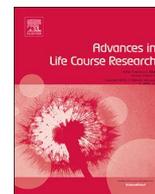
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Without the ties that bind: U.S. young adults who lack active parental relationships



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ABSTRACT

Parents are an important source of affection and support for young adults in the U.S., so those who lack parental relationships are a potentially vulnerable group. This study outlines how common it is for young adults to report lacking an active parental tie and provides a portrait of these young adults. Analysis of the 2008–2009 National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health ($N = 5090$) reveals that the vast majority of young adults ages 25–32 in the U.S. – 97.6% – have an active relationship with at least one parent figure. Only a small share of young adults lack a relationship with a mother figure (6%), due primarily to early maternal death. A larger share of young adults lack a relationship with a father figure (20%), usually because their father figure is deceased or they never had a father figure (rather than having become estranged over time). Young adults who are Black or from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to lack parental ties in young adulthood. In addition, prior events such as parental separation or incarceration are associated with an elevated likelihood of being estranged in early adulthood (though these events are rarely followed by estrangement with an existing parent figure).

1. Introduction

As early adulthood has become more challenging, parents increasingly provide financial and instrumental assistance, as well as advice and emotional support. Recent research has highlighted the increased reliance of young adults on their parents and the positive characteristics of these ties (Fingerman, Cheng, Wesselmann et al., 2012; Wightman, Patrick, Schoeni, & Schulenberg, 2013). However, not all young adults have relationships with their parents. Long-term changes in family structure have meant that children are less likely to reach adulthood having lived continuously with both parents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). They are more likely to experience the stressors that accompany divorce, and are more likely to have relationships with other types of parent figures, such as step-parents (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008; Kennedy & Ruggles, 2014). Because of these shifts in family dynamics – as well as situations like parental death and incarceration – we might expect that many young adults lack access to parental (particularly father) relationships and the affection and support that often accompany them. However, little is known about the group of young adults who lack active parental ties.

Here we use data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health to estimate how common it is for young adults to

lack relationships with a mother or father figure in the U.S. – either because they never had the parent figure in their lives, because he or she has died, or because they no longer have contact with the parent figure. We also identify the characteristics associated with absent ties. This research contributes to our understanding of contemporary early adulthood by providing a rich portrait of a potentially vulnerable group of young adults.

1.1. The importance of parents and changes in family relationships

For most individuals, parent-child relationships are positive and beneficial throughout the life course. These relationships often involve the sharing of tangible resources, emotional support, and frequent contact (Fingerman, Miller, Birditt, & Zarit, 2009). Parents and adult children tend to name one another as among their most important social ties and, in most cases, both parties appear to benefit from these relationships (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987; Hartnett, Furstenberg, Birditt, & Fingerman, 2013; Van Gaalen & Dykstra, 2006). In particular, parents and adult children who report more positive relationships have higher levels of well-being and lower levels of depression (Fingerman, Pitzer, Lefkowitz, Birditt, & Mroczek, 2008; Umberson, 1992; Ward, 2008).

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The dynamics of contemporary young adulthood make relationships with parents especially important. The process of transitioning to adult roles – including finishing school, entering the workforce, leaving the parental home, marrying, and having children – is more protracted and the chronology is more varied compared to prior periods (Arnett, 2000; Fussell & Furstenberg, 2005; Isen & Stevenson, 2011; Vespa, 2017). As a result, the parent-child tie has become increasingly consequential well beyond the age of 18, a fact that is now widely recognized both normatively and institutionally (for example, the Affordable Care Act mandates that parents' health insurance covers children through age 26). Research has shown that these changes are reflected in transfer patterns: the amount of financial support young adults receive from parents is higher now compared to previous cohorts (Wightman et al., 2013).

Although parent-child relationships tend to be helpful and positive on average, they are not universally positive or present. Due to long-term changes in family structure, in particular, we might expect that a substantial number of young adults lack relationships with at least one parent. In particular, the rise in divorce and non-marital childbearing has loosened the bonds between some parent-child pairs. Fathers increasingly live apart from their young children, which often results in lower levels of closeness, contact, and resource transfers (Cheadle, Amato, & King, 2010; Cooney & Uhlenberg, 1990; Vespa, Lewis, & Kreider, 2013). In addition, a variety of other factors may lead to lacking parental ties in young adulthood, including disagreements or misaligned values, parental death or incarceration, or histories of abuse or neglect (Agllias, 2015b; Gilligan, Sutor, & Pillemer, 2015). What remains unclear from the literature is how common this situation is in young adulthood and who these young adults are.

1.2. Demographic factors associated with lacking parent figure ties

Young adults may lack active relationships with parent figures through three pathways: because they never had a mother/father figure relationship (i.e. there was no woman/man who raised them), because their mother/father figure has died, or because they do not communicate with a mother/father figure who was previously in their lives. We anticipate that certain demographic factors will put young adults at greater risk for lacking parental relationships through each of these pathways.

Gender is one such factor: we expect that both sons and fathers may be more likely to lack relationships than daughters and mothers, due to the gendered nature of “kin keeping,” whereby women have closer and more active familial relationships than males (Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Troll, Miller, & Atchley, 1979; Willson, Shuey, & Elder, 2003). In addition, young adults may be more likely to lack father figures due to early death compared to mother figures because of higher male mortality and the fact that fathers tend to be older than mothers (Landry & Forrest, 1995).

We also consider socioeconomic position and race-ethnicity. Individuals coming from lower socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds may be at higher risk for lacking parent figures in young adulthood. Because lower SES mothers are more likely to have a child outside of marriage (Rindfuss, Morgan, & Offutt, 1996), some of these parents – particularly fathers – may have never been in their children's lives. Others may have been active parents previously but no longer maintain ties by the time the children are young adults, due to factors such as drug or alcohol addiction, mental health issues, difficulty paying child support, or because they have moved on to other families (Edin & Nelson, 2013; Tach, Edin, & Mincy, 2010). Those who come from low SES backgrounds may also be more likely to lack a parent figure due to early death, compared to their high SES counterparts (Olshansky et al., 2012).

