RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation
Journal of the Social Sciences

Building an Open Qualitative Science

Part I

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The Russell Sage Foundation

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Building an Open Qualitative Science, Part I

CONTENTS

Listening to the Voices of America

KATHRYN J. EDIN, COREY D. FIELDS, DAVID B. GRUSKY,
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We make the case for building a permanent public-use platform for conducting and analyzing immersive interviews on the everyday lives of Americans. The American Voices Project (AVP)—a widely watched experiment with this new platform—provides important early evidence on its promise. The articles in this issue reveal that, although public-use interview datasets obviously cannot meet all research needs, they do provide new opportunities to study small or hidden populations, new or emerging social problems, reactions to ongoing social crises, submerged values and attitudes, and many other aspects of American life. We conclude that a permanent AVP platform would help build an "open science" form of qualitative research that complements—rather than replaces—the existing very important body of immersive-interviewing research.

Keywords: qualitative, immersive, open science

At the height of the 2008 financial crisis, Queen Elizabeth II asked, "Why did nobody see it coming?" When economist Paul Krugman delivered an address in Lisbon four years later, he owned up to the failure and placed the blame squarely on his discipline. Economists, he asserted, should be "ashamed of their profession" because it had failed to predict, much less coherently explain, one of the key crises of our time—the Great Recession (Krugman 2012).

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This was no small failure. The unemployment rate doubled between December 2007 and October 2009; one-fourth of American families lost at least 75 percent of their wealth over the first four years of the recession; and approximately ten million American households lost their homes over the recession's full course (Pfeffer, Danziger, and Schoeni 2013). "Times of crisis are when economists are most needed," Krugman continued. "If they have no useful advice to offer—the whole enterprise of economic scholarship has failed in its most essential duty."[1]

Do sociology and other social sciences have a crisis-prediction record good enough to meet Krugman's very reasonable standard? It would be hard to argue that they do. In many respects, the story of the twenty-first century is a story of cascading social crises, few of which have been successfully predicted, well monitored, or well understood. As Richard Bookstaber (2023) recently put it, we're entering a new epoch of social crises, a "slow-motion tidal wave of risks" that may even pose an "existential threat to civilization." In a recent *Global Risks Report* (World Economic Forum 2022), 20 percent of surveyed elites expected to see "tipping points," "persistent crisis," and "catastrophic outcomes" in the next decade, a steep increase relative to earlier assessments. Because these crises are often social—as much as economic—in structure, it is important to apply Krugman's challenge more broadly to the social sciences as a whole.

When a broader census of social crises is taken, it quickly becomes clear that there is ample failure to go around, failure that has taken the form of ignoring or dismissing warning signs or underinvesting in relevant monitoring activities. The rise of political extremism—which has reinvigorated White supremacist ideologies, polarized civil society, challenged democratic forms of governance, and eroded trust in many institutions—was largely unpredicted and unanticipated and not well monitored until it was fully upon us. The social effects of the ongoing takeoff in natural disasters are also poorly understood. Across the nation, communities have seen a rapid acceleration of weather-related disasters (costing the economy $165 billion in 2022 alone), yet our capacity to monitor the social fallout from these crises is not well developed (National Centers for Environmental Information 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic, which has so far caused more than 1.3 million excess deaths in the United States (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2023b), revealed that critical real-time or near-time health and economic data were often unavailable, with the result that a host of new monitoring instruments had to be built on the fly (for example, Census Bureau's Household Pulse survey, Kaiser Family Foundation COVID-19 Vaccine Monitor). The ongoing opioid epidemic has now claimed nearly a million lives, but social scientists only detected it well after the carnage began more than two decades ago (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2023a). The ongoing sharpening of geopolitical tensions and Cold War sensibilities has brought on a sharp rise in apocalyptic worldviews, an emerging crisis that has been largely ignored, barely monitored, and remains poorly understood (Davis 2022). A historic decline in fertility—which has left the United States with its lowest total fertility rate ever recorded—is yet another unanticipated and poorly understood crisis (Hamilton 2021). The "loneliness and mental health crisis," which predated the pandemic but accelerated in tandem with it, was likewise in play long before it was diagnosed (Demarinis 2020; Twenge et al. 2021). And, finally, after decades of decline, we've seen a dramatic surge in homicide rates in 2020 and then a gradual decline thereafter (with 2023 rates still above pre-pandemic levels), a development that was not predicted and has triggered a sharp social and political fallout that continues to play out (Arango 2023).

Are we asking too much of social science? We don't think so. Although even the most effective monitoring system may not have predicted the opioid epidemic, it should at least have been able to detect signs that a crisis of this kind was likely to emerge, especially in parts of the country (such as Appalachia) suffering from rising anomie and an epidemic of

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1. "Crises," he emphasized, "are times when economics and economists can and should really prove their worth" (Krugman 2012).

pain. As Paul Krugman said of the Great Recession, "Nobody could realistically have demanded that the economics profession predict that Lehman Brothers would go down on September 15, 2008, and take much of the world economy with it" (2012). But Krugman goes on to note that "What you can criticize economists for . . . is failing even to see that something like this crisis was a fairly likely event" (2012). Even by this relaxed standard, sociologists have likewise often fallen short. Although arguably there were many leading indicators of "something like" a rise in political extremism or "something like" a mental health crisis, the field has not been set up with the infrastructure needed to reliably detect these crises and many others.

The foregoing list of crises also makes it clear that the early prediction problem is hardly our only monitoring problem. We also need real-time monitoring of responses and adaptations to known crises and social developments. Even after a crisis is clearly in play, we still want a monitoring system that captures how the most affected people are coping and making sense of the crisis, how those who are more protected and privileged are interpreting it, and the causes lying behind the crisis. If, for example, our monitoring system failed to predict the rise of political extremism, we might still hope that it would at least provide evidence on how extremists make sense of the movement, how those opposed to extremism interpret it, and the social psychological or behavioral precipitants of an extremist worldview (such as perceived threats to social standing among rural Whites).[2] This after-the-fact monitoring function is of course important not just for crises but also for social processes that develop more gradually into major social problems (such as rising income inequality).

No matter which monitoring task we are considering, either "early prediction" or "after-the-fact," it is clear, then, that the social science record is hardly stellar. If Krugman was hard on

economists, it is surely appropriate for other social scientists to likewise step up and accept some blame. We have evidently been so busy with our own narrow disciplinary concerns that we have forgotten that—at minimum—it is our job to anticipate, monitor, and interpret the many social crises of our time. Just as Krugman lamented that economics has let us down, so too the social sciences as a whole have often failed in one of their essential duties, that of alerting the nation to the most important crises and social developments. Although there is no guarantee that such alerts will be heeded, a core job of social science is to put the evidence on the table so the general public and policymakers can decide how best to react to it. The response to such warnings may well be one of disinterest or prolonged inaction. Even so, our job—as social scientists—is to expose the problems in a timely way, especially as we move into a new polycrisis period that places a premium on swift information-gathering.

The simple purpose of this introduction is to attempt to make some headway in envisioning how the country's monitoring infrastructure could more successfully deliver on this need. We will start by asking why the existing infrastructure for monitoring has fallen short and then consider what is needed to improve it. To foreshadow our argument, we suggest that we need a permanent immersive-interviewing platform that elicits broad, open-ended conversations founded on openness, trust, and honesty. This new platform, which would supplement existing survey-based monitoring, would make it possible to directly listen to Americans at regular intervals, thereby accessing their interpretations, their sentiments, and their responses to ongoing crises.

The case for setting up such a platform does not rest exclusively on the need to detect new crises and monitor responses to known ones. Although we have stressed to this point the growing importance of crisis monitoring, it is no less important to carry out everyday moni-

2. There are of course many social scientists who have engaged in after-the-fact interpretations of political extremism. See, for example, Arlie Hochschild, *Strangers in their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (2026); Katherine J. Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker* (2016). We are not suggesting that such after-the-fact monitoring does not happen but only that a richer trove of real-time data would assist in carrying out that type of monitoring.

toring of key attitudes and behaviors that evolve under the force of long-standing social and institutional processes (such as rationalization, marketization, individualization, othering) as much as sudden crises. We will show that a public immersive-interviewing platform can meet this need as well by allowing for ongoing real-time analysis of a shared, large-N, nationally representative dataset. It goes without saying that this new platform would never replace—but only complement—existing research traditions based on other very valuable research methods (administrative data, surveys, social media, qualitative journalism, and individualized immersive interviewing).

THE EXISTING MONITORING INFRASTRUCTURE

Before describing this new platform in more detail, it is useful to take stock of our extant monitoring system based on surveys and administrative data, social media content, qualitative journalism, and conventional forms of immersive interviewing. Although each of these approaches plays an important and irreplaceable role in our monitoring infrastructure, we will show that none of them ensures that the voices of all Americans are reliably monitored and analyzed in real time.

Real-Time Monitoring via Surveys and Administrative Data

If asked how the pulse of the American people is taken, most people would point to federally funded cross-sectional and panel surveys (such as the General Social Survey [GSS], the Current Population Survey, the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, and the National Health Interview Survey); surveys funded by philanthropic organizations and nonprofits (such as the Pew Research Center and Kaiser Family Foundation surveys); administrative data (such as tax records, educational records, and safety net program data); and key Census Bureau products (such as the decennial census, the American Community Surveys, County Business Patterns, and Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates). These types of surveys and administrative data products are indeed critical for monitoring purposes. We use them to monitor unemployment, poverty, income inequality, educational access, safety net use, incarceration, consumer behavior, health outcomes, social and political attitudes, and much more. Although work is ongoing to improve this infrastructure (via improved data linkage, new survey products, and more), no one would dispute that our constellation of survey and administrative products, when taken together, constitute one of the world's premier quantitative monitoring systems.

But this infrastructure also has its limitations. The capacity to detect what is happening on the ground via surveys and administrative data rests on the assumption that survey designers know which questions to ask; that the items on administrative instruments, which have been designed to meet narrow organizational agendas, can be successfully repurposed for other agendas; that survey takers will consent to participate and that selectivity in providing consent is minimal; that respondents can or will provide accurate responses; that closed-ended responses suffice to capture all that needs to be known; that we have the requisite budget and organizational capacity to add new items frequently, to collect data frequently, and to release it to analysts in real time; and that funders can be convinced that the proposed survey is sufficiently valuable. Because some of these assumptions will not be met (and perhaps never can be), it is hardly surprising that social scientists have often failed to detect crises in a timely way or to lend critical insights into them quickly enough to inform the immediate policy response. The existing infrastructure places impossible demands on survey designers, survey respondents, and repurposed administrative instruments and thus leaves a boatload of dark matter that is simply not amenable to the forced-choice survey, at least not in its current incarnation.

It is possible, to be sure, that we will eventually get better at identifying and incorporating key survey variables and ultimately explain the social world more satisfactorily within the confines of the survey tradition. But that is an exceedingly long-term proposition that will not help us get the job done now. In our crisis-laden century, there is arguably an imperative to improve our monitoring infrastructure in

the short term, and it seems unlikely that doubling down on the survey form alone will suffice.

Real-Time Monitoring via Social Media Platforms

This is all to suggest that, insofar as our monitoring relies on the closed-ended survey, we are making a big bet that social scientists are prescient enough to know what types of dark matter should be exposed and thus what questions to ask, seemingly a big ask in a polycrisis environment that could engender relatively rapid changes in sentiments and behaviors. This leads us to ask whether the still-burgeoning stream of social media monitoring can solve this problem. It might be thought, after all, that the open-endedness of platform-based expression (Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, Reddit, X) nicely eliminates the need for the prescient social scientist and thus makes for an increasingly useful monitoring instrument in the twenty-first century.

Given how much time is now spent on social media platforms (Perrin and Atske 2021), no one can dispute the importance of understanding what is happening on them. Although platform-monitoring research is thus immensely useful, it is nonetheless difficult to harness for monitoring trends in everyday attitudes and behaviors. This is because such research can only provide evidence on the highly culled sample that contributes to a particular platform (the selection problem), cannot always distinguish human from nonhuman participation (bots, AI-generated content), can only reveal how the participating subpopulation reacts to the primes embedded in the structure of the platform and the user's idiosyncratic feed (the priming problem), cannot be assumed to reveal the equally important constellation of attitudes and behaviors that are evoked off platforms (the generalization problem), and raises ethical concerns that have not yet been fully resolved for panopticon-style monitoring and many other forms. The selection problem is in fact deeper than it appears because many platform users are mere lurkers who never contribute data and thus engender yet another form of missing data (McClain et al. 2021). The priming problem is also

deeply problematic for monitoring because users are exposed to a rapidly changing environment of feeds (with the nature of these changes also differing across users). Although it is possible that one could statistically control for such priming effects, the task is dicey given the very complicated changes in platform environments across users and over time. The generalizability problem refers to an even more fundamental priming effect that is likely insurmountable without substantial side evidence on offline life (Gonzalez-Bailon 2023). The obvious problem here is that we simply cannot know whether online discussions are sufficient without also knowing what is happening offline. These various challenges, taken together, make it difficult to rely exclusively on social media analyses for gauging trends in racial or gender animus, bullying and assault, toxic political beliefs, social isolation and estrangement, meaninglessness and anomie, social deprivation, and all manner of other key attitudes or behaviors.

This is not to deny in any way the importance of monitoring platform behavior. Because many people spend substantial time on social media platforms, we surely need to know what is happening on them. But we also need tools that solve the selectivity problem by listening to the voices of those who are and are not active on platforms, that solve the priming problem by delivering a controlled prime that is tuned for the research purpose at hand, and that solve the generalizability problem by examining offline as well as online behavior. We will show that a public immersive-interviewing platform can make some headway on each of these problems.

Real-Time Monitoring via Qualitative Journalism

The third prong of our monitoring infrastructure—qualitative journalism—has increasingly taken on monitoring functions that surveys or social media can't easily handle. Because social media analyses mainly speak to online behavior, and because survey and administrative data often lack depth and cannot easily be analyzed in real time, qualitative journalism has come to play a critical—if largely unacknowledged—role in our current monitoring infrastructure.

This turn to qualitative journalism was nicely illustrated during the early months of the pandemic. Were people lonely during the early shelter-in-place orders? We turned to journalism to find out (Halpert 2020). What was behind the so-called Great Resignation? We turned to journalism to understand it (Gelles 2022). How were Americans talking about race and racism as the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests took hold? We read the immersive interviews that journalists provided to learn more (Issawi 2020). How did essential workers handle the risks that were suddenly thrust upon them? Journalists again gave us the early answers (Ward 2020; Sharp 2020; Greenhouse 2020). In all these cases, social scientists eventually waded in and provided important scholarship, but only after millions of readers—including employers, public intellectuals, politicians, and other leaders—had their views shaped by the early qualitative evidence that only journalism was providing. It is in this critical sense that we already have a real-time monitoring infrastructure that shapes our early policy response. The obvious danger here is that we often act on this information without knowing how accurate it is.

Although the United States has increasingly turned to qualitative journalism for real-time monitoring, it has done so partly because it has nowhere else to turn. It would be hard to argue, after all, that the evidentiary foundation of qualitative journalism (sometimes comprising as few as two to three interviews) is sufficient to the task, a conclusion that should not surprise given that journalism was never set up to meet the evidentiary standards of science. It does not have the infrastructure or funding models that support large-N analysis, probability sampling, and that all-critical capacity to sort out competing accounts via sustained secondary analysis. It also does not have the normative guardrails that are fine tuned for scientific objectives. The concept of reproducibility within journalism is, for example, wholly incommensurable with the scientific understanding of that concept. When journalists refer to reproducibility, they are invoking the assurance that, if the specific informants featured in the article were reinterviewed, they would confirm that they were correctly quoted and that the quoted material was consistent with their experiences. This formulation does not deliver the assurances that are needed for high-quality monitoring. If we are to monitor well, the key question is not whether the interviewees were correctly quoted (although obviously that is a necessary condition for good science), but whether they are representative of the group being described and can therefore be used to characterize that group. This scientific concept of reproducibility is hardly an esoteric one. Even everyday readers of qualitative journalism are typically interested in the central tendency and almost certainly treat the provided quotes as representing just that (unless the quoted people are famous and of intrinsic interest in themselves).

This is all to stress that, because journalism is set up to deliver on the journalistic mission and responds to incentives that are not fine-tuned to the needs of science, it cannot necessarily be counted on to deliver fully on the real-time monitoring function. The core job of journalism is to report on current events, to deliver opinions and interpretations, and to hold power accountable. It is wrong to criticize it for failing to carry out science-based monitoring when doing so is hardly its job and when another institution—social science—has that job as its explicit charge.

Real-Time Monitoring via Scholar-Driven Immersive Interviewing

The immersive interviewing carried out within academic social science is a critical fourth prong of our monitoring infrastructure. This academic tradition of immersive interviewing has been built out quite systematically and, as a result, overcomes many of the problems that emerge within its journalistic version. As a social science method, the immersive interview offers the opportunity to capture rich information on how people think, feel, and act (as described in their words), all of which are key assets in detecting new crises and monitoring responses to existing ones. Because it is such a powerful method, it is taking off in all social science fields, even the social-science-adjacent fields of psychology and management (see fig-

Figure 1. Proportion of Articles Using Qualitative Interviews
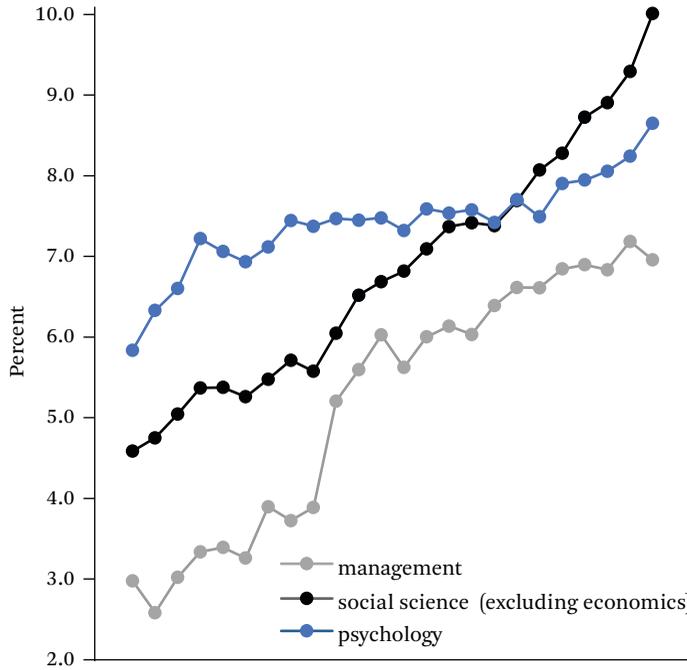
Source: Authors' tabulation based on Thelwall and Nevill 2021.

ure 1).[3] As sociologists Mario Small and Jessica Calarco (2022) recently concluded, the "importance of interview. . . methods to social science, and to society, is not in question."

Although few, we suspect, would challenge this conclusion, this does not imply that immersive-interviewing research has fully delivered on all the many objectives to which it can be put. It has fallen short, in particular, for purposes of real-time monitoring because it is not typically built on a repeated cross-section design that makes it possible to benchmark change against a known baseline, not always based on samples that are large enough to reach reliable conclusions about the population of interest, and not typically based on samples that are representative of the population of interest. We appreciate that these methodological strictures are not relevant for all the various types of immersive-interviewing research in play. Moreover, even when the re-

searcher's objective is to monitor trends, it is entirely possible that small nonprobability samples will pick up the trend of interest. It is hard not to be impressed by many notable successes of this sort (Edin and Shaefer 2015; Desmond 2017). The core problem, however, is that in the heat of the moment (such as a cascading crisis) we will just never know whether a small nonprobability sample is in fact delivering. If much is at stake in getting it right, we are therefore well advised to carry out complementary studies that rest on a comparable benchmark from the past, a sample size large enough to make it unlikely that sampling variability is driving the apparent trend, and a sampling design that ensures that an artifactual trend has not been generated by changes in the processes by which respondents are selected into the sample.

It is costly to meet these standards. To date, neither the government nor the country's main

3. Although the proportion of economics research that relies exclusively on immersive interviewing is still relatively low, it is becoming more common for economists to include an immersive interview component in studies that are primarily quantitative (see Thelwall and Nevill 2021; Bergman et al. 2020).

philanthropic foundations have been prepared to fund immersive-interviewing research at anything approaching the amounts that currently go to fielding quantitative surveys, building quantitative administrative datasets, or supporting big quantitative research teams. Because immersive interviewing does not typically have access to this level of funding, it continues to take a do-it-yourself individualized form that produces myriad small-scale, unrepresentative, single-use data sets that are privately owned. Under this individualized form, each researcher collects their own dataset tailored to the research question they are taking on, a style of research that has been immensely productive but makes benchmarking, trend analysis, and comparison harder to undertake.

The long-standing presumption has been that immersive interviewing is intrinsically a small-scale individualized operation and that it has remained as such not because it has been starved of funding but because it is well suited for that mode of production. This presumption has never been put to the test because the research field has not been given access to the funding needed to allow for experimentation with other modes of production. The swift ramp-up in public funding for the social sciences privileged quantitative work because, unlike qualitative work, it had the "look and feel" of the natural sciences (Solovey 2020). Fueled by the resulting expansion in funding, quantitative scholarship shifted out of the small-scale individualized mode of production (in which individual scholars were responsible for collecting their own private-use datasets), and the multidomain (omnibus) public-use survey became a go-to source for quantitative scholars in many fields. These new datasets were much larger than their predecessors, relied heavily on new methods of probability sampling, and made it possible for researchers to hand over the task of data gathering to specialist data collectors in government or other professionalized research firms. The key point here is that the very same transition out of this individualized small-scale mode of production could not possibly have happened within the qualitative field because the requisite funding was not made available to a field that was derogated as unsystematic and unscientific.

Because qualitative research remains under-resourced to this day (and especially so relative to its impact), most qualitative scholars accordingly have little choice but to resort to small nonprobability samples, even when they are attempting to monitor trends in ways that might require larger representative samples.[4] As a result, we simply do not know whether the field would benefit, as has the quantitative field, from developing big public-use datasets that stand alongside the existing individualized research mode. The purpose of the American Voices Project, to which we now turn, was to undertake just that experiment.

THE EXPERIMENTAL AVP

To this point, we have argued that the country's current infrastructure is not always getting the monitoring job done, given the threefold problem that survey and administrative data do not capture the dark matter of our lives, that the variegated primes delivered within social platforms likewise are not fine-tuned to uncover this dark matter, and that existing immersive interviewing within journalism or academia—both of which have the capacity in principle to unlock that dark matter—have been harnessed to modes of production (journalism, small-scale academic projects) that are not funded or organized in ways that always allow them to deliver fully on that capacity. To take on these problems, David Grusky and Kathryn Edin (along with several thought partners) came together some ten years ago to begin planning what would become the American Voices Project. Although they envisioned a public dataset modeled after the GSS, the AVP would allow researchers to hear directly from the American people in their own words, thus unlocking the dark matter.

To reduce costs, their plan was initially very modest. It entailed using survey and administrative data to identify the key types of communities across the country and to then choose one community of each type for immersive in-

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4. It should be stressed that many qualitative researchers are uninterested in generalizing to a known population (see Small and Colarco 2022; DeLuca 2022).

terviewing. In 2015, at a meeting at the Russell Sage Foundation with leading academics and potential funders, economist Greg Duncan challenged the AVP team to think bigger. What was needed, he said, was a large, representative study where all Americans—not just those within the exemplar communities—had an equal chance of being heard. Following the model of the GSS, we then embraced the vision of creating a permanent platform that was based on a probability sample, that oversampled low-income Americans (because they lack the money, power, and networks to be adequately heard), and that would be open to secondary analysis.

In 2016, a distinguished group of quantitative and qualitative scholars came together to fulfill this vision, with plans to launch an experimental immersive-interviewing platform (the experimental AVP) funded by many of the country's top foundations and supported (via key staff infrastructure) by a coalition of Federal Reserve Banks (Alexander et al. 2017). After two years of piloting in seven communities across the nation, the AVP was fielded from 2019 to 2022 as the country's first qualitative data-collection effort that was nationally representative, large-scale (2,700 interviews), and multiple-domain (omnibus). Based on its signature tell-me-the-story-of-your-life prompts (with semi-structured probes), the AVP would, it was hoped, engender the deep listening that could provide evidence on the everyday experiences, thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of a representative sample of Americans. The main objectives were to collect new types of data on the social scientific issues of the day, to explore the feasibility of establishing a permanent AVP platform, and to examine whether this platform might address some of the problems with using current immersive-interviewing research for purposes of real-time monitoring.

Just as the GSS, for example, seeks to cover a host of life domains, so too the AVP was conceived from the start as an omnibus study. After delivering the tell-me-the-story-of-your-life prompt, the AVP probed on a broad range of life domains via open-ended, nonjudgmental

questions. It addressed such topics as the rhythm and routine of everyday life in the family, neighborhood, and workplace; employment, earnings, and job search; household spending and consumption practices; health and health care of family members; experiences with schooling and childcare; mental health, drug use, anxiety, and stress; parenting, family conflict and trauma, and family support; views on religion and meaning in life; political views and voting behavior; and attitudes about race, racism, social class, and inequality. The prompts also yielded detailed information about expenditures and income, including resources gleaned from cash and in-kind social programs (which notoriously suffer from underreporting problems in surveys), informal sources of income, and other ways of making ends meet.[5] Although the core tell-me-the-story protocol was abstract enough to capture a host of possible and often difficult-to-anticipate reactions to systemic challenges, the AVP additionally included several special modules that made it possible to garner unstructured reactions to prominent current events (for example, prompts about the COVID-19 pandemic, the Black Lives Matter movement, the storming of the Capitol, anti-vaccination attitudes).

These tell-me-the-story prompts, which were delivered holistically as part of an engaging conversation lasting approximately ninety minutes, were followed up with a request to link to past, present, and future administrative data. In the experimental AVP, 82 percent of all respondents consented to such linkages, a rate consistent with that secured in other studies. The resulting linkages, in conjunction with short follow-up surveys (delivered via text message), make it possible to convert each round of the AVP into a panel at relatively low cost. The AVP study then concluded with a short survey ascertaining demographic data and other well-validated survey staples (such as health, mental health, stress and anxiety, political views, perceived social standing, trust, experiences with discrimination).

When the AVP initially went to field in the summer of 2019, all interviews were conducted

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5. Interviewers were instructed to continue probing until expenditures and income were reconciled to within $50, a method pioneered by Kathryn Edin and Laura Lein (1997).

in person, with teams of interviewers moving across sites. After the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, the protocol was retooled for remote interviewing, and remote fieldwork resumed after a short hiatus. This pandemic-induced retooling obliged the AVP team to develop innovative techniques for remote interviewing that maintained the quality of face-to-face interviewing. These new techniques, which also brought substantial cost savings, are now being further developed as we plan for a permanent AVP platform.

THE ANTICIPATED PAYOFF

We turn now to discussing some of the research benefits coming out of the experimental AVP. It is important to do so because a permanent immersive-interviewing platform is costly and should of course only be built insofar as the research payoff is accordingly substantial. We begin by laying out some of the research benefits that had been anticipated by the AVP team and then examine whether these benefits have been realized by the contributors to this issue as well as other early AVP researchers.

Improved Monitoring

At the start of this essay, we stressed the need to build a better monitoring infrastructure, a twofold task that entails increasing the country's capacity to detect early signs of emerging crises (the discovery objective), and increasing the country's capacity to monitor how people are reacting to and coping with known crises and other rapidly developing social processes (the coping objective). Because we have already discussed these two related objectives in some detail, all that needs to be noted at this point is that the AVP protocol was explicitly designed to deliver on each of them. The tell-me-the-story prompts open windows of discussion across a host of life domains (such as work, religion, family formation, politics, health) that provide rich opportunities for discovery. At the same time, these prompts provide opportunities to understand how respondents are coping with known crises, given that they directly reference life domains and activities that would presumably be affected by most any crisis (loss of work, health challenges, loss of income). To provide further evidence on coping

behaviors, the AVP protocol was periodically revised to include new prompts that directly referenced important new developments while it was being fielded. Because the AVP was fielded at a time when many crises played out, there is ample opportunity to assess its value in understanding how people cope with them.

Supporting Cumulative Science

We have emphasized the value of the AVP for real-time monitoring because its large-*N*, representative, public-use design is especially advantageous for monitoring. But many other types of immersive-interviewing research could benefit from a public-use dataset. The AVP should be helpful, for example, in developing a cumulative form of qualitative research oriented to assessing and extending existing findings coming out of immersive-interviewing and other methodological traditions. This work is important to undertake because some of the most influential research in the immersive-interviewing field has been based on small or unrepresentative samples and could benefit from the follow-up analysis that the AVP makes possible.

The value of public-use datasets—within qualitative and quantitative fields alike—is that they provide researchers with a common test bed and data resource that allows for cumulation within a defined data zone. Because this zone covers core institutions (work, family, politics, religion, neighborhoods, health), a strong case can be made for focusing a stream of research on them. Although there is inevitably contestation about what constitutes the core, the virtue of undertaking this process is that it carves out a zone in which cumulation can happen. It generates a concentration of scholarship on core topics, the opportunity to carry out secondary analyses, and ultimately the capacity to yield consensus findings that then become the basis of cumulative science and policy. The foregoing is of course a long-run process, but our hope is that the initial round of experimental AVP analyses (which are partially represented in this issue) will open lines of inquiry that at least hold promise of generating cumulation of this sort.

The simple goal, then, was to expand the

footprint of immersive-interviewing research by complementing the existing very successful form with a new defined data zone in which cumulative research is supported. This new form is in no way a substitute for the existing form; that is, just as the GSS's defined data zone can never replace all the critical quantitative work occurring outside it, so too the AVP's defined data zone is but a small complement to the vast amount of critical immersive-interviewing research occurring outside it.

Enabling Discovery

It was hoped that this cumulation would occur in conjunction with a parallel stream of discovery research oriented to generating new hypotheses. The latter line of work entails mining the AVP data for discoveries, not just discoveries that take the form of early warning signs of emerging crises (as we have stressed to this point), but also all manner of other discoveries within the various life domains that the AVP protocol covers. The simple point here is that such discovery work will likely be more successful when samples are large, when they are representative of the groups of interest, and when the underlying data are available for secondary analysis and can therefore be contested and extended.[6]

The extent to which AVP data can indeed generate high-quality discoveries of this sort is open to question. When a division of labor is installed between data collectors and data analyzers (as is the case with all public-use datasets), it means that the analysts are no longer directly participating in the interviews and therefore cannot engage in follow-up exchanges that allow them to pursue promising leads or to address pressing unresolved questions. The AVP trial analyses provide invaluable information on the types of research for which such follow-up exchanges are or are not critical. If we find that public-use datasets can generate high-quality scholarship for a wide range of research questions, it will reduce entry costs into the field and open up new opportunities for students, journalists, and scholars who cannot secure the release time or research support to build their own datasets.

The Payoff to Omnibus Datasets

The defining feature of conventional immersive-interviewing research is a circumscribed division of labor in which a single scholar (sometimes running a small team of research assistants) is responsible for study design, data collection, and data analysis. Under this mode of production, data are typically collected for a single targeted study topic, as no institutionalized mechanism for data sharing or pooled data collection is available (in ways that would yield, for example, an omnibus dataset). The field thus ends up with a host of narrowly siloed and incommensurable datasets that are each tailored to a single research question. Because this approach has, as we have already stressed, yielded a long stream of highly successful studies, no one should question its value or the importance of continuing to build and support it in its current form. The premise of the AVP is simply that this very successful research stream should be complemented with a parallel form of analysis that exploits the multiple-domain data coming out of an omnibus instrument. It is hard to justify the convention that public and philanthropic funding should only be provided for quantitative omnibus datasets.

Why are omnibus datasets, such as the AVP, likely to be valuable within the immersive-interviewing field? It's not just that pooling data-collection efforts via omnibus studies is more efficient and reduces overall demand on respondents. Even more important, the key research case for an omnibus dataset is that, because information on many life domains (family, education, work, religion, politics) is simultaneously available, new opportunities are opened to make unforeseen cross-domain connections and discoveries. This omnibus opportunity is precisely why the NSF-funded General Social Survey (and similarly comprehen-

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6. Although some immersive-interview researchers are able to secure the grants needed to collect large representative samples (and to make their data available for secondary analysis), such funding has typically been in very short supply. It is much more common, therefore, for immersive-interview scholars to work within an individualized mode of production that limits the opportunity to collect either a large sample or a probability sample.

sive quantitative datasets funded by other government agencies) have been so successful and have spawned so much breakthrough research. By collecting hundreds of quantitative variables spanning many domains, these datasets have enabled discoveries that were never intended, envisioned, or mandated by the data collectors themselves. The AVP adopts the same omnibus logic as the GSS but applies it by collecting cross-domain narratives rather than cross-domain variables.

The presumption, then, is that just as GSS researchers bring together variables from multiple domains in unanticipated ways, so too AVP scholars will be able to make productive cross-domain connections that lead to important discoveries. Do early traumas leave an imprint across many life domains? Are political extremists (populists) distinctive in an across-the-board fashion that shows up in their family life, religious life, work life, and neighborhood life? Are the lifestyles of social class members likewise distinctive in this across-the-board sense? Or are they instead very heterogeneous because of intersections with other identities? Are workplace decisions deeply affected by events in other life domains (family, religion, politics)? The AVP should make it possible to approach these types of bread-and-butter questions in new and productive ways. Because the AVP corpus of text is relatively large, it will often be useful to approach these questions with machine learning and natural language processing.

Understanding Hidden Populations

The voices of people who are derogated or stigmatized, excluded from mainstream society, or othered in some way are largely unheard and almost always unheeded. The qualitative research tradition has long been committed to studying just such hidden populations and thereby giving voice to those who are voiceless. This work is invaluable. Because it is very costly to study hidden populations, it has not always been possible, however, for qualitative re-

searchers to deliver fully on their commitment to learn from those who have been marginalized. As sociologist Stefanie DeLuca (2022) notes, this representativeness problem has taken two forms: the voices of subpopulations that are expensive to sample are less frequently heard, and the voices of subpopulations that tend to fall into convenience samples are too frequently heard. The former problem means, for example, that there are many more studies of people in the urban North than in the Deep South (given that the urban North has more universities and is therefore easier and cheaper to access), whereas the latter means that even within the urban North there are too many interviews of people who are living very close to universities and thereby prone to falling into the convenience samples of the university's qualitative researchers.

The AVP, because it implicitly shares costs across many users, can bear the high cost of interviewing difficult-to-reach populations and thus help overcome these problems.[7] In the typical small-scale research form, each study typically operates under a stringent budget, given that the interviews will only be used once. With a public-use dataset, the large number of users renders a more expansive budget justifiable (from the point of view of government or philanthropic funders), thus making it possible to increase the sample size, pay the premium for probability sampling, and thereby access small and difficult-to-reach populations. This capacity to listen to rarely heard voices may well be one of the most important payoffs to the AVP.

THE ACTUAL PAYOFF

Given this setup and overview, we can now review the analyses that have thus far come out of the AVP. The AVP data have been analyzed in an initial round of crisis monitoring reports covering the pandemic as it unfolded, a second tranche of analyses that are appearing now in this issue, and a third overflow tranche that was opened to meet the substantial demand

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7. The AVP sample was originally designed to represent the unhoused population and people residing on Native lands. These plans had to be abandoned when the pandemic broke out because it was difficult to reach these populations with a remote interviewing protocol. The AVP leadership team is pursuing opportunities to incorporate these populations now.

that could not be met via our partnership with the Russell Sage Foundation. These three experimental rounds of analysis were undertaken in hopes that they will help the AVP team finalize the dissemination process for the full public release of the experimental AVP. Because this preparatory work was pressing, the AVP team proceeded with these experimental releases before all interviews were completed and transcribed, before all variables were cleaned and available, and before the administrative data linkages and follow-up surveys were available. This means that the analytic samples were often small and that the data needed for many important types of analysis were not yet available. The analyses discussed here should therefore be understood as a small and incomplete subset of those that will ultimately be possible.

The researchers featured in this issue were the very first to test the secure server environment that the AVP team is building for future high-volume public use. To protect the confidentiality of AVP interviewees, all analyses had to be completed within this secure environment, and interviews were only made available after redacting identifying data (such as names, addresses, and employers). The articles themselves were released only after they passed disclosure avoidance review (that resulted in further redactions, suppression of small cell sizes, and other confidentiality-protecting interventions). These protections did of course slow down the analyses and subsequent review process. We are working to streamline our processes by drawing on ongoing efforts by the Census Bureau and leading survey firms to improve protocols for deidentification, noise-infusion, and disclosure avoidance review (Pascale et al. 2020).[8]

Monitoring in a Crisis Economy

It is fitting to start with the AVP's monitoring analyses given that, from the outset, the AVP has been conceived as a resource for real-time monitoring. As an initial test of its monitoring capacity, we completed an experimental series of crisis monitoring reports based on analyses of the AVP interviews in the midst of the pandemic, an initiative that was funded in part by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. During this critical period in history, the AVP's intrepid team of interviewers was invaluable, often serving as interviewers by day and report-writers by night. The key research objective for these reports was to provide an ongoing, direct, real-time window into the voices of the people as one crisis after another coursed through the country. The resulting reports were among the first to identify how people reacted to being isolated and alone at home, to the loss of jobs and the ramp-up of pandemic relief, to the stark increase in health inequalities, to the new class divide between face-to-face and remote work, to the burgeoning Black Lives Matter movement, to the storming of the Capitol, and to the vaccine rollout (Mattingly et al. 2021; Coleman et al. 2022; Freese, Johnson, and Garcia 2021; Grusky et al. 2021; Jackson et al. 2021; Fields et al. 2022).

Although we will not review these reports in any detail, it bears stressing that sometimes their portrait of everyday life resonated with the conventional journalism of the period and sometimes it did not. We should not treat reports that are wholly consistent with journalistic accounts as any less valuable. Because the immersive interviewing within journalism often informs the country's early policy response (despite being based on small or unrepresentative samples), it is important to undertake this testing even when it simply shows that journalism got it right. It is also important, whenever it proves necessary, to use the AVP to revise and extend the accounts coming out of conventional journalism. The reports served this function as well. As but one illustration, it is useful to consider the extensive journalistic treatment of the BLM movement, a treatment that often featured widespread optimism about opportunities for "significant, sustained, and widespread change" (Buchanon, Bui, and Patel 2020). In a crisis report authored by Corey Fields, Rahsaan Mahadeo, Lisa Hummel, and Sara Moore, a core finding was that discussions of systemic change were not as prominent as

we might think, indeed even the most liberal White respondents were not typically focused on it. To the contrary, they tended to focus on issues of personal growth and awareness, with the objective of understanding and coming to terms with their own privilege. For liberal White respondents, the BLM movement was principally an opportunity to recognize and talk about their privilege, but not so much an opportunity to consider in any fulsome way the institutional changes that might reduce that privilege. By contrast, Black respondents viewed the protests of 2020 as a mandate to move beyond such therapeutic projects to concrete reform, institutional change, and restitution. The report concludes, "Although the ways in which Black and white people talk about race has long differed, the protests of 2020 may accordingly be seen as a wedge event that sharpened this conversational divide" (Fields et al. 2022). Elsewhere, we return to the implications of this divide, but for now we simply want to stress that our real-time analyses helped us better understand what is happening on the ground as different groups came to terms with social change in different ways.

The second tranche of experimental AVP articles (those appearing in this issue) allow us to examine the payoff to crisis monitoring when it takes a slow science—rather than real-time—form. Although the Russell Sage Foundation call welcomed research on all topics, a great many applicants proposed to consider whether conventional survey research, social media monitoring, or journalistic reporting on pandemic society had missed important developments. We did not select too many proposals of this sort because the crisis-monitoring reports already filled this niche and because the window for real-time monitoring had largely passed (given that the AVP data-collection period had ended). We did, however, select some crisis-monitoring proposals to garner additional evidence on the payoff to building a permanent immersive-interviewing platform.

Did these articles bear fruit? In addressing this question, it is useful to begin with the article by Kyle Fee, Sloane Kaiser, and Keith Wardrip (2024, this volume, issue 4; "Catching Up and Coping in the COVID Economy"), a nicely ambitious effort to understand the econ-

omy in the midst of the pandemic. The setup for this article is the many competing narratives about how low-income households were faring in the pandemic. Whereas some commentators have argued that pandemic relief programs restored low-income households to a "firm financial footing," others have highlighted the "financial distress that persisted in spite of these programs." As the authors point out, it has been difficult to adjudicate between these competing accounts using administrative data, given that what is truly dispositive is not so much the objective circumstances of households as their reactions to and interpretations of those circumstances. The AVP data are accordingly well suited to add to the discussion. Although the authors note that much of what they found aligns with research based on surveys or administrative data, they also emphasized that this research has not sufficiently appreciated the "acute financial difficulties" that the pandemic engendered. To make ends meet, low-income households struggled in a host of ways (such as taking on debt, borrowing from family or friends), but most prominently by turning to the gig economy and older informal-economy forms (babysitting, fixing appliances, selling handmade goods). These struggles to make ends meet led to "heightened levels of stress, worry, and anxiety" that "challenge the broader notion of households on firm financial footing as a result of the pandemic relief programs." The authors conclude that a permanent immersive-interviewing platform would be a "powerful complement to the growing suite of real-time quantitative data" on the economy.

The other two articles in this section provide a complementary portrait of a pandemic economy that has generated more distress than has typically been appreciated. In the article "Some Surviving, Others Thriving," by Catherine Thomas, Michael Schwalbe, Macario Garcia, Geoffrey Cohen, and Hazel Rose Markus (2024; this volume, issue 4), we learn that a large swath of structurally disadvantaged Americans was mostly "just surviving," given that they were dealing with "major life chaos" because of health and financial problems. Although they tried to cope with this chaos via "persistent high effort and emotional restraint," the

authors worry that the American cultural imperative to avoid the negative and seek the positive conceals the extent to which people were being pushed to the breaking point. Because the AVP's interviewers were trained to cultivate open and trusting conversations, they were sometimes able to break through this silver lining imperative, often finding that underneath it lies more discontent and distress than has been appreciated. This distress frequently arises because many people feel that their financial and life challenges are not respected, appreciated, or even seen by others and that they are therefore struggling all alone. The third article in this section—authored by Theresa Rocha Beardall, Collin Mueller, and Tony Cheng (2024; this volume, issue 4)—shows that crisis-induced inequalities are further magnified because many groups face profound administrative burdens when engaging with the high bureaucracy of contemporary U.S. society ("Intersectional Burdens"). This burden takes the form, for example, of struggling to figure out how to make a doctor's appointment, to restore or maintain program benefits, or to otherwise deal with a bureaucracy that treats them as unworthy and undeserving. Because this burden is more likely to be experienced by those who are facing racial discrimination, financial struggles, and other systemic hardships, it again works to magnify inequalities during a crisis.

These conclusions are based on relatively small AVP samples (given that transcription was incomplete) and should of course be revisited with larger samples that would allow us to better understand when survey, administrative, and immersive-interview data yield consistent or inconsistent results. The articles in this issue suggest, however, that conventional monitoring methods (such as poverty measures, unemployment rates, food insecurity measures) would be usefully supplemented with a permanent AVP-styled platform that would provide critical supplementary evidence on how low-income households are faring in a crisis-rich world. This two-platform approach would not only help us pick up economic distress as new challenges emerge but may ultimately make it possible to build better quantitative measures that capture distress more completely.

An Emerging Detachment Crisis?

The articles in the preceding section speak to the AVP's capacity to monitor how people are coping with a known set of crises. If the AVP could also be used to pick up early warning signs of new and emerging crises, that would of course be another important asset. Although it is obviously unfair to expect the next big crisis to be instantly uncovered by one of the small handful of contributors to this volume, it is nonetheless of interest to discuss some of the more troubling findings that have emerged in the early contributions and that arguably provide hints of emerging crises.

The two articles in the emerging-crisis section of this issue are usefully grouped because they converge on the worry that structurally disadvantaged populations have become profoundly disaffected. The first of these—authored by Katherine Cramer, Elizabeth Youngling, and Clinton Rooker (2024; this volume, issue 4)—describes the emergence of a low-income population that feels isolated from mainstream society and buffeted by economic and administrative forces beyond its control ("The Political Implications of Economic Lives"). This is expressed as a sense of futility about getting a decent job, a limited "capacity for interest in politics," and a limited "sense of agency or responsiveness from institutions of any type." As the authors describe it, the outside world becomes a blurry amalgam of institutions (government, workplace, benefits providers) that low-income people do not understand, tend to view as very distant from them, and are lumped together as a "faceless, amorphous force." This blurring is so profound that one interviewee referenced all government institutions vaguely and generically as "they or them."

The second article in this section, authored by Reuel Rogers (2024; this volume, issue 4), describes another structurally disadvantaged population—urban and suburban Black Americans—that is likewise struggling with profound disillusionment ("The Black Suburban Sort"). The interviews discussed in his article reveal a deep resignation about ongoing crime and violence, hopelessness about the prospects for racial justice, and a broad "democratic fatigue." As one respondent put it, "I'm numb to

it." When queried about politics, respondents would provide such responses as "I'd rather not talk about it," "it's like repetitive suicide," or "what can I do personally to make a difference?" For this group, there is again an overriding feeling of detachment, spawned by repeated disappointments rather than an incapacity to engage (for a related interpretation, see Thomas et al. 2024, this volume, issue 4).

The upshot is that, although both articles clearly reference the rise of detachment, they rely on different mechanisms that then affect different subpopulations. The detachment that Rogers describes stems from the disillusionment that comes of repeated political failures to address abiding racial inequities, whereas the detachment that Cramer, Youngling, and Rooker describe stems from ongoing personal buffeting by distant and foreign institutions (welfare organizations, government, labor markets). These two forces, as important as they are, may of course be joined by many others that can create isolation and hopelessness (crisis fatigue, rising normlessness, rising addictions, declining fertility) and bring about a wide-ranging detachment crisis.[9] The two articles in the disillusionment section provide in this sense an early warning that our nation's many social problems may have become too overwhelming for too many.

Classical Interpretive Studies

We have also read the contributions for insights into whether scholars can successfully carry out immersive-interview analyses resting on inductive interpretation of themes. This interpretive form—long the backbone of immersive-interviewing research—is of course an important success story within contemporary social science, as evidenced by its growing popularity (Thelwall and Nevill 2021). In building the AVP, many of our (friendly) critics worried that classical interpretive analysis would be compromised, as AVP researchers are no longer engaged in data collection and must therefore forgo the usual back-and-forth between interviewer and interviewee. The AVP leadership team is currently building plans for a permanent immersive-interviewing platform that will allow researchers to carry out follow-up interviews with sample members. Because this would only be viable for research teams that could afford to purchase such interviews, our assumption is that a minority of researchers would have the funds needed to avail themselves of that option. It is important, then, to ask whether a high-quality secondary analysis can be carried out without that follow-up.

The five articles in our classical interpretive methods section make it clear that high-quality secondary analysis is feasible in some cases, but that follow-up interviews are likely to be invaluable in others. The first article, a study of attitudes toward vaccination during the initial rollout period, reveals that views are not nearly as polarized as the survey-based research literature would have it ("Discourses of Distrust"). The authors of this piece—Amy Casselman-Hontalas, Dominique Adams-Santos, and Celeste Watkins-Hayes (2024; this volume, issue 4)—show that negative experiences with the American health-care system are so widespread that pretty much everyone is skeptical about the institution, including liberals who are typically represented as trusting medical science uncritically. The second article in this section, an analysis of health care within the Latinx population, provides a rich description of barriers to access that substantiates some of the key conclusions in the literature ("Can't Buy Me Health-Care Access"). The author, Josefina Flores Morales (2024; this volume, issue 4), also points to problems that haven't been adequately appreciated by prior scholars, such as an extremely high level of medical mistrust within the Latine population (attributable, in part, to misuse of pain medications). The third article, a study of platform-based gig labor by Brandon Jackson (2024; this volume, issue 4), reveals that motivations for engaging in gig work go beyond the usual accounts (need for immediate cash, attractiveness of flexible hours) featured in survey-based research ("Motivated by Money?"). Although

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9. The article by Michael Sauder, Yongren Shi, and Freda Lynn ("Multiple Meritocracies") also identifies a large swath of Americans who are "indifferent, accepting, disengaged, apathetic, or alienated."

lower-income workers are indeed typically driven by frequently emphasized supply and demand forces, Brandon Jackson shows that higher-income gig workers often sought gig work simply because they enjoyed the opportunity to learn about their neighbors and neighborhoods. The latter workers noted, for example, that it's interesting to see what people are ordering, to visit new neighborhoods, and to meet new people. The fourth article in this section, an analysis of housing insecurity by Max Besbris, Sadie Dempsey, Brian McCabe, and Eva Rosen (2024; this volume, issue 4), lays out the many ways that housing-insecure people dealt with the new challenges of the pandemic ("Pandemic Housing"). Although one might have thought that new coping strategies would have emerged, they instead find that those in precarious circumstances mainly fell back on such long-standing strategies as doubling up, seeking public benefits, and turning to friends and family (as well as weaker ties). The final article, by Priya Fielding-Singh, Elizabeth Talbert, Lisa Hummel, and Lauren Griffin (2024; this volume, issue 4), complements the large quantitative literature on pandemic caregiving with a tight qualitative study ("Caregiving in a Crisis") showing that working mothers with middle-class jobs found it especially difficult to deal with school closures and to continue delivering tightly curated extracurricular activities for their children (music lessons, playdates, soccer practices). Among middle-class households, stay-at-home mothers were able to adapt to pandemic-induced reductions in schooling and extracurricular opportunities, whereas working mothers found it much harder to continue engaging in "concerted cultivation" and reported much stress, worry, and frustration as a result.

We obviously cannot do justice to these studies here. For our purposes, it is mainly relevant that they show that secondary analysis can often deliver new and useful results, even without the benefit of follow-up questioning. The AVP analyst is, in effect, trading off the loss of follow-up questions for the extra information gleaned across the many domains in AVP's protocol, a trade-off that some contributors explicitly noted and found attractive (Besbris et al. 2024, this volume, issue 4). As true of all omnibus datasets, the AVP's sweet spot is either a research topic that is well covered within the confines of the protocol (such as the AVP's coverage of work, poverty, and family), or one that is more shallowly covered but benefits richly from the breadth afforded by an omnibus approach. The early evidence suggests that an ample range of projects falls into one of these two categories. This is obviously not to suggest that all questions are fully answered even among projects within this sweet-spot zone. As with studies using quantitative omnibus datasets, the studies in this issue sometimes advance the field as much by identifying what needs to be known as by securing definitive results.

Finding Hidden Populations

In our introductory comments, we suggested that yet another sweet spot for the AVP is its capacity to secure low-cost representative samples of people who are derogated, stigmatized, or otherwise excluded from mainstream society. Although qualitative research has long been built around a commitment to listen to and learn from excluded or marginalized populations, it has sometimes been difficult to live up to that commitment because many such populations are hidden from view and costly to sample without resorting to convenience samples. The purpose of this section is to examine how our contributors took advantage of the AVP's capacity to construct a probability sample of small subpopulations. We have included two articles in this section illustrating how hidden populations can be teased out, but in fact many others could have been included in this section as well. For example, many contributors exploited the AVP's capacity to analyze small intersectional populations (involving intersections of racial, gender, economic, or other identities), but it is presumably unnecessary to review this very important AVP asset because it is quite an obvious one.

We have instead selected two studies that reveal how the AVP can be used to find subpopulations that are not readily identified (hidden populations). In our first illustration of this approach, Corey Abramson, Zhuofan Li, Tara Prendergast, and Martín Sánchez-Jankowski at-

tempt to identify those who are experiencing extreme pain, a more daunting task than one might think ("Inequality in the Origins and Experiences of Pain"). The usual approaches to taking on such a problem clearly fall short. If one proceeded by partnering with a hospital, the resulting sample would only pertain to those who are being treated for pain. If one resorted to a convenience sample and advertised for interviews with those in pain, the resulting sample would likely overrepresent those who constructed their identities around pain and suffering (and would no doubt be unrepresentative in all manner of other ways). If one sought to draw a sample from online panel sources (Qualtrics, Prolific, AmeriSpeak), a complicated and expensive set of filter questions would be needed to ferret out those who fall into the sample. These are, then, all unattractive or costly options. The AVP, by contrast, opens the opportunity to draw a probability sample (without any cost to the secondary analyst) that solves all such problems at once by simply searching for respondents who discussed pain during their interviews. Although these discussions could happen in the course of conversations about health and health challenges, they could also come up when discussing work histories, family relations, or any of the other domains covered by the AVP's omnibus protocol. Using this sampling approach, Abramson and his coauthors are able to build a comprehensive map of the social organization of pain and then examine the extent to which pain comes up in everyday conversation, the types of pain inequality that emerge, and the ways in which culpability is featured in discourse about pain and misery.

The second example featured in this section is an article by James Hiebert, Lillian Kahris, and Kristin Seefeldt (2024; this volume, issue 5) on disability and work in the United States ("Making Sense of Health-Related Labor-Market Exits and Disability"). The purpose of their article is to understand the often-stigmatized (and partly hidden) population of people who have withdrawn from the labor market for health reasons. We might again ask how a qualitative scholar would go about sampling from this population. If the scholar proceeded by soliciting interviews from those re-

ceiving disability benefits, the resulting sample would exclude those who were ineligible or did not apply for such benefits, a potentially very important omission. If the scholar instead proceeded by advertising for a convenience sample of interviews with those who experienced a "health-related labor-market exit," it would be unclear how that filter was understood by potential respondents and how other selective processes might bias the sample. If the scholar contracted with any standard survey house to draw a probability sample, the cost would be prohibitive. The AVP again cuts through all these problems and allowed Hiebert, Kahris, and Seefeldt to draw the requisite probability-based sample by using the AVP survey to select those not working and then reading through the resulting transcripts to determine whether health problems figured in the withdrawal. After doing so, they then scoured the interviews to determine whether people embraced the identity of disabled, interpreted it as a transition rather than an identity, dismissed it as label assigned to them by others, or rejected it altogether. The resulting study reveals—very compellingly—that people only rarely embrace the identity of disabled even when they are receiving disability benefits or struggling with severe health problems.

We have dwelled on these two articles because they nicely illustrate the potential of the AVP to open a new window for understanding populations that are marginalized, stigmatized, and rarely heard. Because it is typically very expensive to access these populations, they have either been ignored altogether or studied via unrepresentative samples. The AVP resolves this long-standing problem by offering a large representative pool that can be flexibly culled to pull out small hidden populations in automated ways.

Omnibus Analyses

We have noted the various research opportunities that are opened up with an omnibus dataset, but have not yet fully discussed whether our contributors have taken advantage of them. Have the contributors exploited the full information available across various key institutional domains (family, education, work, religion, politics) in the AVP interviews? This

section of the issue includes four articles that have explicitly drawn on the omnibus structure of the AVP data. Although many other contributions also relied on cross-domain analyses and could have been included as well, these four will suffice to illustrate the payoff to an omnibus approach. We anticipate that many future studies with the AVP data will likewise rely on its omnibus structure.

The distinguishing feature of these articles is a conceptual interest in understanding the cultural logics that order people's lives. Because these are deep logics, a common conceit is that they will express themselves across a range of life domains, but that is of course a testable assumption that, as we will see, is not always borne out. The second distinguishing feature of these articles follows directly from the first. Because the shared objective is to discern the abstract logics that inform people's lives, it is natural to turn to computational methods (machine learning, natural language processing) that can be readily tailored to ferreting out such logics. Although computational methods thus figure prominently in these pieces, the authors also use interpretative methods to validate and make sense of those abstractions.

In the first of these articles, Michael Sauder, Yongren Shi, and Freda Lynn (2024; this volume, issue 5) examine how people understand the role of luck, merit, and structural forces in determining their own life trajectory ("Multiple Meritocracies"). It would be conventional to address such a question with a survey item providing a preset menu of responses to a query about the importance of merit in getting ahead. Because such survey questions may evoke stock or socially acceptable responses, Sauder, Shi, and Lynn proceed instead by analyzing the manifold accounts about social mobility that emerge organically while telling one's story. By analyzing these on-the-ground accounts, they are able to show that their inner logic is rarely consistent with a vulgar meritocratic view that comes out of survey-based analysis. To the contrary, they find that most everyone understands that their lives reflect a complicated admixture of merit, structural barriers, and contingencies, although there are differences of emphasis in the types of structural barriers that are

privileged (as well as the extent to which they are emphasized). In another analysis that exploits the AVP's omnibus format, Shira Zilberstein, Elena Ayala-Hurtado, Mari Sanchez, and Derek Robey (2024; this volume, issue 5) examine the extent to which people view themselves as agentic, as opposed to being passively buffeted by structural forces ("The Self in Action"). Although the conventional hypothesis is that privileged people are more likely to view themselves as agentic, the authors show that all people, including those who are less privileged, tend to view themselves as agentic in some situations and passive in others (or even to subtly intertwine both types of sentiments in the same situation). This approach again exploits the AVP's omnibus format by examining how agency and passivity surface across a wide variety of domains and settings. The third article in this section, by James Chu and Seungwon Lee (2024; this volume, issue 5), uses the AVP's omnibus format to show how people judge and evaluate others across a variety of social contexts ("How Americans Judge"). The main finding is that, when praising family and friends, some people consider whether they are warm or likeable (prosocials) whereas others consider whether they are competent or talented (meritocrats). By contrast, this divide between prosocials and meritocrats recedes in importance when public-sector actors (police, teachers, politicians) are being judged, perhaps because the public sector imposes norms of judgment that mute the particularism of more intimate engagements with family and friends. The final article in this section ("Talk of Family"), a provocative piece by Jessica Hardie, Alina Arseniev-Koehler, Judith Seltzer, and Jacob Foster (2024; this volume, issue 5), follows people as they move through the various institutional domains in the AVP protocol (work, religion, health, criminal justice) and asks whether their families are prominently mentioned in these discussions. This analysis provides a new approach to understanding the extent to which people's lives are enmeshed in and focused on family.

The preceding articles thus exploit the omnibus protocol by uncovering logics that reflect generalized habits of the heart rather than situationally specific ways of acting, judging, or

interpreting. The resulting measures of meritocratic, agentic, prosocial, and familistic logics may be understood as competitors to conventional survey-based items that are secured by asking respondents to directly summarize their behavior or sentiments across many settings. When, for example, a survey respondent is asked whether they behave agentically, they are presumably expected to play back in their minds their manifold engagements in manifold settings, ferret out how agentic they have been in each of them, and then calculate the cross-engagement average. Because that is a cognitively demanding operation, one could forgive a respondent for forgoing it and instead falling back on well-rehearsed stock answers. This line of reasoning implies that, rather than asking respondents to rewind, ferret out, and average, we are better off asking them to recount their engagements directly, just as the AVP's omnibus protocol does, and then rely on an algorithm to perform the requisite analysis and averaging on the resulting raw data. The AVP thus opens up the possibility that the various habits of the heart currently ascertained through survey items may be more successfully operationalized and monitored through immersive interviewing.

LIMITATIONS

The analyses in this issue suggest that the AVP is largely delivering as we had hoped it would. The contributors have provided new evidence on the key crises and developments of our time, uncovered hints of new crises in the making, shown that high-quality interpretative analysis does not always require follow-up interviewing, culled important hidden populations from the AVP's large pool of interviews, and used the omnibus form to develop a new suite of measures that may outperform conventional survey-based measures. Although we are heartened by this early round of results, it would of course be unwise to reach any conclusions about the AVP's payoff until additional waves of research using the full dataset are completed.

In carrying out our stock-taking exercise, it is also useful to consider the various concerns of our reviewers and commentators, some of whom have not always been fully convinced

that a public immersive-interviewing platform fills a pressing need. The AVP team has engaged frequently with such commentators and critics by hosting AVP conferences, AVP briefing sessions, and various meetings with our trial users and other leaders in the field. We have also benefited greatly from the reviews of this article and the many AVP grant proposals that have been submitted. Although the feedback that we have received in these various ways has sometimes been critical, it has almost always been constructive in ways that have led to important improvements to the AVP methodology. Because the possibility of establishing a permanent immersive-interviewing platform is currently being discussed with leaders in the field, it is especially important to take stock of criticisms relevant to these discussions. The purpose of this section is to do just that by rehearsing the most common criticisms, discussing whether they are on the mark (as dispassionately as we can), and considering whether a future AVP fielding could and should address them.

Criticisms of the Protocol

It is useful to begin by addressing the complications that arise when one seeks to build a public-use platform within a field that has historically focused on individualized data collection and research. When a protocol is designed to serve a wide range of research purposes, the stakes are high and the decisions fraught because public money is being expended in ways that affect what types of research can be undertaken and what will or will not be discovered. It is understandable, therefore, that an important swath of concerns have emerged around the proper scope of the AVP protocol, how it is vetted, and how it can be modified and revised. We will present these critiques by directly paraphrasing some of our reviewers and commentators because they have stated them in nicely direct and pithy terms. These critiques, which are set off as extracts, are followed by our responses.

> The protocol's reach: "Although the AVP protocol covers the interviewee's everyday interactions with important institutions (e.g., the family, neighborhood, workplace), many as-

pects of everyday life aren't touched upon in the protocol and can't be addressed via an AVP analysis. The AVP protocol is too narrowly circumscribed to substitute for conventional privately-collected datasets."

We have led with this line of criticism because it gives us another opportunity to stress that a public immersive-interviewing platform can only complement—but never replace—the immensely valuable individualized research form. Because the immersive-interviewing method has been so productive and successful, our goal is simply to expand its footprint by building a complementary public-use form that can be used whenever researchers address questions within the AVP's core data zone. The AVP's goal is to cover everyday life and sentiments in those institutions (the family, the workplace, and the neighborhood) and cultural domains (religion, politics, identity) that are central to contemporary life and are thus useful gateways to understanding how people live, what they are thinking and feeling, and how they are making sense of their lives. This approach nonetheless leaves much important terrain unexplored; indeed, just as analyses of GSS's core data zone can never replace all the critical quantitative analysis occurring outside this zone, so too analyses of AVP's core data zone will always be but a small complement to the vast amount of immersive-interviewing and related research occurring outside this zone. Although the data zone covered by the AVP interview is thus limited in size, the goal is to broaden it in future AVP fieldings by regularly rotating in special modules that address unfolding crises, emerging topics of interest, or other critical new content.[10] The most important job of the AVP's future advisory board will be to guide the development of the full protocol and to oversee open competitions for the special modules (modeled after the GSS's special module competition). This oversight function entails assessing whether the existing prompts are performing well, testing and evaluating possible new prompts, and otherwise

balancing the competing needs for continuity and updating. Because the advisory board is all-important in this sense, it is of course critical that it is broad and diverse, that it represents a wide range of research constituencies, and that it secures input throughout the planning process from all relevant communities and stakeholders.

> The differentiation of data collection and analysis: "The AVP has installed a division of labor between data collection and data analysis that prevents researchers from pursuing promising leads or otherwise following up with interviewees. Without this follow-up capacity, the analysis may be shallow and many fundamental questions may remain unanswered."

This concern may be understood as an analog to the common lament among survey analysts that an important causal variable is unavailable in the survey of interest. The standard response to this problem—indeed it is the go-to mantra of all graduate-student advisors—is that survey users should choose to undertake an analysis that is feasible rather than opting for one that is not. Within the AVP context, several of our early users likewise opted to change their research question when they discovered that their original one could not successfully be taken on, a type of problem-selection pragmatism that is the unfortunate cost of doing business in the world of public-use datasets (see Besbris et al. 2024 for an insightful discussion of this point). This is not to gainsay the equally important point that, had follow-up interviewing been made available within the AVP platform, a broader swath of topics could have been examined by combining existing interview material with new probes. Because our critics have been quite convincing on this point, we have built concrete plans for installing a new follow-up capacity whereby interested researchers can contract with the AVP's data-collection organization to carry out reinterviews in future fieldings. This innovation

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10. We experimented with this special module approach in the original fielding as well by adding new prompts in response to the Black Lives Matter movement, the early pandemic shelter-in-place orders, the highly contested vaccination rollout, and the storming of the Capitol.

will allow researchers to garner new evidence on possible mechanisms or interpretations, take on puzzles that the original interviews left unresolved, or otherwise exploit the power of reinterviewing. Although researchers can always resort to the usual alternative of mounting their own independent study, the virtue of this new design is that it would exploit the existing probability sample and the existing data already available from the original interview.[11]

> Community engagement: "The AVP research process seemingly runs counter to the growing commitment among social scientists to develop relationships with the communities involved in their studies (i.e., "community-engaged scholarship")."

This critique arises because of the prohibitively high costs of engaging with each of the many communities that serve as secondary sampling units (SSUs) within our national study. Before the pandemic broke out, the AVP interviewers formed small teams that moved from one SSU (census block groups) to the next, a design that allowed them to form relationships with community leaders. We also relied heavily on our Federal Reserve Bank partners to engage with communities in their catchment areas. These relationships were, however, mainly forged after the protocol was developed (and did not, therefore, inform the contents of the protocol itself). In future fieldings of the AVP, engagement with individual SSUs will likely be even more limited (given the high costs of SSU-specific engagement), and other approaches to ensuring a participatory research design will have to be taken. Because it may not be possible to engage with representatives from each of the hundreds of SSUs in future fieldings, it will be especially important to include representatives of the different types of SSUs that are part of the study (such as rural, deindustrializing,

or gentrifying SSUs). It is also critical to recognize that many types of communities—not just spatially defined ones—are important to engage. The advisory board for future AVP fieldings should accordingly be charged with building the protocol in collaboration with representatives of all key communities (as defined by race, ethnicity, gender, community type, and other identities), and additionally carrying out cognitive testing across this wide array of groups (with such testing ensuring that the prompts are interpreted as intended and thus provide a valid vehicle for expression). The latter commitment to rigorous cognitive testing, which qualitative scholars do not always undertake, is especially critical given the AVP's interest in properly representing and interpreting the voices of everyone. At the same time, many qualitative scholars who collect their own data are committed to trialing their initial research conclusions and interpretations with community members (and then revising their interpretations as necessary), an approach that secondary users of public-use datasets would do well to emulate. When the full public release of AVP data occurs, we plan on hosting a regular series of AVP conferences that will include not just scholars but also a wide range of community representatives. If this hybrid conference form proves to be successful, we hope that it will be adopted in future AVP fieldings as well.

Criticisms of Probability Samples

The AVP team has also encountered criticisms suggesting that probability samples are not always as useful as they are made out to be. Before we turn to two very reasonable worries about probability samples, it is important to first dispense with a worry that is frequently expressed but based on a misunderstanding of probability sampling. We refer here to the argument that scholars who analyze subpopula-

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11. Although we are very excited about installing this follow-up capability, it bears emphasizing that the vast majority of immersive-interview studies have relied on one-off interviews rather than repeated interactions (between interviewer and interviewee). The opportunity for follow-up interviews may nonetheless prove more valuable within a public-use context because the first-round interviewers may not have probed in ways that the secondary user would have (as the first-round interviewers were not likely animated by the particular research topic being pursued by that secondary user). The best way to determine the value of this follow-up capability is to install it in the next AVP fielding and examine how frequently it is used and to what effect.

tions (such as Asians, single adults, or sports fans) of a national probability sample cannot treat those subpopulations as probability samples themselves. This is an incorrect conclusion (see DeLuca 2022). The great benefit, to the contrary, of a national probability sample is precisely that it does yield spinoff probability samples for any subpopulation within the original sample. This means that researchers interested in a subpopulation analysis within the AVP can secure all the benefits of a probability sample without having to draw one on their own.

The AVP thus makes it possible to draw hundreds of subpopulation probability samples at no cost to the secondary user. As attractive as this sounds, our critics have suggested that this theoretical benefit may not always be available in practice, given that many subpopulations of interest are either small or hidden. We discuss each of these two problems in turn.

> Small populations: "In many cases, researchers wish to study very small populations, like people in a small town, people who have a rare disease, or people who are members of a fringe political or religious group. The AVP is quite unuseful in these situations."

This critique makes the important point that, whenever a researcher has an intrinsic interest in a very small population, the AVP will not be useful because it will not have enough—or perhaps any—cases within the population of interest. Because this point is uncontroversial, we have relatively little to add. We simply reiterate that the AVP, like the GSS and other omnibus public-use datasets, was never designed to replace very valuable existing forms of research that are able to target extremely small populations. The only supplementary point we would make is that sometimes a study site,

such as a deindustrializing town, is chosen not because of an intrinsic interest in that particular site but because it is viewed as a convenient vehicle for examining how small-town deindustrialization plays out more generally, how workers cope with deindustrialization in a small-town setting, or some other more generic question about deindustrialization. It is not uncommon to choose sites precisely because they are exemplars in this sense. When that is indeed the case, a large-population study is in effect masquerading as a small-population one, and an AVP-based analysis might well be feasible and useful, but only insofar as the analysis in question does not require a large observation-per-site ratio.[12] The researcher might, for example, proceed by pooling interviewees across all deindustrializing sites in the AVP rather than carrying out a case study of one such site. If doing so still failed to yield an adequate sample size, the researcher could also consider pooling across multiple fieldings of the AVP.[13] This approach can open up many attractive opportunities to understand important—albeit small—subpopulations without having to resort to nonprobability samples. If a researcher pooled, for example, five annual AVP samples (with two thousand observations per year), they could expect to find approximately one hundred people who identify as transgender (USA Facts 2020), approximately fifty-five affiliates of Jehovah's Witnesses (PRRI 2021), approximately 550 believers in QANON (Uscinski et al. 2022), and approximately ninety users of methamphetamines (National Survey of Drug Use and Health 2021). Although it is often argued that very small groups of this sort can only be studied via nonprobability samples, the AVP opens up an important alternative approach that allows for generalizations to known populations.

12. It is important to reiterate here that a pooled AVP analysis of deindustrializing sites would yield very few observations per site and would not, therefore, be viable for any analysis that demands a great many observations per site. If, for example, a scholar sought to undertake a full-network analysis of the effects of deindustrialization, a pooling approach would almost certainly be inadequate to the task (because it would not be possible to represent the full network in any given site). The larger point here is that a great many important research projects require single-site designs of the sort that the AVP could never handle.

13. Under current plans for future fieldings, the AVP will be fielded continuously (with four quarterly samples per year).

Hidden populations: "The AVP cannot be used to study hidden populations unless interviewees are explicitly queried about their membership in the population of interest. Moreover, whenever the group of interest is stigmatized (and many hidden populations are of course stigmatized), even a direct query won't get the job done because interviewees may be reluctant to discuss the relevant identity or behavior."

This second critique again takes aim at the practical usefulness of the AVP in studying small populations that are hidden because they are not based on a frequently adopted identity (of the sort that might be ascertained in, say, the AVP's follow-up survey). The subtext of this critique is that, although the AVP has the theoretical capacity to generate probability samples of important hidden populations (such as conspiracy theorists), in practice it is very difficult to ascertain members of these populations without including an explicit query about membership (such as "are you a conspiracy theorist?"). If this claim were generally true, it would reduce the usefulness of the AVP because the protocol would need to anticipate all the subpopulations of interest and then query systematically about each of them. We are not convinced, however, that this identities-must-be-queried claim is indeed true. The main reason we are unconvinced is that many AVP authors have been able to successfully identify hidden subpopulations by searching for relevant markers within the interviews. These scholars have shown, for example, that the AVP interviews can identify conspiracy theorists (Bauvois et al. 2023), those experiencing severe pain (Abramson et al. 2024), those too sick to work (Hiebert, Kahris, and Seefeldt 2024), and those who have experienced a sexual trauma (Caputo et al. 2024). We do of course need to worry about false negatives. It is possible, for example, that those who do not engage in conspiracy talk within an AVP interview are in fact conspiracy theorists but are reluctant to talk about it because it is stigmatizing. To address this worry, the gold standard approach would

be to draw a subsample of AVP interviewees who do not engage in conspiracy talk, and to then follow up with a reinterview that uses best-practice prompts to draw out possible shy conspirators (using the new follow-up capacity discussed). Although this gold standard approach has not yet been deployed within the AVP context, it is at least reassuring that the existing AVP-based rates of conspiracy talk, severe pain, sexual trauma, and health-induced withdrawals largely comport with rates from other trusted sources. It is thus plausible that, because the AVP interview adopts well-tested approaches to reducing stigmatization (such as normalizing all responses to prompts), a gold standard approach might not yield all that many false negatives. This is not to question the importance of directly testing that conjecture by estimating the number of false negatives when the AVP's new follow-up capacity is installed. The results from such tests will not only provide high-quality evidence on stigmatized behaviors but also could be used to improve the AVP's existing methods for enabling open, honest, and judgment-free conversations.[14]

Criticisms Pertaining to Analytic Complications

The last set of worries pertain to the various data-processing complications that arise when analyzing large numbers of immersive interviews. Because our trial users were entering uncharted territory, they faced a host of problems that the AVP team had only imperfectly anticipated, many of which had to be solved on the fly and often quite imperfectly. We are immensely grateful for their patience in working through these complications. It is useful to share some of the data analytic concerns that they or our reviewers raised and discuss how these concerns might be addressed with new software and methods for large-N qualitative datasets.

Industrial-sized analysis: "Although a large-N dataset may be useful for analysts using computational methods, the payoff is less clear for

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14. Before the AVP was fielded, the interviewers underwent a full month of intensive training, with the last week of that training devoted to trial interviews carried out under the supervision of seasoned interviewers.

those using classical interpretive methods. It's simply impossible for a single scholar—or even a modestly-sized team—to process all the interviews that are now available."

The AVP leadership team had not, we have to confess, anticipated this concern. We instead worried that the AVP sample was too small to meet the needs of scholars who wished to locate hidden populations, to carry out intersectional analyses, or to use data-intensive computational methods. It was a mistake on our part to fail to appreciate that many scholars found the AVP attractive not because it could be sliced and diced into various subpopulations of interest but because its underlying probability sample made it possible to generalize to the U.S. population while still using classical interpretative methods. For these scholars, the large sample that was part and parcel of the AVP design was a mixed blessing, as it simply took too long to read, hand code, and digest all the interviews (even with the luxury of modestly sized teams of analysts). In most of the early AVP analyses, this complication was sidestepped because the research began before all interviewing or transcribing was completed, and the available sample was therefore relatively limited in size.[15] Because a large sample now is available, it is clear that improved software is needed to support large-N qualitative analysis, software that makes it possible to work efficiently with large coding teams, that allows for crowdsourced coding, and that supports mixed-methods analysis (at the individual level) more seamlessly. Even with such tools, scholars who prefer to work alone or in small teams may choose to draw a random subsample of interviews insofar as they wish to generalize to the U.S. population, thereby reducing the amount of reading and coding without any sacrifice of representativeness. It may also be useful to deploy analytic approaches that qualitative researchers have designed to reduce the cognitive burden of analyzing larger datasets or to exploit large language models (LLMs), natural language processing (NLP), and various automated coding regimens.[16] Whenever researchers have explicit hypotheses in play, they can also use power tests to settle on the requisite sample size in advance, an approach that eliminates the intrinsic subjectivity (and resulting bias) of asking the analyst to decide when saturation has been reached. Although we are unconvinced, therefore, that industrial-sized analysis is an intrinsic problem, we do of course agree that qualitative software needs to be upgraded to work more seamlessly with large numbers of cases, large research teams, crowdsourced coding, and individual-level mixed-methods data.

Weights and classical interpretive analysis: "The AVP weights are of course useful for those using quantitative computational methods, but it's unclear how to use them within the context of classical interpretive analysis. If interpretive scholars opt to simply

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15. The sampling design for the pandemic-year AVP was based on quarterly samples because this allowed analysts to make inferences about the U.S. population every quarter rather than waiting for all 2,700 interviews to be completed.

16. We thank one of our anonymous reviewers for pointing to various exemplar approaches (Timmermans and Tavory 2022; Small 2009) for analyzing large qualitative data sets. These approaches begin with a very small subsample of cases or even a single case and then examine how this subsample (or single case) yields conclusions that may differ from other cases. Because such approaches are labor intensive, LLMs could be harnessed to compare the text of this scholar-selected index case to all other cases in the data set, thereby generating a subset of discrepant cases for further analysis by the scholar. This machine process could be run multiple times with slight prompt variations to provide confidence intervals on the analysis subset that was ultimately chosen. It would also be possible to develop a more thoroughgoing form of LLM-based coding by drawing on coding manuals produced by expert qualitative researchers, passing them to the LLM, assessing the capacity of the LLM to reproduce the coding decisions of human coders on held-out data, and iterating on this process until the LLM passes a threshold of acceptable performance. The upshot is that we are confident that the large-N problem can be addressed via a host of human and automated data-reduction techniques, including, at worst, simply taking a random sample of the data.

ignore the weights, they cannot any longer safely generalize to the population of interest, thereby losing one of the main payoffs to an AVP analysis."

The AVP data come with precalculated sampling weights because the AVP sampling design incorporated an oversample of some subpopulations and because response rates among those selected into the sample differed across subpopulations. We also provide AVP users with the data fields needed to adjust for clustering and other sampling design features. For scholars carrying out quantitative analyses of the AVP data, no special or unusual complications thus arise. The interpretive analyst, by contrast, does not have the benefit of best-practice guidelines that help them exploit the representativeness of the AVP data. At the data analysis stage, the interpretive scholar of course wants to be able to learn from the data in unbiased ways, ideally exploiting sampling weights to that end. In this context, the separation of data collection from data analysis is potentially an asset because it makes it possible to develop data-delivery software that feeds interviews to the analyst in ways that offset known bias-inducing dynamics, such as confirmation bias. We could imagine, for example, interview-delivery software that uses sampling weights to correct for nonresponse bias when delivering interviews to analysts (meaning that interviews with, say, a weight of 2 would be twice as likely to be pushed out to the analyst). In this way, analysts are delivered a representative experience as they read the interviews, thus reducing the risk that nonresponse bias or chance clustering of certain types of interviews installs an improper prior that is then hard to overcome. For scholars who prefer to use a saturation rule, this approach would ensure that judgments about saturation are not affected by an unrepresentative feed, thus reducing at least some of the subjectivity associated with this rule. This approach could similarly be applied at the subpopulation level to ensure that a representative sample is delivered and then experienced within each of the groups of interest. We are not of course suggesting that the foregoing example solves all problems or that it is in any way straightforward to overcome the host of cognitive biases that affect interpretive analysis (and all other forms of analysis). We are instead suggesting that public-use datasets offer important opportunities to experiment with possible approaches, to assess their bias-reducing effects, and ultimately to develop software and analytic approaches that improve the quality of social science research.

CONCLUSIONS

During the build-out of the experimental AVP platform, a fair number of AVP skeptics worried that there would not be much demand for the data, a worry that is quite reasonable given that collecting one's own data is deeply built into the immersive-interviewing field and serves, in effect, as a rite of passage. We are gratified, in light of this worry, that the response to our open call attracted the second-highest number of applications in this journal's history. Because applicants were so numerous, we had to open a second tranche of trial analyses, and many promising results from that second tranche are now appearing. We are grateful to all our early users in helping us prepare for the full rollout and for providing critical early evidence on the payoff to the AVP.

As discussed, the AVP also has garnered its fair share of criticism, although arguably the amount of criticism in play is quite modest for a field infamous for contention. The criticisms that have been proffered have almost invariably been constructive and have motivated important improvements to the AVP's methodology. With these concerns in mind, a large team of AVP advisors is currently consulting with data-collection organizations, government agencies, and possible funders to explore how the experimental AVP is best converted into a permanent immersive-interviewing platform.

As the trial period comes to a close and we move to full dissemination of the experimental AVP, it is worth asking how a permanent platform (one that is continuously in the field and allows for real-time public use) would likely play out. If the early AVP results can be safely extrapolated, one would have to conclude that a permanent platform would have a substantial effect on basic and applied social science, likely a larger effect than that of adding yet another public-use quantitative dataset to an already

crowded field of such datasets. This new qualitative platform, because it would be fine tuned for discovery, would send a signal that we care about detecting and monitoring social problems as much as we care about detecting and monitoring natural disasters, such as hurricanes, floods, fires, or earthquakes. The amount of monitoring research would take off; the capacity to detect crises in the making would improve; the high costs of a delayed diagnosis would be reduced; and journalists (and their critics and competitors) would have a real-time probability sample of Americans at their disposal. By exploiting the dark matter of immersive interviews, this new platform would also help us build better predictive models of key outcomes (such as poverty, homelessness, depression) and then use these models to improve social programs and advance basic science. The new infrastructure would likewise give conventional survey-based opinion and attitudinal measurement a run for its money by developing powerful new NLP-based measures of sentiments from the raw material of everyday life (rather than attempting to surgically elicit sentiments by simply asking about them). The AVP platform may also give conventional social media analysis a run for its money by supporting new NLP-based measures of sentiments that are primed in known and controllable ways, that are comparable over time and across subgroups, and that are based on representative rather than highly selective samples. Across all these fields, the new platform would serve as a shared testbed, and a more cumulative form of qualitative work would emerge through increased replication, reinterpretation, and systematic accretion and extension (Weeden 2023). This new field of large-*N* qualitative work would rapidly grow as students are trained with public-use datasets in high school, college, and online classes, as new types of large-*N* qualitative analysis software are developed, and as entry barriers are dramatically reduced and open the field to less-resourced scholars lacking the sabbatical time and money needed to collect their own datasets. It follows that this new platform would enrich basic social science, applied social science, and even social scientific journalism.

It is unlikely that this new work, as important as it is, would come at the expense of the very successful individualized form of immersive interviewing. When public-use datasets were introduced into the quantitative field in the 1950s, the corresponding individualized form of quantitative research nonetheless remained strong and prominent, indeed it was periodically reenergized by the introduction of various cost-saving innovations, such as the rise of remote interviewing and the introduction of online panels. The same outcome is very likely within the immersive-interviewing field. It would remain the country's go-to resource for addressing topics not covered in the public-use dataset, for carrying out in-depth studies that go well beyond what is available in the omnibus protocol, and for capturing hidden populations that are just too small or too vulnerable to be reached with a public-use dataset. At the same time, the public-use form would generate new questions that could only be addressed with one-off studies, thereby further increasing demand for them. The available evidence suggests that the GSS, for example, has had precisely this effect within the quantitative field (Davern et al. 2021). The permanent immersive-interviewing platform currently being planned would also reduce the cost of one-off studies (and thus expand their reach) by allowing for piggyback studies with empaneled AVP respondents. For all these reasons, it is likely that the public-use form will always play a complementary role, serving in effect as a form of brand differentiation that testifies to the larger success of immersive-interviewing research.

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Monitoring in a Crisis Economy

Catching Up and Coping in the COVID Economy

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In this article, we assess the utility of the American Voices Project in supplementing more traditional sources of labor market data. To do so, we explore the effects of safety net program expansions on household financial stability and labor force participation during the COVID-19 pandemic. We find that despite the expanded safety net, employment loss was sometimes associated with declines in financial well-being. We find little evidence of the programs disincentivizing work, however. Pandemic relief programs helped cover essential living expenses, but implementation challenges muted their effects for some. Connections between employment loss and declines in mental well-being, as well as both the vulnerability and importance of gig work, emerged as prominent, if unexpected, themes. Our analysis suggests that, with improvements, an ongoing, large-scale qualitative data collection effort could be an invaluable asset in monitoring labor market conditions in low-income communities.

The first known case of COVID-19 reached American shores in January 2020 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2022), and by mid-March, the disease had set in motion both a public health epidemic and an economic recession. Many of those who were spared from the worst effects of the former were subjected to the widespread impacts of the latter. In the weeks and months following the onset of the pandemic, the federal government embarked on a series of efforts to mitigate the economic harm to workers and the households they supported as the country entered recession.

The economic impacts of the COVID-19 recession and subsequent policy responses to mitigate those impacts fed competing narratives about how expanded safety net programs impacted the financial stability and labor market decisions of low-income households. Articles and editorials in the popular press debated

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whether expanded unemployment benefits reduced worker participation in the labor force (Mulligan and Moore 2020; Iacurci 2021), or whether the missing workers were absent due to other COVID-related factors, such as fear of disease, school closures, or retirements (Chaney Cambon and Dougherty 2021). The perception that unemployment benefits were keeping workers on the sidelines of the labor market were among the reasons that roughly half of the states ended certain benefits prior to their federal expiration (Whittaker and Isaacs 2021). Simultaneously, research and public opinion, although not necessarily contradictory, were not always aligned on these topics and at times conveyed varying levels of impact; as an example, Economic Impact Payments (EIPs) and the refundable child tax credit lifted more than fourteen million people out of poverty in 2021 (Creamer et al. 2022), but the majority of recipients responding to one survey believed the funds helped them only "a little" (Marist Institute for Public Opinion 2021).

With these competing narratives as backdrop, we aimed to assess the potential of the American Voices Project (AVP) as an instrument for collecting policy-relevant labor market information that could supplement conventional survey and administrative data. As a first-of-its-kind data collection effort involving immersive interviews with more than two thousand households across the United States, we wondered whether the AVP as designed and executed could deliver the breadth and depth of qualitative data necessary to enrich, validate, or challenge conclusions reached with quantitative data while providing additional nuance around the complex decisions income-constrained households made during this period. To assess the AVP's ability to do so, we leverage seventy-six interviews conducted between the fall of 2020 and the summer of 2021, focusing on low-income households most likely to be in the labor force and benefit from pandemic relief programs. We structured our exploration of the AVP data set around these policy-relevant research questions: How did interviewees experiencing negative employment effects describe the role that safety net programs played in stabilizing household finances? Is there evidence that these programs

affected the employment or job-search behaviors of beneficiaries?

The AVP interviews in our sample offer a nuanced understanding of how low-income households were experiencing and responding to pandemic-induced economic shocks. Consistent with prior research, we find that for many low-income households, the pandemic and recession led to a loss of employment that took many forms, from a slight reduction in hours to a permanent layoff. However, the depth and prevalence of related financial hardships described in the interviews challenge the broader notion of households on firm financial footing, propped up by pandemic relief programs and disincentivized to return to work. Instead, interviewees' experiences with acute financial difficulties during the pandemic were more aligned with quantitative research highlighting the financial distress that persisted despite these programs. Some interviewees described how pandemic relief funds, when delivered, and gig work activities, when not disrupted by the pandemic, were paramount to covering essential living expenses. Interviewees also highlighted the important connections between mental well-being and financial stability as they described heightened levels of stress, worry, and anxiety about making ends meet during the pandemic.

We view our analysis as a test-drive of sorts for how a data set such as the AVP could be used to contribute to policy-relevant research in the future. When we compare our findings with the literature, we consider none to be wholly novel. That is, research preceding ours and reviewed in this article also finds evidence of household-level financial distress and the problematic deployment of unemployment benefits during the pandemic, for example. However, the alignment between our findings and prior, mostly quantitative, work does not render AVP data redundant or superfluous. Instead, it is a testament to its validity. This article also deepens our understanding of the pandemic economy at the household level, giving robust insight into experiences that might otherwise be masked by averages and aggregate statistics. We conclude that with some improvements a generic, immersive-interviewing platform such as the AVP could serve as a valu-

able complement to the existing and emerging quantitative infrastructure in monitoring economic conditions in low-income communities.

BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented shock to the U.S. economy.

Employment Disruption for Low-Income Households

Over two months in the spring of 2020, nonfarm payroll employment declined by almost 22 million jobs, roughly 17.million workers became unemployed, and the unemployment rate increased from 3.5 percent to 14.8 percent.[1] Employment losses were concentrated in industries that relied on face-to-face interaction and services and, due in part to their higher representation in susceptible industries, Hispanic and Black, younger, and lower-income workers, as well as workers with less formal education, were more likely than others to experience job loss (FRB 2021; Despard et al. 2020; Karpman et al. 2020; Wardrip 2021; Cortes and Forsythe 2021; Horowitz, Brown, and Minkin 2021; Bartik et al. 2020; Bell et al. 2020), which took the form of reduced hours, the elimination of a position, and the loss of self-employment (FRB 2020; FRB 2021; Horowitz, Brown, and Minkin 2021).

The COVID-19 recession arrived quickly but lasted only two months, March through April of 2020 (NBER 2023). The early recovery was characterized by the recall of workers from temporary layoff and a subsequent rapid rebound in overall employment levels (Wolcott et al. 2020; Forsythe et al. 2020). The economic disruption proved to be longer lasting for some, however, given that only about half of the adults laid off because of the pandemic had returned or expected to return to their former job as of late 2020 (FRB 2021) and certain groups of workers (such as low-wage workers, Black workers) were less likely to regain employment than others (Cortes and Forsythe 2021; Bartik et al. 2020). The broader economic recovery continued into 2021 as unemployment steadily declined and payroll employment gradually increased, although at year end, they would remain above and below pre-pandemic levels, respectively.[2]

The Federal Safety Net

Acting quickly to support dislocated workers, the federal government created and enhanced a number of programs to blunt the economic effects of the pandemic and associated recession, including a major expansion of the unemployment insurance (UI) system. Passed in March 2020, the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act and subsequent legislation modified the UI system along three dimensions to amplify its generosity and reach: benefit levels were increased; eligibility was expanded; and duration was extended. Between April and July 2020, UI claimants received a supplement of $600 in addition to their regular benefits through the Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation program; the supplement expired and in January 2021 was replaced by a $300 top-up. Further, through the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) program, eligibility was extended to those not generally covered by the UI system, including self-employed workers, gig and contract workers, and those with a limited work history. Finally, the duration of benefits was extended through the Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation program; with the exception of the five-month lapse and subsequent reduction of the supplement, these programs extended benefits through early September 2021 (BEA 2021). However, roughly half of the states terminated their participation in one or all of these programs in June or July 2021 for numerous reasons, including concern that programs were keeping potential workers out of the labor force and in light of the growing number of job openings (Whittaker and Isaacs 2021).

The $600 supplement available to UI recipients in mid-2020 was designed to replace the earnings of the average worker (Bartik et al. 2020), but because pandemic job losses were concentrated in low-wage industries, the "replacement rate" (share of prior earnings re-

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1. Authors' analysis of data from BLS (n.d.-a, n.d.-b, n.d.-c).

2. Authors' analysis of data from BLS (n.d.-a, n.d.-b).

placed by benefits) for many UI recipients exceeded 100 percent. In fact, workers with the lowest wages were eligible for benefits that would have doubled their prior earnings, and the median replacement rate was estimated to be 145 percent (Ganong et al. 2020). A survey conducted in July 2020 suggests that among low-income households that received UI benefits, the vast majority reported that their income was higher than (56 percent) or about the same as (27 percent) their pre-layoff earnings (FRB 2020). The expiration of the $600 supplement in the summer of 2020 lowered the median replacement rate below 50 percent until the smaller $300 supplement was implemented in January 2021, raising the replacement rate again above 100 percent for the lowest-earning half of dislocated workers (Cortes and Forsythe 2021).

The apparent generosity of expanded and enhanced UI benefits must be considered alongside the ability of those experiencing job loss to access them. An analysis of Department of Labor data shows that only 28 percent of unemployed workers received regular UI benefits in 2019; at least in part due to the longer duration of benefits permitted during the pandemic, this share rose to 78 percent in 2020, even before factoring in the PUA program that expanded eligibility (Ganong et al. 2022). A simulation combining publicly available data to estimate individual eligibility with administrative data on actual payments suggests that the vast majority of those eligible for UI benefits received them, although the recipiency rate for the PUA program (76 percent) appears to have been lower than for standard UI (98 percent) (Forsythe 2023). Survey data tell a less optimistic story. Self-reported receipt of UI benefits among seemingly eligible workers was a much lower 36 percent, although benefit receipt in survey data is known to be underestimated (Forsythe and Yang 2021). Among those who applied for UI benefits between March and December 2020, roughly three-quarters (77 percent) reported being successful (Carey et al. 2021), but even successful applicants may have experienced delays in the delivery of their benefits (Bitler et al. 2020) because some state UI offices were suffering from well-documented backlogs in processing claims stretching weeks or months (DOL 2021). The rollout of the PUA program was notably problematic. Most states took more than thirty days to implement the program (DOL 2021), payments were subject to long delays (Greig et al. 2021), and some states initially paid recipients the minimum allowable benefit in order to expedite payments, with the expectation that recipients would be made whole retroactively (GAO 2020b).

Compounding their administrative and operational challenges, the UI programs did not provide relief equitably, cushioning the loss of earnings for some groups of workers more than for others. UI receipt varied dramatically—but not randomly—by state, as pandemic-era access to benefits was associated with the states' UI policies and pre-pandemic coverage levels (Bell et al. 2021; Carey et al. 2021; Forsythe and Yang 2021). Among those who applied for UI benefits through the end of 2020, Black and Hispanic workers, younger workers, workers from lower-income households, and workers with less formal education were less likely to receive them (Carey et al. 2021). The lower recipiency rate for PUA-eligible individuals also likely disproportionately affected low-wage workers (Forsythe 2023).

In addition to UI benefits that directly targeted workers displaced by the pandemic, the federal government also approved more broadly targeted direct cash transfers. Between March 2020 and March 2021, Congress approved three rounds of EIPs ranging from $1,200 to $2,800 for each married couple and from $500 to $1,400 for each dependent child. Payments began phasing out for couples with an adjusted gross income of more than $150,000. Married parents earning less than $150,000 and supporting two children would have been eligible for a total of $11,400 (Treasury n.d.). Relative to the UI programs, the disbursement of EIPs went smoothly, relying as it did on information contained in previously filed federal tax returns. However, an assessment of the first round of EIPs found that nearly nine million eligible individuals had not received their funds several months after disbursement began, many because their low level of income did not require them to file a tax return. The assessment also uncovered issues related to underpayment as well as problems

with the distribution of prepaid debit cards for recipients with no bank account information on file (GAO 2020a). A survey conducted in May 2020 indicated that, relative to higher-income and White respondents, individuals living below the poverty line and Black and Hispanic individuals were less likely to receive the initial EIP (Holtzblatt and Karpman 2020). Additional analyses of bank account and survey data suggest that individuals with lower balances and lower incomes were less likely to receive an EIP than those with greater resources (Ratcliffe et al. 2023).

Mixed Signals on Household Financial Stability

In the aggregate, the UI and EIP programs kept millions out of poverty, particularly in the early months of the pandemic (Han, Meyer, and Sullivan 2020; Parolin et al. 2020), and the UI program alone lowered the official count of the impoverished by 4.7 million in 2020 (Chen and Shrider 2021). Both safety net programs continued to lift millions above the poverty threshold into 2021 (Creamer et al. 2022), a year in which self-reported financial well-being reached its highest level in a national survey begun in 2013 (FRB 2022). Further, those making less than $30,000 annually saw a two percentage-point improvement in their financial health between 2020 and 2021 (Dunn et al. 2021). There is a vast body of evidence suggesting that those who received UI benefits had an economic advantage over those who applied for but did not receive such benefits (FRB 2020; Carey et al. 2021; Dunn et al. 2021); similar findings are associated with the receipt of EIPs (Dunn et al. 2021; Karpman and Acs 2020).

Evidence is clear that both EIPs and UI benefits provided needed financial support and promoted general economic security for those who received them (Whittaker and Isaacs 2022), with the benefits accruing to some types of households more than others. EIPs disproportionately supported the spending needs of lower-income and unemployed households (Armantier et al. 2021; Boutros 2020), as well as those living paycheck to paycheck, those with lower account balances and liquid wealth, and Black and Hispanic adults (Karger and Rajan 2021; Baker et al. 2020; Parker et al. 2021, 2022;

Horowitz, Brown, and Minkin 2021). In addition to helping cover typical expenses, the receipt of both EIPs and UI benefits led to spending increases for low-income households (Chetty et al. 2020; Chetty, Friedman, and Stepner 2021; Greig, Deadman, and Noel 2021). Account balances declined more quickly for unemployed, younger, and lower-income account holders than for their counterparts, however (Farrell et al. 2020; Greig, Deadman, and Noel 2021). A study using checking account data shows that the lowest-income account holders had the highest percent increase in account balances (65 percent) in December 2021 relative to 2019 levels, but given their low starting points, this amounted to an increase of only around $500 (Greig, Deadman, and Sonthalia 2022).

Given the dramatic level of job loss and the temporary and episodic nature of the UI programs and EIP disbursement, to say nothing of the noted challenges with their administration, improvements in aggregate measures of well-being mask a fair amount of heterogeneity. In spite of the safety net programs, those who lost employment were much more likely than those who had not been laid off to struggle covering their expenses (FRB 2021; Holzer, Hubbard, and Strain 2021; Despard et al. 2020; Dua et al. 2021), with higher levels of financial distress observed both for those with lower levels of education and for Black and Hispanic adults (Dunn et al. 2021; FRB 2021). Financial stressors included difficulty covering food costs, medical expenses, and housing payments (Bitler et al. 2020; Dua et al. 2021; Despard et al. 2020; GAO 2020b; Karpman et al. 2020). Of note, according to a survey administered in early 2021, even among those using UI benefits to cover spending needs, nearly one-third had a very difficult time meeting usual household expenses, and nearly one-quarter of those also receiving SNAP benefits occasionally experienced food insecurity (Mohanty 2021). A reliance on earnings rather than benefits was far from a guarantee of financial stability, given that about half of those who experienced a pay cut after February 2020 reported earning less money in early 2021 than before the pandemic (Horowitz, Brown, and Minkin 2021).

Low-income households facing economic

distress discussed a variety of coping strategies, including increased indebtedness, a reduction in spending, and the depletion of savings (Mattingly et al. 2021; Karpman et al. 2020). Some adults who experienced income volatility turned to gig work, a strategy that may have been only partially effective in smoothing earnings during the pandemic (FRB 2021; Liu 2020), but one that may have filled a desire to work and, in some cases, to receive income more quickly than UI claims could be processed (Ravenelle, Kowalski, and Janko 2021).

The Work Disincentives Debate

As discussed, whether and the extent to which workers opted out of the labor force in favor of enhanced UI benefits was a contested topic in the popular press, and it received a substantial amount of attention from the research community. The evidence is mixed.

Focusing on the effects of the $600 supplement, analyses of small business payroll data suggest that differences in states' replacement rates had little to no effect on a worker's likelihood of remaining unemployed or returning to work (Bartik et al. 2020; Finamor and Scott 2021). Likewise, states' relative replacement rates were not found to be associated with job growth after the supplement ended (Dube 2021). Although one study suggests that the $600 supplement had a larger effect on job application activity (Marinescu, Skandalis, and Zhao 2021), the effect on recipients' job-finding rates seems to have been only small to moderate (Ganong et al. 2023; Petrosky-Nadeau and Valletta 2023).

The decision made by some governors to end the $300 supplement in mid-2021 prior to its federal expiration provided another opportunity to test whether enhanced UI benefits were affecting workers' decision to participate in the labor force. When states announced their intention to end the benefit early, their share of national online job postings clicks increased measurably but fleetingly (Kolko 2021). Comparing workers' behavior in states that withdrew with those in states that retained the supplement, an analysis of bank transaction data finds a modest increase in the job-finding rate of workers in the former but attributes the finding to the exhaustion of UI benefits rather than the ending of the $300 supplement; this effect is characterized as being toward the lower end of what historical research on UI would suggest (Coombs et al. 2022). Other studies using a traditional labor market survey also find employment increases in states that ended the $300 supplement early (Arbogast and Dupor 2023; Holzer, Hubbard, and Strain 2021). With a few exceptions, the research generally suggests that even though the expansion of UI benefits had measurable impacts on the propensity to seek work, the impacts were relatively small (Ganong et al. 2022). The temporary nature of the pandemic-era supplements, the difficulty finding a job during a recession, and the prevalence of workers being recalled after a temporary layoff are offered as explanations for the relatively small employment effects associated with both supplements (Ganong et al. 2023), alongside health risks during the pandemic and the closure of schools and daycares (Ganong et al. 2022).

Workers themselves also shed light on the degree to which UI benefits and EIP receipt affected their decision to rejoin or remain in the labor force. In nationwide focus groups, noncollege workers generally suggested that support from these programs did not allow them to stop seeking employment altogether but, in some cases, gave them the flexibility to find better-paying work instead of accepting the first offer (Miller et al. 2023). In a survey administered to employees of small businesses in mid-2020, only 7 percent of those negatively affected by COVID said they would not look for work because it was not financially necessary to do so (Bartik et al. 2020). Another survey exploring the first round of EIPs found that the payments would not affect the labor force activity of the vast majority of respondents. Among unemployed respondents, more suggested they would begin looking for a job or put more effort into their existing search after receiving an EIP than said an EIP would reduce their job-search activity (Coibion, Gorodnichenko, and Weber 2020). Finally, in response to a survey administered in mid-2021, unemployed noncollege workers who were not urgently searching for a job suggested that the fear of contracting COVID was the primary reason for their lack of urgency. For these workers, the three most im-

portant milestones that would encourage a return to work were the availability of more job opportunities, increased vaccinations, and UI benefits or savings running out, in that order (Bunker 2021).

Existing research leaves no room for doubt that lower-wage and noncollege workers bore the brunt of the employment disruptions associated with COVID-19 pandemic and recession. Aggregate statistics indicate that the relatively generous expansion of UI benefits and the distribution of EIPs fortified household balance sheets in the wake of this employment shock, but there is also evidence that certain groups faced unequal access to these resources and persistent economic hardship. Complementing more traditional sources of survey and administrative data, the AVP offers a new source of in-depth information collected directly from scores of low-income households who shared their stories during this tumultuous period. As a first-of-its-kind, large-scale immersive-interviewing platform, we assess the utility of the AVP as a tool to monitor labor market conditions during a crisis by exploring these households' experiences in the labor market, their efforts to balance a budget, their interactions with state UI offices, and their decisions surrounding labor force participation.

DATA AND METHODS

This analysis follows as closely as possible the consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (Tong, Sainsbury, and Craig 2007). Our three-person research team (two males, one female) includes members of the Community Development departments at the Federal Reserve Banks of Cleveland and Philadelphia. Our team generally focuses on issues related to workforce development and economic mobility for low- and moderate-income individuals. We are seasoned research professionals but less experienced with the type of full-scale qualitative research project undertaken in this analysis. Recognizing our inexperience, we sought out and benefited from the guidance and support of an experienced qualitative methodologist throughout this project. Eight Federal Reserve Banks, including our own, were among a coalition of AVP supporters, but the research team was not connected to the production of data.

Data

In this analysis, we rely exclusively on AVP interview transcripts. The AVP was a large-scale, qualitative data collection effort involving a representative sample of American households and led by the Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality. The interview protocol included roughly two hundred questions spanning a wide range of topics such as life history, family, daily routines, and health; detailed demographic information was collected for each household member, as were data on living costs, income, and program participation, including the receipt of UI benefits. The interviews, which were conducted by current college students or college graduates who received intensive training in qualitative interviewing, lasted an average of 2.2 hours, and interviewees were compensated anywhere from $60 to $145 for their time (Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality 2021). In total, more than 2,700 interviews were conducted between July 2019 and August 2021, with those prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic conducted in person and the remainder by phone. In March 2020, questions exploring the impact of the pandemic were added to the interview protocol, including a question about the receipt of stimulus funds (that is, EIPs); additional questions about crossroads and turning points that tended to yield very rich responses were added in September 2020. Interviews were recorded, and transcripts were deidentified before being made available for research purposes. Additional information on the AVP data set can be found in the introduction to this issue (Edin et al. 2024).

Approach

We consider our approach to be aligned with thematic analysis as described in Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006). Our research questions were motivated by an interest in better understanding the COVID-19 pandemic and associated federal relief programs on low-income households—and specifically, how these relief programs affected household financial stability and labor force attachment. As is customary with secondary analysis, we underwent an inductive process to collect information relevant to our research questions, remaining flexible to allow the data to guide and refine

our focus (Hinds, Vogel, and Clarke-Steffen 1997; Chatfield 2020). Doing so allowed us to not only address our specific research questions but also provide important, if unexpected, context on the employment and financial experiences of low-income households during this period.

Sample Selection

We use the second national sample of AVP interviews, conducted between September 2020 and August 2021 because it included new questions that yielded responses relevant to our inquiry. More than seven hundred interviews were completed as part of the second national sample, but only 490 had been transcribed at the time of our analysis. We limit our sample to households with earnings below 200 percent of the poverty level for the corresponding year, using Health and Human Services poverty guidelines for 2020 and 2021, adjusted for household size. We further restrict the sample to interviewees younger than fifty-five years old and exclude those who were disabled, retired, a seasonal worker, or a full-time student. We use household earnings to select our sample because research on the pandemic's employment effects shows that low-wage workers absorbed the brunt of the job losses and received the greatest boost to their income through the expanded safety net programs. The other exclusions allow us to focus on those most likely to be in the labor force, which was critical to our research questions. Seventy-six interviewees satisfied these criteria.

Relative to the second national sample and largely a product of our selection criteria, households in our sample had much lower earnings in the last year, were considerably younger, had lower levels of educational attainment, included more people per household, and were more likely to be employed or in the labor force (see table 1). Our sample also has broad geographic representation, including transcripts from twenty-one of the thirty-six states represented in the second national sample. These interviews were conducted during a period when COVID-19 presented significant health risks, and while the economy was improving, the unemployment rate was still above pre-pandemic levels (see figure 1).

Analysis

We used an inductive process to develop our codebook as we became familiar with the information contained in the transcripts. As mentioned, our initial reading of the transcripts allowed us to gain familiarity with content and develop our codebook. We refined our initial codebook through an iterative process of double and triple coding more than twenty transcripts, using NVivo (March 2020 version), a qualitative software program to facilitate the coding of passages, store results, and ensure coding consistency. During this process, we collectively discussed and settled discrepancies among coders, which helped us refine the definitions of our codes. To ensure a common and consistent understanding of the codebook throughout the analysis, we double-coded every fifth transcript and discussed and resolved any differences. After we finished coding the transcripts, we independently summarized what we viewed as the major themes associated with each code and then met as a team to discuss our interpretations and settle on what we consider to be our primary findings. As part of this process, we used the demographic information collected during the interviews to explore whether any themes were more or less prevalent across a variety of household characteristics, including the number of adults and children present, the ratio of last year's earnings to the federal poverty guideline, residence in an urban, suburban, or rural area, and the race and ethnicity, education, age, and country of birth for adults in the household.[3]

Figure 2 presents a visual oversimplification of our codebook and a preview of how we present our findings in the following section. It also

3. Because AVP interviews were intended to capture the experiences of all household members, using household—rather than interviewee—characteristics is more appropriate for identifying group differences. We developed separate categories for households with adults of different races or ethnicities or falling into different age bins. We used the highest educational attainment of adult members to classify households by education, and we classified any household with an adult born outside the United States as an immigrant household.

Table 1. Interviewee Characteristics

	Study Sample		Second National Sample	
	Unweighted	Weighted	Unweighted	Weighted
Gender				
Female	58%	45%	59%	51%
Race-ethnicity				
White alone, not Hispanic	50%	47%	53%	58%
Black alone, not Hispanic	25%	24%	22%	12%
Average age	31	34	47	48
Average household size	2.8	3.0	2.4	2.5
Average household earnings last year	$20,634	$19,974	$36,978	$42,355
Employment status				
Employed	71%	72%	48%	46%
Unemployed, looking for work	14%	15%	7%	7%
Not in labor force[a]	14%	13%	38%	43%
Other-Unknown	0%	0%	6%	4%
Education				
Less than high school diploma	17%	30%	8%	11%
High school diploma	32%	36%	21%	27%
Some college (including associate's degree)	37%	23%	29%	30%
Bachelor's degree or higher, unknown	14%	11%	42%	31%
Neighborhood type				
Urban	57%	39%	40%	27%
Suburban-rural	43%	61%	60%	73%
N	76	16%	490	100%

Source: Authors' calculations using American Voices Project data.
Note: Categories representing ten or fewer interviewees are combined with other categories or excluded to protect confidentiality.
[a] Includes interviewees classified as unemployed and not looking for work, retired, disabled, full-time students, and seasonal workers. Among these groups, only the first is included in the study sample.

clearly depicts how our exploration of the transcripts for information related specifically to household financial stability and the ways that pandemic relief programs might disincentivize work led to the discovery of our primary themes. Although the transcripts contained virtually no information suggesting safety net programs affected household members' labor force participation, they were rich in information on the connection between employment loss and financial hardship. Further, we found that gig work was both a direct casualty of the pandemic and a common financial coping strategy. For some interviewees, employment loss and subsequent financial distress led to heightened levels of stress and anxiety, which we refer to broadly as negative impacts on interviewees' mental well-being.[4] Depending on their implementation, pandemic relief programs played a role in lessening these hardships for some and compounding them for others.

4. We are interested in aspects of financial and mental well-being that interviewees directly associated with pandemic-related employment loss.

Figure 1. U.S. Economic and Public Health Context, 2020–2021

Interviews in our sample (left axis)
Unemployment rate (%, left axis)
COVID-19 deaths (right axis)
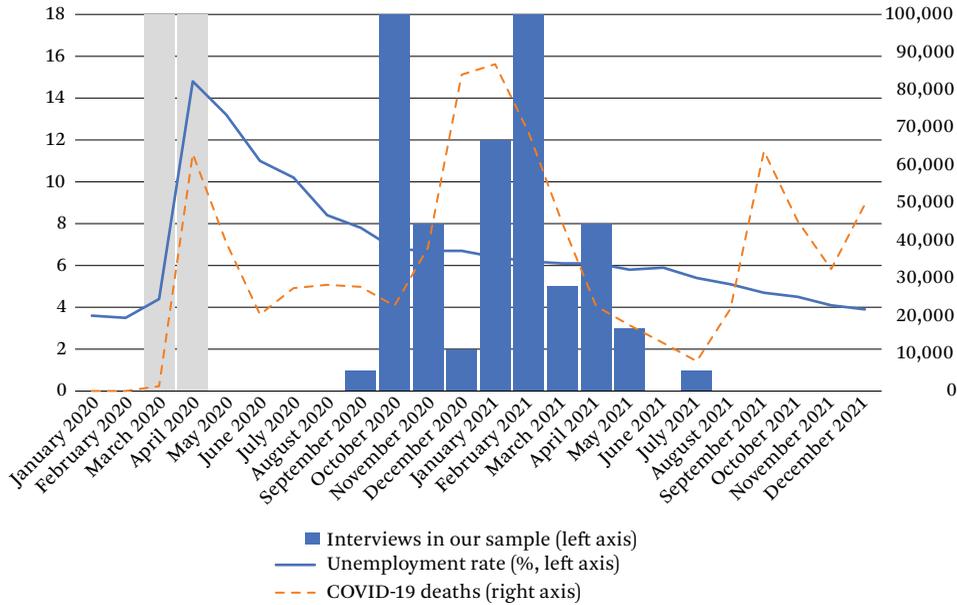
Source: Authors' calculations using American Voices Project data; BLS (n.d.-c); Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (n.d.).
Note: The bar on the left spans March and April of 2020 designating the recession. Weekly COVID deaths aggregated to months using the month corresponding to the first day of the week.

Figure 2. Schema Illustrating Intersection of Themes Explored
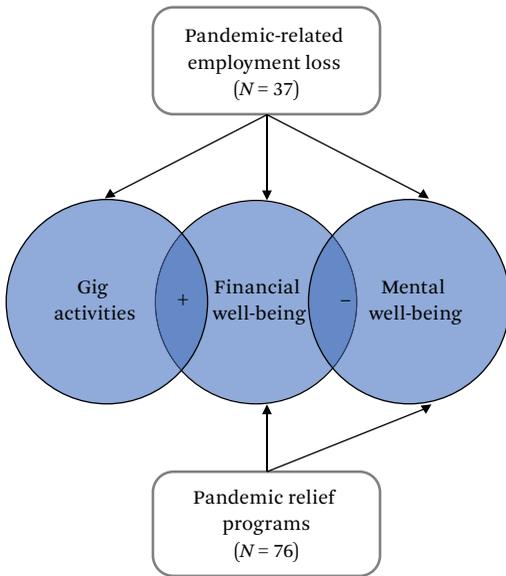
Source: Authors' tabulation.

FINDINGS

The labor market disruption wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic has been well established, but interviewees' accounts of this disruption provide important context for our findings. Given the economy-wide magnitude of job losses and their concentration at the lower end of the wage spectrum, it is perhaps unsurprising that we find evidence of pandemic-related employment loss for a subsample of thirty-seven of the seventy-six households (the subsample). Many of these interviewees, or those in their household, experienced a permanent layoff as a direct consequence of the COVID-19 recession, but reduced hours and temporary layoffs of weeks or months were more common.[5]

It is within the job loss subsample that we explore two primary themes emerging from our analysis. We discuss the impact of employment loss on the subsamples' financial and mental well-being and then highlight the pandemic's

5. We use permanent layoff to describe a permanent separation from the employer and temporary layoff to describe a layoff from a job to which a worker expects to be recalled.

effects on gig work that played a critical role in stabilizing household finances. We neither searched for nor expected to find rich content on mental well-being and gig work as we reviewed interviewees' discussions of employment loss and subsequent financial stability, but the importance of these issues was evident in the transcripts. Our final set of findings related to UI benefits and EIPs draws on the full sample to capture the widespread receipt of EIPs across low-income households in our sample.

In an effort to center the voices of those with lived experiences, quotes from fifteen interviewees residing in fourteen states and representing diversity along such dimensions as self-identified race and ethnicity, gender, and age are used throughout this section to support and describe the themes we discuss. The age category of the interviewee, whether the household's earnings were below 100 percent or between 100 and 199 percent of the federal poverty guideline, the season and year of the interview, and general type of work are provided.[6]

Financial and Mental Well-Being

In spite of the short-term nature of the employment disruption for many households and the pandemic relief programs available during this period, interviewees from more than half of the households in our subsample described financial hardships or declining financial stability as a direct consequence of their pandemic-related employment loss. Interviewees discussed their difficulties making ends meet; falling behind on rent and utility payments was commonly reported and, in some cases, accompanied by references to subsequent housing instability.[7] In the words of one health-care worker who was out of work for months due to the pandemic: "When my rent's short, I would pay the rent that I'm short on with the next check and then catch up. I didn't catch up really because I had other expenses like [inaudible]. I tried to catch up as much as I could" [age 35 to 54, below 100 percent, winter 2021].

"Ouch in My Pocket"

Even though none of the households in our sample earned more than twice the poverty level in the prior year, the financial hardship discussed by some interviewees seemed to mark a turning point toward instability. Reflecting on the swiftness of this transition, one worker who was also a student said, "all of a sudden, I don't have my ducks in a row. And it's not my fault." Another remarked that as a result of the pandemic, their "income has changed tremendously" and they "barely make it." The health-care worker lamented that after paying the rent on time for many years, they had fallen behind on payments and may have no choice but to move without paying what they owe, despite renting from landlords they considered to be good and patient. When asked to compare the last few months with the prior year, an interviewee who worked in the hospitality industry said, "Like, it's totally different from last year. Last year, I was doing good. This time, the hours are short. We're not getting paid what we were. So, it's like been a big ouch in my pocket" [age 35 to 54, below 100 percent, fall 2020].

The apparent disconnect between the temporary bouts of under- or unemployment described by most of this subsample and the level of economic hardship described in the interviews may reflect the small margin for error in the financial conditions of households living in or near poverty. The most common strategy interviewees mentioned to make ends meet involved taking on debt, frequently by borrowing from family or friends but sometimes by using more formal lines of credit. Other strategies included reducing spending, negotiating with creditors, and prioritizing which bills to pay ahead of others. A few also described drawing down savings, but some households had little to no reservoir. When asked whether they would be able to cover an unexpected $400 expense, one construction worker replied,

> No, I would not have the money. My bank account is at zero as of right now, so as far as how would I get the money, I might have to

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6. The information provided is purposefully limited to protect the identity of interviewees.

7. For more on housing insecurity as seen through the lens of AVP interviews, see Max Besbris and colleagues (2024, this issue).

ask my mother for a couple of bucks, and then maybe go out to one of my old bosses and try to get a loan or something like that. I don't really have a lot of resources on extra funds. We're living day to day. [age 18 to 34, below 100 percent, fall 2020]

"Bad Days"

For some of the households in our subsample, the consequences extended beyond a weakened sense of financial well-being. During the course of their interviews, many also mentioned heightened levels of stress, worry, and anxiety; we refer to these instances collectively as negative effects on the mental well-being of interviewees or members of their household. Roughly one-fourth of these thirty-seven interviewees discussed the impact of their employment loss, or fear of such loss, on their mental well-being. Most associated declines in mental well-being with the financial hardships stemming from their loss of employment, such as the inability to pay rent or keep the lights on, but this laid-off worker's response to a question about struggling with depression and anxiety suggests the loss of the job itself levied its own emotional toll:

> Yeah, I have bad days. I get depressed especially, just not necessarily the lockdown, just not having a full-time job, not being able to, I'm used to paying for everything in the house and now, having to split a bill here and there with pop, I don't like that just because he raised me and I owe him. He doesn't owe me, so I mean, I get down on myself not a lot, but a few days here and there, I feel depressed and stuff like that. It's not overwhelmingly depressed, but I know when it's happening. I know the days that I'm depressed. I can just feel it, but it's really more because of the full-time work thing than it is anything else. [age 35 to 54, 100–199 percent, fall 2020]

This quote is illustrative of the depth and acuity of most interviewees' references to mental well-being—a heightened sense of concern, stress, and anxiety but one that does not pervade the interview. Others, however, conveyed a deeper level of distress. One interviewee who worked in the auto industry described being at

their "wits' end" as they contemplated a return to criminal activities to stay afloat financially. Several interviewees alluded to deep-seated concerns about the future and the uncertainty surrounding their employment and financial situations. Echoing the point made about rising financial instability, the worker-student noted, "Because it's like, you never know what the next month is going to be like, and I've never had that uncertainty, ever in my life." Describing their current financial situation, a former server said, "It scares me to death, that's how I feel, I can't get a job, I can't get any help, and I don't know what I'm going to do."

Work-related stressors evident among interviewees who lost employment were not limited to the financial implications of this loss. Other stressors, such as the fear of catching COVID-19 in the workplace and being overworked, arose but were discussed infrequently. In some cases, however, interviewees shared experiences that reflected the unique, cumulative effects of undergoing financial strain during a pandemic, as one employee working at a car wash stated: "The pandemic has affected my mental health with my anxiety because, I mean, my checks were cut up, so my bills were piling up, being around people and thinking, you know, they might have it has made my anxiety skyrocket to the point where I can't be around other people or go to store or go to the restaurant, I don't feel safe" [age 18 to 34, 100–199 percent, fall 2020].

Among the thirty-seven interviewees in the subsample, households with earnings below 100 percent of the federal poverty guideline and those with a lower level of formal education (no more than a high school diploma) were more likely to discuss negative impacts on both their financial and mental well-being than were their higher-income and more formally educated counterparts, respectively. These differences by educational attainment may be explained by the correlation in our sample between education and earnings.

Gig Work

As stated previously and as illustrated by the experiences of the thirty-seven households in our subsample, pandemic-related employment loss took many different forms, from a

short-term reduction in hours to a permanent layoff. In some cases, the pandemic disrupted the earnings from a traditional employee-employer relationship (W-2 earnings), whereas in others, earnings from gig work, such as side jobs, freelance work, selling items of value, or temporary employment, were casualties of the pandemic.