The likelihood of lacking active parental relationships may also vary by race-ethnicity due to differences in family structure patterns and intergenerational relationships (Hogan, Eggebeen, & Clogg, 1993;

Umberson, 1992). Black young adults may be especially likely to lack relationships with fathers, compared to Whites and Hispanics, because they are less likely to grow up with married parents (Cherlin, 2010; Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008; Umberson, 1992). Nevertheless, Black individuals may retain strong ties to mothers in young adulthood (Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 1998; Sutor, Sechrist, Gilligan, & Pillemer, 2011; Umberson, 1992). Finally, because of mortality differentials by race, individuals who are Black may also be more likely to lack a parent figure due to early death, compared to those who are White (Olshansky et al., 2012; Umberson et al., 2017).

1.3. Relationship characteristics predicting estrangement

Some individuals may have had a mother/father figure relationship earlier in life, but have little or no contact with the parent figure in young adulthood. We refer to this situation as “estrangement.” Whether parents and children become estranged may depend, in part, on dynamics that were present early in the relationship, such as whether parents stayed together or separated, whether the parent and child lived in the same house, whether the parent was ever incarcerated, and whether the parent figure was a biological parent or a different type of parent figure.

First, the “type” of relationship may be important in determining whether young adults maintain an active tie with a parent figure into adulthood. In particular, ties to biological parents may remain stronger in adulthood, compared with other types of relationships, such as step-parents, or aunts and uncles who raised the child. Scholars have argued that biological parent-child relationships are normative and considered non-voluntary, so individuals expect these ties to be stronger and more difficult to sever than when the parent figure is a step-parent or another type of friend or relative (Crabb & Augoustinos, 2008).

Further, nonresident parents have been shown to have weakened ties to their children (Amato, 2000; Amato & Booth, 1996; Aquilino, 2006), and may therefore be prone to eventual loss of contact. When a parent lives apart from his or her child following a separation, it could be due to choice, or to factors such as custody and visitation judgments. This is consistent with the solidarity model, which argues that the associational solidarity generated from shared experiences is necessary for affection and cohesion (Bengtson & Roberts, 1991).

We also expect that young adults who have experienced the divorce or separation of their biological (or adoptive) parents will be more likely to lack contact later. Family Stress Theory says that family discord and estrangement are more likely to happen in the context of stressors, such as union disruption (Agllias, 2015a; Galvin, Braithwaite, Bylund, & Braithwaite, 2016; McKenry & Price, 2000). Research in the field of social work has supported this contention, finding that estrangement is often caused when major disruptive events lead to interpersonal conflict (Agllias, 2015a; Carr, Holman, Abetz, Kellas, & Vagnoni, 2015). A common pattern found in qualitative research is that adult children report cutting off contact with a parent whom they believe reacted poorly to a divorce (Agllias, 2015b).

Finally, young adults may be estranged from parents who have been incarcerated. Incarceration tends to reduce parental involvement and has been associated with weaker parental ties (Swisher & Waller, 2008; Western, Lopoo, & McLanahan, 2004).

1.4. The present study

This study addresses three research questions that provide a descriptive portrait of young adults who lack active relationships with parent figures. Most prior research on the relationship between parents and young adult children in the U.S. has focused on what is average or typical – average frequency of financial transfers, average level of contact, etc. – or has explored how parent-child relationships differ across groups (Cooney & Uhlenberg, 1992; Fingerman, Cheng, Tighe, Birditt, & Zarit, 2012). This study uses nationally representative U.S.

data to make a unique contribution by focusing on 25–32 year olds with the particular vulnerability of lacking a parental relationship. We address the following questions:

- 1) How common is it for young adults to lack relationships with a mother figure, a father figure, or both? What are the most frequent “pathways” for lacking mother and father figures, including: (a) the child never had a mother/father figure (i.e. they cannot identify a woman/man who raised them), (b) the mother/father figure has died, or (c) the child has a living mother/father figure but they communicate rarely or never (“estranged”)?
- 2) What demographic factors are associated with lacking parent figures via each of the three pathways? We examine the roles of gender, age, socioeconomic background, and race-ethnicity. We expect males – both fathers and sons – to lack ties more frequently than females (particularly via the estrangement pathway). Individuals from lower SES backgrounds may be more likely to lack parental ties (overall and for each of the three pathways) than individuals from higher SES backgrounds. We also expect that Black young adults will be more likely than White young adults to lack relationships with father figures (via all three pathways), but the same may not be true for mother figures.
- 3) Focusing on the “estrangement” pathway, specifically, what are the preexisting characteristics of the relationship (or of the parent) that could help explain a lack of contact during adulthood? We expect that young adults will be more likely to be estranged when the parent figure was someone other than the biological parent, when the respondent experienced a parental separation, when the parent figure did not live with the respondent in adolescence, or when the parent figure had been incarcerated. (These variables are examined solely for the estrangement pathway since they do not apply to – or, in some cases, are not available for – individuals who lack ties due to death or never having had a mother/father figure.)

2. Method

2.1. Data

Data for this study come from Waves I and IV of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (“Add Health,” Harris, 2009). Add Health is a large, nationally representative study of U.S. adolescents who were in grades 7–12 during the 1994–1995 school year, when Wave I data were collected (Harris, 2013). In 2008–2009 when Wave IV of the study was administered, respondents were in the core age range of 25–32. All 5090 respondents who were ages 25–32 were retained in the analytic sample.

Initially, a stratified random sample of American high schools was drawn and students from each school (and corresponding middle schools) were then sampled and interviewed in their homes.¹ Respondents who completed the Wave I in-home interview were sought for follow-up in Waves II, III, and IV. In Wave IV, 92.5% of the sample was successfully located and 80.3% of the sample was interviewed. Response rates for Wave IV differ by race, gender, and other characteristics; however, analyses have indicated that after sampling weights are applied, bias is small for nearly all survey questions (Harris, 2013).

Due to follow-up protocols for Wave IV, even respondents who were not in touch with parents were likely to have been successfully contacted. In addition to parental contact information, the study team utilized respondents’ own contact information provided in Wave III of the survey, as well as contact information for ‘another person like a relative or close friend, who would know how to reach [them]’ (Tabor,

2014). When these approaches were not successful, the team relied on information from their locating database, collected over the 14-year study period, in addition to other modern methods for locating respondents, such as social media. Successful interviews were conducted with several populations considered difficult to study, including 73 incarcerated and 16 homeless young adults.

Throughout the analyses, we utilized measures of prior characteristics from Wave I, when all respondents were adolescents ages 18 and under. Measures from the middle waves (Waves II and III) were not used since respondents were divided between high-school-age and post-high-school-age during these waves, making some variables not comparable across age groups (such as variables based on household rosters).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Having versus lacking parent figure ties

Whether the respondent lacks a parent tie is based on four questions from Wave IV. As with other U.S. studies such as the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) and the Family Exchanges Study (FES), the Add Health questions regarding parental support focus on parent “figures,” rather than biological parents (Family Exchanges Study, 2013; Panel Study of Income Dynamics, 2015).

Regarding mother figures, the following questions were asked in Wave IV of Add Health:

1. “We would like to know about the woman you feel raised you. This may be your biological mother, or it may be a step-mother, adoptive mother, grandmother, etc. If you have more than one mother figure, choose the one who is most important to you.” [Respondent chooses from a list, or reports that they were not raised by a mother figure]
2. “Is your (mother figure) still alive?”
3. “How often do you and your (mother figure) see each other?” (“Never,” “once a year or less,” “a few times a year,” “once or twice a month,” “once or twice a week,” “almost every day,” “don’t know”)
4. “How often do you and your (mother figure) talk on the telephone, exchange letters or exchange email?” (“Never,” “once a year or less,” “a few times a year,” “once or twice a month,” “once or twice a week,” “almost every day”)

2.2.2. Questions for father figures follow the same format

Based on this set of questions, there are three pathways through which respondents could be classified as *lacking a mother/father figure relationship*: (a) they never had a mother/father figure (i.e. there was no woman/man they felt raised them), (b) they were raised by a mother/father figure but he/she is no longer alive, (c) they were raised by a mother/father figure but they currently see or communicate with each other “once a year or less” or “never” (we refer to this third group as “estranged”). In contrast, respondents *have a relationship with mother/father figure relationship* if they identify a person as filling that role and report having regular contact with her/him (i.e. communication or visits “a few times a year” or more often). Table A1 in Appendix A presents the distribution of respondents by contact frequency with mother and father figures, and shows how these responses were coded. Throughout the paper “mother figures” will sometimes be referred to as “mothers,” and “father figures” will sometimes be referred to as “fathers.”

2.2.3. Demographic characteristics

Socioeconomic background was assessed using the resident parents’ education levels in Wave I. When there was no resident father, we used the education level of the biological father, since these education levels were likely similar (same for mothers). Education was coded as number of years of schooling, and separate variables were created for mothers and fathers. For the small number of cases with missing data ($n = 21$

¹ U.S. middle schools typically educate students ages 11–14 and high schools educate students ages 14–18.

for mothers, 58 for fathers), we used multiple imputation. Mother's and father's education levels were imputed based on the other parent's education and the respondent's background characteristics, following recommended practice (UCLA: Statistical Consulting Group, 2017). This was executed using Stata's "mi impute" commands for multivariate imputation. Because we imputed missing data, each respondent was assigned two values for parental education levels (one mother and one father), even if the respondent did not have two parent figures. We took this approach so that lacking a given parent (the dependent variable in our models) would not affect the parental education scale (an independent variable). Following other studies, the education levels of the two parents were then averaged to create a scale (Verba, Burns, & Schlozman, 2003).

Race-ethnicity was based on the Wave I question: "What is your race?" Respondents were recoded into four categories: White non-Hispanic (hereafter "White"), Black non-Hispanic (hereafter "Black"), Hispanic of any race (hereafter "Hispanic"), and non-Hispanic other race (hereafter "other race"). Only 4 respondents (0.08%) refused to answer or have missing data for race-ethnicity. In these cases, the same question from Wave III was used, or as a last resort, the interviewer's evaluation of the respondent's race.

2.2.4. Relationship characteristics predicting estrangement

The type of mother figure relationship was ascertained using the Wave IV question, "What is this person's relationship to you [the woman you feel raised you]?" "Biological mother," "Adoptive mother," "Step-mother who adopted you," "Step-mother," "Foster mother," "Grandmother," "Aunt," "Sister," "Other female relative," "Other female non-relative." The same question was asked for father figures. In order to collapse the smallest groups, responses were recoded into the following categories (separately for mother and father figures): biological, adoptive, step-parent,² grandparent, other relative, or other non-relative.

Dummy variables for whether the respondent lived with their mother figure and father figure, respectively, during adolescence were coded using the Wave I household roster. For instance, if the respondent reported in Wave IV that their father figure was their grandfather, we examined the Wave I household roster to see if a grandfather was listed. This variable is considered an indicator of the previous presence of the tie.

We expected parental separation to be a key stressor that would predict subsequent disengagement. Add Health does not include a direct measure of whether the respondent's biological parents separated, so instability was approximated with a dummy variable for whether the respondent's biological mother and biological father (or both adoptive parents) were living together in Wave I. This dummy variable = 1 if parents had separated (not living together) and = 0 if the parents were living together.

Information on parental incarceration was assessed in Wave IV with the question, "(Has/did) your (father figure) ever (spent/spend) time in jail or prison?" Responses were categorized as yes (=1), or no/"don't know" (=0). There were very few cases of mother figures being incarcerated; these were dropped from the logistic regression because they aligned perfectly with the dependent variable. As a result, only incarceration of father figures was included in the regression analysis.

Table 1 presents weighted respondent characteristics, for all respondents and by relationship status with mother and father figures. The average age is 28.4 and the average value of the parental education scale is 13.4 years. The majority are White (67%), 16% are Black, 11% are Hispanic, and the remaining 6% are a different race-ethnicity.

² Step-parents who adopted the respondent are counted as step-parents (not adoptive parents).

2.3. Analytic strategy

To answer the first research question, we estimated the proportion of 25–32-year olds who lack active parental relationships using information from the Add Health survey, as described above. We calculated: (a) the prevalence of each of the three pathways to lacking mother/father figures and (b) the overlap between lacking a mother figure and lacking a father figure (i.e. what fraction of young adults lacks both and what fraction lacks neither).