"Blow into Our Finances"

The loss of earnings from gig work was described by roughly one-fifth of the subsample. Interviewees discussed experiences ranging from the loss of seasonal employment at an amusement park to the need to curtail babysitting "once COVID numbers started spiking up." A chef discussed the opportunity to do private, in-home cooking demonstrations and the impact of the pandemic on this nascent entrepreneurial activity:

> I do some stuff on the side here and there if people want — I had this one lady that [inaudible] but she wants me to do like a personal like a private cooking show for her, and her immediate friends and family. To where I would show up at her house with my equipment stuff like that, and actually just cook for them make something good for them let's do a little dinner show. I can do stuff like that on the side I don't get it very often like [inaudible] one of my first few that I've done, but I've never been able to get this one done yet, because it's just this whole coronavirus thing threw me off. [age 18 to 34, below 100 percent, fall 2020]

For many of these interviewees, the loss of income from gig work was paired with—and compounded by—a reduction in earnings from their primary form of employment. In the words of one recent college graduate:

> I did lose a lot of working hours. I worked 40 hours a week to maybe like 15 or 20. So I was still able to keep my job, which is great, and then I also made a lot of money selling [creative works] and when the pandemic hit, no one wanted to buy [creative works] because nobody wanted to spend extra money on something they couldn't afford. And so that

took a blow into our finances as well. [age 18 to 34, 100–199 percent, fall 2020]

"Got to Pay Bills"

Gig work was raised not only as a casualty of the pandemic but also as an important financial coping strategy. For some interviewees, it was difficult to discern whether these efforts predated the pandemic as part of an established system for making ends meet, but for most, they were clearly a direct response to the pandemic-related employment disruption. Illustrating a hybrid case, one stay-at-home mother of two suggested that while finding a side job to make ends meet was not atypical, "it's been more frequently having to make ends meet with the COVID and everything" because a household member had their hours reduced at work. Among this group, very few references were made to jobs in the platform economy, such as food delivery or rideshare services (for an analysis of the app-based platform economy using AVP data, see Jackson 2024, this issue); instead, interviewees described more informal efforts to offer services for hire in the community. One interviewee described their daily routine as follows: "I wake up and I check my phone and emails and all that stuff to check for a job. . . . Hopefully, I have jobs. If I have jobs, then I plan my day according to them, but if there's no work . . . then I got my own little room back here and I fill out job applications, play [video games], find something constructive to do" [age 35 to 54, 100–199 percent, fall 2020].

Other interviewees discussed selling goods rather than services. Examples included masks, digital content for video games, and making snacks distributed via both farmers markets and an online marketplace. Others discussed selling personal belongings for whatever cash they could generate after their hours were cut at their primary job:

> I had to sell personal items that I didn't want to sell, I had to sell things from my house that meant a lot to me, I had to sell other things that were worth a lot more money for less money just, because it's like well I got to pay bills. . . . So we've lost a lot of things that we didn't want to lose, but we've gotten through

and we've come on the other end of it we're starting to do better now due to my new job. [age 18 to 34, below 100 percent, fall 2020]

The Role of Pandemic Relief Programs

Shortly after the onset of the pandemic, an unprecedented number of federal, state, and local policies and programs were enacted to protect the U.S. economy and stabilize the labor market, particularly for vulnerable households. Because the AVP interview guide included direct questions about the receipt of UI benefits and stimulus payments (EIPs), and given the level of employment loss in our sample and widespread eligibility for EIPs, interviewees commonly discussed these programs in particular.[8] In this section, we use the full sample of seventy-six households to explore interviewees' use of these funds and views on program effectiveness.

"It Did Help a Lot"

Interviewees who elaborated on how UI benefits and EIPs were spent primarily discussed covering essential expenses. This included paying "the bills" (such as rent and utilities), and thus the funds helped offset some of the described financial hardships. A handful of interviewees suggested that these programs covered no more—and sometimes less—than their essential living expenses. One interviewee who was laid off from their job early in the pandemic put it plainly, stating "there's nothing left over for anything" after using their unemployment check for basic needs. When asked how a temporary layoff affected their pay and benefits, a worker at a meat processing plant remarked, "They kind of affected it a lot. Meaning I had to make a lot of sacrifices, but at the same time, the unemployment did help. It did help a lot. If it wasn't for that I don't know how I probably would have made it through to be honest with you" [age 18 to 34, below 100 percent, fall 2020].

Rather than covering ongoing living expenses, a few interviewees allocated their EIPs, in particular, to large, unexpected spending shocks such as a veterinary bill, braces for their

children, or compensation to another motorist for an automobile accident. Others discussed earmarking any surplus funds to cover future expenses. Households with earnings below 100 percent of the federal poverty guideline and households whose adults self-identified as Black were more likely than their counterparts to discuss using pandemic relief funds to cover essential living expenses. The latter observation may be explained by the fact that Black households in the sample had lower average earnings than households in the other race and ethnicity categories.

As might be expected in light of our focus on low-income households, only a handful in our sample suggested that they did not need the pandemic relief funds, spent them on discretionary items, or described a stronger household balance sheet as a result of their UI benefits or EIP receipt. One unemployed delivery worker mentioned how the "free money . . . helped us catch up on a lot of stuff" and expressed optimism that next year would be even better. This interviewee was the only one in our sample to make a clear connection between receipt of pandemic relief funds and labor force participation, stating that because "the government has given us free money, we don't really have to work."

Only one other interviewee even approximately suggested pandemic relief funds acted as a disincentive to work. After describing their partner's ability to find informal work as being back and forth—consisting of anywhere between five and forty hours per week—the worker-student discussed the tension their partner felt between trying to earn income through gig work and maintaining their crucial, albeit unreliable, UI benefits:

Okay. So, like, when you're on like unemployment, like if you make any additional money, like usually, like put that in, and so it comes off of what you get every week. So, like, when he gets his unemployment check, he just won't work that week, just so we can keep that money coming in. Because when you do like too many weeks where you're trying to pick

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8. In addition to these programs, a handful of interviewees also discussed enhanced Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits and rent and utility assistance.

up side jobs and claim unemployment, they're like, cancel your claim. So, like, he'll do like unemployment and then if like, they hold up his account for like identity verification for like a month, then he'll like go and work for it's like, it's really inconsistent. Because I can't even say, like he works as much a week, just because it's not the same at all, every week is so different. But normally, he'll be a full-time everyday worker. [age 18 to 34, below 100 percent, winter 2021]

Earlier in the interview, the same interviewee said "it's like you're not allowed to work" in reference to receiving their UI benefits.

"Unemployment Has Been a Nightmare"
Although relief programs were intended to ease the financial stress on vulnerable households brought on by the pandemic, challenges navigating the UI system in particular led to adverse outcomes for some interviewees and their household members. Interviewees described interacting with the UI system as the worst, stressful, and a battle. Criticisms of the system fell into four primary categories: being denied or failing to receive assistance, delays in benefit receipt, inconsistency of payments, and difficulties contacting program administrators. The first pertains to both UI benefits and EIPs; the last three were raised in connection with the UI system only.

Some interviewees felt they were unjustifiably denied benefits on applying, were deemed to be ineligible, or did not receive the assistance to which they felt entitled. The complexity of program eligibility renders it impossible to tell which denials were supported by fact and which were unjustified, but it is clear in the transcripts that some interviewees felt as if the programs were not administered equitably. For example, the construction worker explained that they had to take time off of work to supervise their children who were attending school virtually from home. Eventually, the worker was fired and later denied UI benefits: "So, I lost my job. . . . There wasn't like kids going back to school, which meant I had to stay home with my kids. Which meant I had no . . . I lost my job because of it. But when I checked, when I tried

to fill out unemployment, they said that wasn't a reason" [age 18 to 34, below 100 percent, fall 2020].

Several interviewees also criticized the pandemic relief programs for the delays they experienced receiving benefits. For most, these objections were raised within the context of the described financial hardships, when relief funds were urgently needed. Administrative hiccups led to months of backpay in one case, and, in another, the post approval notification that a review specialist would need to get involved delayed the distribution of funds. A related but distinct concern with UI implementation was the inconsistent nature of payments even after they were approved. The former server described their frustration with interrupted or intermittent payments, as illustrated by these comments that also allude to delays that compounded the inconsistency: "So I started [serving] again, and I was making ends meet, and COVID hit, that took away the job, unemployment has been a nightmare, you can't get it hardly, and if you do, they stop, they start it, they stop, they start it, there's no, and it takes six months to even get it going, and then if it stops, takes another three to four months" [age 35 to 54, below 100 percent, spring 2021].

Finally, some interviewees found it difficult to get in contact with UI administrators when seeking more information about the program or their eligibility. As interviewees discussed this and other shortcomings in the UI system, feelings of stress and anxiety were shared, which serves as a testament to the criticality of funds for underresourced households. This passage from the worker-student encapsulates several of the broad categories of complaint highlighted in this section and illustrates how the program's perceived flaws undermined both financial and mental well-being for those it was meant to serve:

I mean, I feel sick. Sometimes I get headaches just because of stress. And I mean that happens being a student and working but it's all that stress of like, it's serious like, I wonder like, "Okay, I have a bill due next month if I can't pay it, what's going to happen?" What am I going to have my lights on? Or am I

gonna have my heat on what's going to happen here? . . . And really, I mean, you get your unemployment so inconsistent when you call try to get help, no one answers. The lines are so busy. I mean, they add that extra $300 here in [state], no one's seen it yet. I mean, it's just, it's stressful, and it's stressful, and it's negative. And day-to-day stuff right now it's tough. [age 18 to 34, below 100 percent, winter 2021].

When delivered as expected, UI benefits and EIPs helped ameliorate the financial hardships that many households in our sample experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic and associated recession. Implementation and deployment challenges encountered by interviewees illustrate how the programs could also prove detrimental to both financial and mental well-being.

DISCUSSION
In this article, we present our analysis of transcripts from seventy-six in-depth interviews conducted with low-income households as part of the American Voices Project. We sought to learn whether and to what extent a large-scale qualitative data platform such as the AVP could contribute to public policy questions surrounding the federal response to the financial and employment disruptions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic that were known to disproportionately affect low-income workers and households. Reflecting the direction of both quantitative research and active policy debates during this period, the research questions we used to guide our examination of the data set were: How did interviewees experiencing negative employment effects describe the role that safety net programs played in stabilizing household finances? And is there evidence that these programs affected the employment or job-search behaviors of beneficiaries? In this section, we begin by discussing our findings as they relate to our research questions. Shaped as they are by our experiences with the data, we end with our thoughts on how an immersive-interviewing platform such as the AVP could be a resource for monitoring labor market conditions and related policy responses.

We find that for many low-income households, the pandemic and recession led to a loss of employment that took many forms, from a slight reduction in hours to a permanent layoff. The depth and prevalence of related financial hardships described in the interviews challenge the broader notion of households on firm financial footing as a result of the pandemic relief programs. The experiences of many of the interviewees are more illustrative of prior quantitative studies highlighting some degree of household-level financial distress than of research suggesting a suppressed poverty rate or inflated checking account balances. Many of the interviewees who received pandemic relief funds described them as paramount to covering at least some essential living expenses, with fewer references to saving the proceeds or using the funds for discretionary expenses. Criticisms of the UI system, in particular, gave voice to the well-documented challenges to state offices facing unprecedented demand for their services.

We find little support for the position that expanded safety net programs acted as a disincentive to participating in the labor force. In our sample of thirty-seven interviewees with evidence of employment loss, in only one clear case did an interviewee describe UI benefits or EIPs in these terms. In only one other instance did an interviewee describe how UI rules and the irregular and inconsistent nature of benefit receipt affected their partner's market decisions. An important caveat to our findings, however, is that the absence of evidence should not be confused with evidence of absence. Participants were not directly asked about how relief programs affected their employment decisions, so it is entirely possible that interviewees did not discuss "all aspects of their experiences" (GAO 2022, 57) during the semistructured interview.

There is also reason to believe that both the study period and our sample selection criteria could have made it more likely that we would read transcripts describing financial distress rather than work disincentives. To leverage the rich responses to new questions added to the survey protocol in September 2020, we begin our study period in that month. Our sample therefore includes only interviews conducted after the expiration of the $600 UI supplement in July 2020, which may have ushered in a pe-

riod of "material hardship for a multitude of UI recipients" (Cortes and Forsythe 2021, 25). Interviews conducted between spring and summer 2020 may have revealed a different level of financial distress or additional evidence of benefits affecting interviewees' labor force participation. The same could be said for a study period that extended through the summer of 2021, when some states ended the $300 supplement early, but the last interviews available in the broader AVP database were conducted early that summer. Further, we intentionally constructed our sample to learn more about the experiences of the lowest-income households most likely to be affected by the pandemic-induced employment disruptions, but given their income levels, these same households were also most likely to face difficulty making ends meet generally. Even so, the AVP transcripts allowed us to burrow under the aggregate statistics and gave us a window into the financial stability of scores of low-income households during this period, and the view was not always as rosy as the top-line numbers would lead one to believe.

The interconnections between household financial stability and mental well-being highlight the opportunity for discovery that we view as an important strength of using qualitative data in spaces where quantitative analysis may be more customary. Consistent with pre-pandemic work illustrating unemployment's negative implications for mental well-being (McKee-Ryan et al. 2005; Paul and Moser 2009; Singh and Siahpush 2016), research has found that households experiencing an income shock or employment loss during the pandemic were more likely than others to experience depression or anxiety (Donnelly and Farina 2021; Killgore et al. 2021; McDowell et al. 2021; Panchal et al. 2023; Parker, Igielnik, and Kochhar 2021; Singh, Lee, and Azuine 2021; Reading Turchioe et al. 2021; Guerin et al. 2021; Kelley et al. 2023). The connections between job loss or financial stress and reduced mental well-being have been shown to be strongest for low-income workers (Guerin et al. 2021; Prime,

Wade, and Browne 2020). Regarding the association between UI receipt and mental well-being, our research appears to be aligned with recent work showing that UI benefits were effective in lessening the probability of anxiety and depressive symptoms for households receiving benefits (Berkowitz and Basu 2021; Donnelly and Farina 2021).[9] In their coverage of the stress surrounding denied claims, breakdowns in communication, delayed payments, and the financial hardships that ensued, AVP interviews with disgruntled applicants testify to this association.

Further underscoring the exploratory value of using qualitative data, the importance and vulnerability of gig work during this period emerged as integral to some interviewees' financial experiences. Research suggests that although overall fewer people participated in gig work in 2020 than in 2019 (FRB 2021), some who lost a job or had their hours reduced during the pandemic turned to gig work for income (Reynolds and Kincaid 2023; Accenture 2021), and gig activity was almost twice as common for those saying it is hard to get by than for those living comfortably (FRB 2022). Earnings from gig work were often considered essential or important in meeting basic needs (Anderson et al. 2021) and provided a financial buoy for Black and Latinx families, before and during the pandemic (Fields-White et al. 2020). In some instances, income from gig work was a substitute for those who did not apply for, did not receive, or could not wait for UI benefits (Ravenelle, Kowalski, and Janko 2021). Gig work was far from immune to the economic disruption caused by the pandemic, however, as demand shifted away from ride-sharing and other services that required physical contact and toward delivery services and online platforms for selling goods (FRB 2021; Accenture 2021; Liu 2020; Greig and Sullivan 2021). Putting a finer point on this disruption, nearly all of the dozens of contingent workers interviewed for a qualitative study reported losing employment due to decreased demand or restrictions on in-person services (GAO 2022).

9. Although the negative association between difficulties with UI receipt and mental well-being is evident in our sample of transcripts, those who are highly affected by stress have lower UI recipiency rates than those who are not (Forsythe and Yang 2021).

Our findings broadly support the literature's depiction of gig work during the pandemic as both a fallback source of income and a source of potential risk in the face of shifting demand during a public health crisis (Greig and Sullivan 2021).

Overall, our analysis suggests that with some improvements, an ongoing effort to collect in-depth, nationally representative, qualitative data could provide critical information to inform sound policy development in the future. Although it is true that our findings are largely aligned with prior research and that we claim nothing as wholly novel, it is also true that we did not gain access to the transcripts until more than eighteen months after the earliest interviews in our sample were conducted, a period during which a robust body of research was published. The value of the AVP, then, lies in the potential for more timely access to a repository of information collected with an interview protocol that can be modified to respond to the moment. For example, with dedicated resources and a process for timely transcription, coding, and analysis, specific challenges surrounding UI receipt for affected workers, which were evident in our sample and likely present in transcripts preceding our study period, could have been quickly and clearly identified. To be sure, these issues were raised in the press (Murphy Marcos 2020) and richly described in later qualitative analyses (Ravenelle, Kowalski, and Janko 2021; GAO 2022), but a more rigorous or more streamlined examination may have been possible if a nationally representative sample of immersive-interview transcripts had been readily available as problems with UI receipt emerged. A vast array of quantitative data sets that were not available or widely used during the Great Recession—for example, data on checking account balances (Greig, Deadman, and Noel 2021), online job applications and postings (Marinescu, Skandalis, and Zhao 2021), small business payroll data (Finamor and Scott 2021), and mobility tracking data (Bartik et al. 2020)—were used to monitor the COVID-19 recession as it unfolded. Ongoing, systematic interviews could be a qualitative complement to these data sets, mirroring their timeliness but improving on their depth and richness.

For any future efforts to create a large-scale, immersive-interviewing data platform, we make the following suggestions aimed at either improving access to these data or deepening the content. Regarding the former, transcripts should be made accessible to researchers on a rolling basis soon after interview completion, and the data set should be made publicly available. Both steps would drastically improve the platform's ability to inform policy-relevant research. Further, with safeguards in place to ensure the anonymity of participants, granting access to the general public would not only broaden its reach and expand its utility as a tool for evidence-based policy development (Chetty et al. 2020), but it would also improve transparency by allowing the results of future research to be replicated.

To deepen the content collected, we recommend developing several topic-specific interview modules—with a labor market module among them—to be delivered alongside a standard set of core questions. Doing so would allow for the elicitation of richer content without extending an already lengthy interview protocol. Next, to address what we recognized as missed opportunities in the transcripts, we recommend additional interviewer training on how to ask probing follow-up questions, a practice that might be more natural in a topically focused, modular interview. Finally, we propose a process that makes supplemental data collection possible, potentially through a short survey or a tailored interview protocol targeting a specific subsample of interviewees. The ability to explore a topic of interest in more depth would leverage the existing strengths of the AVP's design and overcome the difficulties we sometimes encountered in trying to interpret interviewee remarks that lacked depth, clarity, or context. We acknowledge that this process would need to ensure continued participant anonymity, be limited in scope so as not to overburden those involved, and include additional compensation for interviewees, but such a feature would allow researchers to better use these data for more directed analyses.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we analyze the transcripts from seventy-six interviews conducted with low-

income households between the fall of 2020 and the summer of 2021 as part of the American Voices Project. We conducted this analysis because we saw the potential for the AVP as a new source of rich information on labor market experiences and wanted to assess the AVP's ability to realize this potential. We did so by exploring the revealed experiences of households that lost employment during the COVID-19 pandemic and that ostensibly benefited from an expanded social safety net. In the transcripts, we find evidence of job loss for roughly half of our sample, and that, among these households, financial distress was not uncommon and was sometimes described in terms of the stress and anxiety that often accompany it. Although vulnerable to disruption during the pandemic, gig work was raised by some interviewees as an important economic lifeline, as were UI benefits and EIPs; administrative challenges associated with the UI system proved an independent source of stress for some households. We find little evidence that UI benefits or EIPs played a role in the labor market decisions of interviewees or their household members.

Our primary goal with this analysis was to assess the utility of a large-scale, immersive-interviewing platform such as the American Voices Project as a supplement to traditional market data. In comparing our findings with the literature, our conclusion is that although the experiences of our sample add depth and richness to the available quantitative analyses and are a good reminder of the heterogeneity that lies beneath averages and aggregates, we cannot claim any findings as wholly novel. We interpret the alignment of our findings with the vast body of relevant research as a testament to the quality and value of the AVP data set. Similarly ambitious data collection efforts in the future would benefit from several modifications to both improve timely access to the data and deepen its topical coverage. Given our experiences with the data and assuming these improvements, we believe a platform such as the American Voices Project could represent a powerful complement to the growing suite of real-time quantitative data available to inform both public policy and public opinion.

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Some Surviving, Others Thriving: Inequality in Loss and Coping During the Pandemic

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*We investigate the contrasting realities of the pandemic on psychosocial experiences and ways of coping among American Voices Project respondent surveys (*N = 720*) and interviews (*N = 172*). Despite similar levels of distress early in the pandemic, by late 2020 clear differences across education, race and ethnicity, and gender emerged, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Those with structural advantages reported greater gains from the pandemic, including self-improvement opportunities like therapy and time outdoors. In contrast, respondents without college degrees, Black and Hispanic individuals, and women reported experiencing greater psychosocial shocks into the later months of 2020 and feeling disproportionately undervalued, socially disconnected, and stressed, respectively. The former two groups also systematically differed in their coping strategies, which included hard work, emotion suppression, and faith.*

Keywords: inequality, pandemic, education, race, gender

> But only the strong survive, so there's no time to be depressed. . . . you have to be focused. . . . You just have to be strong and never give up. That's my motto. Be strong, man . . . no matter what the situation is.
>
> —Black man, high school degree,
> low income

> From a family perspective, it was the best. . . . It's made my husband and my marriage stronger because we just have got time together and talk and take walks in the neighborhood etcetera and do things that we couldn't do before when I was traveling or he was traveling.
>
> —White woman, college degree,
> high income

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The pandemic disrupted people's lives across the United States. Yet how it unfolded and what it meant for lived experiences and well-being are tightly bound up with social and economic status. To investigate the contrasting realities of the pandemic, and their impacts on well-being and ways of coping, we conducted a mixed-methods analysis of data from the American Voices Project (AVP), including both in-depth interviews and quantitative survey items.

Our findings highlight significant inequalities in experiences of loss—of well-being, dignity, and social support—and coping strategies during the early phases of the pandemic. After the initial health and economic shocks, individuals facing structural disadvantages, including those without college degrees, Black and Hispanic individuals, and, on some measures, women, were primarily just managing to survive.[1] Conversely, individuals with structural advantages were at times thriving during the pandemic. These types of inequalities and their consequences have been a focus of studies in both sociology and psychology (Calarco 2018; Calarco et al. 2020; Grusky, Hall, and Markus 2019; Markus and Stephens 2017; Ryff, Keyes, and Hughes 2003; Stephens, Emery, and Townsend, forthcoming).

In this study, we build on previous research using a novel mix of conversational interviews and quantitative surveys to specifically examine how the pandemic's disruption of everyday life affected individuals differently based on their education level, race, ethnicity, and gender. Our aim was to uncover patterns and themes in the psychological experiences and coping strategies of these diverse groups. We found that many respondents living with structural disadvantages during the pandemic described the major life chaos accompanying sickness, death, and financial insecurity. By contrast, White respondents, and especially those with college degrees, reported less severe inconveniences of cramped workspaces and children at home all day. Some even noted the pleasure in finally finding time for introspection, therapy, exercise routines, and cooking. The coping behaviors of the advantaged and the disadvantaged closely tracked the inequality in resources available to contend with their different lived realities.

At the end of 2020, the United States entered the third peak of COVID-19. During this period, Black and Hispanic individuals were disproportionately likely to experience firsthand illness or death in the family and growing fear of contracting COVID-19, impacts that reflected existing structural inequalities (Chetty et al. 2020; Egede and Walker 2020). Further, because pandemic-related job losses were concentrated among individuals without college degrees and among Black and Hispanic individuals and women (Koeze 2021), the end of expanded unemployment insurance and relief benefits and a fresh round of layoffs that occurred toward the end of 2020 meant more financial setbacks for these groups (Handwerker et al. 2020). Likely related to these differential impacts, the mental health of Black, Hispanic, and Asian individuals in the United States worsened to a greater extent than that of White individuals and these groups were also less likely to receive mental health care during the pandemic, according to nationally representative studies (Thomeer, Moody, and Yahirun 2023).

How stressed, depressed, or disrespected people felt corresponded to their decreased levels of employment, difficult financial situations, and exposure to the devastating consequences of the pandemic. These different life circumstances reflected the significant socio-economic and sociocultural contexts and categories that structure people's lives, including educational attainment, race and ethnicity, gender, and their intersections (Grusky and Weisshaar 2018; Lamont, Beljan, and Clair 2014; Markus and Moya 2010; McDermott and Samson 2005; Ridgeway 2011, 2019).

For instance, respondents without college degrees, relative to those with college degrees, reported greater decreases in their well-being and sense of dignity, according to quantitative trends, and qualitatively reported feeling disregarded, undervalued, and overlooked by their society and government. Black and Hispanic respondents reported a greater lack of social

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1. We use the designation Hispanic to refer to respondents who answered yes to the question "Are you of Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish origin?"

support, according to quantitative data, and qualitatively Black respondents reported feeling more isolated from their community and support systems. Women reported feeling greater stress than men, according to quantitative data, and qualitatively reported feeling overwhelmed and overworked given domestic duties, even though many lamented losing their formal jobs.

In short, respondents from structurally disadvantaged groups were at times just surviving, barely. They experienced both more severe shocks to their daily lives and fewer resources to effectively cope with these shocks. Their forms of coping reflected the pandemic's compounding of historical hardship, and often involved staying strong, increased hard work, suppression of negative emotion, and reliance on faith—strategies often used in circumstances of adversity (Chen and Miller 2012; Troy et al. 2017).

By contrast, White respondents with college degrees reported stress primarily due to disruptions in plans and routines during shelter-in-place orders, yet they also expressed gratitude for additional time at home. Some even saw clear benefits from the pandemic, such as opportunities to invest in family and relationships, pursue new passions, and focus on self-improvement. Activities ranged from enjoying nature and taking classes to improving their homes. Additionally, some respondents became more introspective, with others seeking therapy to navigate these times. Despite these differences, respondents across our sample demonstrated resilience by employing an impressive array of coping strategies. Notably, an optimism and determination to find the silver linings and maintain a positive outlook in the face of adversity were evident across all race and ethnicities, genders, and socioeconomic statuses (Keller 2015; Piacenza 2020).

Through our interdisciplinary, multimethod analyses, we make several contributions to the social science literature. Unlike studies that have smaller convenience samples or a focus on a single sociodemographic group, our approach allows for a comparative analysis of the psycho-

social experiences across diverse groups—including those defined by social class, gender, race, and ethnicity—within a national probability sample. Our quantitative analysis highlights the psychosocial variables with the most significant disparities across sociodemographic groups during the pandemic, pinpointing how these disparities are linked to losses in some groups and gains in others. Furthermore, we shed light on how these groups' unique coping responses to their varied lived experiences may compound existing inequalities.

In addition, we illustrate the ways in which qualitative and quantitative data from a large-scale, mixed-methods, national probability sample may be productively combined to generate representative, rich, and contextualized insights into social trends. Here, we tie sociological phenomena (such as limited access to social services) to personal psychological consequences (such as diminished sense of dignity) and a diversity of coping strategies (such as shifting attention to regulate emotion). With this initial set of analyses, we also hope to showcase how the AVP data will be valuable for future empirical investigations by social scientists who seek to further understand how the constraints and affordances of social contexts can shape psychological tendencies.

DATA AND ANALYSIS STRATEGY

We conduct a mixed-methods analysis of the AVP data integrating qualitative data from 172 interviews collected in the fall of 2020 with quantitative data from 720 surveys collected from the spring to the fall of 2020. We leverage the quantitative data to examine differential trends across educational level, race and ethnicity, and gender on self-report questions that were asked consistently across respondents. Although we are not yet able to infer directly to the U.S. population as a whole, we provide within-sample confidence intervals around the group trend lines to highlight when well-being, dignity, stress, and social support appear to have diverged the most by education level, gender, and race and ethnicity.[2] We independently analyzed the qualitative data on an exploratory

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2. Inference to the U.S. population is possible with American Voices Project sample weights. These weights were not yet available at the time of this analysis.

basis and illustrate how the diverging trends are expressed in individuals' everyday realities.

Quantitative Methods

We used R, version 4.1.0 (R Core Team 2021), to analyze the quantitative trends from 720 AVP interviews conducted from the beginning of the pandemic on April 1, 2020, up to November 20, 2020. The AVP protocol also included demographic and economic questions on employment, earnings, and expenses, as well as a social psychological survey of fifty close-ended items that respondents answered at the end of the interview session. This survey included validated and original items that measured psychological well-being, dignity, and social support, among other constructs. Among these measures, we focus on well-being, dignity, social support, and stress as indicators of psychosocial challenges for this analysis.

We created an omnibus index of overall well-being that consisted of fifteen items regarding individuals' assessments of happiness, life satisfaction, hopefulness, sadness, and loneliness.[3] Our measure of stress consisted of two items ("In the last month, how often have you felt nervous and stressed?"). Social support consisted of six items on perceived sources of instrumental, emotional, and financial support ("When I run into financial difficulties, I can rely on others in my community to support me"). Our measure of dignity included eight items ("I feel I have something valuable that I can contribute to my community," "People respect me"). All survey constructs and items are reported in table A.1. With these constructs, we then assessed disparities across indicators of relative advantage or disadvantage, namely respondents' education level, race and ethnicity, and gender. We present graphs and exploratory analyses of these data.[4]

Qualitative Methods

We used NVivo to code all 172 AVP respondent interview transcripts conducted in the fall of 2020 when the United States entered the third and most severe peak of the pandemic to date. All but twenty-three of these respondents also completed quantitative survey measures. Extensive two- to three-hour in-depth interviews, conducted from September 24 to November 11, 2020, followed a protocol that asked participants open-ended questions about their life histories, daily routines, experiences with the pandemic, mental health, stressors, ways of coping, and relationships, among many other topics (for detail on the full AVP protocol, see Edin et al. 2024, this issue). We identified patterns and themes that emerged from the coding process and interpreted these themes, with a focus primarily on respondents' experiences with the pandemic. A team of six research assistants coded the 172 interviews, with one coder assigned to each transcript. Our primary coding categories included mental health challenges, such as stress and worry; psychosocial losses, such as losses of normalcy and of aspirations, as well as gains; and coping responses, including mental and emotional strategies, activities, and consumption behaviors. Coders tagged the relevant sentences or paragraphs in transcripts for each code. The authors refined these tags into more specific coding categories when necessary.

To explore the over- and underrepresentation of each coded category by key demographic characteristics (education, race and ethnicity, gender, and income), for each coded category we compared the proportion of respondents represented by each demographic characteristic to the proportion of our qualitative sample. To help illustrate this methodological approach, we provide two examples in ta-

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3. Well-being items include life satisfaction from the World Values Survey (Bjørnskov 2010), the single-item general self-rated health question (DeSalvo et al. 2006), the Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, Kamarck, and Mermelstein 1983), CESD-R-10 depression screener (Van Dam and Earleywine 2011), and the three-item UCLA Loneliness Scale (Hughes et al. 2004).

4. With this quantitative data, we show exploratory trends by educational level (as indicated by having or not having a college degree), race and ethnicity, and gender. In this article, for race and ethnicity, we predominantly concentrate on Black-, Hispanic, and White-identifying respondents given low numbers in other racial-ethnic categories in the qualitative sample, though differential patterns by both race and ethnicity are explored to the extent possible in the qualitative findings.

Table 1. Example of Over- and Underrepresentation of Categories by Demographic Groups

	No Bachelor's Degree		Bachelor's Degree	
Category	% Category	% Sample	% Category	% Sample
Loss of dignity	80	56	20	44
Psychological gains	14	56	86	44

Source: Authors' calculations.

ble 1. Within the category of respondents coded as experiencing a loss of dignity, for instance, 80 percent did not have a bachelor's degree. Comparatively, 56 percent of our total sample did not. This indicates an overrepresentation of individuals without a bachelor's degree among those expressing a loss of dignity. In contrast, within the category of respondents coded as experiencing psychological gains during the pandemic, 86 percent had a bachelor's degree. Comparatively, 44 percent of the total sample did, indicating an overrepresentation of those with bachelor's degrees among those experiencing psychological gains during the pandemic. In our analyses, we focused only on differences in these proportions that exceeded 10 percentage points.

Methodological Notes

Three caveats warrant attention. First, we rely on relatively small samples to conduct intergroup and intersectional comparisons. Although we use 95 percent confidence intervals as an exploratory indicator to guide our quantitative analyses—to distinguish possible signal differences in group trends from statistical noise—our objective was not formal hypothesis testing. Rather, we sought to identify potential group differences in the quantitative data. Second, because our analytic sample is not yet weighted, we do not seek to generalize to the U.S. population. Additionally, though we used the same sampling methodology over time, our comparisons over time may be affected by changes in sample composition. Although we cannot rule out this possibility, we found the demographic variables to be balanced over time as well as across the quantitative and qualitative samples, as shown in table 2. This suggests the sample compositions were consistent over the eight months we studied.

DIVERGING EXPERIENCES OF THE PANDEMIC IN LATE 2020

Economic experiences caused by events such as the pandemic are often reflected in what economists call a K-shaped recovery, in which some portions of the economy rebound quickly while others experience ongoing challenges or downward trends (Dalton et al. 2021). By fall 2020, higher-wage workers and people with college degrees had begun to experience a rebound, whereas low-wage workers and those without a college degree experienced weaker recovery, largely due to greater rates of unemployment and underemployment (Halpin, Agne, and Jain 2021). Our data reflect similar trends on a psychological level, revealing K-shaped patterns in terms of well-being, dignity, and stress, among other attributes, in the last quarter of 2020.

Figure 1 plots measures of psychological and social well-being of respondents across educational level, race, and gender from the spring to the fall of 2020. These data show that, as the pandemic hit hard in the first few months, respondents were reporting similar psychological and social experiences. As shown in the plots, the four-month period between April and July of 2020 was one in which most if not all respondents appear to have experienced similar levels of stress and well-being.

Yet after the initial disruptive shocks caused by the pandemic, we observed divergences in our data on indicators of psychological and social well-being, particularly across education, race, and gender. Mirroring trends in economic recovery, these divergences are seen in the later months of 2020, growing between August to November, with the largest group differences indicated by areas where the gray confidence bands in figure 1 do not overlap. As shown in the left of figure 1, panel A, after experiencing declines in reported well-being during the first

Table 2. Distribution of Sociodemographic Characteristics

	Qualitative Subsample		Quantitative Subsample	
Variable	Counts	Percent	Counts	Percent
Gender				
Woman	105	61.0	421	58.5
Man	63	36.6	290	40.3
Race-ethnicity				
Non-Hispanic White	87	50.6	400	55.6
Non-Hispanic Black	43	25.0	138	19.2
Hispanic (of any race)	27	15.7	141	19.6
Household income				
Low (<$30,000)	92	53.5	338	46.9
Middle ($30,000–$85,000)	34	19.8	178	24.7
High (>$85,000)	21	12.2	102	14.2
Education				
Less than high school degree	15	8.7	61	8.5
High school	80	46.5	367	51.0
Four-year college degree	75	43.6	287	39.9
Age				
20–39	58	33.7	267	37.1
40–64	61	35.5	254	35.3
65 or older	49	28.5	143	19.9

Source: Authors' calculations.
Note: Not all respondents answered all survey questions and sociodemographic items. Missing cases are omitted from table rows for simplicity but included in the percentage calculations. Categories with counts of ten or fewer are excluded or combined with other categories for confidentiality purposes. No statistically significant differences between the two samples were found across the reported demographics.

few months of the pandemic, respondents with college degrees showed trends of rebounding psychologically by the fall of 2020.[5] Among respondents without college degrees, on the other hand, psychological and social well-being stayed lower, exhibiting a prolonged malaise, and diverging from the rebound trend seen for the college educated.[6]

As seen in the right of figure 1, panel A, respondents without a college degree also saw downturns in dignity, or their sense of being valued and respected in society, in the final months of 2020, relative to respondents with a college degree. As seen in figure 1, panel B, Black and Hispanic respondents in our sample saw marginal declines in perceived social sup-

5. Given small sample sizes within each social category, we are not able to statistically examine intersectionalities across the categories of race, ethnicity, gender, and educational level, but future work on a full account of the pandemic should be able to speak to these.

6. The Census Bureau's nationally representative Household Pulse Survey also found that those with less education, as well as women, racial and ethnic minorities, and lower-income individuals, showed, for instance, higher rates of depression and anxiety but found these disparities present at both initial and later phases of the pandemic (Cai et al. 2021).

Figure 1. Trends in Well-Being, Dignity, Social Support, and Stress by Education, Race and Ethnicity, and Gender in the Second Half of 2020

A. Education Level

Well-Being

Dignity

B. Race-ethnicity

Social support

C. Gender

Stress
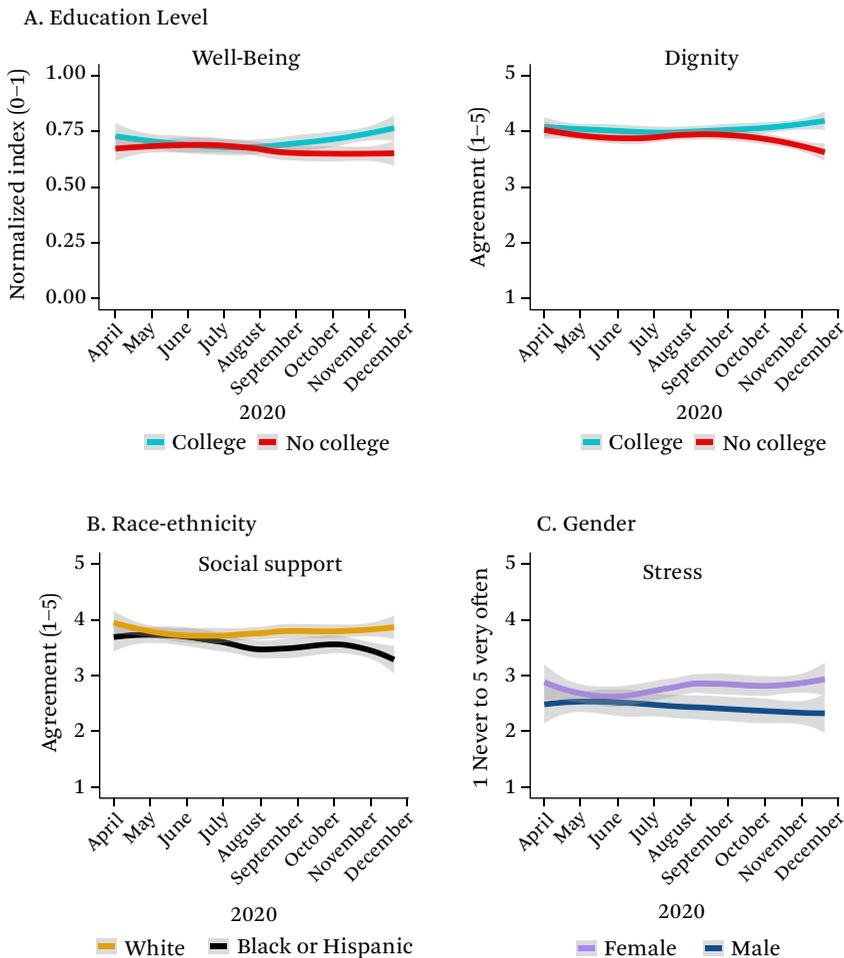
Source: Authors' calculations.

Note: Gray bands around the lines represent 95 percent confidence intervals. See methodological notes. For education level, college refers to having a college degree and no college refers to not having a college degree, even though the respondent may have taken some college coursework

port (feeling they can rely on others), whereas White respondents saw no change. As seen in figure 1, panel C, women showed greater increases in stress over time compared to men. In contrast, White respondents with college degrees largely maintained their psychosocial well-being throughout this early phase of the pandemic (see intersectional figure A.1). Research suggests that feelings about self, relationships, and status in society have powerful influences on health, well-being, and economic outcomes (Adler 2009; Adler et al. 2000; Heck-

man, Stixrud, and Urzua 2006). Consequently, these divergences also have implications for social policy and programs, as we discuss.

INEQUALITIES IN PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL LOSSES VERSUS GAINS DURING THE PANDEMIC

What were the impacts of these diverging trends on those without college degrees, on Black and Hispanic individuals, and on women? To better elucidate the psychological effects of the pandemic's compounding of his-

torical hardship, we independently turned to the smaller sample of qualitative data and illustrate the converging trends expressed in respondents' lived realities. Although our sample size does not allow us to generalize to the wider population, we find that groups facing structural disadvantage experienced several types of loss during the pandemic. In contrast, those interviewed from privileged groups tended to experience more routine disruptions and some even reported benefits of their circumstances.

In the in-depth interviews, we find evidence that respondents in groups facing structural disadvantage—particularly those without college degrees, Black individuals, and women—tended to express distress and disappointment related to feeling overlooked and unprotected by their government, feeling socially isolated, and losing ground in their financial conditions or careers, respectively.

THOSE WITHOUT COLLEGE DEGREES: FEELING DISREGARDED, OVERLOOKED AND UNDERVALUED

Respondents without college degrees tended to express feeling vulnerable in terms of their health and their financial stability and generally unsupported and disregarded by their government and by society in a time of need. The pandemic tore away sources of support for dealing with underlying financial insecurity, such as reliable access to benefits and childcare. Mirroring the quantitative trends discussed, feeling overlooked and unsupported in this way was often associated with an expressed loss of dignity—some feeling undervalued and underrespected by society in their time of need, and others feeling incapacitated in their ability to contribute to society.

For instance, an older woman without a college degree reported feeling that the government and larger society were indifferent to her health and well-being. She saw the government failing to put in place measures to sufficiently protect her against COVID-19, and she thought other people were failing to perform the necessary precautions to prevent community spread. "I've been so angry that we're not being protected at all. Our state . . . [is] not protecting us. . . . Try [to] be an old person when they don't care about you. . . . It's disbelief, it's incredu-

lous, it's horrible. . . . It's just so weird thinking that, because you're old you're disposable. It's bizarre. It's just bizarre to think that they don't care if you live or die" [White woman, high school degree, low income].

Some respondents expressed feeling unsupported by their government because programs to provide them with security or financial support were difficult to access when service offices closed and resources were available only through online portals. Applying for these critical programs in a time of need was more challenging for individuals facing economic hardship often due to certain hurdles such as unreliable internet access. Relatedly, Alex Lu and his colleagues (2022) document the ways in which working-class job seekers expressed a sense of greater distress and isolation from being ill equipped to access jobs when searches shifted to online platforms relative to upper-middle-class job seekers.

Other AVP respondents discussed gaps in the safety net that they encountered when contending with novel circumstances brought on by the pandemic. For example, one respondent talked about a lack of childcare when the schools closed: "So, I lost my job. . . . There wasn't like kids going back to school, which meant I had to stay home with my kids. . . . I lost my job because of it. But when I checked, when I tried to fill out unemployment, they said that wasn't a reason. . . . So as at right now I still can't get an appointment through [the state]" [Black man, less than high school degree, low income]. Another discussed an inability to collect unemployment insurance: "Because I hadn't been at my current position long enough, I was unable to collect unemployment. The state of [redacted] came out with a secondary program, which was like the COVID relief, unemployment version. Then I was unable to receive that as well, due to an issue with paperwork. Then they never followed up" [White woman, high school degree, low income].

Black Respondents: Socially Disconnected and Unsupported

The pandemic conditions cut off many individuals from their social networks and caused stress in their relationships. Although many studies have documented experiences of isola-

tion during the pandemic (Klinenberg and Leigh 2023), this sense of isolation was more acutely felt and more frequently remarked on by Black respondents (regardless of education level) in our sample and those without college degrees, the latter being consistent with findings of Lu and colleagues (2022). Greater losses of social support were quantitatively reported by Black respondents in late 2020 (see figure 1, panel C), and this pattern was reflected in the qualitative data as well. For example, one Black woman lamented how pandemic precautions upended her relational routines by removing the possibility of small, everyday interactions with her community and left her deprived of social connection: "I used to sit on the porch and people would stop by and talk to me, and we would sit and talk. Maybe they were just coming home from work or going to work. And I would talk for half an hour or longer, but I don't do that anymore. I've lost the conversation with people that I used to talk to because I don't sit outside and talk like I used to" [Black woman, high school degree, low income].

The loss of in-person connection also led to feelings of loneliness and disconnection. An older Black man expressed a deep sense of isolation because he could see his family and friends only through a computer or telephone screen and could no longer hug them. For some, the challenges of the pandemic meant they could not contribute or relate to their communities in ways that they were used to and that were meaningful to them. For example, a Black woman from the Midwest with a high school degree noted how she was "angry" at herself because, "I'm not participating. . . . I don't volunteer anymore."

Women: Underemployed yet Overworked
In the face of financial challenges, layoffs, and childcare duties from school closures, women were more likely than men to describe being burdened by new domestic duties and obligations. Some women in our sample also lamented losing progress in their professional and home lives that they had worked hard to achieve. Well-documented disparities in household labor between men and women (Bianchi et al. 2000) indeed became exacerbated during the pandemic. Representative studies have

found that women who were mothers disproportionately adopted childcare duties during the pandemic, whether or not they were still employed, and these new childcare duties were associated with some reduced labor-force participation, particularly among women without college degrees (Goldin, 2022; Zamarro and Prados 2021). This gender gap in drop out has been linked to 2020 school closures (Collins et al. 2021), yet was detectable even in the earliest phases of the pandemic (Landivar et al. 2020).

Combining the impacts of job losses and increased domestic responsibilities, female respondents in the AVP sample indicated a transition to underemployment while experiencing an increase in workload. This dynamic could have contributed to the heightened stress levels observed among women in late 2020 reflected in our quantitative analysis (figure 1, panel B). Several studies corroborate this finding documenting women's, particularly mothers', disproportionate domestic burdens and the negative consequences on their emotional well-being and anxiety (Racine et al. 2022). These trends have been found among women from both lower and higher socioeconomic backgrounds (Calarco et al. 2020, 2021; Heilman and Calarco 2023; Lyttelton, Zang, and Musick 2021; Ruppanner et al. 2021).

> When I heard this report the other week about the number of women that have exited the workplace since March, it was just very sad to see. I mean, I understand it. It's been rough. So, just stress from that, feeling like I'm not getting enough work done. You know that you need to do more, but you just physically can't do any more than what you're doing. . . . So, that has significantly taken my level of stress to the next level. And it's frustrating because even husbands who are nice guys like my husband, they don't get it. . . . We are past the breaking point. [Black woman, college degree, high-income]

Many women in particular had to take on full-time domestic responsibilities without reprieve, labor that is often invisible, unpaid, and disproportionately performed by women (Dugarova 2020). These full-time responsibilities meant they lost control over their own

time: "This school thing is what more affects me because of the fact that they're home every day now. They all eat all the time" [Hispanic woman, high school degree, low income].

A loss of employment for some and a lack of support in meeting overwhelming domestic obligations also meant more than immediate hardship and stress. Losing jobs meant losing dreams. "I just got hired on at [redacted]. . . . That was my dream job. It was the one that I wanted. I hoped to get that job. I wanted that job. So, we trained from home, but I couldn't grasp it. And then they shut down. They actually shut down and I got laid off" [Black woman, high school degree].[7]

These financial challenges seemed to affect unemployed women's sense of personal adequacy. Having a lack of support to contend with the challenges of the pandemic meant that they could not provide for their families. "But even with food we struggled, to put on our table. It's the worst feeling, especially as a mother and as a provider, that you can't have—not being able to give your kids a plate of food" [Hispanic woman, college degree, low income].

Such financial and physical vulnerability also clouded the future. Some respondents expressed a constricted sense of possibility, in their words feeling stuck, at a standstill, that the world was slowing down or coming to a stop. For some, this led to feelings that their progress was not only set back but had been permanently derailed.

White Respondents with College Degrees: Gains in Self-Improvement Opportunities Despite Disrupted Routines

Although White individuals with college degrees also experienced losses, these losses were, in many cases, qualitatively different from those described earlier. Moreover, White respondents with college degrees, including

men and women, even reported experiencing benefits arising from the pandemic.[8] Research indeed finds that individuals with college degrees, and particularly those from higher-income households, were more likely to be able to work remotely and thus to maintain work, buffering them from negative financial and health impacts of the pandemic (Angelucci et al. 2020). Moreover, in terms of their time use during the pandemic, individuals with college degrees were able to spend less time in transit and to have more free time as well as time with their children (Cowan 2023).

Relatedly, one of the main challenges described by White respondents with college degrees related to remote work. Relative to Black and Hispanic respondents, they described disruptions related to work-life balance. When asked about his work routines, for example, one White respondent stated, "Everything feels really hectic. . . . the concept of the week doesn't even really make sense anymore" [White man, college degree, low income].

Another expressed difficulty and frustration in her attempts to achieve work-life balance at home and find physical workspaces for everyone: "It's been tough. In the beginning, it was quite an adjustment. I used to go to the office at work every day, so is my fiancée. My daughter was going to school everybody had their schedule and a routine that they were used to for a long time. So, well we had to shift to the new normal, I had to find space for everyone to have like a working station" [White woman, college degree].[9]

In addition to their work-life routines being disrupted, individuals also lamented losing their usual opportunities for travel and leisure. "We were going to take a tour along the Seine to Normandy and that was something I wanted to do for a long time, had to cancel that. . . . So, I think traveling is a big thing that's got inter-

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7. This respondent did not provide their income. We included income for all quotes when respondents provided it.

8. We observed that, although female respondents reported experiencing losses and stressors related to COVID-19, they simultaneously reported gains. Moreover, women tended to discuss any type of loss or gain overall more often than men, suggesting women were either more likely to have both of these experiences or were more willing to discuss them than men.

9. This respondent did not provide their income.

rupted with the pandemic" [White woman, college degree, middle income].

At the same time, White respondents with college degrees also expressed meaningful gains in other domains, such as experiencing more control over their time and opportunities for self-improvement. These benefits were often afforded by being able to retain their economic resources. Indeed, some White individuals with college degrees, including both men and women, acknowledged the relatively limited consequences of the pandemic on their lives given their relative privilege.[10] "I am surprised I am still doing good. . . . I just hope that things can at least maintain for us the way they have been, because we are fortunate to live the lives that we do" [White man, high school degree, high-income].

Although White individuals with college degrees lost control over some aspects of their lives, particularly in the public sphere, they were simultaneously able to gain control over other aspects of their lives, especially in the home. Many were able to spend more time with their families and thus deepen relationships. The pandemic pace of life also gave them time to work on themselves, to meditate, to reflect, to read, and to ask the big existential questions of who am I? and what do I want? "So as an individual, it really gave me time to be quiet and really connect with my own self and say, 'You know, what do I want?' . . . We actually had an incredible summer. . . . I could get out almost every day. So, truthfully, COVID enhanced my life. It's, it didn't make my life bad at all" [White woman, college degree, high-income].

Others mentioned gaining time to rest and to connect with themselves, which brought psychological and emotional benefits. A White retiree with a college degree noted that, after the first few months of shelter-in-place conditions, she began to find her time at home to be restful, giving her the chance to water her flowers, for instance, and enjoy the slower pace of life. Summarizing her experience during the pandemic, she stated, "The whole year has been a

transformation of my mental and physical and kind of emotional life for me. I like it, it has been an improvement, it has not been negative at all. . . . But I'm thankful personally for me, that it made me have an awareness of where I was headed in my life, what was important in my life, what I should be doing for the rest of my life, how I should be spending my time" [White woman, college degree, middle-income].

These major differences in how the pandemic rearranged respondents' lives were mirrored in how they coped with their unequal situations, which we turn to next.

INEQUALITY IN COPING

As people in the United States were hit by the pandemic, they coped, drawing on a diverse repertoire of activities and strategies to persist through disruption, hardship, pain, and loss. When we asked respondents about how they coped, they told us about certain mental and emotional strategies, as well as activities such as listening to music, watching television and movies, spending time online, taking time outside, and decluttering their homes, in addition to consuming more alcohol, cannabis, and food.

Researchers have developed a variety of systems to categorize and investigate how people psychologically cope with difficult situations on an individual level (Carver, Scheier, and Weintraub 1989; Gross 1998). For example, in meeting the challenges of uncertainty, hardship, or loss, people may try to directly address the problem, or they may reappraise the situation by trying to think or feel about it differently. They can also attend to the negative emotions arising from the situation and try to reduce them or in some way regulate these feelings. Many people seem to do some combination of these. It is important to note that scholars have critically examined this emphasis on individual-focused coping, highlighting the significance of collective coping strategies (Gutierrez 1988; Singh and Pandey 1985). They underscore the role of social forces, such as rac-

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10. Although women tended to experience more stressors, they also expressed more gains. This finding calls for further research with larger qualitative samples to explore the intersectionalities with gender across other sociodemographic categories (race and ethnicity, education, occupation, and so on).

ism and sexism, along with access to power and resources as pivotal factors influencing the coping process (Banyard and Graham-Bermann 1993).

During the pandemic virtually everyone everywhere had to cope with some uncertainty, fear, and changed life circumstances. This allowed us to examine group differences in coping mechanisms, differences that research has shown to be associated with different mental and physical health costs. Suppressing negative emotion, for example, tends to predict lower well-being as well as higher risks of cancer and premature death (Chapman et al. 2013; Gross and John 2003). In contrast, cognitive strategies such as reappraisal ("seeing things in a positive light") have been associated with lower rates of depression and anxiety, especially for those without college degrees (Troy et al. 2017).

Recent qualitative studies have identified resilience factors in diverse populations. Support from family and friends was salient among working-class job seekers (Lu et al. 2022), whereas communal networking emerged as a collective coping strategy among social and health-care workers (Itzhaki-Braun 2022; Johannessen et al. 2022). Complementing these findings, survey research revealed that positive reframing, acceptance, and humor were associated with better mental health than self-distraction and behavioral disengagement among a predominantly well-educated White Australian cohort (Gurvich et al. 2021).

A mixed-methods study during the pandemic conducted by Kyle Chankasingh and colleagues (2022) additionally found that individuals with lower incomes, as well as women, encountered greater coping challenges during the pandemic among a primarily college-educated White sample of women residing in urban Canadian settings. This research delineated several coping mechanisms, such as exercising and maintaining communication with friends and family, but did not assess how these strategies differed by education and race. Building on this literature, our study captures a diverse representation of participants and probes deeper into variations in coping strategies across key demographic characteristics.

American Optimism

AVP conversations reveal a number of clear patterns in how people coped, which we saw across education, race and ethnicity, and gender. First, our respondents broadly exhibited an effort to see things in a positive light, even as the pandemic toll mounted. From Alexis de Tocqueville's nineteenth-century observations about the United States' "lively faith in the perfectibility of man" to recent psychological research, individuals in the United States are known to exhibit greater optimism about their lives and to prefer focusing on positive feelings over negative ones relative to people from other high-income countries (Alesina, Stantcheva, and Teso 2017; Sims et al. 2015; de Tocqueville 2002). This strategy may pay off. Positively reappraising stressors and maintaining optimism in the face of adversity have been associated with positive health outcomes such as lower cardiovascular disease, particularly among individuals living in poverty (Chen and Miller 2012). Consistent with existing qualitative research during the pandemic that "most people hoped for the best" (Kar, Kar, and Kar 2021, 3), respondents in our sample from all demographic groups conveyed the sentiment that things are tough, and tomorrow will be a better day. One woman's description of navigating unemployment during the pandemic highlights this optimism:

> I was really stressed out like, I need a job. I need to make money. I need to go to school. I need to get an education and like, I applied to a nursing program and I got turned down and that like sucked, like, jeez, can't anyone want me? But so that was really stressful and for some reason, I don't know why, I just felt like this peace, like you know what? Like the time's going to come and the right thing is going to come. [White woman, high school degree, low income]

To stay positive, many respondents reappraised their negative situations by either finding silver linings or finding other ways to reframe the situations in a positive light. Illustrating this type of reappraisal, for example, another respondent described the process of how she managed to shift her view of the

stay-at-home restrictions: "I also play with my mind to say, well, this is only for your health, that you do this it's only for your health, so you don't go out there. . . . So, I always try to keep making play with my head to make it positive enough to see this for a good instead of negative" [Black woman, less than high school degree, low income].

Although staying positive was a common sentiment, other coping mechanisms appear patterned by race and socioeconomic status. Go-to coping strategies for structurally disadvantaged individuals tended to focus on persistence and preventing negative feelings. In contrast, individuals with more resources had both the time and money to alleviate their fears in other ways that research suggests may be less detrimental to well-being over the long run.

Coping for Those Hardest Hit by the Pandemic

Individuals from groups facing structural disadvantages described coping behaviors that reflected these disparities and the greater hardship, stress, and loss they faced from the pandemic. To cope with their more challenging situations, they reported working hard to try to change their situations and themselves, restraining their emotions, and shifting their attention. In the face of unpredictable stressors, they also described turning to faith.

Hard Work

Many respondents without a college degree, and Black respondents across all levels of education, talked about the need to work hard to change their situations to get through the hardships of the pandemic. This type of persistent coping reflects a commitment to hard work, both mentally and physically, and a determination to achieve one's goals. Facing unemployment and the difficulty of a job search, one respondent revealed his sole coping strategy: to take action. His sentiment mirrors Robert Frost's famous phrase, "The only way out is through." He explained: "It was hard at first, trying to find work and stuff. I really don't have a coping mechanism for that. My coping mechanism was to just get up and try to find something, try to make something happen" [Black man, less than high school degree, low income].

Suppression of Negative Emotion

In addition to being persistent and working hard, individuals without a college degree and Black respondents across education levels also tended to report trying to stay strong and engaging in emotional restraint because they couldn't afford to be depressed. As the Black man with a high school degree highlighted in this article's opening quote stated, "Only the strong survive, so there's no time to be depressed." Similarly, a White woman with a high school degree described how controlling her emotions was paramount for her progress: "I've been working on myself and I still make progress every single day. Because I refuse to let anything else control my emotions but me and I can do it, you know what I mean? I can control my emotions" [White woman, high school degree, low income].

Another respondent described how they couldn't let their emotions get to them because of their social isolation. Depression did not feel like an option: "I don't allow things to get to me, I can't afford it. . . . I try not to let anything get me down, because I don't have that family to support me. I don't have those close friends that are going to come over and talk me through this or talk me through that, so I have to take care of myself. So I don't get depressed no matter what" [Black man, college degree, middle-income].

Research indicates that this tendency to suppress negative emotions and persist through tough challenges is associated with diminished cardiovascular functioning and other adverse health effects, especially among African Americans (Cole and Omari 2003; Krieger and Sidney, 1996; Kwate and Meyer, 2010).

Avoidance

Respondents also described efforts to keep their minds occupied by other things to avoid facing the emotional pain of their circumstances. One respondent, for example, used the metaphor of blinders to describe her strategy of not acknowledging the negatives in her life: "Sometimes we, you know, you keep your shades on. . . . you just don't even want to ac-

knowledge the bad. . . . I just kept my blinders on to keep moving forward" [Black woman, high school degree].[11] Another respondent actively chose to sidestep her thoughts: "I just try to not think . . . and If I think then I start getting upset, and then I just try not to think anymore" [White woman, high school degree, low income].

Limited research exists on the effects of this strategy for long-term well-being. A study conducted online during the pandemic found that deliberately avoiding thoughts about the pandemic was linked to increased anxiety and depression (Kar, Kar, and Kar 2021), yet that study's participants were primarily well-educated middle-class individuals.