To address the second question, we present graphically the proportion of young adults lacking parent figures, by child's gender and age, parental education, and race-ethnicity. We also used logistic and multinomial logistic regression models to identify the demographic factors (i.e. gender, age, parental education, and race-ethnicity) that were associated with lacking parental relationships (as a whole and via each of the three pathways). First, we used logistic regression models in which the dependent variable equaled 1 if the respondent lacked an active parent figure relationship, and equaled 0 if the respondent had an active relationship with that parent figure (estimated separately for mother and father figures). Then we estimated multinomial logistic regression models in which the dependent variable categories corresponded to the three pathways for lacking active parent figure relationships: (a) the child never had a parent figure, (b) the parent figure has died, or (c) the child has no contact with the parent figure ("estranged"). The comparison category consisted of those who have active parent figure ties. Models were estimated separately for mother and father figures.

For the third research question, we focused on the estrangement pathway (i.e. respondents who have a living mother/father figure but have little or no contact with him/her). Drawing on a more extensive set of variables, we examined whether relationship characteristics predicted estrangement from parent figures. Logistic regression analyses were employed and the independent variables were preexisting characteristics of the relationship or of the parent that could help explain the lack of contact during adulthood. These included type of relationship (biological parent, step-parent, etc.), prior coresidence with parent figure, parental separation/divorce, and paternal incarceration. Models also included demographic factors, including respondent's age, gender, parental education, and race-ethnicity. (We did not estimate these models for young adults who lost a parent due to death or who never had a parent figure because the parental variables – e.g., type of relationship, incarceration – were not available or not applicable for these pathways.)

Data were analyzed using Stata 13.0/SE. Survey weights were applied to account for stratified sampling and nonresponse. Logistic and multinomial logistic regressions were estimated using the "logit" and "mlogit" commands, respectively. These were exercised in conjunction with "mi estimate" to account for imputed data in the models, and the "svy" and "subpop" commands, which specify survey weights and the analytic sample.

3. Results

3.1. Prevalence of lacking parental ties

The top panel of Table 2 shows how common it is for young adults to lack mother and father figures via each of the three pathways. Only 0.5% lacked a mother figure because they never had a mother figure, 5% lacked a mother figure because she was deceased, and 1% lacked a mother figure due to estrangement. These figures indicate that more than 6% of young adults lack a mother figure in total (0.5 + 5 + 1). The numbers are higher for father figures: 7.4% reported never having had a father figure, 8.7% had a father figure who died, and, nearly four percent of young adults were estranged from their father figure, for a total of 20% (7 + 9 + 4). The bottom panel of Table 2 shows the overlap between lacking a mother figure and lacking a father figure in a

Table 1
Respondent Characteristics, by Relationship with Mother and Father Figures, National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health Wave IV (2008–09), Weighted.

	Full Sample	Mother figure (“MF”)		Father figure (“FF”)	
		Has Relationship ^a	Lacks Relationship ^b	Has Relationship ^a	Lacks Relationship ^b
Male (%)	50%	51%	49%	51%	50%
Age (Mean)	28.4	28.4	28.6	28.3	28.6 [*]
Parental Education Scale ^c (Mean)	13.4	13.4	12.9 [*]	13.5	12.9 [*]
Race-ethnicity (%)					
White	67%	68%	59% [*]	71%	54% [*]
Black	16%	16%	23% [*]	13%	28% [*]
Hispanic	11%	11%	11%	11%	13%
Other	6%	5%	7%	5%	6%
Percentage in this category (weighted)	100%	94%	6%	80%	20%
N =	5090	4753	337	4035	1055

^a Has a living mother/father figure and communicates with or visits him/her at least “a few times a year.”
^b Respondent never had a MF/FF, MF/FF is deceased, or respondent is ‘estranged’ (i.e. there is little or no communication).
^c Average years of parental education.
^{*} Difference from “Has Relationship” group significant at $p < 0.05$.

Table 2
Distribution of Young Adults (Ages 25–32), by Relationship with Mother and Father Figure, National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health Wave IV (2008–09, N = 5090), Weighted%.

Mother figure:		Lacks Relationship			Total	
Has Relationship		...because never had MF	...because deceased	...because estranged		
Father figure:	Has Relationship	76.1%	0.4%	3.2%	80.1%	
	Lacks Relationship	...because never had FF	6.5%	0.1%	0.7%	7.4%
		...because deceased	7.9%	0.1%	0.7%	8.7%
		...because estranged	3.2%	0.0%	0.3%	3.8%
Total		93.6%	0.5%	4.9%	100.0%	

Mother figure:		Lacks Relationship		Total
Has Relationship		Lacks Relationship		
Father figure:	Has Relationship	76.1%	4.0%	80.1%
	Lacks Relationship	17.5%	2.4%	19.9%
	Total	93.6%	6.4%	100.0%

simplified format. Three-quarters (76%) of young adults have regular contact with both parents (upper left-hand quadrant), meaning that the remaining one-quarter (24%) lack a relationship with at least one parent. However, lacking a relationship with *both* parents is relatively rare at 2.4% (lower right-hand quadrant).³

3.2. Demographic factors associated with lacking parent figure ties

The second research question (regarding the demographic factors associated with lacking a mother/father figure) is addressed in Fig. 1 and Table 3. Fig. 1 shows the proportion of young adults lacking mother figures (Fig. 1a) and father figures (Fig. 1b), by key characteristics. These figures show bivariate associations. In contrast, Table 3 examines the same associations using multiple regression. Panel A of Table 3 shows odds ratios from logistic regression models predicting whether the respondent lacks an active relationship with a mother or father

figure, respectively. In Panel B of Table 3, the “lacks relationship” group is separated into the three distinct pathways (never having had a parent figure, death, and estrangement) in order to identify which demographic factors are associated with each pathway. Multinomial logistic regression models were estimated and the reference category consisted of those who have an active mother/father figure tie.

As shown in Fig. 1a, there are no significant differences (at the $p < 0.05$ level) in relationships with mother figures by gender or age of the child. This is also the case in the multiple regression analysis (Table 3, Panel A, “Mother Figure” column).

There are several striking differences across the parental education scale (our measure of socioeconomic background). Those with higher values on the scale were less likely to lack mother figures overall: only 4% of those in the highest parental education category were lacking mother figures, compared to 8.4% of those in the lowest category. In particular, only 3.1% of those in the highest parental education category had a *deceased* mother figure, while the percentage in the lowest education category was twice as high (6.2%). Similarly, only 0.3% of those in the highest category were *estranged* from mother figures, versus 1.6% in the lowest category. Echoing this, Table 3 shows that the parental education scale is a significant predictor of having deceased mother figures and being estranged from mother figures, when other characteristics are controlled (Panel B, “Mother Figure” column).

There are also striking differences by race-ethnicity. Among Black young adults, 9.2% were missing mother figures overall, compared to 5.6% of White young adults. In particular this was due to large

³ If there were other parent-like figures in the respondent’s life (including biological parents) whom the respondent felt did not meet the criteria for parent figure, we were not able to include them in the analysis. We know that such situations exist: of the 0.5% who reported in Wave IV that they never had a mother figure, 81% said they do have a living biological mother. Among the 7% who never had a father figure, it was 64%. Unfortunately, there is no information about whether these respondents have contact with their biological mothers (or fathers) in Wave IV; but the fact that they did not list their biological mother (or father) as their mother figure (or father figure) suggests that these have not been supportive parental relationships.

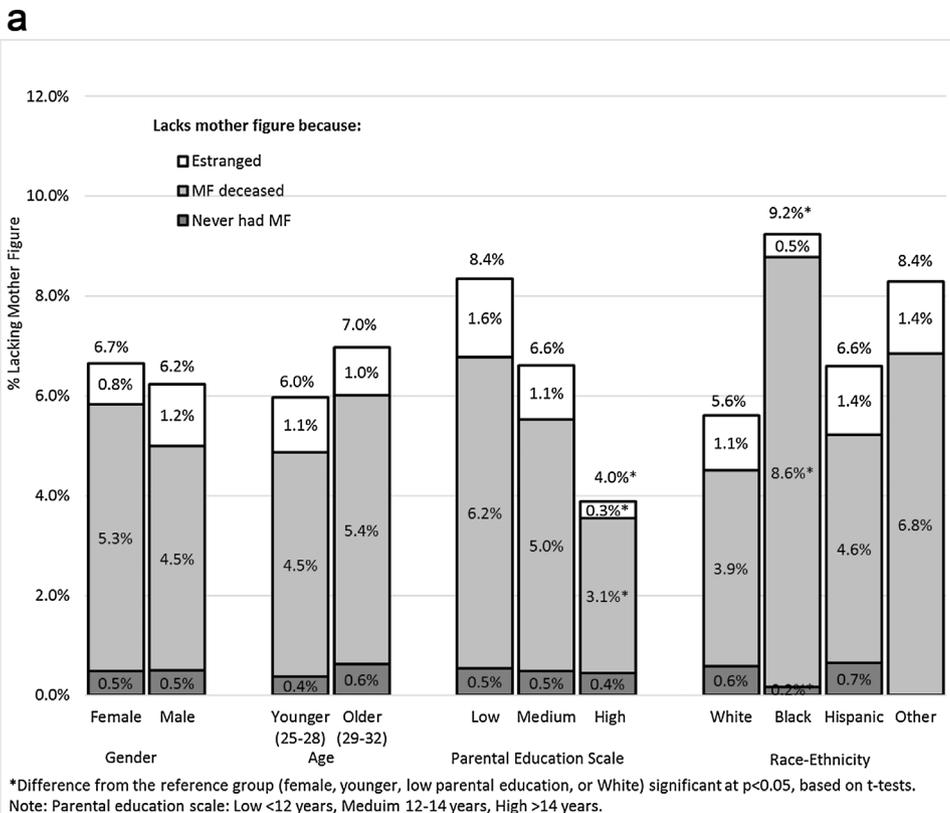
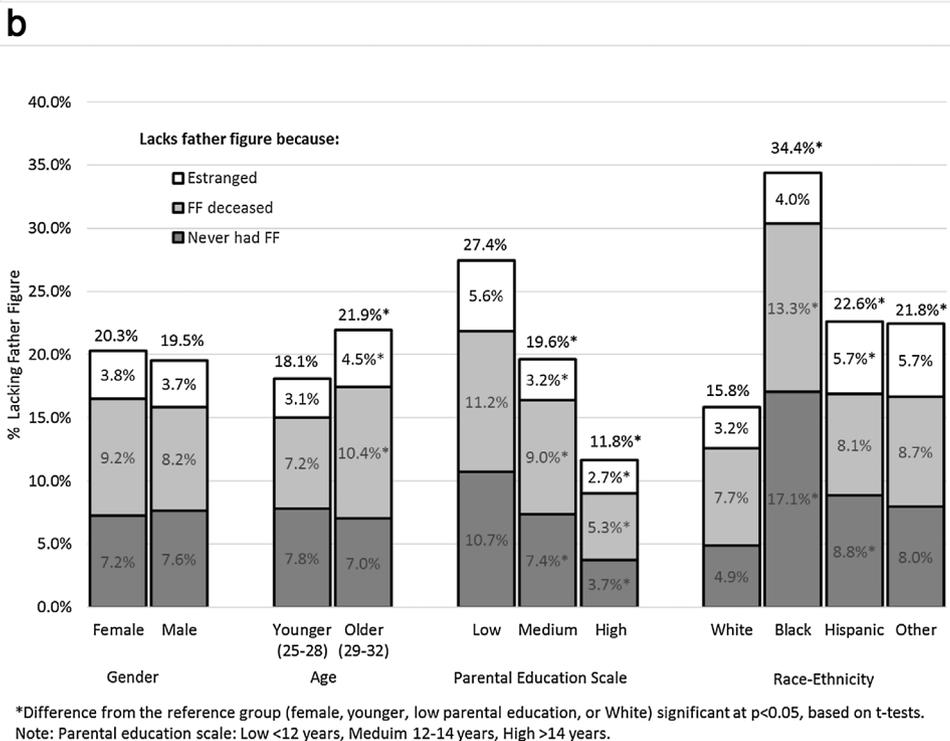


Fig. 1. (a) Pathways to lacking mother figures (%), by selected characteristics. (b) Pathways to lacking father figures (%), by selected characteristics.



differences in the percentage who reported their mother figure was *deceased*: 8.6% for those who are Black, compared to 3.9% for those who are White. Table 3 confirms that these differences exist when controlling for other characteristics.

Fig. 1b presents descriptive results for father figures. Those who were older (ages 29–32) were more likely to lack father figures than those who were younger (ages 25–28). Underlying this differences is the fact that those who were older were both more likely to have a

deceased father figure (10.4% versus 7.2%) and were more likely to be *estranged* from their father figure (4.5% versus 3.1%). The same pattern emerges in the regression results in Table 3.