Faith and Trust in God
Black respondents in particular reported turning to faith. In the face of greater hardship and loss during the pandemic, many found solace in putting their trust in God. This increased reliance on faith mirrored trends in the quantitative data that showed a diverging rise in religiosity particularly among Black and Hispanic respondents (see figure A.2). This relationship with God and community reflected a specific form of collective coping (Jacob et al. 2023; Singh and Pandey 1985). One Black woman, for example, talked about how gospel music helped remind her that "God is good all the time," and that she wasn't alone in facing difficult challenges because God was with her:

> I get depressed sometimes, but I just pray about it, I get past that. I just turn on some gospel music. . . I can't do this alone, and sometimes this world is going to make me think that I'm by myself and I realize I'm not by myself. I don't have to handle this. He told me a long time ago, whatever you can't handle, put it in my hands, but some days I forget that and that's when I go back to that gospel music. [Black woman, high school degree, middle income]

Having faith in God helped provide a sense that things were okay and thereby superseded other coping strategies. A Black man, for example, described not having to cope with the stressors of the pandemic because God would take care of them: "And I don't have to cope with stress. I don't have to cope with the emotional problems. When we're short financially or we have a hard week. It's God's going to take care of it. We all know that, we all know that. So, we're good" [Black man, high school degree, low income].

These themes are consistent with existing research findings that African Americans cope with the stress of racism through, among other strategies, faith, prayer, and spirituality (Jacob et al. 2023; Shorter-Gooden 2004).

Rebounding with Resources: Coping for the More Advantaged
During a universally anxiety-inducing pandemic, White respondents with college degrees exhibited coping behaviors that reflected their greater economic resources and less dire circumstances. They made use of luxuries of time, space, safety, and money less available to disadvantaged populations describing a medley of "self-improvement" coping strategies, including therapy, spending more time outside, and other self-focused activities.

Therapy
One of the most popular coping strategies that White individuals with college degrees reported was the increased use of psychotherapy, possibly expanded with online therapy during the pandemic. As one White respondent with a college degree noted, "I'll tell you, I started therapy again after fifteen years away because my anxiety has grown to an exponential level where I can't deal with it anymore" [White woman, college degree, middle-income].

Respondents talked about the benefits of psychotherapy both for themselves and for their relationships, and how it helped relieve the stress of spending more time at home together: "So, when COVID hit, I think we had more time together and those things were coming up, so we had to navigate those things together. So, we actually found a therapist and we actually went through some sessions to reevaluate our communication. So, our communica-

11. This respondent did not provide their income.

tion actually improved. . . . So, he feels better, I feel better and I think we are ready to navigate this time, COVID and climate change, elections, whatever they may be you know" [Asian woman, college degree, high-income].

Notably, some respondents expressed interest in therapy but couldn't afford it or struggled to find a therapist covered by their health care: "I've definitely thought about getting a therapist, but they're expensive" [Black woman, college degree, middle-income].

Outdoor Spaces

White respondents with college degrees reported engaging in activities that suggested they also had more free time and lived in well-tended areas close to recreational parks, green spaces, and safe neighborhoods to take walks and spend time outdoors, consistent with research findings (Williams et al. 2020). They relieved the stress of working at home by going outside and exercising. "We've used those nice trails that we have here, throughout the whole pandemic, and if it wasn't for this neighborhood. . . . We weren't here last year, a year ago and when the pandemic hit we didn't have this opportunity to walk safely in the neighborhood and just have this tremendous landscape and trails, and again, the neighbors are very friendly" [White woman, college degree].[12]

They were additionally more likely to report enjoying the benefits of gardening. As one college-educated respondent mentioned, gardening was her primary form of coping: "We planted a bunch of plants and herbs and flowers. Tried to make a nice space to hang out during the summer. That's probably been the main coping things that we did" [White woman, college degree, high-income].

A growing body of evidence suggests spending more time in nature improves mental health and cognitive functioning (Bratman et al. 2019; Schertz and Berman 2019). These findings suggest that groups with greater resources and structural advantages likely enjoyed health benefits from their coping strategies. This stands in contrast to groups with fewer resources who had to rely on coping strategies that often came with costs, rather than benefits, to their health.

DISCUSSION

The early days of the pandemic were uncertain and stressful times for many people in the United States. Yet survey data combined with qualitative interviews from September to November 2020 illuminate several ways in which the pandemic's impacts began to diverge depending on one's education, race and ethnicity, or gender. As summarized in table 3, these divergences in social, economic, and psychological states were also reflected in how respondents described their lived experiences and how they coped—from struggling to secure employment and enough food to exercising and spending time outdoors. Many White respondents with a college degree focused on coming to terms with a new normal in their daily routines. For some, the slower pace of remote work and shelter in place even presented opportunities to thrive—to invest in personal development, projects, and family relationships.

In sharp contrast, benefits of the pandemic rarely came up in the responses of Black and Hispanic individuals, nor for respondents without a college degree, who make up the majority of both our sample and the population. Here the new normal included compounding domestic duties, job losses, ongoing pandemic-related fears and losses, and an overwhelming sense of social disconnection and stress. Many respondents expressed exhaustion from ongoing unpredictability, as well as a loss of dignity and the loss of feeling that they mattered in a society that had failed to see, protect, or support them. Their focus was on stemming and surviving these losses. Notably, unemployment insurance and stimulus checks initially buoyed millions of households from falling into poverty. However, once these supports lapsed, poverty rates grew beyond pre-pandemic levels (January 2020), with hardship rising between July to December 2020, according to analyses with the Supplemental Poverty Measure that accounts for receipt of relief programs (Parolin et al. 2022).

Respondents' coping strategies often re-

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12. This respondent did not provide their income.

Table 3. Sociological Patterning of Psychological Losses versus Gains and Coping Strategies During the Early Phase of the Pandemic (April to November 2020)

	Losses and Gains		Coping	
	No college degree	College degree	No college degree	Whites with college degrees
Education	Loss of dignity and well-being. Feeling under-valued and dis-regarded	Rebound in dig-nity and well-be-ing. Gains in time for family and self	Hard work, emo-tional suppres-sion, avoidance	Therapy, time outdoors, exercise
	Black	White	Black	
Race-Ethnicity	Declines in per-ceived social sup-port. Socially dis-connected and unsupported	Rebound in per-ceived social sup-port. Gains in time for family and self	Hard work, emo-tional suppression, avoidance, faith	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Gender	Increases in stress. Underemployed and overworked with new domes-tic duties	Less increase in stress. Lower bur-den of domestic duties	No meaningful differences found	

Source: Authors' tabulation.

flected the magnitude and controllability of the challenges they faced. Many White respondents with a college degree were doubly advantaged. They appeared to experience less severe and more manageable losses and to have more access to public resources (such as parks) and private resources for coping. They used strategies that expressed their feelings and preferences—reading, hiking, enjoying nature, and therapy. In contrast, respondents without college degrees and Black individuals across all levels of education experienced the most COVID infections, deaths, and job losses. As they contended with economic precarity and threats to health, these respondents tended to cope using strategies of persistent hard work and emotional restraint to try to make things better.

The results of this initial interdisciplinary synthesis of conversational interviews and the quantitative survey items from the early stage of the pandemic have implications both for so-

cial science theory and methods and for policy recommendations. In just one example for social science, the qualitative interviews reveal many aspects of psychological experience that have not been fully understood and theorized and are not yet assessed by the quantitative indicators on which policymakers typically rely. In particular, our results suggest the importance of creating questions for surveys and prompts for interviews that dimensionalize the stress that wears on well-being. As indicated in table 3, an important source of stress not typically captured is related to peoples' feelings that they don't count, that their contributions are not valued, or that they don't matter to others. These feelings of not being socially integrated include feelings of disregard as though others are indifferent to their suffering, or that they are being exploited by others through being underemployed, underpaid or overworked. This suggests a collective or social aspect of well-being that is underelaborated and that

may be more crucial for overall well-being than previously understood or documented. The results here provide a window into how the AVP provides an important opportunity to learn more about varieties of stress and mechanisms of coping that will be necessary for measuring the state of American mental health.

Given the unique design of the AVP, we were able to conduct cross-group comparisons and examine a broad range of psychological experiences and coping strategies. The commonality of themes among many respondents, alongside clear disparities across sociodemographic groups, underscores the importance of these areas for future research aimed at understanding and addressing inequalities in America. In particular, qualitative interviews that focus on specific themes could be used to provide even richer detail, situate themes within respondents' broader life circumstances, and differentiate among possible causes of the themes (see, for example, Martin 2013; Small and Cook 2021; Tavory 2020). Experimental studies could elucidate the causal mechanisms underlying these relationships; field experiments with targeted interventions, programs, or policies could provide effective strategies to reduce the disparities we observed.

Overall, our analysis reveals a powerful psychological dimension to inequality that was exacerbated by the pandemic, in addition to the economic and social disparities in the United States. This psychological dimension matters. Research from psychology and public health indicates that the constraints of low socioeconomic status can trigger a recursive cycle of deteriorating mental and physical health, often worsened by experiences of discrimination and a lack of respect, leading to poorer health outcomes and shorter lifespans (Adler, Glymour, and Fielding 2016; Chetty et al. 2016; Kaplan 2019; Marmot 2017). Furthermore, coping strategies involving persistent high effort and emotional restraint, although commonly adopted, are associated with longer-term adverse health effects, such as increased hypertension (Cue-

vas, Williams, and Albert 2017; Williams, Priest, and Anderson 2016). This widespread, seemingly stoic approach to adversity, likely reinforced by the U.S. ethos of individualism and a cultural bias toward positivity, may obscure the extent of an emerging health crisis (Hook and Markus 2020; Kitayama, Markus, and Kurokawa 2000).

On the other hand, the positive experiences of those who thrived during the pandemic highlight potential policy measures to reduce inequalities in well-being. Enhancing universal access to green spaces, remote work options, and mental health programs could be crucial steps. Similarly, ensuring consistent childcare support and reliable broadband access would facilitate broader access to vital financial and social support systems now available online.

Although some policy implications are seemingly straightforward, our conversations repeatedly revealed that existing inequalities and weaknesses of the national safety net made it very difficult for respondents to sustain the professional and financial progress they were working toward.

Pandemic related safety net policies such as the American Rescue Plan helped temporarily mitigate some glaring resource inequalities. However, a revision of foundational cultural narratives, and perhaps the creation of new ones, may be required to generate both continued support for such policies and more lasting equality (Mattingly et al. 2021). Evidence-based narratives might recognize that the mainstays of individual hard work and persistence, though necessary, are not sufficient for success. Hard work may only translate into economic mobility, health, and well-being when people have the social and economic support that they need to overcome unequal and challenging circumstances. Nor are the benefits of hard work necessarily distributed equally. The pandemic has made the consequences of deeply rooted inequality for both individual and societal well-being ever clearer.

Table A.1. Quantitative Self-Report Psychological Measures

Well-being

Life satisfaction	All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days?	1–10: not at all to completely
Subjective health	In general, compared to others your age, how would you rate your health?	1–5: poor to excellent
Stress	In the last month, how often have you felt nervous and stressed?	1–5: never to very often
	In the last month, how often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?	1–5: never to very often
Loneliness	When you think about your life in general, how often do you feel isolated from others?	1–5: never to very often
Depression (past week)	I was bothered by things that usually don't bother me.	1 = rarely or none of the time - 4 = most or all of the time
	I had trouble keeping my mind on what I was doing.	
	I felt depressed.	
	I felt that everything I did was an effort.	
	I felt hopeful about the future.	
	I felt fearful.	
	My sleep was restless.	
	I was happy.	
	I felt lonely.	
	I could not "get going.	

Dignity

People respect me.	1–5: strongly disagree to strongly agree
I feel I do not have much to be proud of.	
I feel I have something valuable that I can contribute to my community.	
How often do you feel you get to step back and think about what is most important to you?	
I gave up trying to make big improvements or changes in my life a long time ago.	
Other people determine most of what I can and cannot do.	
When I really want to do something, I usually find a way to succeed at it.	
I have a clear sense of direction and purpose in my life	
How often do you feel you get to step back and think about what is most important to you?	1–5: not at all to an enormous amount

Social support

Maintaining close relationships has been difficult and frustrating for me.	1–5: strongly disagree to strongly agree
How much can you open up to your family and friends if you need to talk about your worries?	1–4: a lot to not at all
How often do members of your family or your friends let you down when you are counting on them?	1–4: a lot to not at all
The pairs of circles below show you ("You") in relation to people you consider to be family ("Family"), whatever family means to you. Which pair of circles best represents how close you feel towards your family? Response text includes: "You", "Family"	1–5: overlapping circle diagram
People around here are willing to help their neighbors.	1–5: strongly disagree to strongly agree
When I run into financial difficulties, I can rely on others in my community to support me.	1–5: strongly disagree to strongly agree

Source: Authors' compilation.
Note: Quantitative self-report psychological measures were assessed in a survey of approximately fifty questions that followed the qualitative portion of the American Voices Project interview protocol.

Figure A.1. Intersectional Analyses Showing That Trends in Well-Being, Dignity, and Social Support Began to Diverge Among White Respondents with College Degrees, Relative to All Others, in the Second Half of 2020
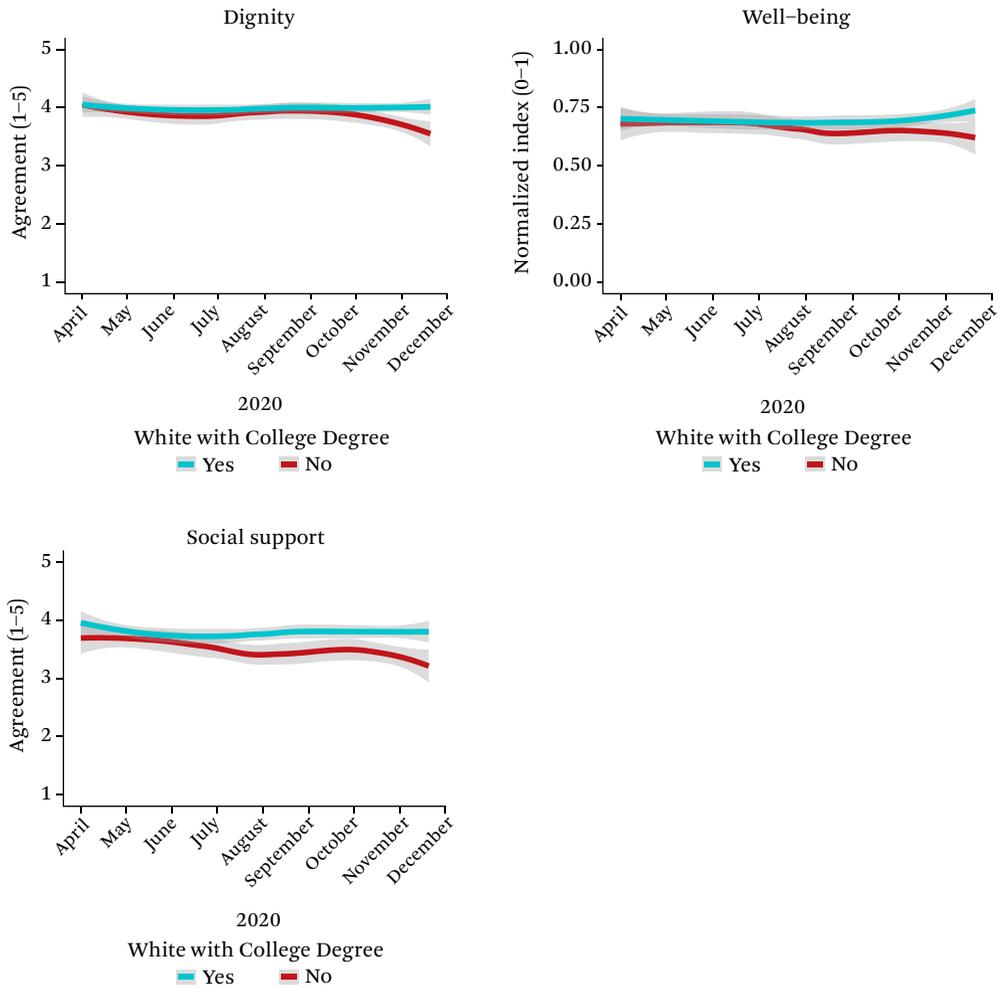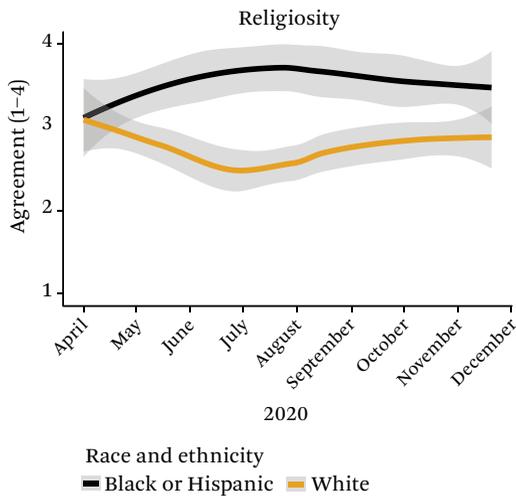

Source: Authors' tabulations.
Note: Gray bands around the lines represent 95 percent confidence intervals.
See methodological notes.

Figure A.2. Endorsement of the Importance of Religion in One's Life Across Race and Ethnicity In the Second Half of 2020

Religiosity

Race and ethnicity
■ Black or Hispanic   ■ White

Source: Authors' tabulations.
Note: Gray bands around the lines represent 95 percent confidence intervals. See methodological notes.

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Intersectional Burdens: How Social Location Shapes Interactions with the Administrative State

THERESA ROCHA BEARDALL, COLLIN MUELLER, AND TONY CHENG

Administrative decisions mediate whether the millions who turn to the state for social services annually can access the assistance they need. We introduce the concept of intersectional burdens—*which describes how a person's social location (including race, class, gender, age, and ability) shapes their access and use of state benefits and programs—to account for the ways mutually reinforcing systems structure experiences with the state and to better understand how inequalities are experienced, reproduced, and resisted. We illustrate the intersectional nature of associated costs by drawing on a random stratified sample of sixty-one Black, Latinx, and White women's experiences from the American Voices Project. We find that individuals who seek public safety net assistance do not experience administrative burdens in the same way or to the same degree and that social location substantively affects how people navigate administrative burdens in public income assistance processes, health-care systems, and housing experiences.*

Keywords: administrative burdens, intersectional burdens, social location, social reproduction, interlocking inequalities, public assistance

Approximately one hundred million Americans participate in social safety net programs each year (Macartney and Ghertner 2023). Recent data indicate that one in four working adults and one in two children in the United States received social safety net benefits and that at least half of those adults participated in multiple safety net programs (Macartney and Ghertner 2023). Many more apply but are turned away for lack of eligibility or by the bureau-

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cratic confusion and inefficiency surrounding access to the benefits for which they do qualify. Poor or working-class people are often the intended recipients of social programs, such as childcare and health-care subsidies. Yet those who gain access routinely report negative experiences navigating program eligibility, compliance, and redemption.

The concept of administrative burdens describes these onerous, complex, and constrained systems that mediate access to state programs and benefits (Burden et al. 2012, 742; Herd and Moynihan 2019). Routine burdens often involve learning, psychological, and compliance costs for individuals in need. Examples include learning to navigate dense policies and procedures to determine eligibility, experiencing psychological stigma in the application process for particular programs, and the need to provide ongoing documentation of one's qualifications, all of which can bring lengthy wait times, innumerable forms, and little direct assistance (Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey 2014, 46). The more demanding these burdens are, the less likely eligible claimants may be to access the benefits they are legally entitled to receive (Fox, Feng, and Reynolds 2023). In turn, these obstacles reproduce existing social and racial inequalities that are most likely to harm women, communities of color, and other marginalized groups (Bleiweis, Boesch, and Cawthorne Gaines 2020; Michener 2018).

In addition to being complex, administrative burdens can be racialized and gendered in ways that normalize and reproduce inequality while obscuring the role of racism and sexism in the process (Ray, Herd, and Moynihan 2022). Racialized burdens make it more challenging for people of color to access public benefits, especially when administrative processes rely on notions of "deservingness" to legitimize the unequal distribution of resources across racial groups (Ray, Herd, and Moynihan 2022). Likewise, gendered burdens disproportionately affect women, migrant women, women of color, and LGBTQ individuals because these communities are more likely to work in low-paid and devalued work with limited health-care benefits (Elliott et al. 2021; Scott, London, and Gross 2007). These inequalities manifest in all areas of social life, including whether households

have enough money to pay rent and feed their family. Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) data in 2019 illustrated this disparity: approximately 62 percent of American households with children receiving food benefits had one adult in the home, and in 92 percent of those households, the adults were women (Tucker et al. 2021).

National hardships can also compound the complexity and frequency of administrative burdens. In 2020, for example, the COVID-19 pandemic turned the nation upside down, exacerbating existing disparities in health care (Garcia et al. 2021; Bowleg 2020; Rocha Beardall 2020), while also pushing families into new job loss, underemployment (Montenovo et al. 2022; Miquel et al. 2022), and food insecurity (Elliott et al. 2021). When attempting to access health care, the pandemic prevented some Americans from traveling safely to and from appointments and required many more to learn new policies to maintain existing benefits while seeking eligibility for new ones. New and old hardships were exacerbated by the 2020 police murder of George Floyd in Minnesota. Floyd's death sparked the largest protest in U.S. history (Kaba and Ritchie 2022) and disproportionately affected Black Americans coping with the stress and emotional fallout of anti-Black violence. However, an emphasis on the racialized and gendered aspects of these experiences alone cannot fully capture how social inequalities unfold along multiple axes, including one's gender, age, and ability status.

We introduce the concept of *intersectional burdens*—which describes how one's social location (including race, class, gender, age, ability, and other social identities) shapes their ability to access and use state benefits and programs. This conceptual framework accounts for the mutually reinforcing identities that affect one's experiences with the state by facilitating an intersectional understanding of how inequalities are experienced, reproduced, and resisted. In the present study, we illustrate the salience of intersectional burdens by drawing on the rich qualitative data collected by the American Voices Project (AVP) from 2019 to 2021. This nationally representative sample includes questions about household composition, emotional well-being, health status, and

personal and family experiences navigating daily life in the context of broader social factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the murder of George Floyd (Fields et al. 2023). Using a random subsample of sixty-one interviews with Black, Latinx, and White women, we find that respondents' social location affected whether and how their journeys were advantaged or disadvantaged. Indeed, although respondents from each racial-ethnic group detailed encounters with administrative burdens, White women seldom experienced disruptions that they perceived to be inescapable. Further, we find that among women who qualified and accessed public benefits, their position within established social hierarchies shaped their experiences navigating administrative burdens.

An intersectional burdens framework sheds new light on how, where, when, and why inequalities persist in the administration of public benefits by providing language to understand how existing social hierarchies are reproduced and strengthened. The framework also enables a more tailored analysis of efforts to increase the uptake of social safety net resources among those in need. This approach does so by uncovering how generalized burdens—such as spending more time in undesirable situations, experiencing heightened distress, and bearing the weight of associated stigmas—are experienced differently in ways that current frameworks have yet to capture. We conclude by considering how intersectional burdens can inform future studies of citizen-state interactions and policy efforts to reduce individual and accumulated administrative burdens. We also consider the utility of this approach in the intergenerational transfer of these burdens and the embodied implications burdens have on family life.

ADMINISTRATIVE BURDENS ARE RACIALIZED

The bureaucratic processes that govern how public resources are distributed can exert unequal costs on Americans in need. These costs are made visible in the study of administrative burdens—defined as the onerous, complex, and constrained experiences individuals encounter when accessing state programs and benefits (Burden et al. 2012, 742; Herd and Moynihan 2019). However, burdens transcend state benefits and appear wherever the state dictates how individuals must seek access to public services, including immigration, voting, and health care (Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey 2014; Mueller and Bartlett 2019). In immigration processes, administrative burdens include substantial application fees, extensive knowledge of U.S. government and history, and complicated paperwork. Additionally, citizens can encounter barriers to exercising their right to vote when faced with a lengthy voter registration process and expensive identification requirements that change across time and place (Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey 2014). In the context of health care, administrative burdens can appear when program eligibility is vague and difficult to access, when the stigma of participation in programs such as Medicaid is high, and when the continuous paperwork involved with accessing and maintaining those benefits proves too unmanageable (Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey 2014). In some cases, these difficulties are designed to refuse rights to claimants knowingly; in others, these burdens can accumulate over time and leave everyday people less able to manage burdens associated with the programs they need.

Administrative burdens can be classified into three types of costs: learning costs, which include the process of gathering and understanding relevant information about available benefits and determining whether is eligible; psychological costs, such as the stigma of applying to and participating in state programs, a sense of powerlessness in dealing with the state, and the stresses and fears associated with dealing with extensive administrative processes; and compliance costs, which account for the time and effort people invest in following tedious administrative requirements to receive and maintain their benefits, including documentation of ongoing eligibility (Herd and Moynihan 2019; Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey 2014). For instance, college students who rely on need-based financial aid must first determine their eligibility, complete arduous income-verification processes, maintain a minimum grade point average, and remain en-

rolled in a minimum number of credit hours to maintain financial aid (Gándara et al. 2023). Some students may also be required to recertify their U.S. citizenship or residency, which can stigmatize students in need who may already feel stressed and powerless in an unfamiliar bureaucratic process.

Recent scholarship finds that these three costs extend beyond the time and effort residents invest to receive and maintain their benefits and into whether, where, and how they can redeem them. Redemption costs—referring to the multiple challenges residents encounter trying to use their benefits (Barnes 2021)—primarily emerge in consumer choice and voucher-based programs such as SNAP. To use this food benefit, beneficiaries must find and navigate third-party vendors to purchase pre-approved foods, which vary across retailers (Barnes 2021). In addition to public benefits, such costs can affect the redemption of the municipal services a person is entitled to receive. For example, in the event of police misconduct, claimants must navigate review boards and power hierarchies to access police services and achieve police accountability (Cheng 2022, 2024; Rocha Beardall 2022, 2024). These hardships disproportionately affect poor and minoritized populations.

Based on theories that the United States is a racial state—in the sense that it relies on racial ideology to govern and organize social life via symbolic, structural, and institutional violence (Alicea 2022)—scholars suggest that administrative burdens can be politically motivated and organized to reproduce White supremacy (Herd and Moynihan 2019; Jung and Kwon 2013; Ray 2019). Scholars have advanced the concept of racialized burdens to illustrate how state actors and practices impose administrative burdens that normalize and reproduce racial inequality and obscure the role of race and racism in the process (Ray, Herd, and Moynihan 2022). One way this happens is when frontline workers rely on notions of deservingness to legitimize the unequal distribution of resources across racial groups (Ray, Herd, and Moynihan 2022), making it more challenging for racial and ethnic minorities to access public benefits.

The costs of administrative burdens—learning costs, psychological costs, and compliance costs—are replicated within racialized burdens in ways that enhance or diminish the standing of particular racial groups. Returning to our immigration example, the inclusion of an English-language requirement and racial restrictions illustrates the presence and influence of racialized burdens. Recent changes made during the Donald Trump administration (2016–2020) reflect these practices for contemporary U.S. citizenship applicants by increasing the number of questions on the naturalization test, restricting travel, and capping visas from Muslim-majority countries, African countries, and Middle Eastern countries (Moynihan, Herd, and Gerinza 2022). In this case, administrative burdens can become "racialized weapons" by limiting access to resources for particular groups (Ray, Herd, and Moynihan 2022). Likewise, in the context of voting, literacy tests, and property requirements disproportionately affected people of color (Herd et al. 2023), and more recently, felon disenfranchisement laws have effectively blocked thousands of people of color from exercising the right to vote (Uggen et al. 2020).

Intersectional Burdens

Administrative burdens are not just racialized; they also differ based on other critical dimensions of one's social location, including gender, class, age, ability, immigration status, and criminal legal system contact. We argue that, intentionally or not, some administrative burdens affect particular groups differently based on specific dimensions of individual identity. To account for the mutually reinforcing identities that affect experiences with the state, we introduce the concept of *intersectional burdens*—which describes how one's social location (including race, class, gender, age, ability, and other social identities) shapes their ability to access and use state benefits and programs—to better understand how inequalities are experienced, reproduced, and resisted. We advance this concept by drawing from intersectionality theory, a conceptual framework that fills in the methodological and theoretical gaps that often remain underexamined when using

an administrative or racialized burdens lens alone.

Legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality (1989) when she described the multiplicative experiences of Black women in the workplace and the law's failure to capture how they were subject to intersecting forms of marginalization based on their race, gender, class, and sexuality. Using the case of *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors* (1976), Crenshaw (1989) recounts how GM's hiring policies excluded Black women before 1964, and years later, how their downsizing using a "last hired-first fired" seniority policy laid off all the Black women hired after 1970.[1] In response, five Black women sued the company, alleging that this layoff system perpetuated and preserved the effects of past discrimination (Crenshaw 1989).

The District Court decided against the women, determining that Black women were not "a special class to be protected from discrimination . . . [and] they should not be allowed to combine statutory remedies to create a new 'super-remedy' which would give them relief beyond what the drafters of the relevant statutes intended" (*DeGraffenreid*). The court reasoned that because GM did hire *some* women before 1964, no sex discrimination had occurred. The court further recommended that the case be consolidated with another against GM alleging race discrimination. Crenshaw's framework illustrates that employment discrimination against Black women did not arise because of their race or gender, but instead, it was because of their race and gender (Crenshaw 1989). This multiplicative framework rejected the idea that experience with oppression is additive, arguing that focusing on single-axis analysis "marginalizes those who are multiply-burdened and obscures claims that cannot be understood as resulting from discrete sources of discrimination" (Crenshaw 1989, 138; Rocha Beardall 2021).

Building from intersectionality theory, the concept of intersectional burdens describes how and when an administrative policy or program can explicitly privilege some people and

not others based on their unique social location. Like Crenshaw, this lens emphasizes how administrative policies and burdens can inherently disadvantage individuals or groups differently based on one's social location. Although not naming this process explicitly, social scientific literature illustrates how administrative burdens associated with rights-granting and rights-depriving programs are differentially experienced by race and gender (Roberts 2022; Rose 1993) or gender and class (Edin and Lein 1997; Orloff 1996). In family formation, for example, several studies demonstrate how women of color routinely encounter racial discrimination in policies surrounding family planning services, exacerbating the longstanding historical devaluation of non-White women's fertility and childrearing practices (Bonaparte 2019; McCormack 2005).

Burdens emerge from structural factors that shape individual-level interactions with organizational processes that in turn influence individual-level life course experiences over time. Our conceptualization of intersectional burdens emphasizes the role of a person's multidimensional social location and patterned interactions with health care and human services organizations as key sites where burdens unfold. For example, due in part to legislation restricting access to family planning and reproductive health services in the broader context of racialized access to health insurance coverage, low-income Black and Latinx women are more likely to experience delayed reproductive health screenings and prenatal care enrollment than low-income White women (Sutton et al. 2021). Given that Black women remain at significantly greater risk for maternal mortality than White women, scholars are now examining how unequal burdens emerge through organizational processes involving health-care providers' racial bias, racialized access to insurance coverage, and disparities in accessing high-quality medical care. These issues contribute to the disproportionate rates of adverse birth outcomes (Bridges 2011), and compounding burdens then manifest cumulative, intersectional inequalities across institutional sites

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1. *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors Assembly Div., Etc.,* 413 F. Supp. 142 (E.D. Mo. 1976).

such as childcare systems (Bouek 2023) and public cash benefits and nutrition assistance programs (Barnes, Halpern-Meekin, and Hoiting 2023; Watkins-Hayes 2011).

Studies focused on more explicitly punitive state institutions further illustrate the intersectional nature of administrative burdens, especially among low-income families of color (Roberts 2022; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011). For example, the child welfare system highlights that "coercive and punitive administrative burdens work to make punishment and marginalization more certain and more severe for poor, Black, and Indigenous families" (Edwards et al. 2023, 227; Rocha Beardall and Edwards 2021). In addition to having disparate experiences with rights-granting social benefits, some social groups are disproportionately affected by rights-depriving administrative burdens such as the requirement that parents document and prove their status as fit parents to pull their families out of the child welfare system (Edwards et al. 2023; Rocha Beardall and Edwards 2021). Parallels to criminal legal system contact are significant. Consider, for example, the administration of probation, another area rife with racialized burdens, where welfare services are provided for only some and the administrative burdens of accessing those services are considerable. Racialized administrative burdens are prominent in both of these cases given that individuals involved in the criminal system are disproportionately people of color who are dealing with poverty (Phelps and Ruhland 2022). Against this backdrop, we examine how women experience and navigate intersectional burdens when attempting to access or comply with public benefits to promote their well-being, families, and communities.

DATA AND METHODS

The American Voices Project interviewed a nationally representative sample of approximately 2,700 Americans between 2019 and 2021, oversampling for low-income households in a three-stage cluster sampling approach. This dataset offers a comprehensive snapshot of everyday social life in the United States during a period marked by the COVID-19 pandemic and mass protests against police violence. These immersive interviews examine many aspects of American life, including political engagement, health-care usage, and economic hardships.

Based on our underlying interest in the challenges of national crises and state resources, we first drew a stratified random sample of five participants in each of twenty-four categories contained in the AVP data, along the following dimensions: gender (men, women); race (Black, White, Latinx); children in the household (yes, no); and time period (interviewed before March 11, 2020, the date the coronavirus pandemic was declared, or interviewed after May 25, 2020, the date George Floyd was murdered). Questions on respondents' social, emotional, and physical well-being were well suited to our overall inquiry. We triangulated that focus by reviewing the entire transcript for each case in our analytic sample to contextualize our analysis within each person's overall life history.

The following analysis focuses on women's experiences navigating the administrative state. We do so for two reasons. Practically, a closer analysis of half our sample positions us better to introduce and develop the emergent concept of intersectional burdens. Substantively, the focus on women promised to be generative given well-documented gendered inequalities and their subsequent likelihood of encountering the administrative state. Patriarchal cultural norms around caregiving, motherhood status, and family affairs translate into expectations for women to take on childcare, housework, and coordinating everyday familial logistics (Daminger 2019; Kyle and Frakt 2021; McLanahan and Kelly 2006; Power 2020). These gendered expectations mean that women are more likely to interface with public institutions, especially because the state engages in what feminist scholars call "homebreaking" or exerting state power inside disorderly homes and forcing changes on them (Gurusami and Kurwa 2021).

As a first step toward an intersectional approach to administrative burdens, we explore these complex interactions by focusing on sixty-one self-identified women (twenty Black, twenty-one Latinx, and twenty White). Descriptive statistics of our sample are presented in

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of AVP Sample

	N	Percent
Female	61	100
Age		
18–44	27	44.27
45–54	13	21.31
55+	19	31.15
Race-ethnicity		
Black	20	32.79
Latinx	21	34.43
White	20	32.79
Income		
<=$24,000	17	27.87
$24,001–$48,000	13	21.31
$48,000–$72,000	14	22.95
>$72,001 (or missing)	17	22.87
Weeks worked in last year		
0	15	24.59
<=40 weeks	16	26.23
41–51 weeks	15	24.59
52 weeks	11	18.03
Region of residence		
Midwest or Northeast	21	34.42
South	26	42.62
West	14	22.95

Source: Authors' tabulation.

table 1, which provides as much detail as possible but collapses certain categories together to meet AVP data reporting requirements.[2]

Over twelve months, we invested equally in training graduate students in qualitative methods and analyzing the AVP data to better understand how women navigated administrative burdens. First, two authors closely read a random sample of ten interviews, three of which overlapped. Based on themes from this initial sample, we created a preliminary codebook that included examples and definitions of parent codes (such as racial identification, political participation, administrative burdens) and

their respective subcodes (such as food-, legal-, health-care-, and housing-related administrative burdens). Second, we trained a research team of six sociology graduate students to apply the preliminary codebook and analyze their assigned category. Each student wrote a detailed memo based on each case they coded and a thematic memo based on the five interviews making up each category (such as White women during unsettled times with children). The authors met with each student individually after each set of five interviews they coded and collectively as a team biweekly. These discussions provided the opportunity to refine and expand the codebook based on new themes identified within and across interviews. Finally, the faculty team collectively reread all sixty-one interviews to clarify, refine, and reconcile the primary findings.

This process employed a modified team-based grounded theory approach to develop conceptual models from the AVP data. Using constant comparison, we proceeded systematically from the within-case level to the within-group and across-group levels. This approach involved open coding to identify general indicators, concepts, and themes around the questions of interest; axial coding to determine the conditions, phases, and relationships between conceptual domains; and selective coding to determine which outcomes emerged as most important in the data analysis and which variables matter most in shaping those outcomes. We employed within-group analyses to assess patterns by time period of data collection, race-ethnicity, gender, and class status, followed by cross-case analysis facilitating comparisons of experiences across individuals and groups. Individual members of our research team proceeded through the data and memos by closed-coding transcripts with the current iteration of the codebook, open-coding transcripts for novel insights, recoding already coded interview transcripts whenever the codebook was updated, closed-coding individual case summary memos, and open-coding subgroup-level

2. The AVP generally applies the Census Bureau's principles on disclosure avoidance for qualitative research. The policies that were most relevant to findings described were, first, quotations can be published only if at least ten thousand people in the group were formed by the combination of all descriptors and, second, demographic tables describing the sample can only be published if the cell count is greater than eleven.

theoretical memos to identify emergent group-level processes. In conducting these analyses, we used the interactive synthesis approach, which combines variable-oriented and case-oriented perspectives (Miles and Huberman 1994).

Our analysis yielded insights regarding the multidimensional nature of social location in shaping individuals' experiences with administrative burdens as they navigated interlocking systems of inequality. However, AVP's reporting requirements and confidentiality design constrained our ability to report more detail regarding the intersectionality of oppression experienced by participants in our analytic sample. For example, the cases presented in table 1 are aggregated in categories no smaller than ten individuals per response category in accordance with AVP policies. Rightfully, the qualitative details on respondent experiences we offer below honor this same confidentiality threshold. Within this context, we draw on illustrative cases to describe the intersectional nature of burdens with as much attention to the particularities of respondents' experiences as possible while maintaining confidentiality.

FINDINGS

The findings are presented in three parts. First, to better understand how the state distributes and withholds resources, we provide an overview of the conditionality of public benefits. These data show that most women experienced some significant form of administrative burden and that these experiences have intersectional dimensions. Whether intentionally administered as such or not, women's ability to navigate and secure public benefits differed and were stratified along race and class lines, in addition to other critical dimensions of their identity, including age, ability, immigration and citizenship status, and criminal legal system contact. Respondents experienced a range of administrative burdens, but our analysis found that intersectional burdens manifested prominently in health-care benefits and housing benefits. We focus on these two domains and unpack the heterogeneity in how people navigated administrative burdens with different levels of success and strain.

The Conditionality of Public Benefits

Respondents across the sample described their experiences with intersectional burdens when the public benefits they were entitled to became conditional during the pandemic. Specifically, governmental programs reassessed eligibility requirements and enhanced overall scrutiny for non-COVID benefits. At the same time, administrative attention turned toward pandemic-related priorities, leaving respondents without assistance even as they sought to comply. As we describe, nonstate sources of support, such as personal savings, distinguished those who achieved greater financial security following the pandemic.

Women across race-ethnicity articulated challenges in maintaining their pre-COVID benefits in the context of additional, compounding hardships experienced during the emerging pandemic. For instance, Pamela, a White woman without children in the home living in the West, described how receiving her unemployment benefits has been a "nightmare" because "trying to get a hold of anybody is virtually impossible. I mean, I literally call them at eight o'clock on the dot, and they're already full to the rim. . . . there's no other way to get a hold of anybody." Over months, the unemployment office had not returned Pamela's phone calls or provided any updates. Going to the unemployment office in person was also fruitless. Lori, a White woman with children in the home living in the South, described her difficulty in paying bills because she stopped receiving her unemployment during COVID. In fact, she was entitled to $9,000 in unemployment, but "because of all the COVID stuff, we weren't able to actually go over to the unemployment office, talk to them." Although neither Pamela nor Lori lost their employment due to the COVID-19 pandemic, they described meaningful challenges to maintain their pre-COVID benefits and navigate the ongoing complex challenges of the COVID context in their daily lives. Here, the pandemic exacerbated the costs of continuing to receive case assistance, even as people sought to comply.

COVID also consumed administrative attention, relegating non-andemic issues to low-priority status. For instance, Stephanie, a

Latinx woman without children in the home living in the South, explained how an accident disabled her and left her without work. She began receiving $500 a month in disability payments and was aware of the performative nature of demonstrating compliance and continued need. She described how she needed to attend her doctor's appointments for "as long as I gotta do it, you know, what the government asks, you know, they wanna see you go to your doctor appointments, they wanna see that, you know, you're doing all right and not messing up." Despite her disability payments, she soon entered housing instability because "they [the government] don't wanna help me with my rent because I didn't lose my job to COVID-19. I'm on my disability, but they're not helping anybody unless you lost your job to COVID-19." Other minority women similarly expressed pandemic delays in receiving food stamps and childcare services.

Women across our three subsamples experienced heightened administrative burdens during the pandemic, but these challenges layered on top of existing needs that were not equally distributed before the pandemic. Mirelia, an undocumented Latinx mother with children in the home living in the West, explained how fortunate her family was to live in a state that permitted those without legal status to obtain identification cards. At the same time, she recognized that the IDs increased their visibility to the state, saying, "We can't commit any mistakes, not at all." Mirelia cited examples of insurance and other licenses, where her family complied with requirements to avoid risking revocation of their IDs.

The psychological costs of the mother's precautions against potential mistakes spilled over into the interview itself, where Mirelia declined to provide the birthdates of her children because of a recent fraud in the clinic where they receive care. The fraud affected her children's documentation, which they had to work to fix. In other words, as someone with a precarious legal status, the mother was simultaneously eager to comply yet constantly suspicious. Such an orientation toward public benefits can foreseeably make it difficult to contest mistakes. Dolores, another Latinx mother with children in the home living in the

West, explained how her friend does not have legal status, even though her children do, and during the pandemic, "she can't do work and they [the government] stopped her cash so far." Whether she was supposed to continue receiving the benefits or not, she did not feel comfortable inquiring because the conditionality of their legal status exacerbated their public benefits.

Existing inequalities in the distribution of resources meant that some respondents had greater access to nonstate forms of support to navigate the pandemic. For example, Candice, a Black mother with children in the home living in the South, explained how they were not relying on public resources before COVID and were relatively unaffected as administrative burdens intensified. Pattie, a Black mother with children in the home living in the South, also described how, even though their bills were piling up, she was "thankful I don't need to go out the house, I barely even go to the mailbox." Although they could live comfortably in their house, she was looking forward to receiving her child's social security check soon to help cover some of their bills. Pattie expressed implicit guilt because she could "barely take him to the movies or stuff like that."

White women in the sample were more likely to describe access to nonstate forms of financial support to ease their pandemic-related stress. For instance, Pamela, who could not contact the unemployment office via telephone, explained how she navigated the pandemic, unemployment, and falling ill through her savings. Previously, she had put aside money to allow her grandchild to visit her. The pandemic's onset forced her to cancel the trip, and she used the money to pay off her vehicle—despite the difficulties with securing her unemployment benefits. For people such as Pamela, the ability to draw on nonstate financial resources available in personal savings or social networks provided a buffer against future exposure to administrative burdens when they met difficulties securing benefits.

Several other White women expressed proficiency and ease when navigating the bureaucracy of public benefits. Many were able to take advantage of COVID-related benefits, such as Sarah, a White woman without children living

in her home on the East Coast, who placed both stimulus checks into her savings account. When Sarah's business began falling low during the pandemic, she got a Payment Protection Program loan that "almost dollar for dollar made up for what I lost." When asked about her experiences with dealing with government programs, Nancy, a White woman with children in the home living in the South, said, "it's fairly easy for me." She explained:

> There's a lot to it in the beginning when you're trying to get on them, you gotta fill out all the paperwork, then you gotta go for interviews and then they do interviews over the phone and they're just checking on all those funds and make sure what you're making and how much they're going to give you, but pretty much I haven't had any problems like I think every six months they do their call a re-determination and like they just go over . . . finances just to make sure where you're at with your money, you're not making no more money or whatever. But I mean it's as easy as getting on the computer and just filling out the work.

Nancy's institutional knowledge likely derived from working at an organization that assisted others in applying for government assistance. Such expertise meant that what would be considered administrative burdens for others, namely, the compliance and redemption costs associated with demonstrating eligibility and claiming entitlements, were actually manageable for Nancy.

Such institutional knowledge may be gendered, given that mothers may be the ones with the onus to contact programs on behalf of their children. Jackie, a White mother with children in the home living in the Midwest, described how it "didn't bother me so much when they cut off the food stamps, but when they cut off the food stamps, they would cut off the kids' health insurance and that was really irritating." Jackie had recently moved from one state to another, which prompted an investigation into whether she was receiving benefits in two states. However, Jackie contacted the insurance offices in the state from which she moved and straightened it out. The mother was hesitant to

demand the insurance, but felt compelled to do so on behalf of her children: "I didn't want to fight with them because I was glad that they even gave me anything. So it was like I felt bad calling and saying why aren't you giving this to me? It was like I didn't even feel like it, but I did it for the kids, you know." With the stimulus money, tax returns, and public benefits, Jackie explained how this was one of the few times she felt financially stable during motherhood.

Overall, women's ability to navigate administrative burdens differed across program domains, yet their experiences with intersectional burdens due to their unique social location manifested prominently in the salience of health-care benefits and public housing. The two remaining subsections dive deeper into these areas to unpack their heterogeneity with greater specificity.

Convoluted Access to Affordable Health Care

Respondents shared how the organizational ecology of bureaucratic red tape demonstrated that whatever public safety net there might be, it did not seem to care about women, their children, or their extended family's well-being. Specifically, respondents shared their learning cost experiences navigating Obamacare and making sense of medical billing, compliance costs in traversing application processes to secure disability benefits and navigating health-care systems without insurance coverage, and psychological costs in keeping pace with shifting insurance coverage statuses for themselves and their loved ones. Their accounts revealed that access and use of health-care services at affordable costs was sometimes a matter of will, but frequently just came down to chance.

Sometimes, respondents experienced positive surprises in the form of health policy changes. For example, Sharon, a White woman who lived in the South, explained that although she had Medicaid coverage while she was pregnant with her children, she lost it because her work paid her enough to disqualify her from Medicaid but not enough to be able to afford private insurance. She shared that she briefly worked enough hours to qualify for private insurance through her employer, but then had to cut back her hours because balancing work and other responsibilities became too hard, result-

ing in her losing her coverage. It is likely that during this period, her state expanded Medicaid eligibility. One day, as Sharon discovered, "They actually just sent me a card in the mail one day, and I was like, 'What the hell?' I hadn't applied and like probably a couple of years. . . . I called them, they're like, 'Hey, you have Medicaid, you're eligible for it.'"

Public insurance was not, however, typically characterized by positive surprises. Many respondents shared that administrative burdens introduced sources of stress, confusion, and complexity. For example, Whitney, a Black woman living in the Northeast with children in the home, said that it was relatively easy to navigate meeting her physical health needs with health-care coverage provided through her state. However, she experienced more difficulty finding a mental health-care treatment provider to prescribe psychiatric medications and help her address insomnia after her former provider quit. Additionally, Jennifer, a Latina woman living in the South with children in the home, shared that breaks in the continuity of her health-care treatment as a function of Medicaid policies and procedures had been challenging to navigate. She related, "Oh, it's been hell," when describing periods when she could not afford to adhere to her medications due to financial burdens. She shared that as she discovered Medicaid would not cover some needed prescriptions, her health would decline until she felt forced to use the Emergency Department or be hospitalized "just for me to get my immune system back working properly until my Medicaid kicks back in to where they pay for it. . . . So that's very hard."

For Jennifer, psychological and compliance costs in health-care led to deferred treatment, and ultimately contributed to her experiences with employment and housing instability as well. She told her interviewers that although she might qualify for Family and Medical Leave through an employer, this was not a paid leave, so she had no source of income during her hospital stays. She said that this process was emotionally overwhelming for her, explaining that "some days I used to just cry. I used to tell my sister, 'You know what, I'm just giving all my children up.' And she was like, 'Why?' I said,

'Because I can't take care of them.' And I'd get frustrated . . . I just shut down." Jennifer's tribulations with complex medical needs was isolating and overwhelming. She reported leaning on her sister for emotional and social support as a resource to help her cope with complex challenges navigating health-care systems and securing resources for her family. Others echoed this sentiment and identified bureaucratic hurdles as a cause of deferred medical treatment or going without prescribed medications.

The emerging pandemic often exacerbated these dynamics. Sarah, a White woman living in the South with children in the home, said that she was not currently taking her medications because of COVID: "I was actually supposed to see [the] pain doctor to get on medication, but they won't see me because of the whole COVID stuff, some clinics closed down, so I haven't been able to actually get into the doctors I need." When asked about any unmet medical needs, Sarah shared her experiences with learning costs associated with navigating the changing bureaucratic landscape of health-care. When it came to something as seemingly simple as a vision exam to fix and update her glasses, she said, "I can't do that because I don't know which doctors I can go to." She explained that it was challenging to figure out which health-care providers were in her coverage network or outside of it, and that her confusion was compounded when her network switched.

Others shared that navigating administrative bureaucracies on behalf of loved ones was time-intensive, challenging, and at times stressful on top of the everyday burdens of caregiving. Navigating health-care paperwork for loved ones was especially difficult. Lydia, a White woman living in the Northeast with no children in the home, related that it was challenging to travel long distances to help her aging parents every month. Eventually, she helped her mother locate and move into a nursing home, "and that was really hard." She found herself simultaneously caring for her parents and struggling to learn how to help her brother access Medicaid from a long distance, which involved a "forty-six-page application." For others, caregiving for a relative with a disability

while managing work became a stressful time management challenge. As Lynne, a White woman in the Northeast with children in her home, explained, this experience was "stressful in the sense of, like you kind of feel helpless, there's nothing you can do to help cure somebody." This meant "always kind of stressing and wondering what today's going to bring." She said that caregiving responsibilities required difficult everyday decisions surrounding whether to take time away from work to travel to appointments or provide care at home.

Yet not all respondents experienced navigating administrative health-care bureaucracies as burdensome. Tia, a Black woman living in the West with grown children, had served in the military and received coverage through the Veterans Administration (VA). She shared that having the same health-care system to meet a range of medical needs provided a relatively smooth process before, during, and after a number of major surgeries. She alluded to the VA's recent transition to rapidly expand Telehealth services during the pandemic, noting, "any issues that arise, you make an appointment, and you see your doctor via the computer screen, but that is working also." She explained that she pays for health care at a reduced rate because it is offered through the VA, that payment is not a barrier for her, and that she did not have any unmet health needs due to the persistence of her VA providers in caring for her.

Despite her positive experience with the VA health-care system and her adult children's experiences with employer-based private health insurance coverage, Tia expressed frustration that her aging mother's health-care experiences have been less straightforward. In fact, this topic was the first thing she mentioned when asked about political issues that mattered to her: "My mom's on Social Security and Medicaid, and I talk to [her] every day and we have conversations about her having to either put off buying her medicines or stating that she can't, you know the medicine's price went up all of a sudden, or the insurance now no longer covers it. . . . that's an issue for me." For Tia, it is unacceptable that her mother has had such a negative experience with the administrative bureaucracies that link health insurance coverage to health-care treatment. Her mother's medical needs are a source of frustration in that these experiences illustrate firsthand the effects of health-care fragmentation, surprise negative policy changes, and prohibitive costs.

The Carcerality of Subsidized Housing

Several respondents described overwhelming burdens in housing and utility assistance programs, preventing them from living in a safe and stable home. Further, rigorous and continuous eligibility requirements left women feeling stressed and without options. Tamara, a Black woman in the Midwest with children in the home, explained: "Living in low-income, you don't have that many good places to stay without having a good income. So, you have to take what you can get sometimes." For others, the lack of essential appliances in rental units exacerbated their anxiety. Many families turned to safety net programs with long waiting lists for assistance because their Section 8 financial status made saving enough money for these items difficult. Stephanie, a Latinx woman in the South without children in the home, shared her struggles with rent, bills, prescriptions, and living with a disability. She confronted her stress by planning ahead, first to catch up on her electric bill and then to buy a stove after a year without one, both of which limited her ability to care for herself.

Burdensome housing experiences also activated "carceral memories" when rental units were physically and psychologically reminiscent of incarceration. Jean, a Black woman, received housing assistance in addition to Medicaid and other public benefits and articulated this experience in two ways: building management and the rental unit. Jean recalled discriminatory treatment and shared how her race, gender, and criminal history compounded her socioeconomic challenges and complicated eligibility for desperately needed public services.

She described her former housing administrators as "real mean," mistreating her in ways that reminded her of being in a jail cell under constant surveillance. Like guards in jail, this person dictated what she could and could not do. This stressor interacted with the physical layout of Jean's public housing unit. She explained:

We can't come outside. We can't hang out. We can't do this. The farthest we can go is from our living room to the patio . . . [it] started making me feel uncomfortable because now I feel like I'm in jail. Because when I was in the penitentiary, we couldn't do nothing but go from our bed to the day room. So, that's how I'm living out here, and I'm paying rent. . . . I feel like, "You holding us captive in our house, and I feel like I'm back in prison again."

In addition to being "real mean," housing administrators jeopardized Jean's public housing access. At one point, she received a letter stating that she failed her background check and no longer qualified for housing assistance. She called the housing office, and the matter was cleared up, but her anxieties about keeping her rental were already in motion.

Considering Jean's social location through an intersectional burdens lens reveals her significant learning, psychological, and compliance costs. Moreover, Jean's journey revealed how death in the family can be a psychological cost in obtaining state benefits. Jean inherited her relative's housing voucher because she was the only living family member listed on the application, not because she was homeless at the time given that the eligibility waitlist at the time was still several years long. This meant that three generations of Jean's family endured race and gender inequalities before their housing need was met by Section 8. Each generation likely felt powerless dealing with the state and fearful when navigating administrative processes to remain eligible for public housing. Further, when housing stability arrives through the loss of one's family, we can begin to see how administrative burdens carry intergenerational psychological costs that outlive those waiting to receive that assistance.

Jean faced additional psychological and learning costs due to the discretionary authority of frontline workers. For instance, when a

housing administrator threatened eviction, she said, "Oh, I don't need a reason," implying that their authority to decide on the spot who was a "good fit" for the complex. Feeling powerless, Jean was mindful of her criminal record and dependence on government assistance. Jean continued working with this person despite the administrator's disdain and efforts to hinder her benefits. Jean also encountered psychological costs and learning costs with another layer of frontline workers' discretionary authority concerning her criminal background and its impact on benefits eligibility. Eligibility protocol and exceptions often remained unclear or undisclosed until recipients received a formal notice, causing residents such as Jean distress. She explained: "I called them [the office] hysterical because they pulled up my background. I know I didn't fail no background." Only after another public housing worker conducted a more thorough investigation did they realize that Jean's criminal record was too old to disqualify her. Although they dismissed the notice and reinstated her housing assistance, failed evictions are traumatic and leave lasting stress and anxiety.

Jean also faced compliance costs with the tedious administrative requirements she navigated to maintain her benefits. She navigated bureaucratic expectations cautiously to avoid risking her eligibility, paying close attention to where she worked, when, and even whether and how she saved any leftover money. Jean explained that she had to constantly monitor her actions and social circle to ensure that she stayed, in her words, on the straight and narrow to not risk losing her benefits. Similarly, she worried about how her multiple safety net programs conflicted with her desire for financial independence. She believed that having Section 8 prevented her from saving or holding a bank account, "because if you can afford that, you can afford to pay your rent."[3] Like other women, Jean turned to her religious faith to help her cope with intersectional burdens.

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[3] It is, in fact, perfectly rational for tenants to be extremely careful about considerations such as this because only 25 percent of those who qualify for vouchers get them, and 40 percent of those who receive vouchers are unable to find a landlord willing to rent to them before the voucher take-up period expires. In rare but important cases, one can be prosecuted for welfare fraud based on simply not understanding the financial rules of the program (Ellen, O'Regan, and Strochak 2021).

Rochelle, a Black woman in the South with children in the home, linked Jean's experience with her own by describing her experience in the form of redemption costs—the cost of learning how to use benefits according to specific procedures (Barnes 2021)—while navigating the public housing lottery system. She explained, "They have to pick your number, I done applied for five to six places, but my number never got picked, so I finally get picked for somewhere I don't want to move to, because I wanted to move far out, but I was ready to go so that's what happened with that situation." Like other public housing assistance residents, Rochelle's housing options were constrained by market availability, location, and the timing of her housing assistance voucher redemption. Her intersectional identity as a low-income mother of color left her feeling behind procedurally, as decisions about her life and her housing were literally left up to the draw. She had to choose what she could and when she could. Similarly, once in an apartment, Rochelle encountered compliance costs—to remain compliant with the tedious administrative requirements and rules of public housing, she needed to "mind her business" with others because not doing so could jeopardize her family's safety.

Rochelle experienced additional psychological costs in feeling powerless as she waited for the ability to redeem her voucher in a new place. Her unit and building were infested with rats and unclean water for an extended period. Life was unbearable. In response, she was placed in a similar apartment, lamenting, "If you ain't got nowhere to go, it's better than being outside, better than being in the shelter. And they said it use[d] to be really bad. I wasn't [there] living back when it was really bad, it was bad enough then." Rochelle explained how the long waiting list and lottery system limited her choices, leaving her to deal with an unintended form of stigma attached to participating in state programs and a sense of powerlessness in dealing with the state. When she complained, the housing authority sent technicians who never resolved the underlying problems, adding to her distress.

Housing assistance programs can also force individuals and families into unsafe living conditions reminiscent of jails and prisons. Rochelle, when discussing her transition into her current home, pointed out that the apartment inflicted several serious psychological costs. Structurally, the walls were made of bulletproof cinder blocks, similar to carceral spaces such as jails and prisons. She shared, "You have to live in the projects to have brick walls, you could have bricks outside your home which helps, because it will help ricochet [the bullets away]." When walls inside the home look and feel like prison walls, it becomes difficult for women to see their home as comfortable and secure.

Rochelle was also concerned about the violence outside: "I told my kids you know, stay off the floor, stuff like that . . . [and] y'all stay behind the brick wall [because] they protect you from bullets." In addition to dealing with rodents and contaminated water, the awareness that her family was unsafe because of numerous shootings nearby took a significant psychological toll. Rochelle related her desire to stay only two years, and "then we get a mobile voucher that we take anywhere in the United States." Yet she worried that wherever they went, this voucher would mark her family as "project people, because they know where we come from." Criminal records, socioeconomic status, gender, and race all converged to create a profoundly burdensome psychological toll on those seeking assistance from the state and, in many cases, highlighted that "moving to opportunity" may not offer the relief some policymakers had envisioned.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this study, we sought to understand whether and how administrative burdens impacted women's experiences with racialized social systems. To examine and refine our theory, we conducted a team-based approach to analyzing a stratified random sample of sixty-one qualitative interviews with women who participated in the American Voices Project. Our findings draw attention to the relationship between state services and the intersectional reproduction of inequality. Overall, the distribution of public benefits, especially in the context of the emerging COVID-19 pandemic, revealed that respondents' ability to secure resources for

themselves and their families was patterned by race, class, gender, age, and ability dynamics. We unpack these patterns in two domains. First, we found that caregiving stress was exacerbated by varying levels of accessibility to medical treatments, arbitrarily restrictive regulations governing insurance coverage eligibility, and out-of-pocket prescription costs. Second, we found that bureaucratic processes governing housing assistance transformed the home into a place of disciplinary surveillance reminiscent of jails and prisons for women of color.

These findings illustrate that intersectional burdens are likely a key driver of cumulative advantage and disadvantage when accessing and using state benefits. Importantly, respondents emphasized how they faced these bureaucratic processes, even when compliance costs such as eligibility requirements shifted around them. Our research findings align with studies uncovering the mechanisms behind administrative burdens, especially those demonstrating the relationship between compliance and psychological costs (Baekgaard et al. 2021) and how individuals experience barriers to public assistance programs (Camillo 2021). Our findings concerning the unequal distribution of challenges in gaining access to resources also resonate with extant studies highlighting the material consequences of racialized legal status (Asad and Clair 2018) and the influential role of whiteness as a credential in the context of resource access within organizational systems (Ray 2019).