There were also stark differences by parental education scale. Both Fig. 1b and Table 3 show that those who were higher on the scale were less likely to be missing father figures, via all three pathways (i.e. less likely to report they never had a father figure, less likely to have a deceased father figure, and less likely to be estranged).

Table 3
Lack of Relationship with Mother and Father Figures Regressed on Demographic Characteristics. Odds Ratios from Logistic and Multinomial Logistic Regressions Shown. National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health Wave IV (2008–09).

	Mother Figure (“MF”)		Father Figure (“FF”)	
	OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI
PANEL A: Logistic Regression				
Lacks Relationship ^a (Ref = Has Relationship ^b)				
Male	0.94	[0.72,1.21]	0.95	[0.81,1.12]
Age	1.06	[0.98,1.14]	1.09**	[1.05,1.14]
Parental Education Scale ^c	0.85**	[0.79,0.92]	0.83**	[0.80,0.88]
Race-ethnicity (Ref = White)				
Black	1.58**	[1.17,2.12]	2.57**	[2.13,3.09]
Hispanic	0.93	[0.59,1.48]	1.19	[0.90,1.58]
Other	1.47	[0.88,2.48]	1.49 [†]	[1.07,2.08]
PANEL B: Multinomial Logistic Regression				
Lacks MF/FF relationship because never had MF/FF (Ref = Has Relationship ^b)				
Male	0.99	[0.42,2.34]	1.07	[0.84,1.38]
Age	1.19	[0.88,1.62]	1.00	[0.93,1.07]
Parental Education Scale ^c	0.90	[0.74,1.11]	0.81**	[0.75,0.87]
Race-ethnicity (Ref = White)				
Black	0.26	[0.04,1.68]	4.16**	[3.16,5.47]
Hispanic	0.99	[0.30,3.24]	1.43	[0.92,2.24]
Other	–	–	1.70	[0.99,2.94]
Lacks MF/FF relationship because MF/FF deceased (Ref = Has Relationship ^b)				
Male	0.84	[0.62,1.12]	0.87	[0.70,1.08]
Age	1.06	[0.98,1.16]	1.15**	[1.08,1.22]
Parental Education Scale ^c	0.88**	[0.81,0.95]	0.85**	[0.80,0.91]
Race-ethnicity (Ref = White)				
Black	2.12**	[1.54,2.92]	2.02**	[1.57,2.60]
Hispanic	0.96	[0.55,1.67]	0.90	[0.59,1.38]
Other	1.75	[0.99,3.10]	1.19	[0.75,1.88]
Lacks MF/FF relationship because estranged (Ref = Has Relationship ^b)				
Male	1.53	[0.81,2.91]	0.94	[0.68,1.30]
Age	0.98	[0.81,1.19]	1.16**	[1.06,1.26]
Parental Education Scale ^c	0.73**	[0.60,0.89]	0.85**	[0.77,0.94]
Race-ethnicity (Ref = White)				
Black	0.38	[0.13,1.14]	1.47	[0.95,2.27]
Hispanic	0.76	[0.28,2.09]	1.52	[0.94,2.43]
Other	1.24	[0.36,4.24]	1.88 [†]	[1.01,3.47]

N = 5090.

^a Respondent never had a MF/FF, MF/FF is deceased, or respondent is “estranged” (i.e. there is little or no communication).

^b Has a living mother/father figure and communicates with or visits him/her at least “a few times a year”.

^c Average years of parental education.

Table 4
Relationship Characteristics (Descriptive Statistics), by Estrangement from Mother and Father Figures. National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health Wave IV (2008–09), Weighted.

	Mother figures			Father figures		
	Has Relationship ^a	Estranged ^b	Total	Has Relationship ^a	Estranged ^b	Total
Type of relationship to mother/father figure (%)						
Biological	93.7%	74.9% [*]	93.5%	82.1%	60.4% [*]	81.1%
Adoptive	1.1%	8.5%	1.2%	2.1%	4.3%	2.2%
Step	1.2%	4.2%	1.2%	10.9%	29.6% [*]	11.8%
Grandparent	2.7%	4.1%	2.7%	2.3%	0.4% [*]	2.2%
Other relative	1.0%	6.2%	1.1%	2.1%	1.6% [*]	2.0%
Other non-relative	0.3%	2.1%	0.3%	0.5%	3.7% [*]	0.7%
Did not live with mother/father figure (Wave I) (%)						
Parents separated (Wave I) (%)	42.5%	65.6% [*]	42.8%	35.7%	75.7% [*]	37.5%
Mother/father figure ever incarcerated (%)	0.1%	0.0%	0.1%	8.7%	28.5% [*]	9.6%
N =	4753	47	4800	4035	194	4229

^a Has a living mother/father figure and communicates with or visits him/her at least “a few times a year”.

^b Has a living mother/father figure, but there is little or no communication (communicates and visits either ‘once a year or less’ or ‘never’). Note: Respondents with no living mother figure (n = 289) excluded from “Mother Figure” descriptives; respondents with no living father figure (n = 860) excluded from “Father Figure” descriptives.

^{*} Difference from “Has Relationship” group significant at p < 0.05.

Table 5
Estrangement from Mother and Father Figures Regressed on Relationship Characteristics and Demographic Factors. Odds Ratios from Logistic Regression Analyses Shown. National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health Wave IV (2008–09).

	Model 1 Estranged from Mother Figure		Model 2 Estranged from Father Figure	
	OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI
Type of relationship to mother/father figure (Ref = Biological)				
Adoptive	10.03**	[3.24,31.05]	1.90	[0.77,4.67]
Step	3.28	[0.77,14.02]	1.77**	[1.19,2.64]
Grandparent	1.01	[0.20,5.04]	0.13*	[0.02,0.97]
Other relative	6.20**	[1.83,20.99]	0.40	[0.11,1.45]
Other non-relative	6.58	[0.62,70.35]	4.11**	[1.54,10.99]
Did not live with mother/father figure (Wave I)	1.55	[0.70,3.40]	1.63*	[1.09,2.42]
Parents separated (Wave I)	1.99	[0.84,4.73]	2.97**	[1.80,4.91]
Mother/Father figure ever incarcerated	–	–	3.09**	[2.06,4.65]
N	4800		4229	

Note: The dependent variable = 1 if the respondent is estranged from their mother/father figure (i.e. they have a living mother/father figure, but they communicate or visit either “once a year or less” or “never”). The dependent variable = 0 if the respondent has a relationship with their mother/father figure (i.e. communicates with or visits him/her at least “a few times a year”). Respondents with no living mother figure (n = 289) excluded from Model 1. Respondents with no living father figure (n = 860) excluded from Model 2. Both models control for gender, age, parental education scale, and race-ethnicity.