These findings on the intersectional nature of administrative burdens enhance the insights of several other articles in this volume. For example, Priya Fielding-Singh and her colleagues' (2024, this issue) findings provide further insight regarding caregiving as a driver of gendered racial inequality in the context of COVID-19 to our findings on intersectional health-care burdens. Max Besbris and his colleagues (2024, this issue) and Jessica Hardie and hers (2024) underscore the significance of processes around securing housing and extended kinship network resources. These studies might be read in conversation with our own to further illuminate the intersection of public resource distribution and private resource sharing. Kyle Fee, Sloane Kaiser, and Keith Wardrip (2024, this issue) also might be read as providing further insights on how the inequitable distribution of COVID-specific public assistance affects material outcomes pivotal for families' well-being and mobility over time.

Our study is not without limitations. For example, although we used income as a proxy for respondents' socioeconomic resources in our sample, we acknowledge that income is not the only class determinant relevant to respondents' exposure to administrative burdens. Wealth and educational attainment may both buffer against families' exposure to administrative burdens. Indeed, recent literature (Smith et al. 2023) documents that educational status may confer resources that enable families to activate "informal" safety net resources, which may in turn moderate exposure to administrative burdens.

Ultimately, this study highlights how racialized-classed-gendered interactions with the state structure people's risks, rewards, and recovery opportunities. Indeed, women in our sample experienced divergent and overlapping hardships based on their intersectional identities and social context (Crenshaw 1989; Collins 1990). Future research might extend our intersectional burdens framework in three ways. First, to examine the lives of other women—such as Native women, Asian women, and women living with disabilities—as they navigate bureaucratic processes to access the resources they need. In these analyses, we anticipate that time spent within these processes may differ across ethnoracial groups and that this unequal distribution of time may exacerbate group-level inequalities that correspond with agency and cumulative advantage or disadvantage across the life course. Second, future studies should quantitatively assess the frequency of intersectional burdens, a goal best suited for a survey instrument designed specifically for the task rather than a broader survey like AVP. Finally, although research has traditionally focused on micro-level experiences and macro-level policy design and implementation, we recommend shifting toward analyzing meso-level governance processes, administrative practices, and their impact on intersectional burdens. These steps will help

reveal the complexities of administrative burdens and provide guidance on shifting those burdens more toward agencies rather than the beneficiaries themselves.

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PART II

A New Detachment Crisis?

The Political Implications of Economic Lives: Listening to AVP Respondents' Perceptions of Efficacy

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How are Americans' perceptions of their economic lives related to their perceptions of their agency (internal efficacy) and institutional responsiveness (external efficacy) in the political realm? We use the American Voices Project data to listen to such perceptions using in-depth, holistic analysis of a subsample of cases. We find that individuals' understandings of their place in the economy resemble the sense of efficacy they express with respect to politics, with those with extreme economic insecurity talking about politics as a world removed from their own. These views are a stark indicator of the compounding effects of economic and political disaffection.

Keywords: political efficacy, economic perceptions, political participation

In theory, the public's participation in politics is the cornerstone of democracy. However, the United States is far from achieving this ideal. Few people exercise their voice in the political realm, even by voting.[1] For many, a key barrier appears to be their economic circumstances, given that people with low incomes repeatedly show up on political participation studies as less active (Schlozman, Brady, and Verba 2018).

But economics matter for democratic engagement beyond the resources people have to draw on. Individuals' place in the economy influences which government programs and actors they encounter, and those experiences in

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1. The percentage of the voting eligible population that votes in a presidential election has not been over 70 percent in more than 120 years. Midterm general election turnout hovers at around 50 percent. Participation in other political acts, such as contacting elected officials, taking part in demonstrations, or working with others on community problems, is much lower (Schlozman, Brady, and Verba 2018).

turn affect their attitudes about their ability to make a difference in the political realm (Mettler and Soss 2004). For example, experiencing punitive, racist, or intrusive policy provision can depress feelings of political agency (Soss and Weaver 2017). On the other hand, successfully navigating benefit programs can boost people's perceptions that government is responsive to people like themselves (Soss 2000).

In other words, socioeconomic status affects the kinds of interactions people have with government, and those experiences affect people's sense of political voice or power. But how does economic experience—beyond economic resources and status—inform people's sense of their political selves and their relationship to government? This is a pressing question in this historical moment. The context of stagnating wages for the middle class, but skyrocketing income for the wealthiest, combined with a deepening class-based divide between those who set policies and those who are affected by them (Carnes 2013; Bartels 2016), makes for a precarious situation for democracies. The growing number of candidates with antidemocratic tendencies who are winning office by tapping into grievances about this state of affairs is a case in point.

Understanding how people translate their economic situation into their political behaviors requires investigating more than their objective economic circumstances. The way people perceive connections among economic, social, and political concerns matters (Lindh and McCall 2020). Perceptions of being left behind (Hochschild 2016), of being denied one's fair share (Cramer 2016), or of status threat (Mutz 2018) outweigh objective economic circumstances in many individuals' vote choices, for example.

In this article, we seek to know how people's perceptions of economic experience are connected to their attitudes about political engagement. How are people making sense of their control over their economic lives, and how is that sense-making connected to their perceptions of agency in the political realm?

To investigate these questions, we use the American Voices Project data to "listen" to the way people are making sense of their lives. The AVP is a nationally representative study of in-depth interviews and closed-ended survey questions conducted between July 2019 and August 2021, with an oversample of people in the bottom half of the income distribution. In-person interviews were conducted with 1,860 respondents before the start of the pandemic. An additional 859 interviews were subsequently conducted remotely. The AVP data, available as transcripts and survey responses, are extraordinary for their ability to illuminate the perceptions that people have about many aspects of their lives. As Corey Abramson and her colleagues (2024) argue, how people understand their experiences is central to how they act. Like Amy Casselman-Hontalas, Dominique Adams-Santos, and Celeste Watkins-Hayes (2024, this issue), we take advantage of this opportunity to understand how perceptions of experience with the institutions people must navigate in everyday life translate into subsequent engagement with those power structures.

We analyze a sample of individual cases from the AVP in a holistic fashion by closely reading the interview and closed-ended questionnaire data for particular respondents. We analyze the way participants understand their economic experiences, how they understand their political experiences, and how they do or do not relate the two to one another. We find that individuals' understandings of their place in the economy often resemble the sense of efficacy they express with respect to politics. Those who are insecure economically express a tenuous, at best, connection to the political realm. One's experience in the economic arena is shaped by overlapping, intersectional identities, such that gender and racial identities inform how respondents make sense of their economic experiences. In addition, these salient identities contribute to the way people perceive their economic challenges, opportunities, and choices. Those with extreme economic insecurity talk about politics as a world removed from their own. Although they may be dissatisfied with politics, they have little to no confidence in their capacity to meaningfully affect it. This is a face of inequality worth recognizing. If the manner in which the United States emerges from the challenges of the first part of the twenty-first century depends at all on whose voice is at the table, those of us in a position to

listen need to notice the compounding effects of economic and political disaffection.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Our concern with individuals' understanding of their experience in the economic and political realms centers on the concept of efficacy. Our investigation is motivated by an interest in the ways experiences in the economy can inhibit individuals from taking action in the political realm. People are more likely to participate politically when they perceive that they have the capacity to act and that forces external to themselves will be affected by that action—that their involvement will make a difference and is worth doing (Almond and Verba 1963; Jacobs, Mettler, and Zhu 2022). The concept of political efficacy, when broken down conceptually into internal and external political efficacy, helps focus on these two related, but sometimes opposing, perceptions: the perception of one's capacity to influence political decisions (internal political efficacy) and the perception of the responsiveness of political institutions to people like oneself (external political efficacy) (Lane 1959; Craig and Maggiotto 1981).[2]

We can imagine an equivalent set of attitudes in the economic realm. A person might believe that they have the individual skills, initiative, or training to get ahead in the economic realm (high internal economic efficacy), yet feel that economic institutions (banks, one's workplace, and so on) are unfair and difficult for people like them to navigate successfully (low external economic efficacy).

We want to underscore that internal and external efficacy are perceptions. They may be linked to objective indicators of one's capacity and the responsiveness of external forces to one's actions, but they are not the same thing as objective reality. People construct their sense of their abilities to make a life of their choosing in response to objective conditions, and through the lens of what is appropriate for

someone of their gender, family background, political affiliation, national origin, race, ethnicity, and so on (Abelmann 2003; Bourdieu 1984). For example, workers who once felt a high level of economic and political efficacy and perceived that the economy was designed in a way that everyone could succeed may blame themselves when they fall behind (Dudley 2000; Newman 1999) or become even more devoted to the ideal of self-actualization when American economic institutions, such as the corporation, fail (Gershon 2017; Lane 2010).

The concept of efficacy has important overlaps with the concepts of agency, power, and locus of control. We understand agency to be a feeling of control over one's actions and their consequences, and power to be the ability to bring about a desired result. We focus on the concept of efficacy because it is explicitly a perception of capacity, control, power, and so on, and again draws attention to perceptions of both internal capacity and external forces. Whether people attribute the source of their economic challenges to their individual behavior, to external forces such as systematic discrimination or government action, or to natural causes, matters for whether people take political action (Miller et al. 1981; Stone 1989; Levin, Sinclair, and Alvarez 2016). Our differentiation between internal and external efficacy in the analyses is intended to account for perceptions of both internal and external forces. Throughout the rest of the article, we at times use the term *agency* as a synonym for internal efficacy, and *responsiveness* to refer to external efficacy.

Expecting a Connection Between Efficacy in the Political and Economic Realms

We have many reasons to expect that political efficacy and economic efficacy are related, but how they are is an open question. Americans do not necessarily think of these two realms in the same way (Hochschild 1981), and efficacy in one realm may not transfer into another (Ban-

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2. Survey measures of these two attitudes used frequently in the American National Election Studies are internal efficacy: "Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on" and external efficacy: "People like me don't have any say about what the government does" and "I don't think public officials care much what people like me think" ("The ANES Guide to Public Opinion and Electoral Behavior," https://electionstudies.org/resources/anes-guide).

dura 2012, 13; see also Wuepper and Lybert 2017). However, we expect that when people consider engaging in politics but have little experience doing so, perceptions of self-efficacy in other aspects of life matter (Condon and Holleque 2013).

We also expect that the lenses people use to understand their economic lives are positively correlated with the ones they use to understand their political lives because of the association between economic resources and political action, and because people with more economic resources tend to have higher levels of political efficacy (Lipset 1981; Lindh and McCall 2020).

Another reason to expect high economic efficacy to correspond with high political efficacy is the relationship between economic standing and political power. Lower-income people generally exert less influence over policy in the United States (Bartels 2016, chap. 8; Gilens 2012), and experiencing less policy responsiveness correlates with lower political efficacy (Wolak 2018). Further, both the political realm and the economic realm are aspects of life in which large institutions impose constraints on what one can achieve. Systematic biases in whose voices matter in society likely span these two realms. Also, less trust in institutions in one realm is related to distrust of institutions in the other (Lindh and McCall 2020, 431).

Despite these relationships, it is possible that perceptions of low external efficacy in the economic realm might instead spur higher political efficacy. Experiencing inequity can mobilize people politically. The distinction between internal and external efficacy is useful for understanding this. People who recognize inequality and interpret this as a lack of responsiveness by institutions (low external efficacy) may nevertheless have high internal efficacy. Experiencing that set of perceptions may actually encourage people to engage in the economy (Roy et al. 2019), or mobilize political action (Gamson 1968; see also Valentino, Gregorowicz, and Groenendyk 2009).[3]

However, a negative experience in the eco-nomic realm may depress political participation. The evidence on this is unclear because aggregate-level relationships, individual-level relationships, and contextual effects vary in the literature. At the aggregate level, an analysis of county-level data suggests heightened state-level unemployment increases voter turnout in presidential and gubernatorial elections (Burden and Wichowsky 2014), and an analysis of county-level turnout data in elections for several state and federal offices from 1969 to 2000 suggests that higher wages and employment are related to lower turnout but have no effect on presidential turnout (Charles and Stephens 2013). However, on the individual level, analyses have shown unemployment is related to lower internal political efficacy among U.S. voting age adults, using data from the 1970s (Schlozman and Verba 1979; Rosenstone 1982), and mid-1970s through mid-1990s (Lim and Sander 2013). People living in countries with low welfare state generosity, low levels of economic development, high unemployment rates, and large income inequality also tend to report lower levels of internal political efficacy (Marx and Nguyen 2016). We take these conflicting results as further reason to examine how individuals' interpretations of their economic lives correspond to that of their political lives.

METHODS

Our goal was to investigate how individuals' understandings of their experience in the economic realm relate to their perceptions of their personal capacity and responsiveness of institutions in the political realm. To reiterate, our focus was on perceptions or the lenses through which people think about their economic and political lives. That focus requires listening. We sought to describe what it sounds like when, for example, people experience disempowerment in the economic realm and use that lens to think about politics. We wanted to describe such views in enough detail that we could better understand the connection between eco-

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3. Gamson's assertion was specifically about low political trust and high internal political efficacy (1968, 48), but see Craig and Maggiotto's reinterpretation of this as a matter of external and internal political efficacy (1981). They find that individuals with low external and high internal political efficacy are more supportive of political protest or violence.

nomic experience and contemporary political behavior.

To investigate, we used the AVP data to listen to the way a wide range of people talked about a range of issues, including their experience and perceptions about the economic and political realms. The AVP interviews consisted of a series of open-ended questions about everyday experiences, including perceptions of economic circumstances and responses to those circumstances, sources of incomes, jobs that the respondent and other household members held, and political beliefs and political participation, as well as many others. The open-ended questions were followed with closed-ended questions about subjective social standing, perceived discrimination, perceived control, perceived opportunity, and perceived health and well-being. The interviews averaged 2.2 hours in length.[4]

We attempted to use the transcriptions as if we had been in the room (or on the call) ourselves. We examined the way people talked about issues related to their economic and political lives, the connections that they volunteered between the two, as well as their views on all of the other aspects of life covered in the AVP interviews. We held open the possibility that their comments about things not explicitly related to politics or economics would help us understand the lenses they used to talk about those two realms. We tried to put ourselves in their shoes as much as possible, to see the world from their vantage point, and then compared across respondents of a wide variety of backgrounds to gain an understanding of the types of characteristics, experiences, and social locations that seemed to vary with the perceptions of efficacy we were identifying.

Our approach is best described as an interpretive approach, in which we are trying to provide a coherent account of individuals' understandings so that we explain why people express the opinions and take the actions that they do (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012). We are attempting to explain how the way that people interpret the world leads them to regard their behaviors as appropriate for someone like themselves (Soss 2014).

Because we were interested in the ways perceptions of economic life demobilize people politically, we focused primarily on respondents who were likely to have experienced the greatest economic challenges, in the lowest and middle earnings tiers (less than $24,000 and from $24,000 to $72,000 in household earnings in the previous year, respectively). We randomly added in respondents in the highest earnings tiers ($72,000 and above in household earnings) as points of comparison. (None of the households we sampled earned more than $120,000 per year.) The AVP's oversample of people experiencing the lowest earnings in the lowest earnings tier was enormously helpful in this respect, given the typical underrepresentation of these voices in surveys and other social science research (Ver Ploeg, Moffitt, and Citro 2002). We intentionally focused on earnings, as opposed to total income, because earnings include benefits, alimony, and so on. This is a more direct indicator of individuals' experience as an actor in the economy.[5] We began with simple random samples within these earnings tiers and then added in respondents to provide variation in terms of age, region, type of place, race, ethnicity, and gender. (The cases we analyzed are presented in table 1.) The goal of this sampling strategy was not to create a representative subsample of U.S. residents, but to provide variation on the objective indicators that we expected to relate to experiences with the economy.

Specifically, we started with a simple random sample of five cases. The initial cases included respondents from lower, median, and upper earnings tiers. Our analyses of these

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4. For more detail, see American Voices Project methodology, 2021, https://inequality.stanford.edu/avp/methodology (accessed March 2, 2024).

5. Our distinction between income and earnings is grounded in our observation from the transcripts that respondents often recognized that income was separate from benefits such as food stamps. Also, although we used the earnings tiers in the data to choose our cases, we paid attention to the number of household respondents in our analyses and note that when relevant to characterize the economic challenges respondents faced.

Table 1. Respondent Characteristics

Characteristics	Observations (*n* = 40)
Household earnings ($)	
0–24,000	18
24,001–120,000 or DK/RTA	22
Gender	
Man	19
Woman	21
Location type	
Urban	17
Suburban-rural	23
Region	
Non-South	25
South	15
Education	
>High school and high school	15
Some college	12
Bachelor's	13
Age	
18–34	12
35–54	17
55–65+	11
Race-ethnicity	
Non-White	20
White	20
Party identification	
Partisan	18
No preference	11
Independent	11

Source: Authors' tabulation.
Note: Household earnings: DK (don't know); RTA (refused to answer); race-ethnicity: non-White includes Black American, Hispanic, Asian, and American Indian respondents; party identification: partisan indicates identifying as a Republican or Democrat.

cases alerted us to an extreme disconnect from government among the lowest-earnings respondents. We therefore purposively sampled additional respondents in specific earnings categories from a variety of geographic regions and racial backgrounds to help us examine whether this pattern held up when we added in such variation.[6]

6. After the initial sample of respondents, we added four upper-income respondents ($72,000 to $120,000). Next, we randomly selected six men from the low to mid-earnings level (less than $48,000). We were interested in whether our analysis differed between union and non-union households and we randomly sampled seven respondents that belonged to a union. The remainder of cases followed this selection strategy, where we added cases that allowed for comparison along a relevant dimension.

For each respondent sampled, we read through the responses to the closed-ended questions to acquaint ourselves with that person's demographics, economic situation and political leanings, and then read through the transcript as a whole. We paid special attention to questions that were explicitly about economics and politics, but held open the possibility that people were unfamiliar with conventional political terms but exhibited familiarity or engagement with political action in other ways. We wrote a summary of each case, with emphasis on aspects of the interview that related to political or economic perceptions and experiences. We looked for patterns across the cases, including patterns in what respondents were not talking about, such as the lack of mention of politics (Fujii 2017).

We shared with each other our case analyses and the conclusions we were reaching concerning the connections in efficacy between the economic and political realms, and identified the types of cases we needed to add to our sample that would allow us to challenge these conclusions. For example, at one point in our analysis we focused on union members in a variety of earnings tiers on the assumption that union members are more likely to encounter political information through their work so that we could investigate cases of people with relatively higher levels of political efficacy at lower earnings levels (Ahlquist 2017).

With several dozen cases in hand, we drafted a memo by reading through the notes and interpretations related to each case and looking for common themes. We checked the patterns we articulated against additional case analyses. For example, after investigating an initial set of low-earnings tiers respondents, it appeared that government showed up in those respondents' comments in only vague ways. We turned to additional cases in these earnings brackets as well as respondents in the highest earnings tiers to verify that this pattern was not a coincidence of the cases that we had chosen and was distinct from patterns among respondents in higher earnings tiers.

EMPIRICAL RESULTS

Although we held open the possibility that the AVP respondents thought about the economic and political realms in distinct ways, we were struck by how irrelevant the distinction between economics and politics seemed to be for the most disaffected people. Most of the low-income respondents we analyzed expressed little sense of agency or responsiveness from institutions of any type. They described having little to no control over their economic lives and little capacity for interest in politics (including debates over specific policy as well as elections or particular government actors.) When they referred to government, they typically did so in ambiguous terms and did not reference specific people or entities they might contact for help or with concerns.

For example, Ruby was a middle-aged woman living with her daughter and her mom. She expressed a sense of futility about looking for work, saying that every time she gets a job she is laid off. She blamed herself for many things. She said she had made some "bad choices" in her life, and did not want her daughter to be like her.[7] In general, Ruby expressed a profound sense of insecurity and described having no social or societal safety net. This insecurity was compounded by Ruby's experiences as a single mother and the perception that "the government doesn't believe that her father shall pay any money," which led Ruby to reduce housing costs by living with her mother. Citing her previous experiences with the justice system, Ruby said the events "destroyed my whole life."

She talked about her circumstances with a combination of self- and system blame. Her disaffection seemed so profound it was difficult at times to determine whether she was talking about government. When she was clearly talking about government safety net programs, she described them as impossible to navigate.

The vagueness with which Ruby referenced all but the most prominent political actors and entities (such as Donald Trump and George Floyd) was common among the respondents

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7. We quote verbatim from the AVP transcripts throughout, even when we suspect there is an error in the transcription, given we do not have a way to determine what was actually said.

we studied with the lowest earnings. They seldom used proper nouns, but instead more often used a vague *they* or *them*.

For example, Paola, a low-income woman who was juggling life with her children in a neighborhood she regarded as very unsafe, never said the word *government*. She said there were shootings "all the time" near her home, and she was so concerned for her children's safety that she enrolled them in a different school, where she was not afraid that they would get shot at recess. This required her to shuttle them to and from school, making it hard for her to get a job between pick-up and drop-off times. As she talked about struggling to pay her rent, she referred to government only as *they* and *them*. Such a faceless, amorphous force is an impossible target to contact for help or to voice concerns, even if she thought it would make a difference. When the interviewer did turn to politics explicitly, Paola's disaffection was on full display: "What's the point in voting? Don't affect me at all."

Likewise, Allison, a young woman who was attempting to get back on her feet after many years of encounters with violence, explained to her interviewer that she could not vote because of prior convictions. When the interviewer asked, "How would you describe your political views if you pay attention to that sort of thing?" She said, bluntly, "I don't. I don't even know what you are talking about. I don't really know." Her response might read as a lack of familiarity with the term political or the idea of political views. But there was nothing in her entire interview to suggest that Allison had any sense of agency with respect to any of the institutions affecting her life.

The descriptions that these and other respondents with low household earnings gave of their lives suggested that they had been dealing with challenges on a variety of fronts for many years with the justice system, the healthcare industry, education, employment, and even their families. After reading those perspectives, their expressions of a lack of agency or responsiveness in the political realm as well were not surprising.

What was perhaps surprising was the way

people experiencing household earnings in the middle tiers also talked about politics in a way that reflected a lack of agency and responsiveness in the economic realm. Participants who were homeowners and currently employed described a similar lack of control in their economic lives and a disconnect from politics. Julio, a Hispanic man who owned his home in a suburb, showed some signs of internal and external efficacy in the economic realm; yet his situation suggested a lack of financial security. We took the following as signs of economic efficacy: He had a job and worked part time for a second employer. He expressed pride and enjoyment in his work. He said he was very satisfied with his life, and was in a long-term relationship.

However, Julio said he was a 4 when asked where he would place himself on a status ladder from 1 to 10, with 10 being the highest. Although he enjoyed his job, he said he was not getting paid very much, which is why he worked a second job. He did not have a high school diploma. He struggled to pay his mortgage during the pandemic and reported spending hours on the phone pleading for an extension. He and his partner were having a hard time finding time together because of his partner's job schedule.

When the interview turned to politics, Julio had little to say. He did not answer a question about whether he votes and asked to pass on other questions about politics. People avoid politics for many reasons; we cannot say for sure why this or any other respondent asked to skip such questions.

However, Julio, like many others who professed no knowledge, interest, or concern about politics, had plenty to say when asked, "If you could talk to someone in charge, someone who could change things, what would you say to this person?" "Try to help the most needy, I would say. Because nowadays, I see it that way, I tell you, because people get stressed, lately I see it more, people with all the changes that have taken place and everything changes suddenly, more than anything to help people, someone who really listens to them and really helps people." Julio did not exude agency in the political realm, but he had enough awareness

of policy to diagnose a lack of responsiveness from those in charge.

That kind of expression—that those in charge are not listening—as vague as it might be—should give us pause. The people expressing little political agency were aware of mechanisms of responsiveness that were not working. Julio wanted someone to listen to the problems of the neediest. Allison wanted better transportation. Their lack of specific knowledge about politics was not due to lack of concern or lack of awareness of things that needed reform.

Political observers have long argued that most people are occupied mainly with personal concerns and have little bandwidth for politics (Schumpeter 1942; Lippmann 1922). We could write off the focus on personal and family concerns even among respondents with some expressions of higher efficacy as merely that phenomenon. But the AVP data call into question the idea that the lack of attention and connection to politics among people with lower earnings and less education is due to a lack of knowledge or lack of capacity for thinking about policy. The data suggest that the distance from politics is part of a more general orientation to professionals or authority that is learned and reinforced in multiple arenas of their lives, such as in their homes (Lareau 2011), in schools (Golann 2021) and in interacting with schools as parents (Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau 2003), in colleges (Jack 2019), and in hospitals (Gengler 2014).

For example, when Taylor—a single Black woman living in the Southwest with her children—says "I really don't per-se speak on [politics]. . . . I don't really have an opinion about it or talk about it," is that a sign of lack of sophistication? Or is it a learned response to living in a society in which she has had to use loans to pay utility bills but notices that people from other backgrounds have been able to grow wealth across generations?

We did encounter respondents in lower earnings tiers who did convey interest and attention to politics. However, even they talked as though their voice did not matter in the political realm. They seemed to pay attention mainly as a hobby, participating only as spectators (Hersh 2018). Cindy, an older White woman in the Northeast, read and watched political content on her phone often, seemingly as a form of entertainment, perhaps particularly during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. But she still felt disconnected from politics and that lack of agency resembled the way she talked about her life more generally. Cindy reported not working in her adulthood because of mental health issues and disability. She lived in an apartment and neighborhood she was embarrassed about. She described herself as a weak Republican, but said, "I really don't care, I'm not really into politics like that, I just be listening to what's going on in the world and what Trump does and what this one does, I worry what's going on in the world." Cindy said COVID-19 government safety net programs had provided "more help now than we ever had it before in my life." She was interviewed after the first round of relief payments. However, when asked what she would tell someone with the power to make a difference, she said, "I am just overwhelmed physically and more depressed . . . and I just want them resources that will help me be able to have my own place, be able to have money left over." Even though she consumed a great deal of political news, when given the opportunity to identify reforms, she did not mention policy or structural change but instead expressed a desire to gain some control and stability in her own life.

Indeed, what people in the lower earnings brackets asked for to make their lives better tended to be modest and focused on sufficiency rather than wealth (see, for example, Anderson 2007). Perhaps it is this perception that even sufficiency is more and more difficult to secure that breeds distrust and alienation from the institutions that supposedly affect their lives.

Economic Security as a Source of Efficacy

Some people who reported household earnings in the lower tiers did express more agency in their connections to government. But it turns out that they were not really exceptions to the pattern of low economic efficacy coinciding with low political efficacy. Their relatively low earnings were deceptive. Their overall income (earnings as well as government benefits, child support, alimony), or their parents' wealth, stable incomes, or access to health care provided

a level of financial security that was not indicative of other low-earnings respondents. That status of having enough to be able to choose and to plan (Hacker 2008) seemed to coincide with clear and intense political attitudes and in some cases knowledge about how to take action in the political realm to achieve change.

One such respondent was Sofia, a woman who reported total income between $72,000 and $120,000. She is self-employed and finds time to work in between shuttling her children with special needs to programs and doctors' appointments and homeschooling. She receives child support from a previous marriage, and various government benefits for her children.

In other words, Sofia exhibited a fair amount of economic agency. Her relatively high level of financial security enables her to take time away from working to care for and home-school her children, and invest money.

Sofia's self-sufficient attitude with respect to employment and about caring for her children showed up in the way she talked about politics, too. She contrasted what she called her libertarian and conservative views with those of a more liberal family member, with whom she argues about immigration. Sofia was very opinionated about politics in the interview, and reported not being shy to express her opinion in other forums. She was stridently antiregulation and antigovernment, and highly critical of state-run health care, but had successfully navigated government programs to obtain help with housing and programs for her children. Her distance from government was an ideological one, not one of disaffection.

Some of the younger adults we interviewed had low household earnings as well as low total incomes but expressed financial security and strong political efficacy. They struggled economically a bit, but they said their families and social networks provided a reliable safety net.

For example, Kylie, a young woman living in a rural community, had intentionally chosen a low-income lifestyle out of a love for outdoor education. She had pursued this path after graduating from college. She talked about economic struggles but reported no debt "which totally feels like a privilege." The interviewer observed that the financial situation that she enjoyed was "pretty smooth sailing." Kylie did not talk about lower-tier earning as a hardship but said that it had been fun to start to earn a salary. "Yeah. And it's been, I don't know—it's been nice to be able to count on like, being able to live on everything we make each week. Yeah, that's fun. That's a fun thing." If faced with a $400 emergency, "It wouldn't feel good but it would be doable. Yeah, like it wouldn't . . . It'd be a hit for sure but it wouldn't make me feel unsafe."

Kylie perceived she could choose her own path within the economy. In other words, she displayed internal economic efficacy. That sense of agency came across in her comments about politics as well. She called herself "radically liberal" and exuded a strong sense of justice and where to target it. She reported always voting and emphasized the importance of doing so. She believed that although many things might be wrong with contemporary American politics, a person could still make a difference at the local level.

Another young respondent, Sandra, a Black woman in a suburban community, seemed to come from a family with much less wealth than Kylie's but still felt a strong level of support from her parents. She was living in her own apartment for the first time and also reported, like Kylie, enjoying being responsible for her own expenses. She had been in school on scholarship when the pandemic began and planned to reenroll in the near future.

Getting started on her own economically had been difficult as she struggled to find employment that paid a living wage, was safe with respect to COVID-19, and did not require working under racist managers. But Sandra's family was a source of financial security as well as emotional support that apparently had made it possible for her to quit her job at a workplace she described as racist. She described her parents as her support in times of emergency and remained on their health-care plan.

That security and ability to choose when and where to work are an important part of economic internal efficacy that showed up in Sandra's political self as well. She expressed injustice and ideas about what to do about it. However, she talked about the politically debilitating effects of racism. She did not have

much faith in political institutions or authorities and refused to identify with either party. She said people would vote "if we felt like we were being taken care of." In the summer of 2020, in the wake of the murder of George Floyd, she was feeling "antigovernment right now especially with everything going on with the riots. . . . I don't think they are really doing good by us right now and not even just Black community, just everyone, especially students and elder, older people." Sandra recounted numerous experiences of racism in her life, from her family's experiences of injustice with the criminal justice system to discrimination at her previous job. She was skeptical that the government and other powerful institutions were built for people like herself.

Sandra exuded significant passion and conviction, but the perception of living in a country in which the institutions were created to prevent her from having agency seemed disempowering.

> It just doesn't feel like the country is being run to help us grow, it just feels like they're just finding new ways to take money out of our pockets to put people under . . . To just, rob us of literally our whole life. . . . it's just really frustrating, you're not empowered, you kind of wish that you were so, that you could make a difference, but in all honesty, you never really know what goes on behind the curtains, honestly. So, I can't even say I wish I was in power because I don't know what power looks or feels like.

Sandra's reflections on power underscore that even when we observed a relationship between economic security and heightened political agency, it did not necessarily extend to a belief that government is responsive. The experiences and perceptions shared in the interviews by respondents of color in particular underscore that people who recognize their agency may nevertheless feel disempowered by the barriers surrounding them.

People in Higher Earnings Brackets Conveyed an Ability to Plan as Well as Choose

The deterrents to taking political action sounded much lower for people in the higher earnings tiers. These respondents exuded more economic security than their counterparts in lower earnings brackets and also seemed to have the capacity to make plans and execute them. Some of the respondents who did not currently have high household earnings but were in the midst of education that would likely launch them into high-earning careers exuded a sense of security and capacity to act similar to high-earning respondents.

For example, when Hank, a White man in a medical fellowship and living with his wife and child, answered a question about what he would say to someone in charge, his response reflected no need for government to respond to his challenges. "That's a good question. I would say give people a chance to be their full selves, and help strengthen and support not only the individual but give strength to the family as a unit that drives individual support for individual success and that helps drives [*sic*] any relationships in this country." He drew on his experiences as a health-care provider to justify his views that the federal government is too bureaucratic, top down, and inefficient. When asked what he thinks the people in charge should do in response to COVID-19, Hank said, "I think it's tough, especially coming from health care, because it's so varied across every plane. And I think we shouldn't pretend that a country as varied as America is can have one response to it. . . . I think we should back down on trying to project a national right or wrong way, and focus on assessing what one's risk is, then allowing that to come down to the individual municipalities." He said that he had grown into that point of view once he started paying taxes. At that point, he had started to question whether the government was really better at deciding how to spend his money than he was.

Hank's confidence in his political views likely stemmed in part from the efficacy he felt in his youth. Growing up, his family had above average income. His father was a doctor and his mother was a homemaker. With familial resources and support, Hank was able to execute his plan to become a doctor. Based on his experiences, his confidence that individuals, families, and communities will likely do better without federal government interference is not very

surprising. When the interviewer asked whether his life will be different five years from now, all that Hank imagined was foreseeable and achievable through his own actions: more healthy children, to be further along in his career, and mentoring younger doctors. He believed he would be making much more money, have a loving, large family and a fulfilling career.

Not everyone in the upper earnings tiers expressed certainty about upward mobility, and many wished they earned more. However, especially among White respondents, their relatively high level of stability and security coincided with a confidence that their political opinions were important and that others would want to hear them.[8] Respondents in the upper earnings tiers talked about politics in specifics, citing particular policies and political actors even beyond the most prominent headlines. This was a stark contrast to people in the lowest income tiers, who talked about government only in terms of they and them and seemed to not know where to begin when asked what they would want changed by someone with power. People with economic efficacy expressed criticism of contemporary politics and the inability of politicians to respond to the needs of the public, but they did so with a level of authority that was distinctive from people who talked about themselves as rudderless in the economy. They conveyed a familiarity with exercising power.

The relationship between internal economic and political efficacy was more than a by-product of greater fascination with political news among people with college degrees (Hersh 2018, 3–4). The people with higher earnings and security appeared to be in social networks that readily connected them to political activity. For example, Chris, a self-proclaimed upper-middle-class White man, ran for school board. He was well versed in the concept of civic engagement, was active politically, and expected the same of others.

Not all upper-earnings people were politically interested and certainly not politically ac-tive. However, relative to respondents with lower earnings, many conveyed a level of economic stability that freed up the mental space as well as the resources to pursue other things, including politics.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The American Voices Project data have enabled us to look closely at the way a wide range of Americans understand both their economic and political lives. The opportunity to examine the way people at the lowest household earnings talk about their lives while examining those in the middle and upper earnings tiers is rare indeed (Ver Ploeg, Moffitt, and Citro 2002). We have treated the data from a selection of several dozen cases in an interpretive and ethnographic fashion, examining the views of the respondents as holistically as possible to look for the connections that emerged between their economic and political selves.

The richness of the AVP data and our approach have allowed us to learn about many aspects of these respondents' lives. Most studies of political efficacy examine attitudes about politics. But these data have enabled us to consider and reveal the political implications of how people think about their power and voice in a more immediate aspect of their lives: the economy. We have shown the ways that experience with employment, securing housing, and the challenge of making ends meet show up in individuals' sense of agency in the political realm.

We have observed that, as Americans navigate their lives in the twenty-first century, there is reason to expect that those who understand their place in the economic world as fixed and beyond their control think about their political lives in much the same way. Even though politics was a highly salient topic when these data were collected, people with extreme economic insecurity often had little to say. However, those who did have the stability and security to make economic choices and plans talked as if they had some attachment to politics, could navigate government programs, and had polit-

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8. As Reuel Rogers (2024, this issue) notes, Black respondents in the AVP sample, although diverging in opinions along socioeconomic lines on some issues, shared a common low expectation that the government would be responsive to their concerns.

ical opinions that they believed were important for others to hear. Although many things affect individuals' political views, the AVP data have illuminated how perceptions of experience with the economy can fill in the blanks when people are asked to talk about a realm arguably more distant, politics.

It may seem obvious that for some people, economic challenges are so difficult that they are disaffected from society in general, including politics. This insight is often forgotten in the contemporary era. Support for populist candidates is often described as motivated, at least in part, by economic grievance (Rodrik 2018). Those accounts imply that economically aggrieved citizens view politics as an opportunity for voice and representation. That conclusion may be driven by insufficient attention to the very lowest income members of society (Parker 2022). Fortunately, the AVP data enable a focus on those underexamined experiences. Among these interviewees, people who perceive a lack of responsiveness are not mobilizing to obtain more responsiveness. Instead, the people we listened to who feel as though they have little agency in the economic realm seemed to see no point in taking political action.

Our work has also underscored that it is perceptions that matter when it comes to political behavior. Traditional models of political participation that focus on the connection between resources and participation (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995) may overlook that it is often perceptions of one's resources or relative power relative to others that matter for whether and how one engages. The opportunity to listen to how these respondents understand their place in the economic and political realms has helped demonstrate that a sense of economic security may be more meaningful than objective socioeconomic standing for engagement in the political realm.

This study has limitations, of course. One is that we have tried to understand the extent of agency people feel in the political realm in general, when the level of agency they feel likely varies by situation (Zilberstein et al. 2024). Another is that we chose an intense focus on a subset of cases, rather than taking advantage of a larger part of this enormous study, or combining our analyses with a machine-driven analysis of all of the cases. Another set of limitations come from the data themselves. We did not have access to the recordings and therefore were sometimes unsure of the tone or intent of what was provided in the transcripts. Also, interviewees seemed considerably fatigued by the end of these lengthy interviews, and we are concerned about the quality of their responses in the later parts of these sessions. In addition, our analyses offer a measure of caution about the household income measure and highlight the need for qualitative studies to understand the resources that an individual actually has access to. As is likely the case with any human data collection, it appears interviewers did not always record things accurately. In the transcripts, we noticed some discrepancies in the household earnings coded by the interviewer and what the interviewee said. Even when a given case showed no such discrepancy, a respondent did not always perceive that they had access to the entirety of the household earnings or income. This was particularly the case in multigeneration families, and in couples with a power imbalance. In one case, a spouse reported that "I never know how much he [her spouse] makes," and his earnings "ain't my business." Finally, we would have liked to know more about the interviewers, given that they undoubtedly had an impact on the nature of the interviewee's responses.

Throughout the study we report here, we focused on perceptions and treated the data as self-reports, not objective measures, of the individual's circumstances. However, it is worth considering the ways these transcripts are valuable indicators of these respondents' actual experiences. The people who create social welfare policy live lives often far removed from the targets of those policies. These data are measures of what it is like to be the recipient, or the aspiring recipient, of social welfare programs. These are accounts that those designing policy and its implementation may not have heard before or taken the time to fully absorb. What is more important for creating effective policy, indicators of circumstances and need measured by those who have never experienced those circumstances, or perceptions of need voiced by

people living those circumstances? Both seem important, perhaps especially as complements to one another. Many of the AVP respondents report information about the mismatch between the policies in place and the nature of the problems those policies were supposedly designed to address. For example, Phil, a man who worked with youth struggling with addiction issues had this to say:

> Somebody has got to handle the addiction problem; this thing is just too clearly out of control. And I know that [a] lot of people I guess that are in the position of making policy that addresses that problem or attempts to address it or pretends to address it or whatever, it must be completely disconnected from reality because they have no idea what's going on. I mean, the rules and the schemes and the plans they come up with just . . . really don't help it any.

One might cynically observe that the U.S. economy was never designed to produce widespread political engagement. However, if those who set policy in the United States seek to foster a democracy more than in name only, the disengagement from government that the current economy appears to foster for many people is worth listening and responding to.

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The Black Suburban Sort: Is Suburbanization Diversifying Blacks' Racial Attitudes?

REUEL ROGERS

The recent expansion in Black suburbanization is the most substantial shift in Black American residential patterns since the Great Migration. It has left Blacks more sorted between urban and suburban neighborhoods across metropolitan areas. This study explores whether this increasing residential stratification is associated with differentiation in Blacks' political views on racialized issues. I first lay out a theory of Black political sorting by place, specifying processes inherent in suburbanization that could lead to opinion stratification between suburban and urban Blacks. This is followed by a descriptive analysis of American Voices Project interviews with suburban and urban Black respondents. The data show Black suburbanization is neither as economically transformative nor politically differentiating as might be expected. Despite subtle opinion differences between suburban and urban respondents, they mostly converge in their bleak assessments of racialized issues.

Keywords: Black suburbanization, Black political attitudes, race, policing, neighborhood violence, Black Lives Matter

New Black residential patterns are changing the geography of race in America. Cities have been at the epicenter of the country's stark racial geography since the Great Migration, when Blacks became a predominantly urban population (Derencourt 2022; Wilkerson 2010). Cities are where the group's racial woes, from neighborhood inequality to intergroup conflict with Whites, have been most acute and where the battles for racial redress often have been waged. But the geography has shifted sharply over the last half-century. Blacks have been suburbanizing at accelerating rates in recent decades. Many are leaving big cities where Black popula-

tions are dwindling steadily, inverting the racial group's residential patterns at a scale not seen since the Great Migration (Bosman 2020; Bartik and Mast 2021). More than half of all Blacks in the country's largest metropolitan areas now reside in suburban zip codes (Frey 2015).

The long struggle for Black liberation likewise has migrated to the suburbs. When a White police officer killed George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, in 2020, it ignited an unprecedented wave of multiracial Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests extending beyond big cities and into the suburbs throughout the summer. Media coverage of this largest racial justice social movement since the civil rights era mostly emphasized Whites' involvement when it sprouted in suburbia (Reed 2020; Sisson 2020). The virtual erasure of Black suburbanites from the reporting replicates a long-standing tendency in popular media to cast suburbs as uniformly White and middle class (Lewis-McCoy et al. 2023). Yet the growing presence of Blacks in the suburbs also should invite analysis of their attitudes about this so-called national reckoning on race. How do their views compare with those of their city-dwelling counterparts? Has the diversifying metropolitan geography of the Black population translated to Black public opinion?

This study explores whether the increasing geographic sorting of Blacks into suburban and urban neighborhoods is associated with stratification in their political attitudes. Although Blacks have never been a political monolith, evidence of stratification in Black political opinion historically has been minimal or hard to find.[1] Blacks typically stand out among American racial groups for the high levels of uniformity and pronounced liberal cast to their political views. Throughout the late twentieth century, this sturdy conventional wisdom tracked in their partisanship, voting choices, and opinions on a range of policies from criminal justice to social welfare (Dawson 1994; White and Laird 2020).

Yet in recent decades, signs of political diversity and even ideological moderation have surfaced in the Black mass public (Jefferson and Yan 2020; Tate 2010). Researchers have sought to pinpoint whether mass- or elite-level changes in the Black population (economic stratification, generational cleavages, and so on) might account for this newly discernible political heterogeneity (Cohen 2010; Dawson 1994; Watts Smith, Bunyasi, and Smith 2019). Among mass-level demographic changes, growing economic divisions in the population have drawn the most attention. Suburbanization, in contrast, has received relatively limited empirical notice in the research on Black political attitudes, although it is one of the most significant Black demographic changes of the last half-century (McGowen 2017, 2018). It is also a key driver of increasing economic segregation between low- and middle-income Blacks (Bartik and Mast 2021; Timberlake 2002)—the same divide researchers believe could be a source of political heterogeneity in the population.

The socioeconomic ramifications of Black suburbanization (economic segregation, concentrated poverty, and so on) have been researched extensively (Bartik and Mast 2021; Farley et al. 1978; Massey and Denton 1993; Pattillo 1999; Wilson 1987). Whether any political shifts have accompanied the Black suburban sort, however, remains an open question. Place-based differences in Americans' political views are hardly unusual. Making sense of American politics these days often entails thinking in geographic terms. Studies show that Whites have become increasingly sorted between red states and blue states, right-leaning rural towns, left-leaning big cities, and suburbs in the political middle (Gainsborough 2001; Cramer 2016; Nall 2018; Rodden 2019). Whether similar place-based political sorting is occurring among Blacks has remained a relatively unexplored empirical question, despite the growing signs of political diversity in the population.

My first aim in this study is to lay out a theory of a Black suburban political sort elucidating how the recent suburbanizing trend could produce variation in Blacks' political opinions.

1. Heterogeneity in Blacks' political views is often obscured by racial sorting in the two-party system, social pressure within the group, and the limits of survey instruments used to measure ideology in the United States (Jefferson and Yan 2020; White and Laird 2020).

Political sorting among Blacks by place is not an inevitability. The geographic distance between suburban and urban Blacks might make little political difference. Just as race often has exceeded class in shaping Blacks' political views, it also might supersede geography.[2] It might matter more than place, if racial hardships follow Blacks across zip codes and drive their political opinions. My theory specifies how the increasing residential stratification of Blacks into suburban and urban neighborhoods might crystallize opinion cleavages in the population but also accounts for the continuing force of race in Blacks' lives. The theory emphasizes causal mechanisms in selection and social processes inherent in the changing residential patterns of Blacks across metropolitan areas.

I then assess a unique national sample of interviews conducted with Blacks living in suburban and urban neighborhoods to determine whether their political views are distinct. My analyses focus on the respondents' perceptions and opinions on the issues that energized the 2020 protests following the Floyd murder: police brutality, neighborhood violence, and BLM. The empirical objective is to show whether living in a suburban versus an urban zip code is associated with any appreciable differences in how Blacks perceive or experience even the high stakes racial issues that typically unify them.

Descriptive analyses of the interviews uncover subtle differences as well as arresting commonalities in the opinions and perceptions of urban and suburban Black respondents. Both groups mostly distrust the police and support BLM. But urban Blacks are slightly more engaged in the movement and supportive of its tactics than their suburban counterparts. Violence is unrelentingly pervasive and safety far too elusive in both the urban and suburban Black neighborhoods represented in this study. Although slightly more suburban than urban respondents perceive their neighborhoods as safe and trust their neighbors, this minuscule distinction is easy to miss when so much distress characterizes the places where Blacks live on both sides of the urban-suburban divide. Still, even modest differences may have consequences for building a unified political agenda and mobilizing Blacks to support movements for racial justice.

The most striking pattern uncovered in the interviews is the interviewees' pronounced pessimism about the likely efficacy of the BLM movement and protests. Blacks in cities and suburbs alike register disillusionment about the prospects for racial justice in the United States. This sentiment is a far cry from the storied hope and determination associated with previous eras in the Black liberation struggle (Phoenix 2019). It raises questions about how readily Blacks' commitment to progressive racial reform can be harnessed and how reliably it can be sustained—especially if their investments in collective action and other forms of political engagement fail to yield meaningful returns. In what follows, I lay out the theory of Black political sorting by place and then turn to the results from analyses of the interview data.

THEORY AND EXPECTATIONS

Although the research on whether suburbanization has generated economic and social change in the Black population is robust, the empirical questions are hardly settled. At the outset of this belated Black exodus to the suburbs, expectations were sunlit. Some researchers heralded suburbanization as Blacks' ticket to socioeconomic mobility and greater residential integration with Whites (Massey and Denton 1993; Farley et al. 1978). Recent media coverage of this suburban wave also paints a picture of Black families decamping to the suburbs to escape the economic distress, shuttering schools, and violence of central city neighborhoods for better lives and more opportunity (Bosman 2020; Blow 2021; Demas 2022). This media narrative glosses over some of the complexities of contemporary Black suburbanization. For one, many suburban bound Blacks are not relocating from central cities to nearby sur-

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2. Michael Dawson's *Behind the Mule* (1995) is the seminal study on the persisting influence of race on Black political attitudes despite growing class differences in the population.

rounding areas, but instead are tracing a reverse migration path from the urban Northeast and Midwest to destinations in the suburban South (Frey 2015). New Black suburban arrivals also include immigrants from the Caribbean and Africa, many of whom are bypassing central cities altogether and making the suburbs their gateway to the United States (Farrell 2016; Clerge 2019).

Still, accounts of Blacks exiting central cities loom large in the unfolding suburbanization trajectory. This characterization echoes the story that accompanied mid-twentieth-century White suburbanization, minus the element of patent racial aversion. Whites fled cities to avoid perceived signs of social decay: poverty, increasing numbers of Blacks, crime, and disorder. Along with racial distance from Blacks, the suburbs promised and delivered the American Dream for most Whites (Jackson 1985; Kruse 2005). For Blacks, the socioeconomic outcomes of suburbanization have been more uneven. Spurred by a combination of push and pull factors, the millions of Blacks migrating to the suburbs in recent decades have met mixed fortunes.

The Political Economy of Black Suburbia

Despite the few studies showing a link between Black suburbanization and modest declines in Black-White segregation, Black suburban dwellers largely live alongside other Blacks (Frey 2015; Fischer 2008). Most reside in majority-Black neighborhoods and municipalities (Massey and Tannen 2017). The economic profile of Black suburbia covers a wide range of places, from affluent outlying areas such as Prince Georges County, Maryland, to low-income, struggling inner-ring suburbs such as Ferguson, Missouri (Lacy 2007; Pattillo 1999; Smithsimon 2022; Wyndham-Douds, Lewis-McCoy, and Johnson 2021). Most Black sub-

urbs, however, fall in the latter category (Wyndham-Douds, Lewis-McCoy, and Johnson 2021). The same problems plaguing Black neighborhoods in central cities—economic precarity, police brutality, resource deficits, and disinvestment—often follow Blacks into the suburbs, reflecting the stubborn racial inequalities of the metropolitan political economy. For instance, the uptick in Black suburbanization rates over the last two decades has coincided with a sharp increase in suburban poverty (Kneebone and Berube 2013; Rutan, Hepburn, and Desmond 2023). This rising poverty rate is especially pronounced in the inner-ring suburbs where most suburban Blacks reside. These suburban municipalities often lack the institutional capacity and resources to remediate poverty (Allard 2017). Black suburbs generally have smaller tax bases, boast fewer amenities, and are saddled with more fiscal burdens than White suburbs (Gay 2004; Pacewicz and Robinson 2021; Wyndham-Douds, Lewis-McCoy, and Johnson 2021).

Blacks are also less likely than Whites to land in incorporated suburbs and benefit from all the political and economic advantages such municipalities afford (Wyndham-Douds 2023). Incorporation gives municipalities the powers of general government and economic development, including perhaps most critically the authority to levy taxes and to control land use through zoning.[3] Unincorporated suburbs, where most metropolitan Blacks outside central cities live, lack these tools of governance. They instead must rely on county governments to provide essential services and functions such as public safety, sanitation, and the like, which may be stretched thin across many places. This jurisdictional status also can put Black suburbs at risk of fiscal free fall. With no control over land use and hence limited power to regulate development, these unincorporated

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3. Decades of research show municipalities typically opt for incorporation—and then wield their regulatory powers over land use—for the purposes of exclusion and resource hoarding (Danielson 1976). Zoning laws, specifying what can and cannot be built within municipal boundaries, have become the leading mechanism for excluding "the undesirables" (non-Whites, the poor) from majority-White and high- or middle-income suburbs (Trounstine 2018; Gordon 2019). Likewise, incorporation enables these suburbs to claw back tax revenues that would have gone to county governments and thus prevent the potential redistribution of these resources to other areas (Wyndham-Douds 2023).

areas are susceptible to economic underdevelopment and environmental degradation.[4]

Yet overall, Black suburban zip codes still compare favorably to Black central city neighborhoods. Suburban Blacks on average live in less poor neighborhoods than their central city counterparts (Timberlake 2002). Despite the precipitous growth in the suburban poor population in recent decades, poverty still tends to be both less concentrated and visible in suburban areas than in central cities (Allard 2017; Lewis-McCoy et al. 2023). Black wealth, in contrast, is much more pronounced in the suburbs. Alexander Bartik and Evan Mast (2021) find that recent gains in Black household incomes have been concentrated in the suburbs whereas the losses have been steep in cities. Consequently, suburbanization has done more to segregate Blacks by income than to commingle Blacks and Whites in the same neighborhoods. As Blacks have suburbanized, they have become more economically sorted, with the greater proportion of high-earning Blacks in the suburbs and their low-income counterparts increasingly isolated in deteriorating central city neighborhoods (Bartik and Mast 2021).

Does Black Suburbanization Diversify Black Politics?

If Black suburbanization has had political ramifications, they are not nearly as well documented or understood as these economic outcomes. Research on the politics of Black suburbanites is relatively sparse (Johnson 2002; Frasure-Yokley 2015; McGowen 2017, 2018; Rogers 2018). Systematic political comparisons of Black suburban and urban residents are also few. It is unclear whether the geographic distance between the two groups is correlated with differences in their political views. Stratification in Blacks' political opinions certainly has not been the norm. Rather, Black political homogeneity has been the predominant pattern, prompting a long line of research by scholars of political behavior. For example, researchers have investigated why Blacks have remained unified, stalwart Democratic partisans despite growing socioeconomic divisions in the population (White and Laird 2020). The leading explanation for this uncommon degree of political uniformity is racial group solidarity and the far-reaching force of race on Blacks' individual life outcomes, such as how much they earn, where they live, and even their vulnerability to mortal or bodily danger during encounters with police (Verba and Nie 1972; Shingles 1981; Pinderhughes 1987; Dawson 1994).

Michael Dawson (1994) theorizes that political differences among Blacks remain mostly muted due to widespread perceptions of linked fate in the population. He predicts that as long as Blacks' individual life chances remain tethered to the fortunes of the group as a whole, they will put racial group interests above other considerations in their political decision making and thus generate high levels of opinion homogeneity in the population.[5] But Dawson also surmises that deepening intragroup economic divisions could rupture linked fate perceptions and lead to more political heterogeneity. The animating question in his study is whether upward mobility untethers middle-class Blacks from their racial group, and in turn diminishes the influence of race on their political attitudes. Their socioeconomic status presumably would have more sway over their political preferences than race. He and other researchers have detected evidence of incipient political diversity among Blacks in recent decades (Dawson 2001; Cohen 2010; Tate 2010).

4. Even incorporated Black suburbs are not immune from these economic challenges. Kiara Wyndam-Douds (2023, 230) notes some suburban "communities of color turn to incorporation as a tool of self-empowerment, autonomy, and placemaking." In the 1940s and 1950s, for instance, Blacks residing in areas just beyond central city limits occasionally incorporated to try to circumvent the racial inequalities of the metropolitan economy and make much needed investments in their neighborhoods. But incorporation generally has not bestowed the same protections and rewards to Black and Latinx suburbs as it has to White suburbs (Purifoy 2019; Waldner, Stillwell, and Smith 2019). It is a duller, less effective instrument for excluding others and stockpiling tax revenues when wielded in majority non-White suburbs.

5. Dawson (1995) introduces Black utility heuristic theory to account for how Blacks perceive distinct racial group interests and then prioritize them over other interests in their political calculations (Rogers and Kim 2021).

Although most research into the sources of this diversity has focused on income and educational differences, the ongoing geographic sort between suburban and urban Blacks warrants empirical attention as well. Like income and education, residence is a familiar proxy for making status distinctions within groups. A suburban address, recent studies suggest, does not merely denote a geographic location or U.S. Census category but also social status in the popular consciousness and even in measurable public opinion (Moos and Mendez 2015). Suburbanization among Blacks sometimes has been cast not simply as a path to social mobility or economic security, but also a way of decoupling Black suburbanites from the so-called tangle of pathology associated with poor Blacks in cities (Connolly 2014). Although Black flight to the suburbs has not been a cure-all for Black inequality, late twentieth-century liberal policies like residential mobility programs touted suburbanization as a solution to the problems of inner-city Black neighborhoods while deflecting attention from their structural roots. This individualistic liberal logic cleaved striving Black families in the suburbs from Blacks mired in beleaguered city neighborhoods. A suburban address away from inner-city perils and negative stereotypes promised a badge of respectability, which holds that good behavior by Blacks is enough to combat racism (Higginbotham 1993; Jefferson 2023). This ongoing geographic shift, then, potentially puts social status as well as spatial distance between urban and suburban Blacks.

A Theory of Black Political Sorting

In theory, these social and economic distinctions associated with neighborhood type could translate to an urban-suburban divide in Blacks' political opinions. Suburbanization entails both self-selection and social dynamics that could diminish the perceptions of shared racial group interests and linked fate, and in turn reduce consensus and generate cleavages in Blacks' political views. For much of the twentieth century, rampant discrimination in the housing market and exclusionary zoning policies put the suburbs out of reach for virtually all but the very wealthiest Blacks (Jackson 1985; Wiese 2004). But as some of these economic and racial barriers have fallen in recent decades, suburban residence has become an option for a wider swath of Blacks, including the growing numbers of low-income Blacks in inner-ring suburbs. Yet the current Black suburban trend remains selective.

First, Blacks beating a path to the suburbs today are typically a selected lot. They tend to have higher incomes, greater homeownership rates, and more postsecondary education than Blacks residing in cities (Bartik and Mast 2021; Frey 2015). Economic advantages buy easier access to suburban zip codes. In many middle- and high-income Black suburbs, residents also demand policies that promote economic selectivity. They routinely oppose commercial, residential, and infrastructure developments that might attract the poor (Wiese 2004; Connolly 2014; Smithsimon 2022). This is a tacit endorsement of policies that bar the entry of the have-nots. These exclusionary policies stymie the suburban aspirations of low-income Blacks in particular, who usually have even less chance of obtaining affordable housing in majority-White suburbs (Massey and Tannen 2017). The policies are consistent with a suburban ideology historians trace back to the postwar twentieth century. Chronicled across both Republican and Democratic strongholds outside central cities and starkly at odds with the statist orientation long associated with Blacks, this suburban ideology privileges individualism, privatism, free market forces, and the protection of property rights (Kruse 2005; Geismer 2015).[6]

When Black suburbanites support these exclusionary schemes, they are using municipal policies to differentiate their interests from those of low-income urban Blacks, whom they presumably view as a potential threat to their economic status and security. These policies are often framed as racial uplift measures (Connolly 2014). But they bolster the status of one

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6. This historical scholarship has focused largely on White suburban areas. But a handful of recent studies have begun to document evidence of this suburban ideology in Black enclaves outside central cities (Connolly 2014; Smithsimon 2022).

segment of the population (that is, middle-class Black suburbanites) at the expense of another (poor Blacks in cities and inner-ring suburbs). They also risk restigmatizing poor central city Blacks through what Cathy Cohen (1999) calls secondary marginalization. This is what happens when already stigmatized segments of an oppressed group are shunned or see their interests discounted, including by relatively privileged group members. Although Black suburbanites might see these policies as good for the race and even crucial for protecting their status as upwardly mobile "respectable" racial group members, they reinforce negative stereotypes about poor inner-city Blacks.

Beyond further stigmatizing these vulnerable segments of the Black population, however, secondary marginalization also can weaken perceptions of linked fate (Bunyasi and Watts Smith 2019). Secondary marginalization often ensues when cross-cutting issues heighten interest conflicts among subgroups in the Black population. For instance, the crises facing low-income Blacks in central cities might not register or elicit concern among their counterparts outside the urban core. The latter might not view remedying the problems of inner-city Blacks as integral to improving the fortunes of Blacks as whole. Suburban Blacks simply might conclude "their blues ain't like mine." They even might deem any attention to the issues bedeviling their coracial counterparts in distressed city neighborhoods as marginal to the Black political agenda. Or they might worry any association with these issues could bog down the entire racial group or mar their own reputation as "respectable" Blacks.[7]

Scholars from W. E. B. DuBois (1899) to William Julius Wilson (1987) to Cathy Cohen (1999) have shown social class, gender, sexuality, and other differences can strain racial bonds and provoke political division among Blacks. The selective, exclusionary processes of Black suburbanization engender another potential cleavage in the population, this one between Black suburbanites and their counterparts in central

cities, particularly the poor. This status-signaling spatial divide is akin to the class-based neighborhood divisions DuBois (1899) documented among Blacks in early twentieth-century Philadelphia and other cities. If Black suburbanites view their interests as incompatible with those of Blacks living in cities or see some urban Blacks as harmful to their socioeconomic status, perceptions of linked fate might recede.[8] Black suburbanites might put their distinct place-based interests or investment in respectability above their racial ties with urban Blacks. This presumably could lead to discrepancies in the political views of the two groups.