* p < 0.05.

** p < 0.01.

Differences by race-ethnicity were also pronounced. Black young adults were more likely to be missing father figures than White young adults (34% compared to 16%); in particular due to a greater likelihood of *never having had* a father figure or having a *deceased* father figure. The regression analyses presented in Table 3 indicate that these differences in father figure relationships between Whites and Blacks are statistically significant (at p < 0.05), even when controlling for other factors.

Fig. 1b indicates that Hispanic young adults were also more likely than Whites to be missing a father figure tie (23% versus 16%), largely due to do higher rates of *estrangement* and *never having had* a father figure relationship. However, Table 3 shows that the differences in father figure relationships between Whites and Hispanics were no longer statistically significant (at p < 0.05) when the parental education scale and other characteristics were included in the models.

3.3. Relationship characteristics predicting estrangement

Next, we examined how preexisting characteristics of the parent-child relationship shaped estrangement (i.e. the pathway in which young adults have a living mother/father figure but have little or no contact). Table 4 contains descriptive statistics and Table 5 presents results from multiple regression analyses that address this question. These tables compare estranged young adults to those who have regular contact. Both tables exclude individuals whose mother/father figure had died and those who never had a mother/father figure because most of the predictor variables were not available for these individuals. Table 4 shows that for those who were estranged from mother figures, their mother figure was less likely to be a biological mother, they were more likely to have not lived with their mother figure in adolescence, and their parents were more likely to have been separated/divorced, compared to young adults with active ties to a mother figure. Similarly, the likelihood of being estranged from father figures was associated with the same factors, as well as father's previous incarceration.⁴

Next, we examine these associations using multiple regression. Table 5 presents odds ratios from logistic regressions predicting whether young adults were estranged from mother or father figures (comparing them to those who had regular contact). Model 1 in Table 5 shows that individuals who said their mother figure was an adoptive mother or another relative were more likely to be estranged, compared to those who said their mother figure was their biological mother (though the large coefficient for adoptive mothers is likely inflated due to the small cell size).

For fathers, individuals who listed a stepfather or a male non-relative were more likely to be estranged than those who named their biological father. Consistent with our hypotheses, there was a higher likelihood of father estrangement among those individuals who did not live with their father figure during adolescence, who had experienced their parents separating, or whose father was ever incarcerated.

The importance of parental separation in shaping estrangement warrants some attention. Table 5 indicates that a high proportion of estranged individuals had previously experienced a parental separation. Specifically, 66% of those estranged from mother figures had parents who separated, compared to 43% of those with active mother figure ties (see Table 4). Likewise, 76% of those estranged from father figures had parents who separated, compared to 36% of those with active father figure ties. The first signs of estrangement, therefore, did not emerge between adolescence and young adulthood, but instead tended to be tied to long-term family trajectories, usually involving parental separation in childhood or adolescence. However, it is equally noteworthy that estrangement was a relatively uncommon event even following parental separation: Only 6.5% of young adults whose parents were separated in Wave I reported being estranged from father figures later on (compared to 1.6% whose parents were not separated). The numbers were even smaller for mother figures: 1.6% of young adults whose parents had previously separated are estranged from mother figures, compared to 0.6% whose parents had not separated (data not shown).

4. Discussion

In the twenty-first century, research has documented the supportive roles that parents play in their children's lives during young adulthood (Fingerman, Cheng, Tighe et al., 2012; Johnson, 2013). In fact, young people's prolonged dependence on parents into the early 30s is a defining feature of this stage of life (Cooney & Uhlenberg, 1992; Furstenberg, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2005; Schoeni & Ross, 2005). It is

⁴ A few statistics regarding the subgroups excluded from these analyses are worth mentioning. Of those who reported that they never had a mother figure, 52% had an adult woman in their household in Wave I (29% for fathers). Further, of those whose mother figure was deceased, only 67% reported that person was their biological mother (72% of deceased father figures were biological fathers). Deceased parent figures were disproportionately grandparents.

therefore notable that researchers had not yet documented the prevalence of lacking parental ties.

4.1. Prevalence of lacking parental ties

Findings indicate that 6% of U.S. young adults ages 25–32 lack an active relationship with a mother figure and 20% lack an active relationship with a father figure. Prior research had explored related topics, such as attempting to classify family typologies as detached or uninvolved (Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997; Van Gaalen & Dykstra, 2006), or examining reasons for maternal estrangement in midlife (Gilligan et al., 2015). The current study differs from prior research because it takes a population approach and provides a detailed portrait of lacking parental ties among the current cohort of young adults in the U.S. In addition to possibly having consequences for well-being, the finding that many young adults lack parental ties also has methodological implications. Specifically, researchers should be mindful that those who lack a mother or father figure entirely (due to death, for example) may be excluded from survey questions assessing relationship quality or contact frequency. These adult children may be omitted from research on parent-child relationships, and may therefore be “invisible” in findings regarding the implications of parental support or other aspects of the bond.

4.2. Demographic factors associated with lacking parent figure ties

This study also identified demographic factors associated with the lack of parental ties. Young adults from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (i.e. lower parental education) and those who were Black were more likely to lack parental ties, compared to young adults from higher socioeconomic backgrounds and those who were White. In addition, older respondents were more likely to lack father figures than younger respondents.

We anticipated that males (both fathers and sons) would be more likely to lack parent-child relationships due to their tendency to have weaker and less active kinship ties (Rossi & Rossi, 1990). We did find that this was the case for fathers: all three pathways (i.e. estrangement, parental death, and never having a parent figure) were more common for father figures, compared to mother figures. However, a large majority did have an active relationship with a father figure (80%). Our results also indicate that lacking a mother figure in young adulthood, while not common, is also not rare (6% of young adults). This fact may be underappreciated in the literature, which tends to assume the presence of mother-child ties. Fortunately, only a small fraction of young adults (2.4%) were lacking both mother and father figures.