Neighborhood social processes in Black suburbs are another possible driver of this opinion divide. The roots of Blacks' linked fate perceptions and racial solidarity are economic, informational, and social (Dawson 1994). Since the early twentieth century, residential segregation has not only limited Blacks' economic mobility, but also cemented their attachments to the informational and social networks through which political preferences and norms gain currency in the population. The informational networks embedded in Black associational spaces, what Dawson (1994) dubbed the Black counterpublic, have been the key site for opinion formation in the population. This is where Blacks delineate specific preferences and build consensus about what is good for the group in politics. Black social networks, in turn, impose the racialized social pressure and monitoring that compels individual conformity with the collective preferences and norms crystallized in the Black counterpublic (White and Laird 2020). These informational and social processes have induced the high levels of uniformity in Blacks' political opinions.

Both processes historically have operated at the neighborhood level where Blacks tend to occupy racially homophilous networks as result of segregation. But the Black suburban wave has attenuated and diversified these neighborhood-level processes (Rogers 2018).

7. These are the predictable ramifications of Black respectability politics (Cohen 2010; Gaines 2012; Spence 2012; Harris 2014).

8. Ismail White (2007) finds Blacks' linked fate perceptions are not readily activated for issues framed as benefiting inner-city families.

First, the spatial distance between Black suburbanites and their city-dwelling counterparts reduces social contact between the two groups. This lessens the odds of their sharing associational spaces and militates against the mutual social monitoring and pressure to fall in line with dominant Black political views or norms. The distance between Black suburban and central city residents also decreases the likelihood of either group taking the other's interests into account when forming their opinions about issues.

For instance, the economic disinvestment and deadly violence devastating the poorest Black neighborhoods in cities may be less salient to Black suburbanites on the other side of the expressway, even if they reside in nearby low-income suburbs with similar challenges. In contrast, Black central city residents, even those living in other neighborhoods, may be more cognizant of these problems and concerned about their spillover effects. Overall, Black suburbanites might view their neighborhoods and socioeconomic prospects as markedly better than and safely removed from those of their central city counterparts. All this could reduce linked fate perceptions and lead to political opinion differences between the two groups.

Discrete informational and social networks also are likely developing in Black suburban neighborhoods apart from those in cities. Although Mary Pattillo (1999) and others find that some Black suburban families maintain ties to Black relatives and friends in cities, many establish separate social networks and associational spaces where they live (Haynes 2001; Lacy 2007; Smithsimon 2022). Ethnoburbs of middle-class and multinational Black communities with separate and distinct social dynamics have formed outside big cities such as New York, Atlanta, and Miami (Waters 1999; Wen, Lauderdale, and Kandula 2009; Clerge 2019; Hamilton 2019). This emerging Black suburban social geography has precipitated the diversification and decentralization of the Black counterpublic, which has been concentrated largely in central cities in the decades since the Great Migration (Dawson 2001; Rogers 2018). With this shift in the Black counterpublic infrastructure, the political opinions of Black suburban and central city residents may be developing along separate tracks.

For example, if a distinct suburban ideology is emerging among Black suburbanites, their corner of the Black counterpublic outside central cities is where it might take root, sprouting in neighborhood associations, school boards, churches, and other civic spaces. With their lower population densities and larger lot sizes, however, suburban neighborhoods are also not nearly as conducive as city neighborhoods for the cultivation of the robust networks that have structured and unified Blacks' political opinions. As suburbanization has stretched and loosened the bonds among metropolitan area Blacks, the likelihood of opinion stratification between suburban and urban Blacks presumably has increased.

Yet inequality and discrimination tend to stalk Blacks across metropolitan areas in both urban and suburban zip codes. These pervasive racial hardships could temper the trends toward political sorting triggered by Black suburbanization. First, the familial ties Blacks in suburbs and cities maintain across zip codes are often activated and reinforced during crises, including those generated by racial bias (Sarkisian and Gerstel 2004). Blacks separated by geography but embedded in the same kinship networks support and bond with each other over these struggles, which in turn can foster expectations of reciprocity and reinforce perceptions of linked fate. Second, the racial inequities of the metropolitan political economy in areas like municipal bond ratings, bank lending practices, and business investment are not always easy to detect. Nor do racial harms necessarily take the same forms across Black neighborhoods. Yet some racial injustices, like anti-Black police violence or profiling, are so prevalent and widely politicized they are familiar to Blacks almost everywhere (Soss and Weaver 2017). Videos of police killings of unarmed Blacks are a grim viral staple of this social media age, making these deadly encounters increasingly visible to Americans. But they are especially palpable to Blacks who are acutely aware of their vulnerability to this form of state violence and the mortal threat it poses to them. Blacks make up approximately 14 percent of the U.S. population but account for more than 25 percent of all police shooting victims (Fox et al. 2019).

Such high salience racialized issues should activate linked fate perceptions and unify the opinions of Black suburban and urban residents. Surveys confirm that these issues elicit broad agreement among Black Americans. In almost every poll, they lament persisting anti-Black racism and racial inequality, not only in interpersonal encounters, but also in their experiences with housing, employment, and government (Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo 1985; Horowitz, Brown, and Cox 2019). But the double jeopardy of feeling overpoliced and underpoliced in their neighborhoods has become especially salient for Blacks in recent decades (Prowse, Weaver, and Meares 2019). Racially fraught policy issues, such as these police shootings of unarmed Blacks, tend to prime feelings of solidarity or linked fate, which in turn induce high levels of opinion agreement and even unanimity in the group (Dawson 1995; Jefferson, Neuner, and Pasek 2021).

Expectations

Based on these theoretical priors, I expect differences in Black suburban and urban opinions to register mostly on ostensibly nonracial issues, especially if they entail residential interests or place-based perceptions. In a previous analysis of survey data, for instance, I found Black suburban residents express more favorable opinions about their local institutions and services than their urban coracial counterparts (Rogers 2018). I anticipate they also should convey more positive impressions about their neighborhoods than urban Blacks. Claudine Gay (2004) finds that Blacks' assessments of their neighborhood quality can shape their perceptions of linked fate. Those with better opinions of their neighborhoods are less likely to believe that race determines their life chances or limits their opportunities. Differing perceptions of neighborhood quality could be a major dividing line in the opinions of suburban and urban Blacks.

In contrast, opinion variance between the two groups should be muted or replaced by uniformity on high salience racialized issues. I expect Black opinion consensus across neighborhood types on the problems that animated the 2020 demonstrations: police discrimination and violence against Blacks. Black Ameri-

cans' bleak views of the police are long-standing and widely documented (Morin and Stepler 2016). Some studies indicate that Black suburbanites are even more dissatisfied with policing and concerned about police violence than their central city counterparts (Harvard, RWJF, and NPR 2017). Proportionally more suburbanites than urban residents are victims of deadly encounters with police (DeAngelis 2021; Sinyangwe 2020). Black suburban municipalities also rely disproportionately on revenue-motivated policing to address fiscal distress (Pacewicz and Robinson 2021; Beck 2023). This revenue-generation policy likely increases contact and the odds of dangerous conflicts between civilians and police in cash-strapped Black suburbs. Considering these trends, I expect as many or more complaints about unfair policing from Black suburbanites as from Black city dwellers.

Finally, Blacks consistently register robust support for BLM (Horowitz 2021; Thomas and Horowitz 2020). They continue to exceed all other racial groups on this score, even as overall public support for the movement has waned in the years since the Floyd murder. I anticipate strong backing for BLM from both urban and suburban Blacks. Urban Blacks, however, might report greater engagement with the movement due to their exposure to the more extensive Black counterpublic networks in cities. I also expect Black suburbanites to worry about protest tactics causing reputational or other harm to Blacks because they may be more anxious about respectability than their urban counterparts.

These expectations are summarized as follows:

Black suburban residents express more positive perceptions of their neighborhoods than Black urban residents.

Suburban and urban Blacks both report discrimination and mistreatment by police. Black suburbanites complain as much or more about discriminatory policing as their urban counterparts.

Although Black suburban and urban residents endorse BLM protests, the latter are more engaged in the movement. Black sub-

Table 1. Blacks by Neighborhood Type

Neighborhood type	Number of Blacks	Percent of Total Blacks
Rural	34	11
Suburban	99	31
Urban	184	58
Total	317	100

Source: Author's tabulation.

urbanites' support for the movement, particularly its tactics, is moderated by respectability concerns.

DATA AND METHODS

To test my expectations, I relied on interviews conducted for the American Voices Project (AVP). The interview protocol combines qualitative, survey, administrative, and experimental techniques to gather data on Americans. The initial wave of the AVP collected a national sample of interviews with 1,613 Americans, including an oversample of 317 Black respondents, roughly 20 percent of the total. The AVP used three-stage cluster sampling across U.S. Census tracts to ensure coverage of key geographic areas, well-defined neighborhoods, and an oversample of Americans in the bottom half of the national income distribution.[9] This strategy yielded a Black oversample especially well suited for comparing Blacks living in different types of neighborhoods. The neighborhood classifications are not self-reported by interviewees but instead imputed based on their census tracts.[10] I created a dataset of the 317 Black respondents and sorted the sample by urban, suburban, and rural residence to focus on those in the first two neighborhood categories. As table 1 shows, Blacks from these two neighborhood types comprise 89 percent of the entire Black sample, with a 58 percent urban and 31 percent suburban share. Although the remaining 11 percent of respondents recruited from rural neighborhoods are not the focus on

the analysis, I occasionally refer to distinct patterns in their interview responses to contextualize the suburban-urban comparisons.

Some suburban and urban interviewees live in metropolitan areas that lately have seen exponential growth in their Black suburban populations—spurred in part by Black outmigration from nearby central cities such as Atlanta, Chicago, and Detroit. These same metropolitan areas are also where poverty has suburbanized sharply since the 1990s. With so many of the respondents recruited from high-poverty census blocks, the AVP data allow for opinion comparisons between urban and suburban Blacks who face similar socioeconomic challenges in their respective neighborhoods. Although the overrepresentation of respondents from these high-poverty areas enhances the validity of comparisons between the two groups, it also limits how much I can extrapolate from the findings in this study to the universe of Black suburban and central city dwellers across the United States.

AVP interviewing proceeded in two stages between fall 2019 and summer 2020, starting with face-to-face interviews and then transitioning to telephone interviews in early 2020 when the COVID pandemic erupted. The interview schedule covers a wide range of topics, including family, finances, health, social networks, community, and politics. To explore the theory of Black political sorting by place, my analyses focus on Black interviewees' responses to questions about their experiences

9. AVP sampled census tracts proportional to their poverty population as indexed by the official poverty measure based on the five-year estimates of the 2016 American Community Survey (ACS).

10. AVP respondents were not asked to characterize their neighborhoods as rural, suburban, or urban. The neighborhood classifications (urban, suburban, rural) are based on the Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD's) Urbanization Perceptions Small Area Index methodology applied to each household's census tract number.

with neighborhood safety and law enforcement. I also examine attitudes about BLM and its goals. Only a subset of interviewees, roughly 33 percent, received probes about the BLM protests because these were added to the protocol in fall 2020. This was after the initial wave of demonstrations sparked by the Floyd killing earlier in the spring. All respondents, however, received probes about their neighborhoods as well as their encounters with police and the criminal justice system. The protocol posed policing questions both with and without the BLM prime. This combination of questions about policing, the carceral state, and neighborhood conditions prompted respondents to think and talk about some of the racially fraught issues that not only animated BLM summer, but also historically have bedeviled Blacks in their quest for justice and liberation (Thurston 2018; Taylor 2020). Blacks' opinions on these issues deserve empirical scrutiny because they not only affect their daily lives, but also offer insight into whether they believe democracy is working for them.

These AVP probes are especially apt for investigating whether the geographic sorting of Blacks into urban and suburban neighborhoods is associated with variance in their views. The questions about BLM and discriminatory policing are a stringent test of Black opinion stratification. By drawing attention to these chronic racialized issues, the 2020 BLM protests presumably primed linked fate perceptions and increased the odds of opinion consensus between suburban and urban Blacks. The demonstrators' fierce condemnation of anti-Black police violence likely resonated with Blacks across zip codes and neighborhood types. Although the movement was associated with rallies mostly in big cities, its inception dates back to the 2012 killing of seventeen-year-old Black teenager Trayvon Martin in a Miami suburb. BLM garnered even greater public attention in 2014 when it reached Ferguson, Missouri, a suburb outside St. Louis, where a police officer shot eighteen-year-old Michael Brown (Lung-Amam and Schafran 2018). In surveys be-

fore and after the 2020 protests, Blacks registered high support for the movement and concerns about police brutality. The group's largely consistent opinions contrasted with Whites' decidedly more mixed impressions (Azevedo, Marques, and Micheli 2022; Fields et al. 2022; Horowitz 2021; Thomas and Horowitz 2020).

But this stark racial divide in opinions might cloak complexities in Blacks' views, including variation by residence. Large-*N* surveys can miss heterogeneity in Black political attitudes. Dawson (1995, 207) notes that "survey analyses of African-American politics are likely to overestimate the degree of political unity" in the group. Surveys typically underrepresent subgroups such as low-income Blacks and rarely feature topics on which Blacks might disagree. Further, the exigencies of survey instrumentation, such as close-ended question items, often preclude delving into the nuances of public opinion. General survey items about perceptions of racism or support for BLM indicating overall group consensus among Blacks may conceal intragroup diversity on political ideology, involvement, or the specifics of policy (Dawson 2001; Bunyasi and Watts Smith 2019).

Interviews are a useful alternative for uncovering patterns beneath the usual consensus issues and revealing signs of opinion divergence—or even convergence—that are either hidden or impossible to detect in survey data.[11] The AVP's open-ended probes about racially discriminatory law enforcement, BLM, and neighborhood perceptions allow for attention to subtle details and distinctions in Black respondents' views. Any opinion differences between suburban and urban Black respondents on these topics, which have elicited so much racial group consensus in surveys, would count as suggestive evidence of a link between residential sorting and opinion stratification in the population.

My research team and I used NVivo to code respondents' views on themes emphasized in the 2020 protests and commonly associated with the national reckoning on race—topics on which Black opinion variance might be hard to

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11. Dawson (1995) recommends multiple research approaches, including focus groups and case studies, to study Black political attitudes. This mix of methods, he argues, is warranted by Blacks' growing demographic diversity and their increasingly complex, intersectional social identities.

Table 2. Coding Framework

Themes	Codes
Neighborhood safety and economic opportunity	Crime: Is crime cited as a neighborhood problem? Violence: Is violence by neighbors or police mentioned? Social Trust: Is the neighborhood characterized as safe or unsafe? Are neighbors viewed favorably or unfavorably? Are they trusted? Economic opportunity: Do respondents see economic opportunities in their neighborhoods? Do they see inequality between rich and poor in their neighborhoods?
Law enforcement	Police: Are police viewed favorably or unfavorably? Are personal experiences with police positive or negative? The latter include unfair stops, searches, questioning, threats, or abuse? Arrest: Have respondents or people they know experienced arrest? Courts: Have experiences with courts been positive or negative? Incarceration: Have respondents or people they know been in prison or jail?
Black Lives Matter movement BLM/M4BL	Cognitive awareness and engagement: Do respondents mention BLM/M4BL? Are they aware of BLM/M4BL? Do they discuss BLM with others? Direct engagement: Have respondents or people they know participated in protests? Tactics: Do they endorse BLM protests or view them as harmful? Police reform or abolition: Do they mention police reform or abolition? Do they mention any other policy ideas?

Source: Author's compilation.

detect. After reviewing the interview schedule, I identified four relevant general themes and devised corresponding codes. The themes are neighborhood safety and economic opportunity, law enforcement, racism, and BLM. These issues have featured prominently in media coverage on the recent upsurge in social movement activity for racial justice. I leveraged respondents' reactions to the questions about neighborhood safety, law enforcement, and BLM across the entire interview protocol to test the expectations of the theory (table 2). After the team coded the interviews, I relied on a series of NVivo queries to analyze how suburban and urban respondents in the Black sample compare on these topics. The AVP protocol also includes a survey administered to respondents after the interviews. Although the interviews are the principal data source for the analyses, I also tracked the distribution of responses by these two groups, their rural counterparts, and Whites on several related survey items. These data do not allow for a test of the causal mechanisms underlying the theory of Black political sorting by metropolitan residence. But they provide fine-grained insights into whether and how Blacks views vary across the urban-suburban divide.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

I now turn to the patterns uncovered in my comparisons of the demographics and views of the Black suburban and urban respondents. My analyses also include some references to the rural Black and White respondents to contextualize and clarify key findings.

Demographics: Which Sorts of Blacks Live in Urban and Suburban Neighborhoods

The entire AVP Black oversample includes more women than men and is almost evenly divided between the old and young. The interviewees represent all regions of the country. The majority, 61 percent, reside in the South. Another 19

Figure 1. Regional Distribution
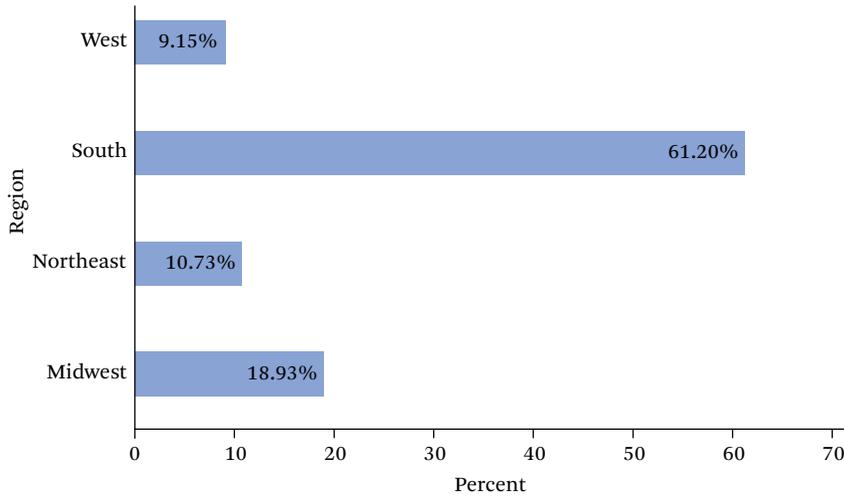
Source: Author's tabulation.

Figure 2. Region and Neighborhood Type
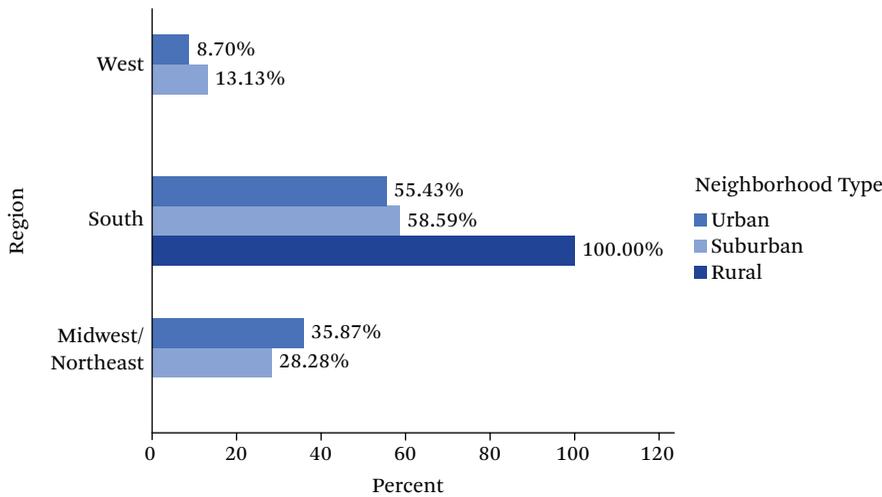
Source: Author's tabulation.

percent live in the Midwest and the remaining 20 precent are roughly split between the Northeast and the West (figure 1). Suburban respondents greatly outnumber their urban counterparts in the samples drawn from the Midwest and West and just barely in the one recruited from the South. Urban interviewees exceed suburban participants only in the Northeast (figure 2). The overall urban and suburban Black samples are commensurate on several key demographic variables. Both have higher

shares of women. They constitute 63 percent of the urban sample and 59 percent of the suburban group (figure 3). Both samples are roughly split between older and younger respondents. Fifty percent of the urban interviewees are forty-five years or older and 55 percent of the suburbanites fall in the same range. Young respondents make up 48 and 44 percent of the urban and suburban samples respectively (figure 4).

But evidence of a suburban edge shows in

Figure 3. Gender and Neighborhood Type
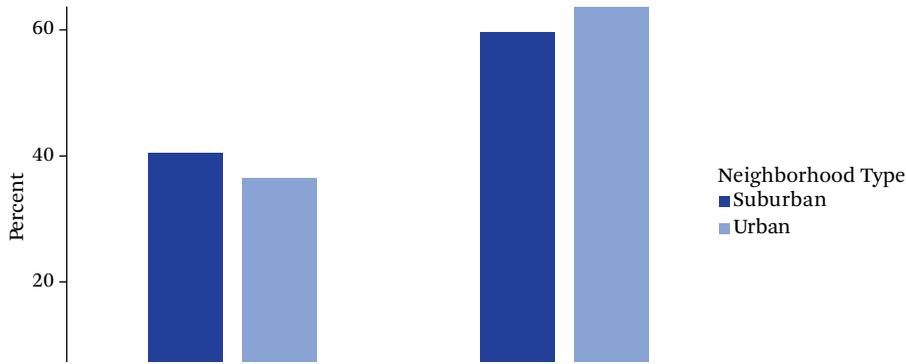
Source: Author's tabulation.

Figure 4. Age and Neighborhood Type
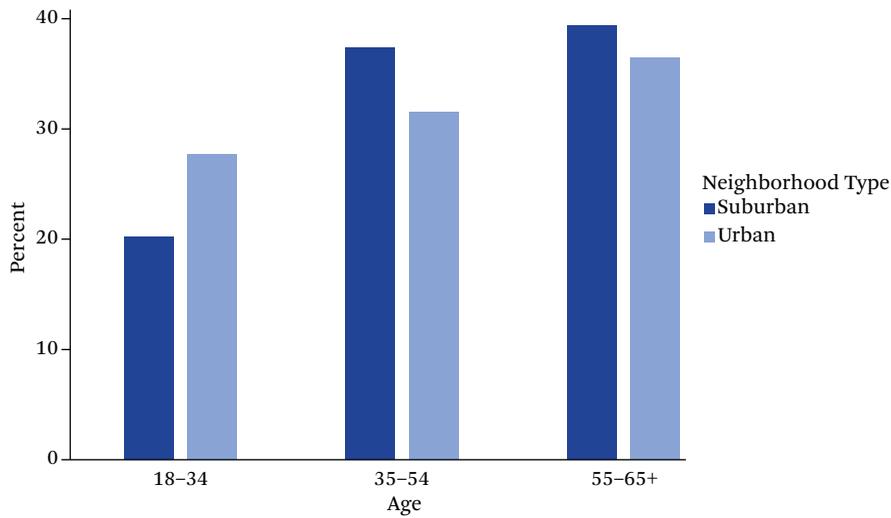
Source: Author's tabulation.

the socioeconomic indicators. Relative to the urban sample, a larger share of the Black suburban respondents reports at least some college education and a smaller proportion lack a high school diploma. Approximately 62 percent of the suburban interviewees went to college, whereas 50 percent of their urban counterparts did. Only 13 percent of the suburbanites did not finish high school, in contrast to almost 20 percent of the urban respondents (figure 5). The same suburban advantage is evident in rel-

ative access to economic resources. The suburban sample has almost twice as many homeowners as the urban sample. Roughly 31 percent of the suburbanites own their homes, whereas only 17 percent of the city respondents do (figure 6).

Finally, the evidence of income selectivity is even more stark (figure 7). Only 32 percent of the urban respondents report incomes over $24,000 per year. In contrast, 56 percent of the suburban interviewees fall in this higher in-

Figure 5. Education and Neighborhood Type
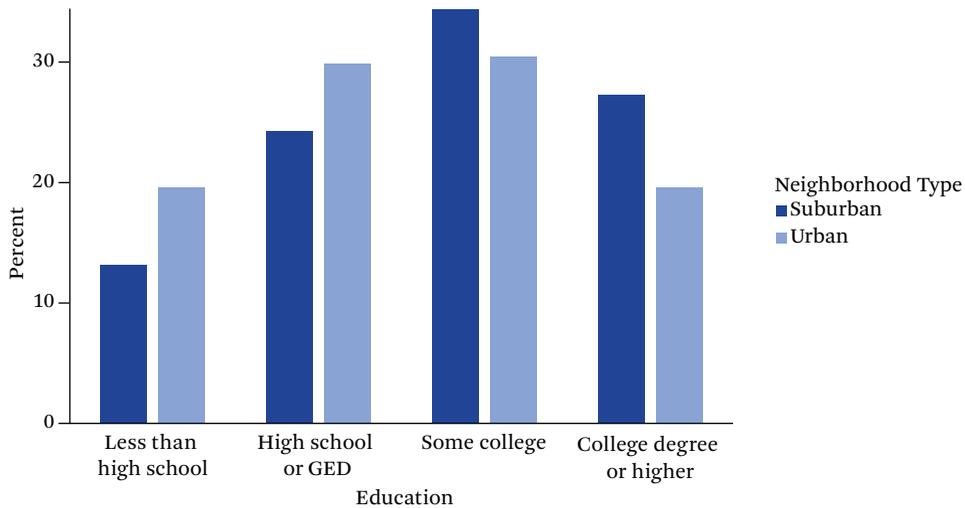
Source: Author's tabulation.

Figure 6. Homeownership and Neighborhood Type
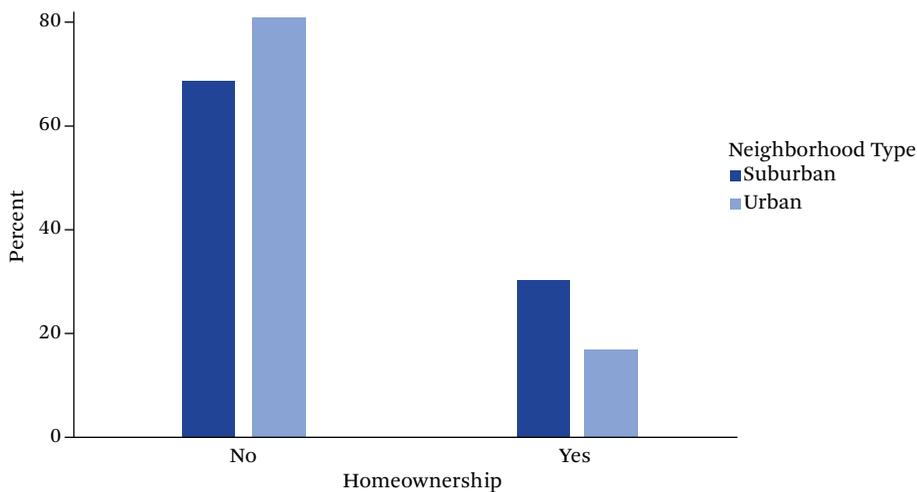
Source: Author's tabulation.

come bracket. On the low end of the income scale, the pattern is inverted. Almost 50 percent of the urban respondents say their families earn less than $24,000 each year, relative to 31 percent of the suburban dwellers. Overall, these figures point to the selection processes shaping the Black exodus to the suburbs. The most upwardly mobile Blacks are leading the charge. The socioeconomic sorting other researchers have documented in national Black

suburbanization trends are evident in the AVP Black sample.

Despite their relative economic edge, however, many suburban respondents live in distressed neighborhoods. Their high proportion in the interviewee pool is due to the overrepresentation of high-poverty census tracts in the AVP sample. Yet this sampling artifact captures a familiar reality for Black suburban dwellers. Unlike their White counterparts, they cannot

Figure 7. Income and Neighborhood Type
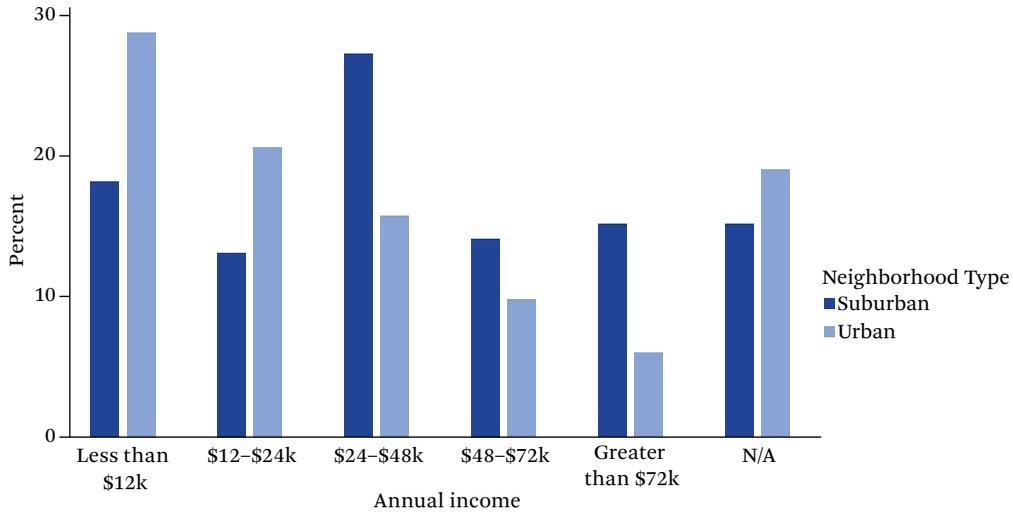
Source: Author's tabulation.

easily turn their economic advantages into access to desirable residential settings. The residential returns to middle-class status—or to income and educational advancements—are smaller for Blacks. "Upwardly mobile African Americans reside in communities with more abandoned housing, higher crime rates . . . and poorer prospects for economic growth than the neighborhoods in which [W]hites of comparable socioeconomic status reside" (Gay 2004, 550). In the suburbs as elsewhere across the metropolitan United States, Blacks' aspirations to prosperous and peaceful neighborhoods are often thwarted by racial inequality.

Neighborhood Safety for Blacks

It is hardly a certainty, then, that suburban interviewees would perceive more safety and security in their neighborhoods than their urban counterparts. Both urban and suburban respondents in the sample express worry, frustration, and sometimes resignation about crime and violence in their neighborhoods. Consider the following three responses to the same query about perceptions of neighborhood safety. The first is from Lynette, a middle-age woman in a southern suburb; the second from Otis, an older suburban man in the Southeast; and the third from Colin, an urban male in the South. Lynette explained, "Sometimes I get a little agitated because there's a lot of young people that live here and do lots of drugs." Otis, the elderly suburbanite, echoed the same concerns: "Well, I live in an area where young kids like everywhere you go, got a drug alley over here, and the kids are always shooting and all that stuff. I don't go around there." Colin described similar conditions: "There was a time when the kids wouldn't even hardly play out in the streets because of the gun violence, and drugs, and all that kind of stuff. Now the community is getting a little better." Across both samples, older respondents are more attuned to neighborhood violence and frequently cast it in generational terms by faulting youth involved with guns and drugs.

Even younger respondents, however, cited youth violence and crime as acute problems where they live. Some said they have been the victims of crime or witnesses to violence in their neighborhoods. Shauntelle, a young woman in a mid-Atlantic city, reported that she has seen these challenges up close. "My neighbor, she just lost her son two years ago . . . and it looks like . . . probably trying to rob him or probably thinking that he had drugs on him or something . . . My car has been broken into three times within the year." Grace, a suburban woman also living in the mid-Atlantic region, vividly recounted how her home was burglar-

ized and car stolen. "They kicked in my door. They took all my perfume because when I travel out and I wear about different perfume. They took this car, my car. I got rid of that. They broke two TV. They kicked the door in. They stole a lot of my clothes." This grim litany confirms that most Black respondents on both sides of the urban-suburban divide reside in neighborhoods scarred by violence and crime. Reports of such problems were more muted among Black interviewees from rural areas. Rural respondents not only had less complaints about crime and violence but also tended to attribute them to outsiders.

Aside from the apparent rural exception, the reports of neighborhoods beset with violence and crime span generational, gender, and metropolitan geographic divides among the interviewees. The picture of almost quotidian peril painted by these respondents is perhaps not surprising in a sample drawn from mostly high-poverty Census tracts. Research consistently shows neighborhoods with substantial levels of concentrated poverty are especially prone to crime, violence, and other forms of disorder (Wilson 1987; Sampson 2012). The residents of these high-poverty metropolitan neighborhoods, whether urban or suburban, are more likely to encounter unsafe conditions then than Americans living in less impoverished areas.

Yet some meaningful distinctions surface when the interview data are disaggregated by income. My research team and I sorted the interviewees into four income brackets ranging from those reporting incomes under $24,000 per year to those with earnings above $72,000.[12] Those in the former category, the poorest respondents in the sample, stand out. Across both the urban and suburban samples, the volume and severity of the neighborhood violence and crime they cite far exceed what respondents in higher income brackets mention. Higher-earning respondents, especially those in the suburbs, are more preoccupied with property crimes in their neighborhoods, whereas the poorest respondents report more drug activity, gun violence, and threats to their survival in the places where they live. Within the low-income cohort, urban respondents refer to worries about crime and gun violence modestly more than their suburban counterparts. But this may be a distinction without a difference. Overall, the poorest urban and suburban interviewees are the likeliest to report living in unsafe neighborhoods.

Without additional data about their geographic context, social ties, and individual predispositions, it is impossible to draw firm inferences about why low-income urban and suburban respondents have similarly dim views of their neighborhoods. For instance, financial paucity simply may relegate the poorest Black suburbanites to lower-quality neighborhoods than their higher-earning Black suburban counterparts. They may live in neighborhoods resembling or even abutting the extreme poverty neighborhoods that have long existed in population-dense cities and are now emerging in suburbs too. Or their social ties with relatives and friends in these city neighborhoods may inform their perceptions of their own nearby suburban environs.[13] In any case, the familiar urban stereotype of neighborhoods distressed with crime and violence is a reality reported not only by urban low-income Black respondents but also by their suburban counterparts. Both groups are all too familiar with these threats to safety in the places where they live.

These vexing problems often plague and further degrade neighborhoods already mired in high levels of poverty, economic disinvestment, and other forms of systemic inequality. The statistical results from analyses of the survey module underscore this bleak assessment. Although the module does not include a question about neighborhood safety specifically, it features one about perceptions of neighborhood economic opportunities. The question is: "To what extent do you think there are opportunities for adults to get good jobs or further their education in your area?" Respondents could

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12. We subdivided the interviews into four income categories: less than $24,000, $24,000 to $48,000, $48,000 to $72,000, and more than $72,000.

13. My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for proposing this possible explanation.

Figure 8. Perceived Economic Opportunities by Neighborhood Type
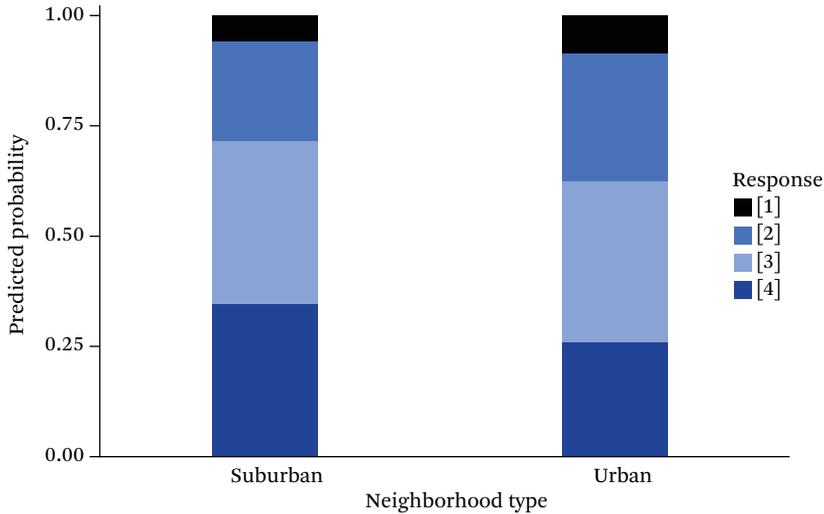
Source: Author's tabulation.

choose one of four categorical ratings: not at all [1], a little [2], some [3], or a lot [4].

I used a predicted probabilities model to compare the responses of the urban and suburban interviewees. None of the differences uncovered between the two groups are statistically significant. Only a minority perceived ample economic opportunities in their neighborhoods: fewer than 40 percent of the urban (0.26) and suburban (0.35) respondents respectively expressed this view (see figure 8). The majority saw very limited or no opportunities for economic gain in their neighborhoods. These impressions diverge sharply from those of Whites in the AVP sample who largely registered more sanguine perceptions of employment and educational opportunities in their neighborhoods than Blacks (see figure 9). Consistent with historical patterns, suburban and urban Whites saw more economic promise where they live than their rural White counterparts.[14] In a means comparison test on this survey item, these differences are statistically significant. Whites' perceptions of economic opportunity vary by neighborhood type. In contrast, economic inequality is apparently a persistent feature of the places where Blacks live. Yet as figure 8 shows, the overall distribution

of ratings between the urban and suburban respondents tilts in the expected direction. By the raw numbers, more suburban than urban participants saw avenues to economic advancement in their neighborhoods.

This shade of difference in the two groups' impressions comes into sharper focus in the interviews. In these extended exchanges, substantially more suburban than urban respondents reported satisfaction with their neighborhoods and made no mention of violence. Of the suburban interviews coded for observations about neighborhood safety, 43 percent were with respondents who said they feel safe in their neighborhoods. For instance, Jasmyn, a young woman who recently moved to a Midwestern suburb, had this favorable appraisal of her new neighborhood. "I don't have any problems with the neighbors. It's a safe neighborhood actually really safe, like I don't even think people lock their car door that's how safe it is. I'm not saying that they shouldn't, but people just have a different mindset over here and it is . . . pretty chill, so I like it, I haven't had any problems with it. I couldn't see myself living anywhere else."

In contrast, only 25.5 percent in the urban sample expressed similar positive attitudes

14. The figure does not include the proportions for rural Whites to avoid disclosing respondents' identities.

Figure 9. Whites' Perceptions of Economic Opportunities
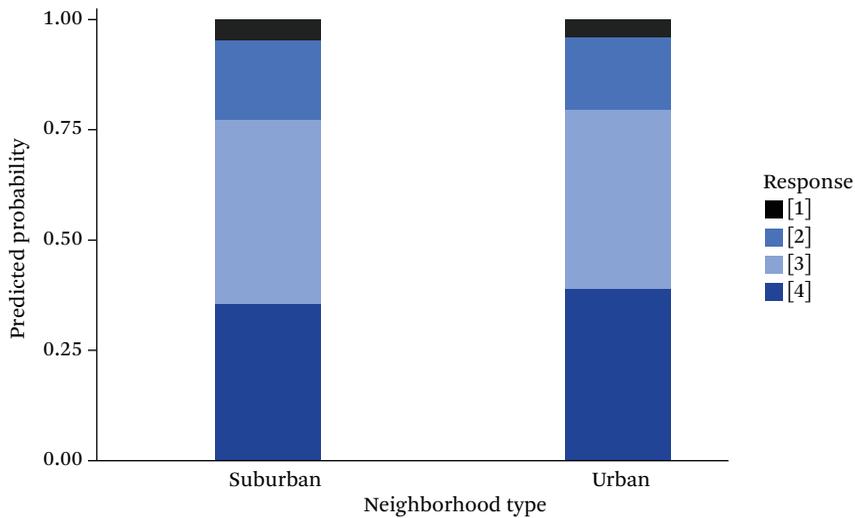
Source: Author's tabulation.

about where they lived, but with a telling caveat. Some urban Blacks who said their neighborhoods were safe also reported exercising extreme vigilance or taking precautions to avoid danger. Consider these two typical observations, one by Donna, a mother, and the other Suzette, a single young woman. "As a mom," Donna offered, "I'm not going to say I feel this is safe, but we try to make it safe. This is what we do. Okay. When we're going somewhere, we're all going. When we're coming in, we're going to come in at a decent hour, . . . make sure the doors locked and stuff like that and make ways that we live safe. The things that we practice and do safe. But not just trust people and say it's safe." Suzette gave a qualified assessment, "Well, there is no crime, there is no killing, and that's it, just be nice to everybody. It's all right, nobody shooting no gun, nobody not threatening, you not get robbed, but you could get robbed any minute, right, you just got to look — make sure you always watching your surroundings, and that's basically it, it's all right." These sentiments were pronounced among women, especially mothers focused on protecting their children.

Other urban respondents seemed inured to the violence around them or resigned to living in a high-crime area. This young woman from a southwestern city, Amanda, explained:

I feel pretty safe. I never fear for my life or fear like, "Oh I got to do this; I got to do that or, oh my god, they're coming; they're going to do this." I never feel like that. Well, I'm from the hood, so I guess it doesn't really bother me.

Another urban respondent, a young woman named Cynthia, said:

I haven't been here that long . . . But far as now, just watching the news, a man was just killed around the corner probably August XXX, I've been here for a month. And it's probably not like, "Okay, this person doesn't mean to me or anything," but you just have to watch your back, things like that. Just keep an eye on your surroundings. It's not the best neighborhood, but I'm happy I have a home.

The troubled reputations of these city neighborhoods often extend to the suburbs. Studies show these negative impressions linger like a specter even when the neighborhoods start to improve (Sampson 2012). They also travel with Blacks who relocate to the suburbs. A substantial share of the suburban interviewees' references to crime were recollections about neighborhoods they had left. Some with favorable attitudes about their current neighborhoods

had moved from city areas they described as distinctly less safe. Kevin, a young man in a southwestern suburb, painted a vivid contrast. "I love [my neighborhood]," he said. "It's peaceful, quiet. It's totally different . . . I don't forget where I'm from. I grew up [around] a lot of drugs, murders, and gangs." Only months after moving to a Midwest suburb, Dontrelle, also in his twenties, concluded, "I could really say it feels peaceful. Since I've been here for a couple months, I haven't heard nothing. No gun shot or saw anything . . . Man, I just got to move from [where I lived previously] . . . because there . . . the type of people that'll plot on you and stuff . . . try to rob you or some shit probably. Over there it was just like, man, every night. I used to couldn't even go to sleep." These respondents viewed the relative calm and safety of their suburban neighborhoods as an upgrade from their former city addresses. But, overall, the suburbs do not grant Blacks the same level of safety from violence and crime they typically afford to Whites.

Racialized Double Jeopardy

Many Americans ordinarily look to police to ensure public safety in their neighborhoods. Black Americans, however, do not perceive these state authorities as unimpeachable tribunes of protection for their group. Rather the stable in-group consensus, reflected in large-N surveys and the historical record, is that police often pose a racial threat to Blacks (Hinton 2021). Even when Blacks have petitioned for law and order in their distressed neighborhoods, the aggressive tactics employed by police have unleashed perverse consequences and prompted opinion reversals by leaders and ordinary citizens (Forman 2017; Fortner 2105). This dim view of police among Blacks has only intensified in recent years (Fields et al. 2022).

It shows in the interviews with urban and suburban respondents, both of whom regis-

tered overwhelmingly negative opinions of the police, as expected.[15] They expressed little to no trust in these state agents, perhaps the only face of government they ever see in their neighborhoods.[16] Fraught and sometimes dangerous encounters with law enforcement officers were almost a ubiquity across both groups.[17] Many respondents or people they know had been entangled with the police or the criminal justice system. A substantial number complained about anti-Black bias in these encounters.

This statement, from Ben, an elderly suburban man in the Southeast, is emblematic of the jaundiced views widely expressed by both sets of respondents:

I don't like the police period, they're not my friend, and I keep saying I came up in the era where police, they take a hold, uphold the law and be biased, when it comes to a neighborhood, all they see is Black, I have seen it's literally if you get caught in a dark, they will hurt you, and there is nothing you can do about it, there is no one you can verify, and since I've been in [my state] I've seen and go to kids, and now I like the commissioner, the city council, if the police got to stop me or whatever, make sure that you get to whatever light and you toot your horn or whatever, so everybody can come out and see, so that something going to happening to you, that's everywhere.

Xavier, a young male resident of a West Coast city, said that encounters with an iron-fisted criminal justice system were commonplace for people in his life and the basis for their distrust of the police:

Well, all my life I would say I've experienced the police being Black in America, that is a common thing, from . . . young it was always uncles and relatives like going to prison, getting arrested, that type of thing. So yeah, po-

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15. Corey Fields and his coauthors (2022) also find distrust of the police is almost universal among Black AVP interviewees in their analyses of the data.

16. As Soss and Weaver (2017) theorize, Blacks and other marginalized minority groups likely infer lessons about government responsiveness and their standing as citizens from encounters with police.

17. Rural Blacks in the AVP sample are curious outliers from their suburban and urban counterparts on the topic of policing. They report far less dissatisfaction and fewer encounters with police in their interviews.

Figure 10. Police Discrimination by Neighborhood Type
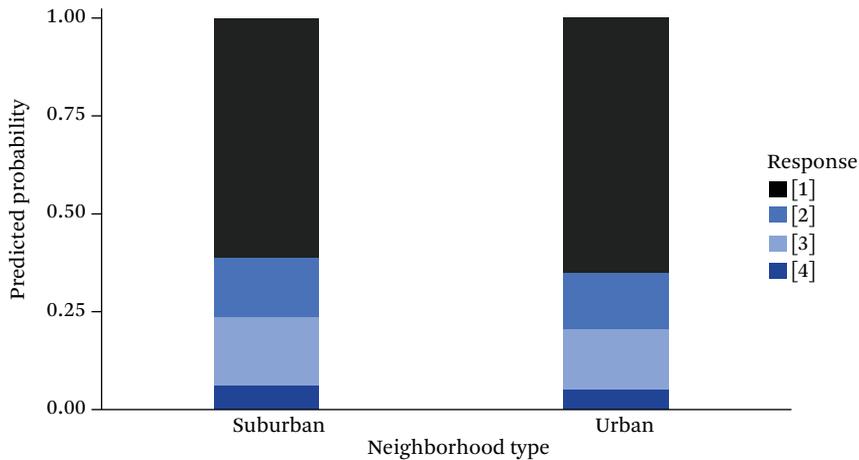
Source: Author's tabulation.

lice interaction was normal, and it was never really positive ever, so just growing up in the hood. I would say it gives you a negative thought towards the police you know what I'm saying. I believe that there's good one, there's bad ones, I myself prefer to not interact with them at all, just to stay safe, I don't want to be the next Black man shot by police. So I try to avoid them at all costs, but I don't think they're all bad, but I still try to stay away from all of them.

Other respondents articulated the peculiar frustration of feeling both overpoliced and underpoliced in their neighborhoods. Hakeem, a young urban interviewee in the Midwest, described this distressing dilemma and the distrust it breeds between Blacks and the police:

They [the police] think just because we're in [LOCATION] everybody over here is bad, but we're not. I have never had any run-ins personally with them, but I have seen some things that I didn't like that they did . . . I have seen racism . . . I've heard some of the police officers say none of you all work. We work.

Everybody on this block works. You all are just . . . or whatever because we're [LOCATION]. I've called the police a couple of times, and they never showed up . . . We pay taxes. We're not gangbangers or anything over here. I'm not saying it's not going on over here, but if I call you and say it's an emergency, I'm not going to call 911 for no reason. Then you show up an hour late and you have an attitude when you come like you don't want to do your job.

The survey data validate these respondents' views. A single item on policing asks, "Over your lifetime, have you ever been unfairly stopped, searched, questioned, threatened, or abused by police because of your gender, age, race, income level, or other characteristic?" The response categories are as follows: no [1]; yes, once [2]; yes, several times [3]; yes, many times [4]. A predicted probabilities model shows substantial shares of urban (0.34) and suburban (0.38) respondents reported at least one instance of unfair treatment by police (see figure 10).[18] A far lower and statistically significant proportion of rural Blacks could remember even a single episode of police harassment.[19]

18. The proportions of Whites reporting discriminatory treatment at the hands of police are much smaller by comparison (see figure 11).

19. I conducted a means comparison test for all three groups on this survey item. This statistically significant result for rural Blacks should be read with caution given the small number of these respondents in the AVP sample.

Figure 11. Whites' Perceptions of Police Discrimination
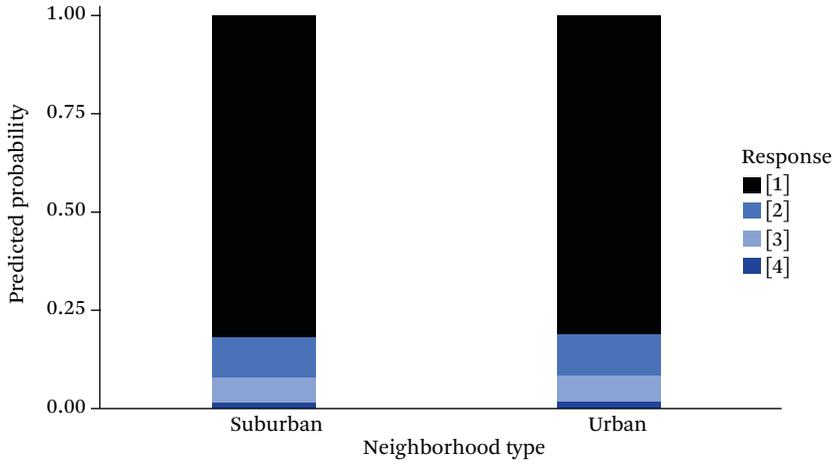
Source: Author's tabulation.

By comparison, no differences in the distribution of responses across the suburban and urban respondents on this survey item are statistically significant. But as figure 10 illustrates, a greater proportion of the suburban respondents than their urban counterparts recalled experiencing police discrimination. Although this is not a statistically meaningful difference, it warrants further consideration.

The suburban respondents are notably expansive about police bias against Blacks in the interviews. Eddie, an older male respondent from a mid-Atlantic state, characterized police stop and frisk tactics as routine harassment:

EDDIE: Police always mess with you though. Especially up in this city.
INTERVIEWER: How? What do they do?
EDDIE: Harasses you. Like, if you just hanging out on a sidewalk or a street, they figure you're dealing drugs. All like that. They done stopped me a whole lot of times, they think I'm dealing drugs, "What you got in your pockets?" Search me and everything. Search my wheelchair. That's harassment. And they don't find nothing on me, but that's just the stuff you got to go through. And uptown, it's worse than out here in the county.

Shonda, a woman from a southern suburb, summed up her encounters with police along the same lines. "My experiences with law enforcement is that I typically get followed sometimes. I've been followed a lot. Checking my bag, my shirt, I guess to make sure it's my car, and the thing that I didn't steal anything. One time my husband and I was in his truck and he has a pretty decent truck for I guess our ethnicity, so, you know."

Urban respondents also mention racial profiling by police, but often with an air of hardened resignation. More AVP interviewees in this group knew people who had been victims of police violence. A few even reported they had experienced police brutality. This series of stark observations by Damian, a young man from the West Coast, captures this perspective.

For me honestly, people have been getting beat up and killed by the police all my life, so it's like nothing new to me, to me I'm numb to it, like I expect to be harassed by the police, just because I'm Black in America, you know what I'm saying, like that comes with it, it comes with it, it's kind of fucked up to say, but like, I expect to be like harassed I expect that when police see me or interact with me that it's going to be for a negative reason, that just comes along with being Black in America it is like a part of life.

Overall, reports and denunciations of police bias, particularly racial profiling, are slightly

more frequent in the suburban sample, in keeping with the expectations of the theory. Perhaps urban respondents have as many troubling encounters with police, but they already hold these authorities in such low esteem that they expect harassment or worse. Black suburbanites either have higher expectations for law enforcement in their zip codes, or proportionally more run-ins with police that go awry perhaps due to the heavy reliance on revenue-motivated policing in Black suburbs. Either way, distrust of police is so rampant across both groups that it tracks as racial common sense. Many respondents detail the steps they take or teach their children to avoid police harassment and violence because distrust of law enforcement is the racial group norm.

There are, however, outliers in both samples. A minority of the Black AVP interviewees registered positive opinions about the police, but they tend to be qualified on a couple dimensions. First, some respondents with this minority opinion have relatives or friends who have worked in law enforcement. Thousands of Blacks are part of the country's security state, with many filling the ranks of local police departments. Despite law enforcement's troubled reputation for anti-Black violence and discrimination, police agencies and prisons have been sites of stable, state-subsidized jobs and career advancement for some Blacks in the decades since the 1960s (Beltran 2023; Taylor 2016). These Blacks and their families rely on law enforcement for their livelihoods. This personal familiarity seems to moderate criticism of the police in general, although the increasing numbers of Blacks involved in policing has not mitigated police brutality in Black communities.

Second, on both sides of the urban-suburban divide, respondents with positive impressions of police typically emphasize respect as a crucial solvent for avoiding conflict with these state agents. Calvin, a southern suburban man with relatives in policing, said, "I ain't never had no problem with law enforcement. I never had no problem with law because I believe in obeying the law and I talked to them like I want to be talked to. I respect them because I want to be respected, so I don't have no problem . . . And my [relative] works,

well I mean, he works in [law enforcement]." Terri Ann, an older woman from a city in the South, echoed this view, although without citing any personal relationships with police: "I don't have a problem with law enforcement. I really like law enforcement. I welcome them into my life at any time, because [PERSONAL NAME] a very respectable person of law enforcement. I don't break the law, so I have no problem with law enforcement being a part of my life. And I have not had any problems with law enforcement, and when I say not any, not any. [PERSONAL NAME] sorry for the people who have, but I have not and neither has my husband."

This emphasis on respect is an explicit endorsement of Black respectability as a tactic for warding off discriminatory treatment and the threat of harm by police. The strategy tutors Blacks to "police" their personal comportment to survive encounters with law enforcement. If they display good and proper behavior, the thinking goes, Blacks can earn the respect of Whites (Kennedy 2015; Obasogie and Newman 2016; Jefferson 2023)—and in the case of the police, they can avoid falling victim to extrajudicial violence. Self-correction allows for self-preservation. But this individualistic approach ignores or glosses over the mounting evidence that anti-Blackness in policing is a systemic problem requiring a comprehensive institutional remedy.

Black Lives Matter

The BLM movement has trained its focus on police violence against Blacks and framed the issue in systemic terms. It flatly rejects "respectability as a tool of resistance in contrast to some previous iterations of Black social movements. . . . It also elucidates the ways in which respectability politics is often employed to maintain inequality" (Bunyasi and Watts Smith 2019, 188). The 2020 BLM summer protests not only condemned recent cases of police brutality against Blacks, but also connected them to a long harrowing history of anti-Black state violence (Taylor 2022). Movement leaders urged a series of drastic police reforms, from abolition to defunding the police to increasing spending on social services to combat the root causes of crime (Byrd 2020). Among Black po-

litical elites, agreement on the racialized nature of the problem was widespread, but consensus on the appropriate policy solution was elusive.

The AVP interview protocol queried respondents about BLM and the 2020 protests with the following probes:

> So far, we've talked a lot about the period since the coronavirus/COVID-19 became an issue. Another topic a lot of people have been talking about lately is race and/or racism and policing. Some people tell us the issues raised by the Black Lives Matter movement have affected them a lot, some say they've affected them somewhat, and others say they haven't affected them at all. How about for you?
>
> How have you been thinking about the issues Black Lives Matter raises?
>
> How have you been thinking about race in the United States. Recently?
>
> How have you responded to the increased focus on race and/or racism and policing? Some people say they're aware of the issue but they keep their thoughts to themselves, others say they've talk to family and friends, others say they've joined protests. What about you?
>
> What about people you're close to?
>
> Tell me more about that.

Support for the BLM movement and its goals was widespread among both the urban and suburban Black interviewees, following the expectations for this study and echoing the pattern in national surveys. A greater proportion of the urban respondents, however, reported cognitive engagement with family and friends about the 2020 demonstrations and the issues animating the movement. Consider the sophistication evinced in these observations by Derrick, a middle-aged urban respondent from the Northeast:

> So again, [stop and frisk] was clearly racial discrimination, so that being said, it's not an experience that's unique to me, it's definitely something that is very pervasive, it still goes on, I mean, not stop and frisk per se, but you know, you have other activities that the police engage in, like, for example, the quality of life crimes that I mentioned earlier, they'll definitely target people of color knowing that, again, they don't have a lot of political support, they don't have a lot of popular sympathy with the general population, just to put it in a nutshell, police don't pick on people with powerful friends they tend to pick on people who are marginalized. So that definitely includes racial minorities and that's been my experience as well.

His allusions to racial bias in police practices and racial disparities in political influence reflect deep engagement with Black discourse on these issues. Jennifer, a mother from a mid-Atlantic city, said she relied on Black counter-public networks for information about the protests:

> We had a banner down here on where I live on the major street. People out there are protesting. So, you sign your name or make a statement on the banner or whatever. So, me and my daughter did that, but definitely conversations whether it's conversations that were happening in our church family, within the family. Everybody's talking about it. You keep abreast of what's happening on the news. And I know you know there are fake news and how media can betray things or whatever. Keep abreast of everything or what's happening.

Both urban and suburban interviewees across the board expressed awareness of the problem, saw it in racial terms, sometimes put it in historical context, and believed the movement to resist it is righteous. As the exchanges about policing reveal, most Black AVP interviewees perceived racialized violence and misconduct by law enforcement as a threat to the entire racial group. Police brutality, they maintained, is a danger to ordinary Blacks everywhere. Corey Fields and his coauthors (2022, 7) offer the same interpretation of the participants' attitudes in their study. "Hearing these respondents," they conclude, "one gets the impression that the police do not keep people safe. Instead, they in-

duce an overwhelming sense of vulnerability and violability."

Although the respondents largely agreed on this diagnosis of the policing problem in Black neighborhoods, they did not register consensus on the policy remedy. For instance, almost none of the interviewees mentioned abolition or defund the police in their conversations with interviewers. Very few cited any policies at all, except to call for legal accountability for police officers who brutalize civilians. The absence of policy talk in the conversations with Black interviewees is presumably an effect of the heterogeneity of Black leaders' opinions on the issue. The sharp focus on anti-Black police violence at the height of the protests did not translate to agreement among Black politicians or movement leaders on how to redress the problem (Taylor 2020). Black elite opinions were fractured, leaving ordinary Blacks with no clear cues on which specific policies would reduce the threat posed by police and improve public safety for the group.

Opinions about the actual protests and the tactics employed are much more salient in the interviews. Though some interviewees in both groups say they participated in protests where they live or in nearby downtown locations, the suburban respondents report they preferred to discuss the issues with family and friends in lieu of demonstrating. The ones who participated insisted the protests they joined were peaceful, as two suburban interviewees underscored. Sheila, a woman in the Midwest, explained: "Yeah. I participated in a march for Black Lives Matter and we marched around out state house here in [LOCATION]. And it was controlled. The police were, they gave us our space, they were very respectful." Darlene, from the South, was succinct but precise. "I have expressed my views. I have participated in peaceful protests." Perhaps both were signaling respectability by emphasizing the peaceful tenor of the protests they joined.[20]

Some suburban residents said the protests were an invitation to chaos, rioting, and property damage. Urban residents echoed these concerns. This is a striking and unexpected point of consensus among both groups. Consider the respectability anxieties reflected in these comments by Angela, a middle-aged suburban woman on the West Coast: "But wait a minute 'Black Folk' you know what the climate is out there . . . But you're out there taunting the police . . . doing behavior that you should know, if you have the IQ of a four-year-old, you should know that doing those types of things is going to get you into trouble." Eric, a young male from a Midwestern city, cites the potential for property damage. "I'm not surprised when I hear these stories [about police killing unarmed Blacks]. . . . It's not shocking. It's not going to make me want to go out and all Black people be doing like that, I think they use it as an excuse to tear up their own city."