In addition, although we anticipated that sons would be more likely to lack parental ties than daughters (specifically through the estrangement pathway), we did not find this to be the case. Some recent research has suggested that there are fewer differences between sons and daughters than in the past (Fingerman et al., 2011; Johnson, 2013). The findings presented here show that the gender similarities between sons and daughters also exist for parent-child ties in young adulthood.

Second, examining pathways to lacking parent figures revealed interesting differences by race-ethnicity. Overall, Black young adults were more likely to lack parent figure relationships than their White counterparts, when controlling for parental education (Table 3, Panel A). However, this functioned through certain pathways and not others. Black young adults had approximately twice the odds of lacking mother and father figures due to death compared to Whites, and four times the odds of never having had a father figure (Table 3, Panel B). These findings are consistent with existing research on children and families (Cherlin, 2010; Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008; Umberson et al., 2017), but how these racial disparities play out during the young adult phase had not been explored. In contrast, we found Black young adults were *not* more likely than White young adults to be estranged from mother and father figures or to say they never had a mother figure. This may speak to the strength of the mother-child tie among Black Americans, despite pervasive disadvantages and pressures exerted on Black families (Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 1998; Sutor et al., 2011; Umberson, 1992).

4.3. Relationship characteristics predicting estrangement

We also examined predictors of the estrangement pathway using a broader set of characteristics regarding the parent child tie. Notably, we found that non-biological parent ties appeared to be more prone to estrangement, particularly those with adoptive mothers, step-fathers, more distantly related women (e.g. aunts), and unrelated men. These results echo research findings that non-biological parent ties are not equivalent to biological ones, and non-biological parent ties generally tend to be less protective and less close (Becker, Salzburge, Lois, & Nauck, 2013; Lansford, Ceballo, Abbey, & Stewart, 2001; Loehlin, Horn, & Ernst, 2010). However, prior research was limited to children (in the case of Lansford et al., 2001), older adults (in the case of Loehlin et al., 2010), or contexts outside of the United States (in the case of Becker et al., 2013). Our findings indicate that for U.S. young adults, specifically, non-biological parent figure ties are more prone to estrangement. In addition, we built on prior research by examining estrangement across a wide range of parent figure types, rather than only focusing on step-parents or adoptive parents, for example. We note, however, that the vast majority of non-biological parent ties were not estranged, and thus, future research might examine factors that distinguish non-biological relationships that do become estranged, such as quality of the relationships.

4.4. Limitations and future directions

Limitations of this study warrant consideration in future research. First, we were constrained by the variables present in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. Notably, the series of questions about contact in young adulthood pertained to parent figures (i.e. “the man/woman you feel raised you”). If there were other parent-like figures in the respondent’s life (including biological parents) whom the respondent felt did not meet the criteria for “parent figure,” we were not able to include them because there is no information about whether these respondents had contact with them in Wave IV. Further, we were only able to capture parental separations that occurred by Wave I (not those that took place between Wave I and Wave IV). Third, the set of possible predictors in the data was not comprehensive. For individuals whose parent figure was not the biological parent (but rather a step-parent, grandparent, or other adult), there was little information available from the respondent’s youth. A related concern is that young adults who had two parents of the same sex were limited in their ability to report on these relationships. However, this issue likely only pertains to a small fraction of this cohort (Gates, 2011). Fourth, because Add Health does not ask about estrangement specifically, we had to make a subjective decision about estrangement based on contact frequency

data. If we had been more conservative in our definition of estranged (specifically, not considering contact “once a year or less” to be estranged), the group of young adults estranged from father figures would be half its current size, and the group of young adults estranged from mother figures would be about one-third its current size. In addition, the cell sizes for some of the pathways are small (i.e. there were 47 respondents estranged from mother figures and 27 who never had a mother figure), which may make it difficult to detect differences across groups. Finally, we should note that one caveat of the analysis is that not all relationships with parent figures are positive. There may be cases where a young adult may be better off severing a relationship with a parent figure rather than maintaining it.

Findings from this study also raise important questions for future analyses. A key question is how young adults and their parents explain the lack of contact. Parent-child relationships could be severed for a variety of reasons, and the cutting of ties could be initiated by either the child or the parent, or it could be mutual. Qualitative research has found that people sometimes attribute estrangement to misaligned values or factors such as divorce, loss of income, and incarceration, and the aftermath of these events (Agllias, 2015a; Gilligan et al., 2015). However, existing national surveys do not include direct questions on reasons for estrangement, so we lack representative data that would provide a fuller portrait. Having this type of information could be particularly valuable if it sheds light on which party (if either) suffers more from the lack of contact, and whether contact is likely to resume later on.

Absent a highly involved friend or family member, the disadvantages faced by young adults lacking parental ties are likely to compound in the years that follow. Because of the trend toward higher life expectancies, parents and children usually have many decades during which they can either reap the benefits of positive relationships, or suffer from negative or non-existent ones (Hagestad & Uhlenberg, 2007). These are relationships in which children tend to be the beneficiaries, since support generally flows “downward” from parents to children (Albertini, Kohli, & Vogel, 2007; Hill, 1970). It is possible that some of those who lack contact in young adulthood will regain it later, but the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior, and research has shown substantial continuity in relationships over time (Amato & Booth, 1996; Aquilino, 2006; Sutor, Gilligan, & Pillemer, 2013). The group of individuals that we have identified as not having active parental relationships in young adulthood will likely not have parental help in caring for their children, a financial safety net in times of emergency, or the emotional security that comes from a strong parent-child bond in the decades to come.

Appendix A

Table A1
Relationship with Mother and Father Figures, Including Frequency of Contact, National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health Wave IV (2008–09), Weighted.

	Lacks Relationship			Has Relationship		Total
	...because never had MF/FF	...because MF/FF deceased	...because estranged	A few times per year	Once a month or more	
Contact frequency:	N/A	N/A	Never ^a	Once a year or less		
Mother Figures (“MF”)						
Percentage distribution	0.5%	4.9%	0.4%	0.7%	1.7%	91.8%
N =	27	263	17	30	86	4667
Father Figures (“FF”)						
Percentage distribution	7.4%	8.7%	2.1%	1.7%	5.0%	75.0%
N =	390	471	103	91	251	3784

^a Respondents who did not know whether or not their MF/FF was alive were presumed not to have contact, and thus were included in the ‘Never’ category.

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