Many suburban interviewees register concerns about violent backlash from police and the criminalization of Black protesters. Some urban respondents seem to harbor similar fears, with a trace of fatalism about police officers' dehumanizing attitudes toward Blacks. A handful of rural responses to the BLM probe reflect the same concerns. But the rural interviewees were far removed from protest activity hot spots, said they did not join any demonstrations, and talked about BLM with family and friends less than their suburban and urban counterparts. The latter two groups tend to have more visceral responses. Consider this reaction from Darnell, a middle-aged urban interviewee from the West Coast: "I feel like it's putting yourself in position to be the next reason for a protest because they killing Black people and minority and Brown people for no reason . . . to me and personally, I feel like it's backwards, they already want to shoot you and kill you, so why go in and aggravate them, and give them a reason to shoot you and kill you. I mean, that's how I see it." Tasha, a female urban respondent living in the Northeast, put similar concerns in less fatal terms: "The police want to paint a picture of disarray. It clearly wasn't." Recalling previous damage to her city in the wake of earlier riots, Yvette, a young sub-

20. Interviewer effects may have biased these responses. The interviewees may have emphasized Black respectability to guard against the risk of activating negative stereotypes about angry or dangerous Black protesters in the minds of White interviewers specifically. A separate study on interviewer effects could help clarify this issue.

urban woman in the Midwest, worried about protesters' safety and police inciting conflict: "We had riots in the 80s and our city never bounced back . . . I hope when they are messing up all these [inaudible], I hope they will clean it up as well because it wasn't nice growing up in a city that had been messed up because of riots . . . I hope the police will stop fighting and things and not letting emotions like overwhelm them."

These warnings about the danger Blacks incur when they protest and the accompanying calls for restraint are a familiar refrain in Black politics. Even in the wake of catastrophic betrayals by government and egregious harm to the group, Black leaders tend to exhort their constituents to bridle their anger.[21] Marshaling multiple streams of evidence, Davin Phoenix (2019) has shown that Blacks are much less likely than Whites to express anger in politics whether in the streets or the voting booth. "Ever fearful of channeling a [B]lack anger that has long been stereotyped as dangerous and uncontrollable, elites offer Black audiences messages intended to placate rather than animate" (Phoenix 2019, 15). The urban and suburban Black AVP interviewees both seem acutely aware of this stereotype threat, though the latter rely more on respectability signals to counter it.[22] Anxiety about pernicious stereotyping likely informs their disapproval and ambivalence about BLM protest tactics. The criminalization of Black protest "send[s] a clear message to Black individuals who are considering joining efforts to advocate for [B]lack lives. . . . You risk being labeled a threat, targeted, monitored, and brought down by state agents" (Phoenix 2019, 17).

The most notable overlap in the BLM opinions of the suburban and urban interviewees is their disillusionment about what the demonstrations would accomplish. The following remark from Alicia, a suburban middle-aged woman in the Midwest who participated in protests, is typical.

I just felt it was us blowing off steam. I don't think that in a greater scheme of things, it really mattered. And I don't think that the powers, that they take Black Lives Matter seriously. I think that it is, and I know this sounds horrible, but I think we are allowed to blow off steam." Steve, a young man from a West Coast city, put it even more baldly. "I don't plan on going and joining any protests because this shit is going to keep happening, like police are going to keep killing minorities and getting away with it, so I mean I'm not going to go out there and give them a reason to shoot me.

These interviewees' brutal assessments resemble the disillusioned liberalism periodically reflected in Black political opinion and famously expressed by twentieth-century Black leaders.[23] W. E. B. DuBois and Martin Luther King Jr., for example, "both moved from relatively optimistic analyses of America's bitter racial conflicts to evaluations . . . more tempered by despair than hope" (Dawson 2001, 274). The AVP respondents' observations reflect similarly dim expectations for democratic responsiveness to BLM demands for racial justice, but also a form of democratic fatigue or what Sally Nuamah (2020) calls collective participatory deficit. This is the deepened mistrust, fatigue, and disillusionment that creep into Blacks' political attitudes when they repeatedly experi-

21. Even when Black anger is unleashed politically, it tends to be apportioned selectively. Traci Burch (2022) finds that narratives about the threat level posed by Black victims of police "officer-involved" deaths can determine whether Blacks mobilize in the wake of these incidents. Her analysis reveals Blacks under age forty are more likely to take political action after cases involving high-visibility, relatively nonthreatening Black victims.

22. Invoking respectability norms to counter racist images is jarringly at odds with a core tenet of the BLM movement (Jefferson 2023; Bunyasi and Watts Smith 2019). In contrast to some earlier Black social movements, BLM rejects Black respectability as a weapon of resistance. It faults Black respectability's preoccupation with individual comportment for contributing to the perpetuation of inequality, deflecting attention from its structural causes, and authorizing punitive social policies to address it.

23. Ernest McGowen (2017) also finds high levels of disillusioned liberalism in Blacks residing in majority White suburbs.

ence nonresponsiveness or half-measures from government. This pronouncement from Michelle, a young urban interviewee in the Southeast, illustrates how hope and engagement can turn to disillusionment and disengagement. "At first, like I want to say, like [year], when I graduated from high school . . . I was very vocal, but as time went by, I just became less vocal because, you know, it's just . . . repetitive, it's like repetitive suicide, you know, what can I do personally to make a difference? As going online, tweeting, or talking about it really isn't helping."

Marcus, a young suburban man, recalled the same trajectory in his appetite for engagement.

Honestly, I felt numb to these issues as I gotten older, because I've gotten used to them. Like I remember, younger as a kid, I would cry out of fear when I hear about incidents like Tamir Rice, and I haven't felt anything this time . . . I feel like it's just a normal thing now. Sometimes, I'd rather not talk about it because I don't feel like anything can change . . . Mostly, I have the right idea. I just don't have that willingness, that fight in me anymore . . . I think it's mostly the exhaustion with it, and I don't feel like there is much hope for a system based on racial inequity, to be transformed in a solvable way.

These expressions of disillusionment are an ominous portent for Black social movements and the struggle for racial egalitarianism in the United States. The interviewees' observations suggest that Black hope in the American democratic experiment is not inexhaustible. Blacks could lose faith in the experiment and the will to pursue political action to perfect it if racial reform and justice remain elusive.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This excavation and analysis of Black AVP interviewees' opinions on BLM, policing, and neighborhood conditions yielded only limited support for the theory of Black political sorting. Black suburban and urban respondents evinced perceptible but minor differences in their appraisals of conditions in their respective neighborhoods, as expected. In discussions of the 2020 BLM protests, Black suburban

interviewees also registered more preoccupation with Black respectability than their urban counterparts. Yet opinion convergence was greater than divergence between the two groups despite the geographic distance separating them. The striking opinion cohesion uncovered in this analysis underscores the theoretical caveat outlined at the beginning of the study: racial hardships burdening Blacks on both sides of the urban-suburban divide also corral and coalesce their views on racialized issues. These racial disadvantages cling to Blacks across geographic boundaries and militate against place-based opinion differentiation in the group.

In contrast, suburbanization historically has lifted Whites from the lowest rungs of the socioeconomic ladder to secure middle-class status. In the mid- and late twentieth century, the move to the suburbs established a buffer between these upwardly mobile Whites and the economic precarity of central city neighborhoods (Jackson 1985). Evidence of this pattern echoes in the AVP interviews, with White suburbanites signaling favorable views of their neighborhood economic conditions. Suburbanization may no longer be the surefire ticket to socioeconomic mobility and security it once was, but it still cashes out more readily for Whites than for Blacks. Late twentieth-century suburbs also created political distance between White suburbanites and their coracial counterparts in cities, usually shifting suburbanites' opinions rightward or toward the middle of the political spectrum (Gainsborough 2001; Kruse 2005).

The recent suburbanizing trend among Blacks has not been nearly as economically transformative or politically differentiating. For many Blacks, a suburban zip code is a hollow prize, especially as extreme poverty has increased outside the urban core in recent decades. The suburbs are not inviolable safe havens that shield Blacks from the indignities and ravages of racial inequality. Suburbanization seems to offer the group flimsy protection at best against these challenges. It simply may produce variation in the same general condition of deprivation that Blacks face across metropolitan areas. Similarly, unless suburbanization can deliver substantial and stable material

improvements that enable Blacks to avert racial hardship, it may lead to only minuscule degrees of differentiation rather than sharp divisions in Black public opinion.

The suburban and urban Black interviewees in this study shared a deep distrust of police and many of the same concerns about excessive violence and scarce economic opportunities in their neighborhoods. Though these patterns seem to undercut expectations for Black political sorting between urban and suburban Blacks, supporting evidence might be found elsewhere. First, this study set an admittedly stiff test for the theory of placed-based political sorting by focusing on several highly racialized issues that typically unify Black opinion. Questions about other topics such as schooling or social welfare policies might uncover geographically sorted attitudinal differences between the two groups (Lewis-McCoy 2014; Posey-Maddox 2014).[24] Second, the AVP oversample of people living in high-poverty U.S. Census tracts helpfully magnifies the challenges faced by Blacks in struggling central city and suburban neighborhoods, reflecting how poverty has spread beyond the core of metropolitan areas. But a nationally representative sample—including more of the middle- and high-income Blacks that have departed or bypassed central cities and flocked to the suburbs in recent decades—also might yield evidence of opinion stratification. In fact, the similarities in views uncovered in this analysis may be largely an artifact of the oversampling of low-income respondents across geographic areas.

Finally, further research to assess the underlying mechanisms of the theory is warranted. This descriptive analysis focused only on expected effects. Data limitations did not allow for a precise inquiry into causes. For instance, the analysis did not directly measure the selection and social processes at the heart of the theory. It also did not include neighborhood-level contextual or compositional data to differentiate between the urban and suburban locations where Black AVP interviewees reside. These additional analyses into the foundations of the theory await.

For now, this study's most sobering evidence of opinion convergence between suburban and urban Black interviewees is their bleak assessment of the prospects for racial justice following the 2020 BLM insurgency. Even as the biggest protest movement in American history gripped the country, the two groups expressed disillusionment in the promises of American liberalism and resignation to Blacks' grim racial plight. Their views contrasted sharply with general perceptions about the significance of the movement, particularly for Whites. Observers widely hailed the multiracial protests as a high watermark for White racial liberalism and antiracism. Some studies lent credence to these pronouncements (Reny and Benjamin 2021). Media outlets hopefully characterized Whites' heightened awareness of anti-Black violence and early support for the BLM protests as a breakthrough in the national reckoning on race. But the Blacks in this study largely viewed the insurgency as a political dead end.

These Black interviewees have been proven prescient and perhaps all too well schooled in American liberalism's failures and betrayals. Liberalism in the United States has faltered repeatedly since its mid-twentieth-century triumphs. This is perhaps why Blacks are extraordinarily pessimistic about its promise of justice, equality, and democratic responsiveness for all. They have learned this lesson through harrowing experience. A long line of research has assayed the limits of Whites' racial liberalism (Clemmons 2022). White support for BLM has cooled. Though some states and municipalities passed police reforms, no national policy sea change to end or curb anti-Black police brutality has materialized (Johnson 2023; Blow 2022). Federal police reform bills have stalled in Congress. The main federal legislation to emerge from the summer-long 2020 protests was the establishment of Juneteenth as a national holiday (Taylor 2022). Although the movement gave rise to a new generation of Black leaders, these politicians cannot count on mobilizing Blacks who may view America's liberal promise as increasingly hollow. This creeping disillusionment may be especially pronounced among Blacks living in distressed city neighborhoods and their coun-

24. I thank an anonymous reviewer for this insight.

terparts in struggling suburbs. There is no guarantee these Blacks will return again and again to the political battleground if they fail to secure remedies for their racial plight or to reap meaningful rewards for their investments in collective action.

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PART III

Classical Interpretive Studies

Discourses of Distrust: How Lack of Trust in the U.S. Health-Care System Shaped COVID-19 Vaccine Hesitancy

AMY CASSELMAN-HONTALAS, DOMINIQUE ADAMS-SANTOS, AND CELESTE WATKINS-HAYES

This article explores the relationships between the American health-care system, trust in institutions, and decision-making processes that have affected COVID-19 vaccine uptake. Findings are based on an analysis of a nationally representative sample of 137 individuals who participated in semi-structured qualitative interviews during the rollout of the first publicly available vaccine in the first quarter of 2021. The vast majority of respondents reported negative experiences with American health care that predated the pandemic, which generated distrust in medical institutions, including hospitals, private health insurance corporations, the pharmaceutical industry, and related government institutions. The article considers the impact of institutional distrust on attitudes about vaccine uptake. Responses fell along a spectrum from vaccine refusal to vaccine acceptance. Sentiment across categories revealed a high degree of hesitancy framed in terms of institutional distrust. The data reveal a complex landscape of beliefs and perceptions, illustrating widespread hesitancy and ambivalence among participants.

Keywords: trust, vaccine, vaccine hesitancy, COVID-19, public health, health care, health insurance, institutions, medical-industrial complex

The COVID-19 pandemic raises serious questions about how a health-care system that has historically left many uninsured and underinsured can manage a public health crisis. Interviews with participants in the American Voices Project (AVP), a nationally representative qualitative interview survey of Americans, revealed persistently high barriers to accessing high-quality affordable health care in the United States. Such barriers have engendered a sense of distrust in the U.S. health-care system and its associated institutions, including hospitals, private health insurance corporations, the pharmaceutical industry, and government institutions charged with regulating and delivering care. COVID-19 vaccination efforts in the

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United States and the responses to those efforts have demonstrated the lethal consequences of institutional distrust at a time when individuals are explicitly asked to place their confidence in public health guidance and medical interventions.

Even though much has been written about the formidable barriers to high-quality affordable health care in the United States, less is known about the relationship between these barriers and the decision-making processes surrounding COVID-19 vaccine uptake. Data from our sample reveal a long history of negative experiences with the American health-care system that predate the onset of the pandemic and are strongly correlated with institutional distrust and widespread skepticism of the COVID-19 vaccine. Such a correlation helps explain the high degree of hesitancy in our data, including among participants who stated that they would likely receive the vaccine. Further, our data show that pre-existing distrust in a wide range of health-care institutions was nearly universal and therefore pervasive across race, gender, class, and political affiliation. Thus, rather than lending evidence to a polarizing discourse that hinges on a pro- and anti-vax binary, the data reveal a complex landscape of beliefs and perceptions, illustrating widespread hesitancy and ambivalence among participants across various dispositions.

This article draws a through line between distrust in American institutions and COVID-19 vaccination beliefs and intentions. We present and discuss our findings in two phases. First, we explore participant interactions with the American health-care system, highlighting the sources and contours of distrust in the medical-industrial complex. The data indicate that negative experiences with American health-care institutions were well entrenched before the pandemic. Thus, we purposefully use the term distrust rather than mistrust because the former indicates a settled belief rather than generalized doubt (Jennings et al. 2021). Second, having mapped the pervasive sense of distrust in the very institutions that play the most critical roles in vaccine development and delivery, we then discuss our participants' decision-making processes as they weighed the risks and benefits of vaccina-

tion. In their interviews, each of the 137 participants in our sample described their feelings about the newly developed COVID-19 vaccine as well as their intentions regarding vaccination. Combining attitudinal and behavioral data led us to develop a vaccine disposition typology onto which each participant was mapped (see table 1). This typology ranges from pro- to anti-COVID-19 vaccine uptake dispositions and features several degrees of hesitancy between the two extremes.

To operationalize vaccine hesitancy for our typology we borrowed from the work of Bipin Adhikari, Phaik Yeong Cheah, and Lorenz von Seidlein (2022, 2), who define vaccine hesitancy as "a state of uncertainty in decision-making due to doubts about the benefits of vaccines, their safety and necessity; and is a transient stage where a candidate may weigh the risks versus benefits of more emotional aspects associated with vaccinations." Unlike other descriptions that portray hesitancy in static terms, this definition captures the processual and transient nature of vaccine decision-making that we observed in participants as they described negotiating a barrage of institutional messaging while feeling heightened social pressure.

By considering respondent attitudes in the context of vaccine intentions, we were able to conduct a nuanced appraisal of decision-making that captured widespread ambivalence that might have otherwise been obscured. In categorizing participants into our vaccination disposition typology, we also tracked the reasons participants gave for their hesitancy. The most frequently cited reasons included a non-specific general lack of trust, feeling that the development of the vaccine was rushed, concern over unforeseen side effects, too little information about the vaccine, and lack of concern about contracting COVID-19. With the exception of being unconcerned about contracting COVID-19, all reflect matters of institutional trust. Further, because many participants discussed multiple reasons, even those who claimed they were not concerned about contracting the virus also cited trust-related reasons (such as "I don't really trust the vaccine and because I don't think I'll get COVID anyway it's not worth the risk"). Thus, we find that in-

Table 1. Vaccination Typology with Definitions and Examples

Disposition	Definition	Sample Quotes from the Data
Pro-vax	Respondent had received the COVID-19 vaccine or planned to and did not express hesitancy	I have already been vaccinated, I had both my shots. I'm excited for it. I plan on getting it for sure. Yes, I'm excited. I think I'm like literally in the last eligibility group with that so I will get it when I can.
Pro-vax hesitant	Respondent leaned toward receiving the COVID-19 vaccine but expressed hesitancy	I'll take it. I'm just not excited about taking a shot that has a lot of things that your body's not supposed to have into it. I'm a little scared to get the vaccination. . . . I'ma take it though I'm just scared about it. I think I'll probably get the shot when it's available for me to get or when I can get it, just because I know it will most likely help me. I'm definitely cautious about it. . . .
Undecided hesitant	Respondent was undecided about receiving the COVID-19 vaccine and expressed hesitancy	My jury is out. . . . I just don't really trust it at this point; I'm not sure whether I would get it. It's tough. Because I'll admit, I'm mixed on the whole the vaccine, . . . part of me is like, trust the system and take it in, and part of me is like, I just don't know. I'm still torn myself. I have on one side both of my parents have successfully gotten both of their doses of the vaccine as health-care workers, and they're doing fine. And then, I know of several people . . . he got his second dose, and got . . . a nerve infection from it.
Anti-vax hesitant	Respondent leaned away from receiving the COVID-19 vaccine and expressed hesitancy	I'm not planning to get it until it's safe and secure. I don't know. I just don't recommend taking it. None of [my family members] are going to get it until there's more data out there to show that it's actually doing something.
Anti-vax	Respondent had not and will not receive the COVID-19 vaccine and did not express hesitancy	No, we are not touching that stuff. No, I will not get the vaccine. I've already heard of too many disasters getting it No, I am not getting the COVID—the COVID vaccine. I don't get the flu shot. I am very concerned about vaccinations in general.

Source: Authors' tabulations.

stitutional trust is salient to understanding COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Our analysis builds on research on trust and vaccines that has explored the dynamics that might have influenced respondents' dispositions during the rollout of the first publicly available COVID-19 vaccine. Trust in individuals and institutions is central to the vaccine decision-making processes. Trust as a social phenomenon can be conceptualized as "a relationship that exists between individuals, as well as between individuals and a system, in which one party accepts a vulnerable position, assuming the best interests and competence of the other, in exchange for a reduction in decision complexity" (Verger and Dubé 2020, 991). This definition demonstrates that trust can be both interpersonal and institutional and typically involves a level of risk which must be negotiated by a trusting party. Interpersonal trust is said to exist between individuals when one or more parties becomes vulnerable by placing their faith in another in order to gain a possible advantage (Spadaro et al. 2020). For our purposes, we might consider a layperson who does not have the medical training needed to empirically evaluate the risks and benefits of a particular vaccine. By placing their trust in a medical professional's endorsement of a vaccine, a layperson benefits from reduced decision complexity but also risks falling victim to bad medical advice.

Institutional trust, defined as "the extent to which individuals accept and perceive institutions as benevolent, competent, reliable and responsible toward citizens," offers similar risks and rewards (Spadaro et al. 2020, 3). The American health-care system, in its capacity to provide lifesaving care, is a powerful locus where one might develop institutional trust. Yet such institutions may also deny or create barriers to access to care, provide care at an exorbitant cost to patients, or provide substandard care, all of which may undermine institutional trust. Therefore, determining the extent to which health-care institutions can be trusted as "benevolent, competent, reliable and responsible" may be fraught as individuals weigh the benefits and risks of their vulnerability to institutional power.

Despite the distinctions between the two forms, institutional trust is frequently enmeshed with interpersonal trust. Because institutions are ultimately composed of individuals, institutional trust is necessarily structured by the trustworthiness of individual actors (Blendon 2006). For example, Robert Blendon and John Benson (2022) cite a study indicating that the United States, when compared with peer nations, ranked near the bottom in trust in health-care institutions, with only 14 percent of Americans surveyed reporting that they trusted hospitals completely. Yet, in the same study, 84 percent of Americans reported that they trust their individual doctors completely. Here, high levels of interpersonal trust are constrained by what is ultimately an institutional project, illustrating the complex dynamics of trust as a multifaceted sociological phenomenon.

We also emphasize a temporal dimension of both interpersonal and institutional trust. In explicating trust within the interpersonal, dyadic context, Dmitry Khodyakov (2007, 126) writes that "the decision to trust another person is made in the present and is affected by the partner's reputation, which represents the past, and by the expectation of possible tangible and/or non-material rewards, which represents the future." Thus we expand our definition of trust to conceptualize it as a process of "constant imaginative anticipation of the reliability of the other party's actions" based on "the reputation of the partner and the actor, . . . the evaluation of current circumstances of action, . . . assumptions about the partner's actions, and . . . the belief in the honesty and morality of the other side" (Khodyakov 2007, 126). Such a conceptualization suggests that past experiences are instrumental in undermining or bolstering trust in both interpersonal and institutional contexts.

Similarly, Khodyakov (2007) distinguishes "thick" and "thin" as two variations of interpersonal trust. Thick interpersonal trust is defined as "the first type of trust people develop in their lives," which is necessary for both "developing an optimistic attitude towards others" and

making social interactions possible (120). By contrast, thin interpersonal trust involves "trusting members of out-groups" and is "riskier" than thick interpersonal trust because it hinges on forming "relationships with people whose real intentions may not be clear" (121). Accordingly, trustworthiness in the absence of previous relationships depends on two factors: "the image of intermediaries that the trustor relies on for obtaining information about trustees . . . and/or the trustworthiness of institutions that back up trustees" (122). To understand this point, one need only think about recommendations sought and given by trustworthy intermediaries for various service providers (legal counsel, mechanics, doctors, and so on). Thin interpersonal trust, then, depends significantly on the reputation of the trustee as well as that of the intermediary of trust (see Zucker 1986).

Beyond the interpersonal domain, scholarly inquiry into institutional trust should benefit contemporary society precisely because we heavily rely on the state and its institutions in our everyday lives. Further, as Geraint Parry (1976) explicates, the institutional trust held by an individual corresponds to the presumed efficacy of state institutions. Like the significance of the parties' reputations in building thin interpersonal trust, institutional trust "depends on [institutions'] perceived legitimacy, technical competence, and ability to perform assigned duties efficiently" (Khodyakov 2007, 123). As Khodyakov (2007, 123) argues, "it is the impersonal nature of institutions that makes creation of institutional trust so difficult, because it is more problematic to trust some abstract principles or anonymous others who do not express any feelings and emotions." One of the central goals of institutional trust, then, is to cultivate "voluntary deference to the decisions made by institutions and increase public compliance with existing [and we might add new] rules and regulations."

Researchers have shown that trust plays a crucial role in gaining public support for vaccines, but no consensus has been reached regarding how trust should be assessed, the specific components of trust that should be considered, and the relationships that warrant

investigation (Jamison, Quinn, and Freimuth 2019; Larson et al. 2014). This lack of consensus is not exclusive to vaccine-related studies but instead mirrors the inherent complexities associated with understanding the concept of trust. Clearly, though, trust in vaccines depends on both confidence in the vaccines themselves as products and trust in the system that is responsible for their production and distribution (De Freitas, Damion, and Han-I 2021; Jamison, Quinn, and Freimuth 2019).

To better understand the relationship between trust and vaccines, scholars have constructed models that capture factors that influence vaccine beliefs and behaviors (see, for example, Wiysonge et al. 2022; Verger and Dubé 2020; Dubé and MacDonald 2016). For example, the 3C model—which identifies three critical factors in vaccine hesitancy—parses vaccine attitudes, intentions, and dispositions into the following categories: complacency, the degree to which the disease is perceived as low-risk or the vaccine is perceived as having low efficacy; convenience, when behavior may be affected by logistical barriers; and confidence, when decision-making is based on perceived efficacy and trustworthiness (see Verger and Dubé 2020; Dubé and MacDonald 2016; MacDonald 2015). The 3C model is sometimes expanded to the 5C model, adding calculation (when decision-making rests on weighing the risks and benefits of a given vaccine) and collective responsibility (when behavior is influenced by one's desire to contribute to the overall health of one's community) as important factors that influence vaccine beliefs and behaviors (Wiysonge et al. 2022; Betsch et al. 2018).

The 5C framework includes factors such as individual beliefs, social dynamics, and institutional constraints, which together demonstrate that vaccine dispositions, including vaccine hesitancy, are "complex and context specific, varying across time [and] place" (World Health Organization quoted in Betsch et al. 2018). In line with Khodyakov's notion of "trust as a process," Ed Pertwee, Clarissa Simas, and Heidi Larson (2022, 458) argue that vaccine hesitancy is "better conceived of as a decision-making process rather than a fixed set of beliefs." An individual's vaccine disposition

may change over time and shift in various contexts, so scholars emphasize that expressing concern about a vaccine is not the same as assuming an anti-vaccination stance (Pertwee, Simas, and Larson 2022; Betsch et al. 2018; Dubé et al. 2013). Moreover, focusing on the processual nature of vaccine dispositions allows researchers to better understand how "cultural, temporal, and spatial" factors influence vaccine hesitancy (MacDonald 2015).

General vaccine-hesitancy literature offers practical tools such as the 3C and 5C models as well as theoretical frameworks that have significantly enhanced our understanding of COVID-19–specific phenomena. Theories of interpersonal trust in vaccine uptake are of particular interest, given that data show that trust between a patient and an individual care provider (such as a personal physician) is highly correlated with COVID-19 vaccine uptake (Karpman et al. 2021). Further, data show that COVID-19 vaccine intentions are affected by institutional trust in American health-care systems where a lack of trust in any or all components of this system can result in hesitancy and diminished compliance with recommended health practices (Blendon and Benson 2022; Bagasra, Doan, and Allen 2021).

DATA AND METHODS

The data for this article are derived from the American Voices Project (AVP), which conducts in-depth interviews to offer a rich and comprehensive landscape of life across the United States. The AVP reflects a nationally representative sample of hundreds of American communities as well as a representative sample within each of the selected sites. The AVP used three-stage cluster sampling in which census tracts were selected by stratified sampling and captured key geographic areas as single-block groups were sampled within tracts to focus on well-defined communities. Tracts and block groups were then selected with a probability proportional to the poverty population to explore the everyday lives of low-income popula-

tions. Additionally, select middle- and high-income populations were sampled for comparison purposes and to capture an overview of American life.

Interviews reveal critical dimensions of everyday life, including aspects of family life, living situations, community, health, emotional well-being, cost of living, and income as well as political perceptions. The AVP includes a database of 1,613 transcribed interviews. The data used in this article stem from a subsample of respondents ($N = 198$) interviewed between January 2021 and March 2021 during the health wave of interviews in which the AVP adjusted its protocol to better capture health-related issues. These health wave months marked a critical moment in which COVID-19 vaccines were becoming available to the American public for the first time.[1]

To best capture participants' decision-making processes, we excluded participants from the health wave interviews ($N = 198$) when we were unable to discern their vaccine dispositions. Although some participants declined to answer questions about their vaccine dispositions, the majority of those excluded were interviewed using a protocol that did not include a specific question about vaccine attitudes or intentions. In some cases, we were able to include participants from this group if other areas of their interviews indicated clear dispositions. A total of sixty-one participants were excluded, leaving a vaccine subsample ($N = 137$) on which our analysis is based. Respondents were assigned pseudonyms and, to protect their identities, inconsequential details from interview excerpts have been omitted or changed.

The vaccine subsample yielded a representative participant pool with diversity across race, gender, income, age, and political affiliations (see table 2). The subsample mirrored critical health-related demographics. For example, respondents reported that they had either received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine or planned to receive it when it became

1. Between December 2020 and March 2021, COVID-19 vaccines were becoming available to health-care workers, first responders, individuals in congregate settings, and the elderly in the United States (Mayo Clinic 2022).

Table 2. Demographics (*N* = 137)

	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Sample
Panel A. Race-Ethnicity		
Non-Hispanic white	79	57.66
Non-Hispanic black	30	21.90
Hispanic or Latinx of any race	12	8.76
Multiracial, Asian, or no data	16	11.68
Panel B. Gender		
Female	80	58.39
Male (or no data)	57	41.61
Panel C. Income category		
Low	66	48.18
Middle	39	28.47
High	15	10.95
No data	17	12.41
Panel D. Age		
Young adult: 18–33	48	35.04
Middle aged: 34–59	57	41.61
Older adult: 60+ (or no data)	32	23.36

Source: Authors' tabulations.

available at rates comparable to the national rate of 47 percent.[2] Likewise, our respondents relied on public health insurance programs at rates on par with national data; 18.25 percent of AVP respondents in our sample were Medicare recipients compared with 18.4 percent of the U.S. population as a whole (see table 3; Keisler-Starkey and Bunch 2021). The only substantive difference between our sample and national statistics was the percentage of respondents who relied on private employer-based health insurance, 29.2 percent relative to 54.3 percent on the national level (U.S. Census Bureau 2021a). Parity in public coverage rates indicate that the discrepancy in private coverage reflects classification rather than demographic differences. For confidentiality reasons, table cells containing fewer than eleven participants were collapsed into the Insured–Other category (see table 3). Doing so obscured subsets of participants whose insurance likely flowed from employer-based coverage. For example, young adults in our sample who stated that they were covered by a parent's health insurance plan were classified as Insured–Other even though such coverage almost always flows from a parent's employer-based private health insurance plan.

Data are drawn from participant interviews that were conducted by a diverse team of advanced degree holders as well as graduate students, college graduates, and undergraduates; all team members were selected through a highly competitive process and received additional intensive training in qualitative methods. Members of the team were also tasked with applying a basic codebook to the interviews using NVivo qualitative coding software. This codebook was generated by AVP leadership to flag broad themes related to health, including participant experiences with the health-care system, perceptions of the COVID-19 pandemic, and attitudes toward the newly developed COVID-19 vaccine.

2. In our sample, 47.45 percent of participants (surveyed between January 6 and March 24, 2021) reported they had received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine or planned to receive their first dose when it became available. In March 2021, the U.S. Census reported that 47 percent of Americans had received at least one dose of the vaccine (U.S. Census Bureau 2021b).

Table 3. Health Insurance Coverage (*N* = 137)

	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Sample
Employer	40	29.20
Medicaid	29	21.17
Medicare	25	18.25
Insured – Other[a]	43	31.39
Uninsured (or no data)		

Source: Authors' tabulations.

[a] Insured – "Other" includes respondents who were insured by an unspecified program, were on a parent's insurance plan, purchased a subsidized private plan through the insurance exchange marketplace, used VA/TRICARE (for veterans and their dependents), were students with university-based insurance, purchased an unsubsidized private plan through the insurance exchange marketplace, were covered by a Medicaid-equivalent program funded through the state, or were covered by private insurance through the Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1985 (COBRA).

We reviewed the transcribed interviews and previously coded data, analyzing the content inductively while developing a unique code-book to identify and categorize emerging themes. In addition to providing insight into how respondents perceived and interacted with American health-care institutions broadly, qualitative coding led us to develop a vaccine typology that categorized participants into one of five vaccine dispositions. We were frequently able to determine a respondent's disposition based on the following interview question: "Some people are excited about the new COVID-19 vaccine, and others not so much. How about for you?" The open-ended nature of this question, crafted to avoid social desirability bias, frequently elicited statements of intent and captured hesitancy when it existed (for example, "I'm not really excited about it. I'll probably get it, but I'm worried about the side effects"). That said, we did not assume that a participant's answer to this question was dispositive. Because many participants discussed COVID-19 when responding to multiple questions, we relied on a holistic evaluation of a participant's entire interview to classify their disposition. To ensure intercoder reliability, we developed a vaccination typology with definitions and examples (see table 1). Although our data are rich and support a nuanced analysis, this article is limited to the extent that it relies on interviews that we did not conduct using an interview protocol that we did not create. As a result, we were unable to tease out additional complexity, clarify ambiguous points, or explore the details of participants' experiences more fully. Future or follow-up research should be conducted to corroborate our findings.

SETTING THE STAGE OF DISTRUST

We can better understand the dynamics that influenced and continue to animate COVID-19 vaccination hesitancy by situating such discourses against the backdrop of individuals' experiences and perceptions of the U.S. health-care system. In this section, we demonstrate how negative experiences with the system generated distrust in the very institutions that individuals were asked to entrust with their lives and the lives of their families.

At the time of their interviews, almost all of our study participants were enrolled in some form of institutional health-care coverage that generally fell into one of three categories: private employer-based coverage or public coverage through either Medicaid or Medicare (see table 3). Despite the diversity of health-care needs, access points, and types of insurance coverage, the vast majority of our participants expressed dissatisfaction with their experiences accessing health care. With the exception of respondents who enjoyed generous coverage through union benefits or who were covered by multiple policies, most individuals expressed frustration with various aspects of the health-care system. Respondents were exasperated by

high co-pays and coinsurance, hidden costs and surprise billing, and lack of coverage for vision and dental care. Further, many were underinsured and found it difficult to pay both monthly premiums and medical bills that were generally not covered due to high deductibles. Many of these frustrations were directed at private insurance companies; however, participants also expressed dissatisfaction with other institutions such as hospitals and pharmaceutical corporations. Respondents also directed their frustrations at the government more broadly, both as a provider of health coverage in the form of Medicare and Medicaid and as the entity responsible for regulating private health insurers and the pharmaceutical industry.

Although most participants were covered by health insurance, many were still forced to forgo, delay, or ration care. Underinsured participants were covered by policies with both high premiums and high deductibles where they made large monthly payments for services that they still could not afford. Jennifer, a young, low-income white woman, said this of her mother:

> She has not been to the doctor in a long time, because insurance is just too crazy. She has health insurance, so it's kind of for emergencies. So, she won't go to the doctor because it's just too expensive. It's just too expensive to go get a physical and do a [wellness] check. . . . But I know my mom was paying like $500 a month. And that was just for emergencies. . . . And it was kind of, it was more than our house payment. So, it's kind of ridiculous.

Similarly, Susan, a low-income black woman in her sixties, explained, "it's like we have insurance, but then I go to a doctor I have to pay a $400 deductible; $400, that's a whole week's pay. So it's hard to stay healthy. So you let a lot of things slide, probably that you shouldn't." Despite paying for services that exceed the cost of a house payment or a week's wages, Jennifer's mother and Susan forwent the services that would help them "stay healthy."

In the face of such challenges, participants made strategic calculations that included rationing care. For example, Jeff, a white man in his fifties, said:

> My disability check does not go very far, and so I have had times that I ran out of [medication] and had to make our rations, make what I had last until payday or until I get the check. With my current [care provider], who also [treats] my [condition], it's $300, but I can't afford $300. So, I had to stop taking that medication. [There's one specialty medication that I need to take or else I'll die]. Everything else is icing on the cake.

Jeff's remarks illustrate how negative experiences navigating health-care institutions, such as the Social Security Disability Insurance system, can generate feelings of distrust as individuals are forced to make difficult and life-compromising decisions about their health and well-being.

Although participants described positive interactions with individual medical professionals such as doctors and nurses, the hospitals and other facilities where they received care were often regarded as prioritizing profits over people. For example, when Tomás, a middle-income Hispanic man in his twenties, went to the emergency room for a serious injury, the institution's priorities felt clear: "I'm bleeding, and they're worried about me filling out some papers. I just took a deep breath, and I'm like, 'Man, they're more worried about money than my health.'" In addition to frustration with bureaucratic protocols, another thought loomed over him: "As I'm walking into the door, honest to God, I'm thinking, 'And I might have to pay this big bill.'"

Echoing Tomás, Bill, a white man in his sixties, clearly indicated his disdain for and distrust in health-care institutions:

> They're all on quotas for how many minutes they're going to spend with a patient. And really, it's the bean counters running the system now; it's really appalling. It seems that the first thing they do is a walletectomy, of course; they want to see your medical insurance card and your charge cards and whatnot. It seems like the system is geared towards extracting the maximum amount of money for

the minimum amount of service, and really efficiently, so I'm not especially pleased with it. It's all about hiding the cost so you don't know how much you're paying or who's paying it. The whole insurance system is really very destructive in that regard: you don't know what things cost, you don't know what you're really going to pay.

Here, Bill frames health-care institutions as being intentionally exploitative ("extracting the maximum amount of money for the minimum amount of service") and opaque ("It's all about hiding the cost"). His comments also indicate that he sees both service institutions and insurance corporations as enmeshed where the provider "hid[es] the cost" as part of an "insurance system that is really very destructive."

Building on his earlier comments, Bill discussed his attitudes toward pharmaceutical companies, whom he viewed as "rip[ping] off" consumers. To illustrate his point, he discussed a lifesaving medication that was affordable until the patent was purchased by a pharmaceutical company: "The company bought the patents on them and jacked up the price that should not have been permitted; those executives should have been marched down to a parking lot and dealt with." This comment exemplifies the distrust in the pharmaceutical industry that punctuates our data, and, when read with his earlier comments, reveals how some respondents regard the American health-care system as an industrial complex in which myriad institutions work together to confuse, exploit, and swindle citizens.

When discussing their general health-care experiences and the COVID-19 pandemic, many individuals directed their frustrations at politicians and the government. The majority of respondents did not reference specific people or point to particular laws when discussing their frustrations but instead expressed a general distrust in politicians and the U.S. government more broadly. As Lisa, a young white woman, noted, "I personally just find it incredibly horrible that we are in the middle of a global pandemic, and there's still people who are—and by people I mean politicians who find it appropriate to say, 'Yeah, well, I mean, health care is a

privilege, not a right,' . . . that's just more of a societal America [that] does an atrocious job with our health care."

Similarly, Barbara, a middle-aged white woman encountering difficulty enrolling in a public health-care program, felt that the government did not care about her or others: "You're on your own, like too bad, even if you are applying for like disability, they don't care, they do not care." Barbara's and Lisa's testimonies illustrate some ways in which participants attribute barriers to accessing health care to the lack of competency ("an atrocious job with our health care") and lack of concern ("they don't care") from the U.S. health-care system and the government more broadly.

Although participant dissatisfaction with health care was persistent and predated COVID-19, the general sense of institutional distrust became increasingly pronounced as respondents began discussing their experiences during the pandemic. A number of participants specifically linked their pre-existing institutional distrust with their assessment of the COVID-19 vaccine. The pharmaceutical companies, in their roles as manufacturers and distributors of the vaccine, and the government, in its roles of overseeing vaccine development and responding to the pandemic more broadly, were the two most frequently cited institutions by participants. For example, when asked about his vaccine intentions, Kyle, a white man in his forties, remarked, "I'm always skeptical of the companies that developed it and what they put out, because they're in the process of trying to make money typically. So, anyone that's doing something with a financial interest I'm like more skeptical of."

Here, Kyle links his pre-existing distrust in corporations ("anyone that's doing something with a financial interest") to his specific distrust in the pharmaceutical companies responsible for producing the COVID-19 vaccine. Like Kyle, George, a white man in his sixties, considered his general distrust in the pharmaceutical industry as he contemplated receiving the COVID-19 vaccine: "Well, I would say in the light of the circumstance I'll take it when I get a chance, but I'm not hugely excited about drug companies. I don't, I don't trust them. I don't trust them, but in light of what's going on, I

don't know what, what is the—what else should we do?"

In his interview, George later assessed the federal government's competence at managing the pandemic: "I mean right now obviously the United States is the worst country in the world when it comes to handling this thing." When we read these comments together, we can see how distrust in one institution (the pharmaceutical industry) can sometimes spill over to lack of trust in related institutions (the U.S. government). Further, George's statements highlight how vaccine dispositions are more nuanced and less predictable than one might assume. Indeed, even though George states a clear intention to receive the vaccine ("I'll take it when I get a chance"), his declaration is couched within comments that express his dissatisfaction, hesitancy, and lack of trust. Ultimately, his decision to be vaccinated does not depend on a positive assessment of the vaccine or the health-care institutions in charge of creating and disseminating it. Instead, it is informed by an overall sense of resignation ("What else should we do?"). Given George's apathy for and distrust in multiple health-care institutions, one could easily imagine a scenario in which he instead chose to refuse the vaccine. His decision-making process illustrates the phenomenon that we discuss in the following section. Like many of his peers in this study, participants who either received or planned to receive the COVID-19 vaccine often expressed hesitancy. Further, the data show that discourse across the hesitant spectrum was remarkably similar.

VACCINE DISCOURSE AND DECISION-MAKING IN THE AGE OF COVID-19

This section builds on the preceding discussion to further explore the impact of existing institutional distrust on COVID-19 dispositions using a novel vaccination typology (see table 1). Based on interview data that revealed their vaccine attitudes and behaviors, we assigned respondents to one of the following categories:

1. Pro-vax: Respondent had received the COVID-19 vaccine or planned to and did not express hesitancy.

2. Pro-vax hesitant: Respondent leaned toward receiving the COVID-19 vaccine but expressed hesitancy.

3. Undecided hesitant: Respondent was undecided about receiving the COVID-19 vaccine and expressed hesitancy.

4. Anti-vax hesitant: Respondent leaned away from receiving the COVID-19 vaccine and expressed hesitancy.

5. Anti-vax: Respondent had not and will not receive the COVID-19 vaccine and did not express hesitancy.

By mapping each participant onto this typology, we find that participant decision-making processes are nuanced and that attitudes overlap even between respondents with oppositional dispositions (see tables 1 and 4). Indeed, individuals of all vaccine dispositions expressed varying degrees of distrust in health-related institutions. First, we begin with a brief discussion of individuals who did not express hesitancy about receiving the vaccine (N = 86). We then contrast these dispositions with a large cohort of respondents (N = 51) who were vaccine hesitant. We end the section by outlining the tipping points that nudge hesitant respondents to adopt a pro-vax stance.

As noted, pro-vax respondents had either received or planned to receive the COVID-19 vaccine and did not express hesitancy. Despite a lack of hesitation, many participants in the pro-vax sample (N = 66) still considered the role of trust when discussing health-care institutions. This frequently came in the form of considering why others might opt out of vaccination. For example, Kayla, a middle-income white woman in her twenties, explained: "I'm excited about it. I'm like, give me a call, I'll take it. I am not going to be someone to refuse this. I trust science, like, yeah, it hasn't been researched that much yet, I don't know, I trust the scientists who are working on it like 100 percent." Here, Kayla acknowledged a lack of information about the vaccine ("it hasn't been researched that much yet"), which could be cause for concern. However, Kayla's personal trust in science as an institution eclipsed this potential risk. Notably, Kayla discussed institu-

Table 4. Vaccination Disposition (*N* = 137)

Vaccine Disposition	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Sample
Panel A. Detailed		
Pro-vax	66	48.18
Pro-vax hesitant	22	16.06
Undecided hesitant	11	8.03
Anti-vax hesitant	18	13.14
Anti-vax	20	14.60
Panel B. Committed versus hesitant		
Pro-vax	66	48.18
Hesitant (all categories)	51	37.23
Anti-vax	20	14.60

Source: Authors' tabulations.
Note: For definitions of vaccine dispositions, see table 1.

tional trust ("I trust science") as well as trust in individuals ("I trust the scientists"). Although she does not mention specific individuals, such as a scientist whom she knows personally, her trust in scientists as individuals evinces the role of trusted intermediaries who facilitate institutional trust.

Unsurprisingly, on the other end of the spectrum, anti-vax individuals expressed starkly different views of the COVID-19 vaccine. Of the five dispositional categories, anti-vax participants (*N* = 20) were the most likely to claim that COVID-19 is fake, overblown, or used to intentionally frighten Americans. Such attitudes rest on a fundamental distrust in the U.S. health-care system, signaling a strong relationship between trust in government institutions and vaccine disposition. For example, Gina, a low-income black woman in her sixties, said:

I don't trust it. They came up with it too quick. . . . We don't even know enough about what COVID is and then you're going to take a vaccine for something you don't even know. They ain't explained it enough to me. First, I didn't believe that it was actually real. Some people died of it. You know that they say people died. I don't trust the COVID vaccine. I don't think they researched it enough. They come up with it too quick.

Gina's response illustrates how a lack of knowledge about the COVID-19 virus and the vaccine is linked to perceived inadequacies ("They came up with it too quick"), communication failures ("They ain't explained it enough to me"), and general untrustworthiness in the U.S. health-care system ("You know that they say people died of it. I don't trust the COVID vaccine").

Finally, although rare in our sample, the racialized nature of anti-vax sentiments among some participants is noteworthy. Unlike demonstrably false conspiracy theories, the history in the United States of state-sponsored and state-sanctioned medical abuse of women, poor people, and people of color is documented (Wilson et al. 2023; Delgado 2020; INCITE! 2016; Washington 2006). Several anti-vax participants linked their historically informed, pre-existing distrust in the U.S. health-care system to their present-day vaccination dispositions. As Lydia, a low-income black woman in her sixties, explained: "Because of my history, African American history. Vaccines in America and just health care, being used as experimental pretty much. I can't think of the word I want to say. But you know what I mean? I think about that, and they are very suspicious. . . . So, because we have a bad history in America, we still have a long way to go. I'm not interested in the vaccine."

Several participants specifically referred to

the Tuskegee Syphilis Study—when the federal government purposely withheld treatment for syphilis to study its progression in a sample of four hundred black men (Emanuel et al. 2008). James, a middle-income, multiracial man in his seventies, said this: "What really got to me though is that the [COVID-19 vaccine] experiment was after the syphilis experiment. So my whole thing is that this is the government. My whole thing is, well, shoot, they did this syphilis [experiment], and it was back again, they did it again to the same people, the group of people in Tuskegee."

Like other respondents, James gave additional reasons for his anti-vax stance, including feeling that the development of the vaccine was rushed and that it would be impossible to anticipate its long-term effects: "Here, they [developed and manufactured the vaccine] in eight damn months, and that bothers me. Not to say it can't be right, but the whole thing is you really don't know what the side effects are. . . . But like I said, they have no idea what the outcome is going to be down the line."

Not only does James attribute his anti-vax disposition to distrust in the U.S. government, he also expresses concern over hasty manufacturing and side effects that might emerge in time. Here, James articulates two of the most common refrains expressed by anti-vax participants and hesitant participants across the typological spectrum: that the vaccine was produced too quickly, and citizens lack the knowledge needed to make informed decisions.

Even though pro-vax and anti-vax respondents are diametrically opposed, both cohorts' decision-making processes hinged on the presence or absence of trust in the U.S. health-care system. Similarly, in the subsample of hesitant respondents ($N = 51$), pro-vax hesitant, undecided hesitant, and anti-vax hesitant individuals share similar trust-related reasons, or core beliefs, for their hesitancy. For these participants, the leading causes of hesitancy were not knowing enough about the vaccine to trust it

and observing the seemingly rushed development of the vaccine.[3] That many COVID-19 vaccine-hesitant participants did not express concern over well-established vaccines (such as for influenza) highlights the value that respondents place on the additional data points that are available for products with established track records.

Hesitant individuals developed several strategies to manage their concerns about the COVID-19 vaccine, the most common being the wait-and-see approach articulated by participants in all three hesitant subgroups. This approach leaves open the possibility of being vaccinated at some future point after one is able to gather additional data about the vaccine's safety and efficacy. Wendy, a low-income black woman in her forties whom we classified as pro-vax hesitant, stated, "I mean, I'm glad we have something that's going to, that's trying to clear this up. I'm just kind of waiting to see the outcome." When the interviewer asked whether she would get the vaccine, she answered, "Debatable. It's in the air. Like I said, I just want to see the outcome."[4]

Similarly, Ken, a white man in his sixties classified as anti-vax hesitant, questioned the efficacy of the vaccine and explained that he and his family would forgo getting the vaccine "until there's more data":

You still have to do the social distancing. You still have to keep wearing the mask. You can still pass it to somebody else. You can actually still get it because at least one person in the news has gotten it after being vaccinated. So, at this point in time, I don't see the pluses of getting it. And my whole family feels the same way. None of us are going to get it until there's more data out there to show that it's actually doing something.

Notably, Wendy and Ken fall on opposite sides of the hesitancy spectrum (classified as pro-vax hesitant and anti-vax hesitant, respectively), yet use the same wait-and-see strategy

3. The COVID-19 vaccine is part of a class of mRNA vaccines that have been the subject of scientific research for three decades (Verbeke et al. 2021).

4. Although these statements seem to position Wendy in the undecided hesitant category, statements made elsewhere in her interview led us to classify her as pro-vax hesitant.

in their vaccine decision-making process. That participants across the hesitancy spectrum frequently navigate uncertainty in similar ways makes clear that vaccine behaviors (that is, uptake and refusal) are mutable and subject to change.

As noted, we conceptualize vaccine hesitancy as a state of uncertainty in which an individual is actively engaged in weighing the risks and benefits of vaccination (Adhikari, Cheah, and Seidlein 2022). Thus, hesitancy is volatile and subject to outside influence. Our analysis reveals a number of factors that can nudge participants toward or against vaccine acceptance, creating pro-vax tipping points among hesitant respondents. As the extant literature would suggest, our data confirm that such tipping points emerge where trusted intermediaries have the opportunity to facilitate institutional trust. For example, Carmen, a Hispanic woman in her thirties, did not plan to receive the COVID-19 vaccine until an outreach worker visited her community to promote vaccination. Although Carmen remained uncommitted at the time of her interview, community outreach in the form of an intermediary shifted her disposition from anti-vax to undecided hesitant. She also indicated that, if the vaccine were easily accessible, she would be even more inclined to receive it. Thus, we should consider how the efficacy of trusted intermediaries is boosted when barriers to entry are lowered. Our data show that local clinics, pharmacies, and community centers acted as tipping point hubs for many respondents who would otherwise be more vaccine averse. Such micro-institutions appear to be effective because they offer easy vaccine access administered by trusted intermediaries (such as a local pharmacist) in familiar settings.

Frequently, individuals who attributed their hesitancy to lack of information about the vaccine noted that they wanted to do their own research before deciding. Although the concept of doing one's own research is often derided by those who assume that the vaccine hesitant will find information from dubious sources, participants often used a variety of credible sources, including seeking out media representing diverse and balanced perspectives and consulting medical professionals to whom they have ac-

cess. As Melissa, a middle-income Asian American woman, noted:

> I'm feeling mostly optimistic about it. And yeah, I mean, at first, I was pessimistic but that was my misinformation, my misunderstanding. And I was until I came across in a news article about an MD PhD in Texas that was developing a low-cost vaccine, that got my attention because I realized that "Oh, wow. Okay, this vaccine is not really the product of operation warp speed as former President Trump tried to claim, or he did claim." This vaccine is seventeen, eighteen years in the making.

Many participants were concerned about the apparent speed at which the COVID-19 vaccine was developed, but Melissa used news media featuring a credentialed expert to educate herself on the development of the vaccine. In doing so, her pessimism shifted toward optimism as she began to lean toward receiving the vaccine.

DISCUSSION

This article demonstrates how negative valuations steeped in past experiences with, and perceptions of, the U.S. health-care system generated distrust in institutions that seek to control public health crises. Regardless of insurance status, the vast majority of participants in this study were dissatisfied with the American health-care system. Because they had experienced this dissatisfaction for much of their lives, their trust in the system was compromised well before COVID-19 reached the United States. In the early days of the pandemic, most individuals watched an already overburdened health-care system strain under the weight of an unanticipated and unprecedented public health crisis. Despite their diverse backgrounds and experiences, as the first wave of COVID-19 vaccines became publicly available, all of our respondents were faced with the same question. Would they place their trust in the U.S. health-care system and its medical interventions to protect themselves and their loved ones from the COVID-19 virus? Here, like virtually all other Americans, our participants engaged their everyday life circumstances, social

networks, past experiences, and available information to decide whether they would opt to receive the vaccine.

During the rollout of the first vaccine, institutional pressure to be vaccinated was high. Although many of our respondents expressed a clear desire to receive the vaccination ($N = 66$) the majority were more reserved, with most expressing hesitancy or outright refusal ($N = 71$). We found that participants' vaccine dispositions resulted from a decision-making process that was social, cultural, and temporal. From a temporal standpoint, respondents drew on their pre-pandemic experiences with the American health-care system to evaluate potential future outcomes. Their dispositions at the time of the interview also reflected an appraisal of cultural messages communicated through media as well as the social influence of people in their immediate and extended social networks.

Even though medical professionals may feel frustrated by anti-vax or vaccine-hesitant attitudes and beliefs, our data underscore the importance of considering how information flows, and scientific knowledge in particular, are experienced by a variety of communities. Although the data are clear that COVID-19 vaccines are safe, effective, and necessary to protect the health of communities, we should be mindful of the context in which vaccine hesitancy arises and acknowledge the pervasiveness of vaccine hesitancy. Whereas a handful of individuals' vaccine dispositions hinged on anecdotal information or dubious sources, these findings did not characterize the majority of participants' core beliefs that led to vaccine hesitancy or refusal. In our review of 137 respondents, we found that vaccine opposition and hesitancy were rarely capricious but rather the outcome of agentic behavior amid various institutional constraints, including lack of institutional trust.

Our research makes both methodological and theoretical contributions to the extant COVID-19 literature. Methodologically, much of what we know about vaccine hesitancy relies on a large body of quantitative and survey data about general vaccine hesitancy as well as COVID-19-vaccine–specific hesitancy. We recognize that these datasets are rich sources of

information but contend that qualitative data allow for more nuanced analyses that better capture decision-making processes. Frequently, quantitative projects rely on binary choices (such as "Have you taken the COVID-19 vaccine?" Yes/No), whereas surveys typically require a respondent to choose from a predetermined list of options (for example, "Which of the following options best describes your attitude toward the vaccine?"). In both cases, a respondent's ability to give a full accounting of their perspective is limited. In contrast, qualitative projects allow respondents to express their experiences on their own terms, facilitating the detection of novel patterns that are otherwise obscured by quantitative methodology. This study moves beyond statistical trends to capture the discrete narratives and personal stories that shape worldviews.

Further, qualitative research on COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy typically relies on small sample sizes that are not generalizable. In contrast, our dataset is large and nationally representative and thus offers thorough insights into the American public's attitudes and perspectives related to the COVID-19 pandemic. As we detail in the data and methods section, respondent demographics in our sample tracked closely with national data. Demographic similarities allow for greater generalizability in service of scaling our research in ways that exceed the scope of most qualitative projects. Having a high-quality, scalable qualitative dataset is especially valuable for inferences to national phenomena. Because participants were interviewed in the months surrounding the rollout of the first publicly available COVID-19 vaccine, their experiences speak to a wide audience because all Americans were undergoing similar processes in which they were evaluating existing information and forming vaccine intentions.

On a theoretical level, our findings further complicate discourses of polarization that place a wedge between pro-vax and anti-vax individuals. Although we were unsurprised that our data revealed a diversity of opinions related to the COVID-19 vaccine, we did not expect to find heightened levels of hesitancy among individuals on both sides of pro- and anti-vax

equation. We found that participants who said that they would likely receive the vaccine expressed trust-related concerns that were remarkably similar to those expressed by respondents who said they would refuse or would likely refuse it. Indeed, pro-vax participants who were not hesitant about being vaccinated themselves validated the trust-related concerns their hesitant counterparts expressed. Hence, despite dominant media discourse that has framed vaccine dispositions as a fiercely pro- and anti-vax dichotomy, we found that most participants across all categories experienced similar decision-making processes. Relatedly, we found that participants in every category engaged in active, agentic decision-making processes rather than passively accepting institutional messaging. Thus, contrary to a simplistic narrative of a deeply divided nation, this study reveals the synergies and convergences in beliefs that point to widespread institutional distrust.

By drawing attention to vaccine hesitancy, we show that people's stances are often more complicated than the pro- and anti-vax dichotomy suggests. The empirical richness of our data helped us explore the reasons, doubts, and fears that undergird these attitudes, offering a nuanced understanding of the factors influencing vaccine decisions. By unpacking and adding complexity to these narratives, we shed light on the salience of trust in the American public's decision-making processes, including the relationship between pervasive barriers to high-quality affordable health care and vaccine hesitancy. Although we abjured making causal claims, our research documents the correlation between pre-existing distrust in American medical institutions and COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy that has both scholarly and real-world applications.

In examining the relationship between institutional trust and COVID-19 vaccine disposition, we were struck by the distribution of participants along demographic lines. We were surprised to find that each dispositional category was quite diverse. Although privacy con-

straints prevent us from disclosing the precise composition of each category within our vaccine typology, we find that all classifications include members of each racial, gender, income, and age demographic. This finding led us to conduct preliminary research on an additional variable—political affiliation—that was not part of our original research design. The scope of our research intentionally focuses on pre-pandemic distrust in health-care institutions rather than political affiliation as a corollary to COVID-19 vaccine disposition. Indeed, we find the former to be undertheorized relative to robust scholarly and media discourse centered on the relationship between political affiliation and vaccine disposition. Research on political affiliation generally concludes a negative correlation between Conservative or Republican identity and COVID-19 vaccine uptake (see, for example, Dolman et al. 2023; Albrecht 2022). Our observations about race, gender, class, and age diversity within vaccine typologies led us to question whether respondent data on political affiliation might differ from extant research that primarily relies on larger quantitative datasets.

A cursory analysis of the political affiliation of the participants in our sample produces findings that one might expect.[5] For example, the majority of those categorized as pro-vax are Democrats. Similarly, Democrats are less likely to be anti-vax than their Republican counterparts. Despite these findings, our data indicate that pre-existing distrust in medical institutions was nearly universal and thus transcends political affiliation. Although we do not refute studies that show that Democrats may be more trusting than Republicans in a variety of settings, our data document a shared experience that, by definition, crosses party lines. We also find it noteworthy that a substantive number of participants did not identify with a major party, signaling another form of ambivalence. Even though we find that the majority of Democrats were typed pro-vax, more than one-third were either vaccine hesitant or anti-vax. In contrast, more than one-third of Republicans

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5. To protect respondent confidentiality, we excluded the number of participants of each political affiliation as it relates to their vaccine disposition. We did not include a table that illustrates our findings for the same reason.

were firmly pro-vax and fewer than one-third established themselves as anti-vax, figures that are respectively higher and lower than one might expect. Further—and perhaps most surprising—we find that anti-vax respondents are balanced across political affiliations. These findings point to the fact that hesitancy is widespread across the political spectrum in ways that may be paradoxical or unexpected. It is possible that this is due to sampling bias or a small sample size relative to most quantitative datasets. Nevertheless, we contend that these findings are intriguing and could prove to be fertile ground for additional research.

These conclusions make novel contributions to the relevant literature in that they demonstrate a through line between areas of study that remain balkanized in contemporary scholarly literature—namely the chronic, well-documented decades-long phenomenon of distrust in the U.S. health-care system and the onset of an unexpected and unprecedented pandemic. Finally, although COVID-19 vaccine literature discusses institutional trust, we find that it fails to adequately consider institutional distrust to be a condition already well entrenched at the onset of the pandemic. As a result, the relationship between the American health-care system, trust in American institutions, and decision-making processes vis-à-vis COVID-19 vaccine uptake remains undertheorized.

As health-care administrators and governmental institutions grapple with vaccine hesitancy, they should consider how their efforts either undermine or build trust. For example, top-down messaging from public health institutions often present complex and sometimes contradictory information that may confuse and overwhelm their audience and further undermine trust. When this happens, it is all too easy to link overwhelming feelings of confusion to extant feelings of distrust in the health-care system. If we accept the premise that trust in novel solutions is paramount to addressing public health crises, our data indicate that state actors and institutions must operate on a variety of levels to rebuild trust in a system that has failed and continues to fail the majority of Americans. This includes reconciling past med-ical injustices, removing barriers to accessing quality care, and restructuring institutions to make health care more affordable. Further, because many of our respondents described being influenced by social networks rather than institutional messaging, efforts toward rebuilding institutional trust must be prioritized.

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Can't Buy Me Health-Care Access: Qualitative Experiences of U.S.-Born Latinx Adults' Health Insurance Coverage and Health-Care Use Post ACA

JOSEFINA FLORES MORALES

Latinx persons have lower levels of health insurance coverage than other racial and ethnic groups even after passage of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA). Using 182 interviews from the American Voices Project, this study examines how U.S.-born Latinx adults experience health-care coverage and health-care use. Interview data demonstrate that health-care access is insufficient to ensure full health-care use. Health-care use costs are so high that they are insurmountable for Latinx Americans. Wealth and liquid assets constrain and are constrained by health-care use. Family members become a safety net. This study can inform policies and programs aiming to improve equity in Latinx individuals' health-care access by centering the importance of reducing economic costs of health-care use.

Keywords: health care, Latinx, adults, insurance, inequality

U.S.-born Latinx adults are twice as likely to be uninsured than their U.S. born non-Latinx White and Asian counterparts (Latino Data Hub 2024). Despite passage of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA), which expanded Medicaid eligibility and reduced income-based disparities in health insurance coverage, Latinx persons continue to be under-insured, less stably insured, and less likely to have seen the doctor in the past year than other racial and ethnic groups (Alcala et al. 2017; Mahajan et al. 2021; Sohn 2017). These disparities exist nationwide despite state variation in the implementation of the ACA. Latinx adults continue to experience systematic barriers that hinder their enrollment in health insurance

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programs and use of formal health-care institutions (Hernandez-Viver 2020). These disparities also exist in other domains. For instance, scholars have documented disparities in unmet dental health-care needs among Latinx persons (Scott and Simile 2005), but a majority of research in this area has focused on Latinx children (Assari and Hani 2018; Flores and Tomany-Korman 2008; Lewis, Robertson, and Phelps 2005; Flores and Lin 2013). Several explanations for the Latinx health insurance and use gaps have been proposed, such as immigration-related barriers (documentation status, linguistic barriers, and so on), employment, trust in medical systems, discrimination, administrative burdens, and high costs. However, although many studies have rightly focused on the health insurance and use experiences of Latinx immigrants, few have focused on a socioeconomically diverse sample of U.S.-born Latinx individuals.

Compared with Latinx immigrants, U.S.-born Latinx persons have different resources available to them to navigate the health-care landscape. U.S.-born Latinx individuals are birthright citizens, which grants them the ability to travel with more ease in the United States and internationally. They also have more education than first-generation immigrants and may access financial capital and credit cards with more ease than undocumented Latinx immigrants. Despite their privileges, U.S.-born Latinx adults remain underinsured relative to other racial and ethnic groups.

In this article, I examine how U.S.-born Latinx adults experience access to health insurance and health-care use by asking what their barriers to accessing health care are and how individuals tend to their health when they are underinsured or uninsured. Drawing on 182 interviews with U.S.-born Latinx individuals (ages eighteen through sixty-four), I find that access to "good health insurance" is not enough to ensure full use of health care.[1] This is because, even with good insurance, health-care use comes with costs so high that they are insurmountable for even middle-class and higher-income U.S.-born Latinx Americans, a population with low levels of wealth. The high costs of health care limit health-care use for U.S.-born Latinx adults across the socioeconomic spectrum, leading to devastating consequences for well-being among the most economically precarious. Family becomes a social safety net for unexpected medical costs, especially in families with mixed health insurance statuses,[2] which had negative implications for family assets. The story of U.S.-born Latinx Americans' health care shows that individuals get caught up in a vicious cycle of limited economic resources and limited health-care use and they reproduce one another: limited economic resources lead to underuse of health care; when catastrophic health events occur, Latinx economic resources are further threatened. The findings of this study shed further light on how, so long as health-care costs remain high and Latinx adults continue to be economically disadvantaged, U.S.-born Latinx persons will continue to be less able to access health care than more economically advantaged groups.

BACKGROUND

Research indicates that Latinx adults have lower rates of enrollment in health insurance and health-care use than most other racial and ethnic groups due to their reluctance to enroll in health insurance programs because of mistrust, racism, and discrimination; service unavailability and institutional constraints; and economic hardship and inability to afford formal health care.

1. All interviewee names are pseudonyms.

2. I use the term mixed-insurance families to describe the distinct constellations of insurance statuses in families. I borrow from the concept of mixed-status families in the immigration literature (Fix and Zimmerman 2001), which describes families in which family members have different citizenship or documentation statuses. In a parallel way, families have variations of insurance status constellations. Variation may stem from insurance status (whether a person has health insurance), type of insurance (public versus private), and insurance stability (whether a person is stably insured over time). Less insured family members rely on others in their family networks during health-care emergencies. Some of these health shocks threaten the economic and financial security of Latinx individuals in the United States.

Reluctance to Enrolling in Health Insurance Programs

Reluctance to enrolling in health insurance programs may drive lower health insurance coverage rates and lower levels of health-care use among Latinx persons. Within this population, lack of a lawful documentation status (being undocumented) may lead to a reluctance to seek formal health care due to deportation fears, which dissuade persons from seeking and using public services even when they are eligible for them (Perreira, Yoshikawa, and Oberlander 2018). Undocumented immigrants are five times more likely than naturalized citizens to be uninsured (Sanchez et al. 2017). Undocumented immigrants often fear disclosing their documentation status to medical providers, and this issue is more pronounced in states with restrictive immigration policies (Marrow and Joseph 2015; Van Natta 2023). Mixed-status families, in which some members are documented and others are not, also see rippling effects of fear of interacting with formal health-care institutions even if intended patients are Medicaid-eligible U.S. citizens (Castañeda and Melo 2014; Enriquez 2015). Mistrust in health-care institutions and misinformation about eligibility for health insurance programs also decrease enrollment in health insurance among the Latinx population (Vargas 2022). In addition, Helen Marrow and Tiffany Joseph (2015) document that financial constraints, language barriers, and bureaucratic requirements make it difficult for undocumented immigrants to enroll in health insurance.

After the rollout of Medicaid expansions via the Affordable Care Act, researchers focused on information gaps and barriers to enrollment among Latinx individuals. Veronica Terriquez and Joseph (2016) find that young Latinx adults are less likely to have health insurance via public programs, highlighting gaps in information. Franciso Pedraza, Vanessa Cruz Nichols, and Alana LeBrón (2017) used the 2015 Latino National Health and Immigration Survey to examine the extent to which the politics of immigration deter individuals from visiting health-care providers. They find that the Medicaid expansion did not eliminate health-care inequities within the Latinx population. Robert Vargas (2022) examines underenrollment in health in-surance among low-income Latinx individuals in Chicago post-ACA using longitudinal ethnography and finds that some Latinx individuals were reluctant to enroll in health insurance programs due to previous interactions with other institutions, such as prisons. Some experienced negative interactions obtaining information about the ACA that led them to delay enrollment. Further, Vargas (2022) argues that disproportionate criminalization of people of color can hinder them from obtaining high quality employment with good health insurance coverage. Latinx individuals in Vargas's (2022) study also experienced discrimination and mistreatment in formal health-care settings.

Institutional and Context Constraints

Enrolling in health insurance programs and accessing health-care institutions are overlapping but distinct experiences. Having health insurance does not always lead to accessing health care. Even among those covered by health insurance, perceptions about the medical system (such as medical mistrust, fear of expensive co-pays) and structural constraints (economic insecurity, lack of accessible neighborhood medical centers) hinder individuals from visiting a doctor (Perreira, Allen, and Oberlander 2021). Neighborhoods in which Latinx communities and other people of color live may have fewer health-care providers. For instance, Jenny Guadamuz and her colleagues (2021) find that Black and Latinx neighborhoods in the most populated U.S. cities have fewer pharmacies. Variation in outreach services may also affect an individual's knowledge about programs for which they are eligible. State policy contexts determine eligibility for public health insurance programs. As of February 2024, forty-one states (including Washington, D.C.) have adopted the Medicaid expansion and ten have not (Kaiser Family Foundation 2024). The current study focuses on interviews with U.S.-born Latinx across the nation, spanning the spectrum state health-care policies.

Latinx Economic Resources and Inability to Afford Health Care

To understand barriers to health-care use in the United States, it is important to understand

the high costs of health care. Relative to other high-income countries, the United States spends about twice as much on health care, costs that are mainly driven by administrative costs and pharmaceuticals (Papanicolas, Worskie, and Jha 2018). The costs of health care have rapidly risen in recent decades. After the Affordable Care Act was passed, high deductible health plans became more common. These plans vary in nature but may include patient deductibles in the thousands of dollars (Wharam, Ross-Degnan, and Rosenthal 2013). Further, out-of-pocket costs are not always clearly disclosed to patients (Ubel, Abernethy, and Zafar 2013), offering greater reason for mistrust, particularly among low-income Latinx patients.

The economic costs of health care remain an important concern for many Americans (Wiltshire et al. 2020), but Latinx individuals have fewer economic resources to cope with those costs compared to several other racial and ethnic groups in the United States. The wealth disadvantages among Latinx adults persist across generations. Due to lower rates of intergenerational wealth transfers between parents and children, the starting points for wealth accumulation during adulthood disadvantage racialized Latinx groups such as Mexican Americans (Salgado and Ortiz 2020; Valdez et al. 2019). Discrimination is another factor influencing racial and ethnic differences in wealth building (Akresh 2011). For instance, racial and ethnic minorities' access to safe wealth-building mechanisms such as access to equitable sources of credit are not usually available in low-income neighborhoods that are majority people of color or ethnic enclaves (Oliver and Shapiro 2013; Pattillo 2010). U.S.-born Latinx individuals are part of a diverse ethnic group that generally have low health insurance rates and low levels of economic resources that could be impactful during a health emergency such as substantial assets, savings, and other forms of wealth (Keister, Vallejo, and Borellli 2015; Salgado and Ortiz 2020; Valdez et al. 2019; Vargas 2022). Even among educated and middle-class Latinx adults, economic resources may remain precarious (Vallejo 2012).

Latinx and Black individuals in the United States are more likely to forgo or delay care due to financial costs than White and Asian individuals (Mahajan et al. 2021). Lacking health insurance may lead to substantial out-of-pocket costs if one seeks care. Lack of health insurance contributes to economic precarity among Latinx communities (Vargas 2022). Further, persons with little to no discretionary income have difficulty meeting the costs of care (Rabin et al. 2020). Individuals with medical debt are more likely to delay care, avoid formal health-care institutions altogether (Hamel et al. 2016), and forgo dental care (Kalousova and Burgard 2013).

Health-Care Strategies Among Latinx Adults in the United States

When individuals experience numerous barriers to health care, they use alternate strategies to address their health. People "insure" themselves and use their social networks to do so. For instance, Andrea Cervantes Gómez and Cecilia Menjívar (2020) find that Latinx immigrants create economic networks of care that include selling medicine from abroad and charging undocumented immigrants for rides to the hospital. These authors also find that some community members took advantage of the systemic barriers that made it difficult for undocumented immigrants, especially undocumented indigenous immigrants in Kansas, to access health care. In addition, Cervantes Gómez and Menjívar (2020) document reliance on homemade medicine, foreign medical treatment, and other forms of self-healing. However, some of these options may be expensive if ethnic ties take advantage of the high need and low health-care access of Latinx persons. Some seek care in different countries. Danielle Raudenbush (2021) examines the binational health-care strategies of Mexican immigrants in San Diego, California, and finds that Mexican immigrants combined U.S.-based health care with health care they received in Mexico. The two sources of care complemented rather than replaced one another. Immigrants obtain specific types of care in Mexico: pharmaceuticals, specialist care, and health care for children (Raudenbush 2021; Vargas Bustamante 2020). These binational health-care possibilities require financial resources to travel, legal documentation to easily travel binationally,

and proximity to the southern border. It is possible that U.S.-born Latinx adults may have cultural norms and health-care repertoires that they learned from family and community ethnic ties.

Relative to Latinx immigrants, U.S.-born Latinx adults have different resources available to them to navigate the health-care landscape. They have U.S. citizenship, which grants them the ability to travel internationally, and they can access financial capital and credit cards with more ease than undocumented Latinx immigrants. Previous studies highlight barriers to enrollment among Latinx persons in Chicago during the rollout of the ACA (Vargas 2022) and informal health-care strategies used by Latinx immigrants in California (Raudenbush 2021) and Kansas (Cervantes Gómez and Menjívar 2020), but research is limited on how U.S.-born Latinx adults navigate being uninsured or underinsured and how they manage to take care of their health years after the ACA's implementation. This study leverages a unique source of national-level data to shed light on how a socioeconomically diverse sample of U.S.-born Latinx adults navigate health care.

THIS STUDY

This study relies on qualitative data from the American Voices Project, the first qualitative census of its kind. I analyzed 182 interview transcripts with Latinx U.S.-born adults between eighteen and sixty-four years old. My study builds on the important qualitative work of Vargas (2022), Cervantes Gómez and Menjívar (2020), and Raudenbush (2021). These scholars have examined Latinx adults' health-care strategies when individuals are uninsured or underinsured. The first study, by Vargas (2022), focuses on the rollout of the Affordable Care Act and barriers to and mechanisms facilitating enrollment among low-income Latinx adults in urban Chicago. The other two studies document how Latinx immigrants in Kansas and Southern California access formal and informal health care in circumstances of limited access or medical mistrust respectively. Although the strength of these studies lies in the detailed ethnographic accounts of discrimination, where people get information, and how they rely on and sometimes exploit ethnic ties, the

studies are limited in the extent to which they can generalize results across contexts, and are limited by their focus on relatively disadvantaged Latinx populations. Middle-class and more educated U.S.-born Latinx adults are infrequently included in previous qualitative studies of health-care access. I build on the insights of previous research by using a large cross-context sample of interviews collected years after the ACA rollout and by focusing on U.S.-born Latinx adults across socioeconomic strata. I find two major patterns of health-care experiences. Group 1 includes individuals with stable health insurance coverage. Within group 1 are the few persons who have hit the health insurance lottery, so to speak. However, even good health insurance is not enough to ensure full use of health care. Group 2 includes individuals who have experienced unstable health insurance, who are uninsured, or who are in a mixed insurance status family.

METHODS

This study uses interview data from the American Voices Project (AVP), a national qualitative census. The specific interview questions I focus on are as follows: "Tell me what it's been like trying to get the health care you need. What about for your immediate family? A. Have you ever had to forgo getting the health care you need? What about anyone in your immediate family? B. Have you ever used alternative forms of medicine? (such as indigenous, non-Western, or informal forms of care)? What about anyone in your immediate family?"

Studies about Latinx health care informed my initial coding strategy. For example, based on studies by Raudenbush (2021) as well as Cervantes Gómez and Menjívar (2020), my initial coding book included a code related to using remedies outside the formal health-care system. In addition, the AVP pilot data informed my hypotheses regarding the health-care strategies of Latinx adults. The AVP's pilot study, for which I was a graduate fellow, provided rich information about the health-care strategies of Latinx persons in southern California. Themes from the pilot data included transnational care strategies, unstable health insurance, and mixed insurance status families. I included these themes in my initial codebook.

My analysis relied on 182 AVP interviews with U.S.-born Latinx adults and used an abductive analysis approach. This approach combines deductive and inductive coding by integrating themes found in research and in the AVP pilot data while remaining flexible to novel themes emerging from the data (Tavory and Timmermans 2014). After the first round of coding of interview transcripts, I updated the codebook with new, emerging themes: medical debt or cost concerns, economic insecurity due to medical issues or that affected care seeking, family support during health-care emergencies or health shocks, and unmet dental care needs.

RESULTS

Table 1 includes a summary of the population-weighted demographic characteristics of the U.S.-born Latinx adults included in this analysis. About 20 percent of the sample had a college degree. About 65 percent had worked in the last month. About 38 percent were married, and more than 50 percent were women. I organized my findings to showcase two main health-care experiences (groups 1 and 2) that emerged from the data. Group 1 includes people who have good, streamlined health insurance or who did not report lapses in health insurance coverage. One hundred and twenty-three interviewees are in this group (67 percent). Of those, fifty-two had the good insurance, usually via a private employer, a state job, or the military. Others had stable health insurance from public programs. Some insured respondents in group 1 reported experiencing bureaucratic barriers, long wait times for appointments, and economic burdens when accessing health care. However, group 1 distinctively had relatively stable access to health insurance. Group 2 respondents reported being uninsured, having unstable insurance or a lapse in health insurance coverage at some point, or had immediate family members who were uninsured. These are part of what I call mixed insurance status families, borrowing from the immigration literature's concept of mixed immigration status families (Fix and Zimmerman 2001). A total of fifty-four interviewees are in group 2 (30.22 percent). Within group 2, variation is significant. A handful of respondents reported having been disconnected from health insurance for most of their lives. Health insurance status for five respondents was unknown from the interview transcripts. In the next section, I describe each group in more detail, highlighting interviews that were emblematic of the themes in each group.

Group 1: Stable Health Insurance

Group 1 described their health insurance coverage and health-care use as streamlined, stable, and relatively good. Some reported a seamless health-care access experience. Others, however, reported that despite their insurance, health-care use remained costly despite being insured.

The Good Insurance

Miguel reported paying several hundreds of dollars a month for a health-care premium. During his interview, he lived in a state that had not expanded Medicaid and described his health-care plan as really good. Although he and his wife were separated, his wife remained on his health insurance plan. Miguel explained that his wife did not want to divorce because she had good insurance. This strategy of spousal insurance being a deterrent of divorce has been documented in quantitative research (Sohn 2015, 2020). Miguel described doctor bills as routine: "Big expense, big expense is the mortgage on the house, but other than that, no, I don't think I've had, just regular doctor bills that we pay, but that's not a great big expense." He also mentioned that his job provided comprehensive benefits, including dental insurance, health insurance, vision and eyewear coverage, and retirement benefits: "I have insurance through . . . which is a very good insurance, all the nurses compliment me [for] my insurance." A good job with benefits and stability were a prerequisite for the best type of health insurance. Miguel's case shows that secure financial resources facilitate access to health care, as indicated by being able to afford a mortgage and having stable employment with generous benefits. Miguel's story reflects a story of middle-class America. However, Miguel's experience was an outlier. His comment about the relative affordability of health care in relation to other expenses highlights the positive consequences of stable economic

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Latinx and U.S.-Born Sample, American Voices Project

Variable	Variable Groups	Percent
Sociodemographic characteristics		
Age	18–24	13.57
	25–34	38.49
	35–44	22.81
	45–54	9.99
	55–64	15.14
Education	less than high school	13.56
	high school	18.59
	some college	47.16
	bachelor's degree	20.20
Worked in last month		64.74
Marital status	married	37.90
	cohabitating	13.98
	single	32.50
	other	15.62
Gender	woman	56.14
Region	Midwest	16.76
	West	40.04
	South	35.77
Health-Care group		
Group 1	good or stable insurance	67.03
Group 2	unstable or uninsured	30.22

Source: Author's tabulation.
Note: Descriptive statistics represent population-weighted percentages for the U.S.-born Latinx sample between the ages of eighteen and sixty-four in the AVP dataset.

resources. Similarly, Lucy lived in a Medicaid expansion state at the time of the interview, saying, "We're pretty lucky. I work for a big corporation. I have fairly good health-care coverage. I've also invested in a [health savings account (HSA)] for many years, so we have a pretty substantial sum of money just sitting in an HSA, so that if we were to have something catastrophic happen, we would be able to cover a lot of our out-of-pocket minimums and things like that." Lucy's husband is covered by her insurance, which covers vision and dental insurance. She described the health savings account as a cushion in the event of a larger health shock. If they were to have medical expenses, they would not have to solely rely on personal savings or family resources. Married couples in which one partner's health insurance coverage is solid via employment have an advantage and a pathway to comprehensive benefits. Like Miguel, Lucy reported secure employment that offered generous benefits. Sadly, their health-care experiences were outliers.

Costly Health Insurance and Strategies to Mitigate Cost

Unlike the few respondents who reported having a relatively streamlined health-care experience, others who had stable health insurance reported economic worries related to health-care use. Diana, a full-time worker and student, described co-pays as an economic burden. She

was covered by a state health insurance program and explained that her "health insurance sometimes [is] just so expensive and there's always co-payments. I'm always having to go to a new doctor. And so, in my blood, supposedly, I have a rheumatoid problem, but they don't know which one or they've done the tests, and nothing has popped up. . . . So, it makes me not wanna go to the doctor." Diana also had chronic health issues that led to more co-pays whenever she visited the doctor. She had received mental health services in the past, but due to the high cost per therapy session and her reality of living paycheck to paycheck, she stopped the therapy. Health insurance coverage, for some, is not equivalent to health-care use per se. As Diana's responses make clear, costs influence people's decisions to forgo preventive or urgent care even when they have access to stable health insurance.

Indeed, hospitalizations and unexpected medical needs may lead to economic insecurity due to job and income loss among those with health insurance. For example, Michael, a resident of a Medicaid nonexpansion state, shared his family's experience. They are stably insured and benefit from good insurance. He described access to medications as no big deal. When his father became ill, however, their family struggled to pay the mortgage. Michael explained that his mother took up more hours at work and that other extended family members supported them financially during that time. A health shock can negatively affect family and household socioeconomic status because it can mean the loss of someone's entire income contributions if that person is unable to work for some time. Health emergencies thus negatively affect family socioeconomic status both directly via health-care costs as well as indirectly via affecting individuals' source of income. If families are unprepared for such a shock to income, they may struggle financially. Although Michael's father was the one who had the medical issues and loss of income, the economic impact was felt by the family and thus garnered a familial response.

Some respondents were drawn to specific occupations because of their health-care benefits. For example, a respondent in a Medicaid expansion state mentioned he had recently ob-

tained a job as a driver because of the good health insurance it provides. He described shifts in his coverage: "Well, when I first started out, I had HMO [health maintenance organization]. My company paid 100 percent, I didn't have to pay anything to them, and it covered 100 percent, I didn't have a co-pay." However, at the time of the interview he paid $100 a week for his insurance and reported substantial costs associated with health insurance for himself and his partner. His conversation with the interviewer is telling:

INTERVIEWER: Okay. What about medical costs, so that can include co-pays, prescriptions, health insurance premiums, those sorts of things?

INTERVIEWEE: That is actually more than our food budget.

INTERVIEWER: And how much on that do you spend per month?

INTERVIEWEE: We've probably spent, how much on medical with your insurance?

INTERVIEWEE 2 (interviewer's partner): $617 and that's pretty much it.

This respondent also reported they had to "dip into savings" to pay for hospital bills. Costs and economic burdens associated with health care were salient among persons who had a stable source of health insurance. Within group 1 respondents with stable health insurance, some had lucked out on good insurance, but many had trouble affording co-pays, health-care costs, or coping with health shocks in their families. Whereas respondents such as Miguel said that medical costs were a minor expense, others such as Diana considered avoiding health care because of the high costs. Despite having relatively stable access to health insurance coverage, health emergencies, health-care use, and regular costs of health care created economic barriers due to limited wealth, assets, and liquid cash to address health needs.

Economic barriers further delimited dental care use. For example, one respondent enrolled in a public health insurance program said,

I mean, it would be great to see a dentist. I probably haven't seen a dentist in like ten years, maybe like seven years actually, but it's

not something that is affordable to do. I could probably research and see if [provider] covers any or, like recommends any dentist offices but it's something that is not like an urgent issue, because I don't have any pain in my mouth. . . . So, I just think it would be great to get my teeth cleaned, but yeah, I don't really have $100 to spend on that.

Preventive dental needs were seen as an extra cost that, in limited economic circumstances, were beyond reach. However, some respondents mentioned they had urgent dental needs that affected their daily lives. In one woman's case, she mentioned that dental care is not included in her health insurance plan: "Well, I have a tooth that I need help with. So, I forgo it, but that's because the dentist is not covered in my health plan." The interviewer followed up to get more information.

INTERVIEWER: Is that like a really big problem for you or does it not bother you too much?
INTERVIEWEE: I just don't chew with that side of the mouth.
INTERVIEWER: How long has the tooth been bothering you?
INTERVIEWEE: Let's see, 2018.
INTERVIEWER: Okay, so it's been a couple years now?
INTERVIEWEE: Yeah.
INTERVIEWER: You're not willing to pay out of pocket to get it fixed?
INTERVIEWEE: Well, if we get some more Coronavirus aid, that's the first thing, I'm going to do. I already thought about it.

This woman related her suffering in detail and provided an example of a health need that she still ignores because she does not have the economic resources. Lacking dental insurance causes direct harm and suffering to low-income persons. These dental care experiences are similar to those captured in research on dental care disparities among Latinx children (Assari and Hani 2018; Flores and Tomany-Korman 2008; Lewis, Robertson, and Phelps 2005; Flores and Lin 2013), but most research on this area has overlooked the qualitative experiences and suffering caused by the lack of dental health insurance. Stable health insurance did not protect respondents from harms caused by unmet dental care needs.

Group 2: Uninsured, Unstably Insured, and Mixed Insurance Status Families

Individuals in group 2 described their health-care use as a costly, economically burdensome affair that was a source of financial stress. Some took on substantial debt, had overdue hospital bills, and had paid medical costs with credit cards they were still paying off. Members of this group had direct experience being uninsured themselves or reported a close family member's experience being uninsured or having long lapses of being uninsured in the past and having directly been affected by this lack of insurance. I call these families mixed health insurance families, borrowing the term from the literature on immigrant families (Fix and Zimmerman 2001).

Mixed Insurance Status Families

Martin, a veteran, had health insurance benefits because of his military service. He was directly affected by a family member's lack of health insurance. His parent, who had recently passed away, had not had health insurance and had had to sell their belongings and accept donations to afford $600 treatments. Martin was still paying some of these medical expenses as credit card debt. He explained, "We were paying out of pocket. . . . It was a little difficult. We sold a couple of things, and I stopped going out as much, of course. . . . So I stopped hanging out with friends . . . and eventually, it got too much for us to handle. People were reaching out to us and giving us money, donated money." Despite having good insurance, the reality of family support networks means that the burden of lacking health insurance may come from elsewhere. Families in which some members have health insurance and others do not can cause economic stress and threaten economic security in the short and long term. Experiences of being in mixed insurance families were common in group 2 members. Martin's economic situation was affected by his family members' lack of health insurance. This pattern of family being a medical safety net was common.

Although some respondents in mixed insur-

ance families struggled to meet health-care bills, others described medical debt as a contested, negotiable cost that takes work and navigation to resolve. The Ramirez couple were insured at the time of their interview. One of them had private and the other public health insurance. Their child has a disability. This family had experienced lapses in health insurance coverage in the past, which is a pattern disproportionately affecting Latinx and Black adults (Sohn 2017). The Ramirez couple have had to advocate for health-care benefits for their child: "Just getting [child's] [state health insurance program] back and to get them to do it retroactive, which that's the only way to get . . . would be to get his money back, took about six months of fighting and calling every week and getting an answering machine, going down there, waiting hours and getting no answers at all." They had an outstanding hospital bill in the thousands and hoped that their health insurance would cover that retroactively. In another case of a respondent enrolled in a public health insurance program, Joana asked her doctor to change her medication given the high cost: "There are two medications that the copay was like $60. I told the doctor, 'Please switch the medication. I can't afford the copay.'" Joana and the Ramirez family showcase how Latinx patients advocate for themselves to attempt to protect their economic positions or to avoid economic precarity. Navigating the high costs of health-care use was a theme for both groups of respondents, but respondents in group 2 were uninsured, had unstable health insurance, or supported uninsured family members, making their encounters with high health-care costs more catastrophic. Some respondents took action to attempt to mitigate the effects of the high cost of health-care use.

Gloria was uninsured, unemployed, and had chronic conditions. She mentioned that residents in the area where she lived who were uninsured went to a local tax-funded hospital, but this avenue of seeking medical care required more time and involved substantial waiting periods. Gloria was in a mixed insurance status family: some were covered by Medicaid, but others were uninsured. Her younger children were on Medicaid, and the older ones were uninsured. Gloria explained that if they needed

medical attention, they would go to the hospital and get a bill. She said, "I don't pay it. I don't pay it. If I'm sick right now, I don't have Medicaid. I don't have none of that, so if I'm sick, I go to the hospital. Let them put it on my credit. I'm not going to pay it anyway. They ain't going to make you pay it, anyway." Although many respondents related avoiding the hospital and preventive health-care because of the high cost, Gloria's perspective reflects a challenge to the assumption that she needs to cover the high costs of health care.

Uninsured, Unstably Insured, or Underinsured

Whether an individual was uninsured, unstably insured, or underinsured was at times a result of oscillating eligibility for health-care programs and job or employment transitions. Economic worries and concerns about health-care use were common among uninsured, unstably insured, and underinsured respondents. As a result of these economic worries, people tended to avoid health-care institutions until necessary.

Ana, a photographer, and her family were uninsured at the time of their interview. They lived in a state that had not expanded Medicaid. She reported having money problems and avoided seeing the doctor. She mentioned traveling to Mexico was a more affordable potential strategy to see the doctor. The interviewer asked Ana, "Can you tell me about any needs you feel are not being addressed in [your] health care?" Ana responded, "Well, I mean, it's not like we don't wanna get checked when we're sick or anything, you know, there's no money. It's very costly." Economic insecurity and having little extra money and savings for health care led respondents like Ana to avoid it altogether. The last time she received regular preventive care was when she had health insurance during her pregnancy. Research documents the gendered ways in which women enter health care through their reproductive health-care access (Van Natta 2023), but this source of health care is temporary. Costs of health-care use among economically precarious U.S.-born Latinx adults block their access to regular as well as stable preventive visits to the doctor.

Many respondents avoided formal health-care institutions because of the perceived and actual high costs and instead looked for over-the-counter medication to address their health issues. Joseph, a young college student who took a break from his studies and began working, lived in a Medicaid expansion state. He described his experience during a health-care emergency:

> Well, actually, the thing was when I went to the hospital, I didn't have insurance at all. We didn't wanna take me to the hospital because I couldn't. . . . There's no way. We knew we would have a really big bill. It took me . . . I only took it for about a week, and after a week I just . . . there's just no way I could hold it no more. I was cramped on my bed, and I just couldn't move from there. And so, they just moved me.

Joseph did not apply for health insurance until after a major health event occurred. His family accrued medical bills and his parents dipped into their limited savings to cover them. Further, during a lapse in health insurance coverage, he skipped medication for a chronic condition for several months. Even among those eligible to enroll in public health insurance programs in expansion states, some people waited until the last minute or until matters worsened and pain or discomfort became unbearable before going to the doctor if they thought it would be costly. Others obtained cheaper medication to ease the pain. For example, Alex, a single mother with a disability living in a state that had not expanded Medicaid, spent some time uninsured and would purchase over-the counter medication to deal with back pain. The family received disability benefits at the time of the interview but had to fiercely advocate for themselves to get those benefits. In fact, they had to get a lawyer to get disability benefits and Medicaid. Before having Medicaid, they would "always take over the counter pills. . . . But it wouldn't help." Sometimes physical tasks like showering were difficult to do on their own. With benefits, they have a provider, but without them, Alex's mother would help. Relying on family for care and financial support was common, especially

among respondents with multiple chronic conditions or health emergencies. Some in group 2 experienced extreme economic scarcity so much that at times the doctor was avoided until completely necessary. Over the counter medications seemed like a cost-effective solution to address at times serious health-care needs.

Being underinsured, that is, having health insurance coverage but underusing it because of high costs or gaps in some types of coverage, such as mental or dental health, can hinder access to needed treatment. One respondent living in a nonexpansion state worked in the service industry and were insured through their employer but had been uninsured. They reported that they had not been to a doctor in months because they worried about co-pays. This respondent was underinsured and the inability to afford co-pays also meant her partner's insurance covered her mental health medication. The respondent explained:

> But I was able to get by with [partner's] help because he would cover my part of the bill and I would just focus on getting money . . . to pay for anything, just pay for food, pay for medication. Because like I have depression [and] anxiety. I need medication or I will be a very unpleasant person to be around. Like me right now, me is good right now. Me without medication right now, not a good person. . . . So, I guess just health in general, is just a whole landmine of horrors, isn't it?

Mental health concerns were common among respondents in this study. This respondent's partner was able to cover the cost of her medications. Across interviews, those without health insurance and those who were underinsured had less access to affordable therapy and to continuous mental health medication. For example, Jocelyn did not finish college, worked at a small business, was uninsured, and lived in a state that had not expanded Medicaid. She reported getting a hospital bill. She had also considered transnational care to get health care. In her case, the lack of health insurance led to limited mental health support. Jocelyn described the following struggle: "I think definitely [I] would like to seek out some kind of mental health with the health services. But I

don't have insurance. I can't afford insurance. I can't even afford insurance when things are good." Jocelyn's experiences showcase the mental health consequences of being uninsured and unable to afford health insurance. The perception that health insurance was costly was common across interviews, but the experiences of Latinx adults in states that had not expanded Medicaid particularly emphasized the unaffordability of health insurance. Further, these cases also highlight how respondents with and without health insurance struggled to get mental health services given their high cost.

Like individuals in group 1, a few respondents in group 2 encountered issues accessing dental care. For instance, despite being a college graduate and employed, Nancy was uninsured at the time of her interview. She had been enrolled in her mother's health insurance plan and then in a public health insurance program. However, her income later disqualified her from that program, and she became uninsured. She said, "I hate going to the dentist because I'm just like, you're going to find something wrong, I'm going to end up paying you thousands of dollars." Some unmet needs were as basic as a dental cleaning. Economic worries about high health-care use related to general health care, mental health services, and dental care costs resonated across the experiences of U.S.-born Latinx adults with different education levels, employment statuses, and income brackets. Although a relative minority of respondents mentioned mental health and dental care services, it is important to note that interviews probed for health care broadly.

DISCUSSION

Latinx individuals are one of the least insured (Mahajan et al. 2021) and most economically disadvantaged ethnic groups in the United States (Kochhar, Fry, and Taylor 2011). Relative to their foreign-born counterparts, U.S.-born Latinx adults tend to have more resources at their disposal to engage with the formal U.S. health-care system. However, I argue that the high costs of health care combined with lower levels of wealth make health-care use unaffordable even for U.S.-born Latinx adults. Using 182 interviews, I demonstrate that health insurance coverage is not enough to ensure U.S.-born Latinx persons' full use of health care. Health-care use costs are so high, they are insurmountable for a population with limited wealth. The vicious cycle of limited economic resources constraining health-care use threatens family-level economic resources. U.S.-born Latinx persons, regardless of health insurance coverage, face barriers to full health-care participation and financial well-being. Health policies and programs need to take the socioeconomic calculus of U.S.-born Latinx patients seriously.

The study of U.S.-born Latinx adults' health insurance coverage and health-care use would benefit from attention by scholars of economic stratification, financial security, and family sociology. Although some respondents advocated for themselves when they encountered medical debt and hospital bills, many underinsured Latinx persons took on the neoliberal personal responsibility of paying for health care by relying on savings to pay medical bills for themselves or their families. Furthermore, family ties were a medical safety net. To better understand the long-term socioeconomic ramifications of being uninsured or underinsured in the Latinx community, researchers need to take seriously the expectations and realities of familial care in health emergencies.

This study showcases the pernicious nature of precarious health insurance coverage. Quantitative survey data and analyses focusing on binary measures of health insurance coverage (such as being insured or uninsured) overlook the fact that some insured Latinx adults remain underinsured and continue to budget their health-care use in ways that are unhealthy and risky. This finding has implications for how to better measure health insurance coverage in survey data. Precarious and unaffordable health care may lead to seeking health care elsewhere. As Raudenbush (2021) documents, binational health-care strategies are part of Latinx adults' repertoires that enable them to have agency over health-care decisions. One potential reason that U.S.-born Latinx persons use the formal health-care system less is that they rely on alternate forms of care and knowledge. For example, a minority of interviewees mentioned relying on home remedies and physicians abroad.

Many respondents reported feeling well and not engaging in preventive health care because they did not feel ill. Avoidance and minimization of preventive health-care needs may be relatively harmless in the short term but may lead to negative health outcomes in the long run. Future researchers may wish to dig deeper into narratives of well-being that may be a way to cope with limited resources or stem from a working-class upbringing. Some of these cognitive schemas may stem from growing up in families that were relatively disconnected from health-care systems. Indeed, Latinx children, whether U.S. or foreign born, remain less likely to have seen the doctor in the past year and less likely to be insured than non-Latinx White children (Ortega et al. 2017). Further, this cognitive process may be a way to cope with a medical system that is expensive and overwhelming (Eggerth et al. 2019).

Unmet dental needs were another theme in the interview data that showcased Latinx suffering. Research indicates that having health insurance increases the odds of having access to dental care (Akinkugbe et al. 2020). In this study, dental care needs were mentioned by persons with and without health insurance coverage. Research on Latinx dental unmet needs has largely focused on disparities among Latinx children (Assari and Hani 2018; Flores and Tomany-Korman 2008; Lewis, Robertson, and Phelps 2005; Flores and Lin 2013). Children of color with health insurance experience longer intervals between dental visits than insured White children (Pourat and Finocchio 2010). These disparities may be magnified among Latinx immigrant adults (Quandt et al. 2007). However, research is limited on U.S.-born Latinx adult experiences with dental care, with a few exceptions (Scott and Simile 2005; Akinkugbe et al. 2020). Aderonke Akinkugbe and her colleagues (2020) find no difference in the prevalence of having a dental visit in the past year between U.S-born and foreign-born Latinx adults. Barriers to dental care included cost, fear of needles, and access to dental providers (Akinkugbe et al. 2020). However, most studies on Latinx dental needs have been quantitative. What people do in response to unmet dental care needs and lack of dental insurance is an overlooked area of research in sociology

and may provide a window into the long-term consequences of being chronically disconnected from comprehensive health insurance.

One theme in the interviews that emerged but was beyond the scope of this study was medical mistrust related to pain medication. Several respondents wanted to protect themselves from the consequences of the opioid crisis that they have seen in their communities and in the news. This is an important nexus for future research. Qualitative research on the perceptions of the opioid crisis among the Latinx community is limited, with the exception of Jennifer Unger, Gregory Molina, and Melvin Baron's (2020) study, which qualitatively examined perceptions of pain medication in a Latinx sample in southern California. Future researchers may wish to further use qualitative interviews to investigate medical mistrust and pain medications among the Latinx community.

This study focused on the experiences of U.S.-born Latinx adults. This is a diverse ethnic group that generally has low health insurance rates and few economic resources (Keister, Vallejo, and Borellli 2015; Salgado and Ortiz 2020; Valdez et al. 2019; Vargas 2022). Even among middle-class Latinx adults, economic resources may remain precarious (Vallejo 2012). The findings presented in this study shed further light on how, as long as health-care costs remain high and Latinx adults continue to be economically disadvantaged, U.S.-born Latinx individuals will continue to be less able to access health care than more economically advantaged populations. This process is akin to buying opportunity in education (Grusky, Hall, and Markus 2019), which shows that more privileged families are able to maneuver economic resources to better place their children in advantaged economic circumstances. They can buy access to better schools, higher-income neighborhoods, and mentoring services. The situation is similar in health care.

The findings in this study resonate with findings from other studies in this issue. For example, Theresa Rocha Beardall, Collin Mueller, and Tony Cheng (2024, this issue) focus on administrative burdens in communities of color. Some of these burdens were present among Latinx respondents in my study. My

findings show that individuals are not passive actors when they navigate health-care bureaucracies. At times, they exert their agency to contest medical debt. This issue also addresses gendered care work. Priya Fielding-Singh and her colleagues (2024, this issue) show how socioeconomic status shaped how mothers coped with the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to classed parenting approaches. Although my analysis does not focus on gender, many respondents in the analysis were mothers and experienced gendered expectations of care work. Some respondents mentioned how their husbands preferred they care for children and how some decided not to work since childcare became too expensive for them. Some of these fluctuating positions, from employed to unemployed, shifted family income and often program eligibility for Medicaid. In the study by Amy Casselman-Hontalas, Dominque Adams-Santos, and Celeste Watkins-Hayes (2024, this issue) on institutional distrust, the authors showcase how distrust of health care as an institution is aggravated when there is a public health crisis. In the interviews I analyzed, a minority U.S.-born Latinx respondents offered critiques of U.S. health care as an institution caring about profit over people. Further, some did not trust prescribed pain medication for fear of addiction and perceived that doctors overprescribed pain medications.

This study has limitations. First, the interview data lack detail about lapses in health insurance. Although some respondents reported how long they had been without health insurance, many did not. Future researchers may wish to further examine the experiences of U.S.-born Latinx adults and how much time they spend uninsured in young and middle adulthood. Second, health insurance status and health shocks unfold over time. Some families in group 1 may experience health shocks that eventually place them in group 2. Qualitative longitudinal studies are needed to better understand life course health-care experiences, especially as people age and develop chronic conditions and functional limitations. Third, relying on qualitative data from interviews without long-term relationships with respondents and without long-term ethnographic observation is problematic. By design, trust be-tween respondents and interviewers may be limited. One interview per person may not be enough to ascertain deeper experiences related to discrimination, for example. Thus this analysis is not designed to disprove or contest existing accounts or theories about health-care inequities among Latinx persons. Instead, I aim to provide in-depth insights on the U.S.-born Latinx individuals' experiences with health insurance coverage and formal health-care use.

Despite its limitations, this study offers multifold contributions to the extant literature. First, my national analysis of Latinx health care is based on a sample that is more heterogeneous in terms of socioeconomic status, location, and age than participant samples covered by previous qualitative researchers focusing on Latinx' health care. Second, this study may propel novel avenues of future research. Future researchers may wish to explore within-group heterogeneity given previous work showing that Mexican and Central American persons experience steeper health-care barriers than other Latinx ethnic groups (Alcala et al. 2017). Future qualitative work may also focus on gender differences in health-care access and use. Some interviews in this study showed gendered burdens in who navigates children's health insurance bureaucracies. This is consistent with research on gendered health strategies in families suggesting that women with children often take the role of family health manager (Calarco and Anderson 2021). Third, my results can inform health policy.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The findings in this study are relevant for policymakers and health practitioners. First, Medicaid state expansions are a clear policy lever that can propel people into health insurance coverage. Second, policymakers might consider creating programs that help low-income adults with medical debt forgiveness. Policymakers and health organizations may create programs that help patients navigate bureaucracies and help patients advocate for their care and benefits. For example, efforts to have families enrolled in the same programs and providers would decrease the bureaucracies that families need to navigate when partners and children are covered by different health insur-

ance programs. In addition, although co-pays, premiums, or deductibles may seem like small amounts to pay to some, they are not negligible for individuals in economically precarious situations who do not have the extra disposable cash assumed by co-pays. Health programs that help cover co-pays among those who are in economically precarious situations would decrease some of the economic burdens that Latinx respondents in this study described. Some have advocated for more local approaches to health care. For instance, Vargas (2016) calls for on the ground interventions to increase trust among uninsured Latinx persons. This type of trust may be important for information dissemination. In conclusion, any policy response to health insurance and health-care use disparities among the Latinx community needs to meet U.S.-born Latinx individuals where they are.

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Motivated by Money? Class, Gender, Race, and Workers' Accounts of Platform-Based Gig Work Participation

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This article examines how workers describe their motivations for participation in the platform-based gig economy, particularly as rideshare and delivery drivers. I investigate how these accounts vary by socioeconomic class, gender, and race. Based on interviews conducted as part of the American Voices Project, I find that workers' accounts differ based on income and gender. Higher earners tend to downplay financial needs and describe platform work as a path to explore their larger community, whereas lower earners focus on financial needs and benefits. Additionally, among lower earners, explanations differed by gender. Interestingly, I did not find any differences based on race. I conclude by investigating why workers from different social groups might offer varying accounts.

Since its emergence in the wake of the Great Recession, the gig economy has increasingly served an important role within the larger economic structure (Vallas and Schor 2020). Proponents of the gig economy touted its flexibility and autonomy, allowing workers to become their own boss while earning money on their schedule. A 2021 Pew Research Center survey shows that nearly one in six Americans have earned money using an online gig platform.[1] Women and people of color were more likely than men and White workers, respectively, to have earned money as platform workers, and lower-income adults were more likely than

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1. The Pew study asks respondents whether they have earned money by "driving for a ride-hailing app; shopping for or delivering groceries or household items; performing household tasks like cleaning someone's home or assembling furniture, or running errands like picking up dry cleaning; making deliveries from a restaurant or store for a delivery app; using a personal vehicle to deliver packages to others via a mobile app or website such as Amazon Flex; or doing something else along these lines." (Anderson et al. 2021, 3)

middle- and upper-income adults to participate in the gig economy (Anderson et al. 2021). Notably, more than half of those who have earned money from a gig platform claim that this work is essential or necessary for meeting their basic financial needs (Anderson et al. 2021).

Despite initial claims that the gig economy would empower everyday workers, socioeconomic class (class), gender, and race inequalities have been imprinted on this new form of economic organization (Ravenelle 2019; Schor 2014, 2017). Women and people of color are not only more likely to work in the gig economy than men and White workers, but also more likely to report feeling unsafe, experience rude clients, and be subjected to unwanted sexual advances when completing gig work (Anderson et al., 2021). Platform workers with lower incomes report more dissatisfaction with their work experiences, confront more precarity, and may be experiencing a "crowding out" effect as more middle-income workers perform gig jobs to supplement their income (Schor 2017; Schor et al. 2020). These issues indicate that the gig economy is not as inclusive and empowering as initially thought. Given the inequality some workers may experience while performing gig work, I ask how platform workers explain their motivations for participating in the gig economy. Although money and flexibility are viewed as the primary motivators for platform work participation (Bajwa et al. 2018; Cameron 2020; Schor and Vallas 2021), I aim to interrogate how these explanations may differ by class, gender, and race. Additionally, I examine potential reasons why such accounts may vary by social group.

To examine how workers describe their reasons for participating in the platform-based gig economy, I draw upon interviews from a nationally representative sample of communities across the United States. The American Voices Project (AVP) is the first nationally representative open qualitative data set in the United States. Thus the AVP dataset is a novel tool to engage in policy research and understand social and economic behavior, including workers' explanations of job selection and workforce participation. Additionally, although I cannot generalize to all gig workers, by using a nationally representative sample, I can build on re-search that has investigated platform workers using local and city-based samples. In this study, I focus on the largest and most prominent sector of platform workers, namely delivery and rideshare drivers who use apps such as Uber, Lyft, Doordash, Instacart, and Postmates (Anderson et al. 2021; Schor et al. 2020; Schor 2021). Understanding why many people seek out app-based driver jobs can shed light on the precarious state of the U.S. economy, given that these jobs require minimal qualifications to enter and are often associated with a negative reputation and stigma (Ravenelle 2019).

I find that social background, namely, class and gender, shape workers' accounts of platform work participation. Specifically, respondents with household incomes of more than $48,000 a year were more likely to frame their motivations for platform work participation in ways that suggested platform work was exciting and something to do to explore the larger community rather than solely focusing on financial needs. Those with household incomes of $48,000 or less were more likely to discuss the financial benefits of platform work. Additionally, among those with household incomes of $48,000 or less, women were more likely to highlight the benefits of platform work. In contrast, the men were more likely to discuss platform work as a temporary endeavor. However, workers' accounts did not differ by race. I evaluate potential reasons why racial differences did not emerge in the discussion.

BACKGROUND
In the following section, I provide a brief background of the gig economy, noting the benefits platform jobs promise, before highlighting some of their shortcomings. I then describe how platform jobs are similar to entry-level service work, as this comparison is important in understanding motivations for participating in the gig economy.

Inequality and the Gig Economy
The modern gig economy emerged after the Great Recession. Companies such as Uber (founded 2009) and Airbnb (founded 2008) emerged as a way that workers, especially recent college graduates, could counter widespread underemployment and find ways to

make money outside the traditional economy (Ravenelle 2019; Schor 2017; Vallas and Schor 2020). More than a decade later, the gig economy continues to thrive as people continue to seek out opportunities within this relatively new sector of the labor market.

Companies such as Uber, Lyft, and Instacart have promoted themselves as options that provide workers flexibility and autonomy alongside the opportunity to make considerable supplemental income. For example, Doordash's website informs potential workers that they are in control: "Your time. Your goals. You're the boss." Proponents of the platform-based gig economy argue that the available jobs can help reduce labor-market inequalities (Sundararajan 2016). Platform work has a low barrier to entry, is easily accessible, and reduces occupational segregation by education, increasing the chances that people from different classes will do the same type of work. Additionally, platform work allows people with low-income jobs to earn additional income.

However, critics note the lack of control that platform workers have as independent contractors (which denies them safety and health protections and a minimum wage), companies' failure to combat discrimination, exploitative techniques to increase worker usage, impersonality and high surveillance derived from algorithms, and reduced compensation (Cameron 2019; Glavin, Bierman, and Schieman 2021; Ravenelle 2019; Schor et al. 2020; Tan et al. 2021; Vallas and Schor 2020; van Doorn 2017). The platform-based gig economy also recreates existing labor-market inequalities. For example, Juliet Schor (2021) writes at length about the racial and ethnic discrimination that platform users and workers experience. A study of Uber drivers finds that women earn 7 percent less than men (Cook et al. 2021).

In another study, noting ongoing race, gender, and class inequalities, Niels van Doorn (2017) argues that platform work should be viewed similarly to the temporary staffing industry. Van Doorn asserts that platform companies take advantage of their workers by maintaining a high level of control over them and designating them as contractors rather than as employees, which would require employee benefits and insurance, and downplays the extent of control that platform companies hold over their workers. Consequently, the gig economy exacerbates the vulnerability of contingent workers in the low-income service industry. The viewpoint van Doorn presents is valuable because it highlights the resemblance between platform-based gig work and entry-level service work.

Despite the criticisms surrounding gig platforms, many workers are attracted to the opportunity to make money and the promise of a flexible schedule (Bajwa et al. 2018; Cameron 2020; Schor and Vallas 2021). For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, some Americans turned to platform work to respond to a loss of earnings (Fee, Kaiser, and Wardrip 2024, this issue). Indeed, many view the relatively low barrier for entry into platform jobs as an advantage when considering ways to make supplemental income or cover expenses during periods of unemployment. Researchers have noted that workers' participation motives can be understood as a combination of necessity and opportunity—or push and pull factors. Push factors include unemployment and underemployment; pull factors include flexibility, the opportunity to earn money, interest in interacting with customers, and entrepreneurship (Bajwa et al. 2018). However, beyond push and pull factors, class, gender, and race also need to be considered when examining workers' accounts for platform work participation.

Platform-Based Gig Work and Entry-Level Service Work

When exploring how people discuss platform work participation, it is crucial to consider their previous experiences with entry-level service jobs and how their social class has shaped their perceptions. Although transformed by technology, many platform jobs resemble entry-level service jobs, such as client transportation, food delivery, repair work, and babysitting (Rosenblat 2018; Schor 2020; van Doorn 2017). By examining how both men and women have approached entry-level service jobs in the traditional economy, we can gain insight into potential motivators for engaging in platform work.

Gender has long been a factor in service work. Working-class men have associated work

with power, control, and a way to provide for their families (Choi 2018; MacLeod 1987; Nixon 2006, 2009; Willis 1981). Thus men often avoid precarious service work that does not guarantee stable earnings to support their families. (Choi 2018; Nixon 2006). Further, working-class men tend to view interactive service work—which emphasizes emotional labor (managing one's feelings and expressions as a job requirement) and deference to the client or customer—as feminine (Choi 2018; Henson and Rogers 2001; Hochschild 1983). Instead of interactive service work, working-class men tend to dominate jobs offering hands-on work and control over their working conditions, such as automotive body repair, transportation, and construction (Nixon 2009).

When men do find themselves working in jobs they view as feminine, they may work to distance themselves from femininity by emphasizing the technical aspects of the work or create backstories to explain why they accepted the position. They may also highlight the importance of having a job while downplaying gender differences associated with the work or resist calls to perform deference and emotional labor (Cross and Bagilhole 2002; Henson and Rogers 2001; Seeley 2018; Wingfield 2010b). Such strategies allow men to maintain a masculine ideal while at work. Because platform workers are often expected to prioritize the needs of their customers, some men may create backstories to justify their engagement with platform work and use other tactics to distance themselves from customer service aspects of the job. Moreover, some men may find the financial uncertainty associated with platform work unappealing.

In contrast to the image of them as middle-class homemakers, working-class women have a long history of working to help meet household financial needs. Unlike working-class men who sought control over their labor, working-class women often worked under the direct supervision of others (Rollins 1985; Glenn 1992). Historically, this work frequently occurred in the homes of middle- and upper-class women and in offices, shops, small businesses, and factories (Glenn 1992; Rollins 1985; Romero 2002). In addition to being more likely to be closely supervised at work, women are more likely than men to work in positions requiring people skills and customer interaction (Hall 1993; Nixon 2009).

Moreover, for many women, work has been carried out in relation to their caretaking responsibilities (Fielding-Singh et al. 2024, this issue; Milkman et al. 2021). As a result, many women weigh their household needs when determining work arrangements (Damaske 2011). One study found that mothers' socioeconomic and employment statuses influenced how they navigated household and work demands during the COVID-19 pandemic (Fielding-Singh et al. 2024). With the possibility of having more control over their work schedule and tasks, women may find the prospect of platform jobs appealing.

Race has played a significant role in shaping entry-level service work in the United States. Native Americans, Black Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinos have historically been marked as exploitable sources of labor (Espiritu 2008). These groups have historically faced discrimination that has limited their employment opportunities to service positions, often serving White Americans. For example, Black men have worked service jobs such as sleeping car porters, coachmen, servers, and cooks (Trotter 2019; Tye 2004). Michael Park (2013) points out that Asian American men were locked into feminized service jobs such as cooks, servers, and laundry workers. Women of color have had to work service jobs to contribute financially to households as men of color have faced difficulties in the labor market. In fact, married women of color have been more likely to work than married White women (Padavic and Reskin 2002). Historically, women of color worked as domestics for White families, including Black women in the South, Asian women in California and Hawaii, and Mexican women in the Southwest (Glenn 1992).

Today, workers of color report lower job quality in the service sector than their White counterparts. The reported gaps are primarily the result of unstable and unpredictable work schedules that contribute to economic insecurity (Storer, Schneider, and Harknett 2020). Given the history of discrimination in the labor market and the financial hardships associated with unpredictable work schedules, one would

expect the gig economy, which promotes entrepreneurship and flexible work schedules, to offer workers of color a potential pathway to circumvent discrimination and financial uncertainty.

It is impossible to understand the gig economy separately from the traditional labor market (Schor 2017; Schor et al. 2020). Despite claims of flexibility and autonomy, I argue that platform work mirrors entry-level service work. As a result, men and women view platform jobs similarly to how they have viewed traditional entry-level service work. However, platform work offers some differences from the traditional market that make it seem attractive to higher-income workers, appealing to women, and worth considering for men in the short term. In the discussion, I hypothesize why race should also be considered for understanding platform work participation and why I do not observe racial differences in the current study. Because class and gender matter for service work participation, they also influence how workers talk about involvement in the platform-based gig economy.

METHODS

The data for this project come from interviews conducted as part of the American Voices Project. The AVP is a large-scale public-use data set containing 2,700 interviews (at the time of data analysis, only 1,613 interviews were available for study). The data set is based on a nationally representative sample of communities across the United States with members of households age eighteen and older. The AVP sampling took place in three stages—at the census tract level, the census block group level (to understand neighborhood-level experiences), and the address-based level, where addresses likely to be low income were oversampled. Interviews were conducted between 2019 and 2021 and lasted about two hours.[2]

During initial data analysis, I worked with a research team to locate the analytic sample. We used the NVivo query function to discover our sample, resulting in 953 cases out of 1,613 respondents. These 953 cases included examples whereby respondents mentioned terms such as gig, freelance, app, and delivery, or explicitly mentioned platforms like Postmates and GrubHub. We then coded the 953 cases to identify rideshare and delivery workers, removing cases that did not expressly mention working for the service (such as "Yesterday, I ordered lunch from Uber Eats"). Eliminating these cases narrowed our sample to forty-eight.

As shown in table 1, the sample includes twenty-seven women, fourteen White respondents, and thirty-eight individuals with a reported annual household income of $48,000 a year or less (see table 1; due to privacy concerns, cell counts smaller than eleven are not published). The AVP dataset categorized annual household income into the following seven groups: less than $12,000; $12,001–24,000; $24,001–36,000; $36,001–48,000; $48,001–72,000; $72,001–120,000; and over $120,000. During the inductive coding process, I found that people with household incomes of $48,001 or more shared different reasons for engaging in platform work compared to those with household incomes of $48,000 or less. Therefore, I treated $48,000 as the income threshold. In the discussion, I explain why these two groups of platform workers may offer different accounts of their gig work motivations.

Although I cannot generalize to all gig workers, I focus on rideshare and delivery drivers for three primary reasons. First, doing so allows me to examine the gig economy's largest and most visible segment of platform workers (Anderson et al. 2021; Schor et al. 2020; Schor 2021). Thus, although this analysis permitted an examination of a large segment of workers, the findings do not reflect the experiences of all gig workers, such as Airbnb hosts, care workers, freelancers, and microtask workers. Second, rideshare and delivery drivers complete their work in public and interact with clients, as opposed to platform workers who may work from home (such as microtask workers). Finally, the type of platform workers studied here perform jobs that some view as entry level and a "last resort" (Ravenelle 2019, 161) because they have a low barrier for entry and do not require assets such as residential space for rent (like Airbnb) or a specialized skill set (such as those offered

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2. For more information on the American Voices Project, please see the introduction to this issue.

Table 1. Sample Characteristics

	Total	Percent
Gender of respondent (*n* = 48)		
Women	27	56
Household income (*n* = 48)		
$48,000 or less or missing	>37	>77
Race-ethnicity of respondent (*n* = 48)		
Non-Hispanic White	14	29
Non-Hispanic Black	17	35
Hispanic or other race-ethnicity	17	35
Age of Respondent (*n* = 48)		
18–24	13	27
25–34	17	35
35 and above	18	38

Source: Author's calculations.
Note: Figures rounded to the nearest whole percent.

by freelancers and care workers). Once I established the sample, I examined how workers talked about their experiences with platform-based gig work. Throughout the analysis, I focused on any potential variation in experiences by class, gender, and race. Additionally, I used grounded theory techniques to code respondents' comments to allow concepts to emerge from the data (Charmaz 2006). Thus the analysis allowed the grouping of three patterns associated with respondents' socioeconomic class status and gender.

FINDINGS

To promote anonymity, I use pseudonyms and retract the names of platforms worked. Additional background information, such as jobs, marital status, and household context, is also omitted to protect anonymity.

Respondents with annual household incomes of more than $48,000 were more likely to minimize their financial needs, describing platform work as exciting and a way to occupy their time (Anderson et al. 2021; Dunn 2020; Rosenblat 2016). I label this group the Community Curious. Perhaps less reliant on the income generated from platform work—or at least less willing to discuss their financial motivations—they expressed the fun they had while working as a platform worker. However,

for men and women with household incomes of $48,000 or less, their gender was salient in their explanations for working as platform workers. Men with household incomes of $48,000 and lower—the Pit Stop Providers—were more likely than their female counterparts to mention not liking platform work, and much like a pit stop is viewed as a temporary interruption, these men were more likely to discuss platform jobs as a way to make ends meet in the short term. I label women with household incomes of $48,000 or less as Pathway Providers. They were more likely to describe platform work as a pathway to make money quickly and easily and promote the independence and flexibility of setting their schedule.

The Community Curious

I refer to the respondents who reported a household income of more than $48,000 as the Community Curious because many described their motivations for working as platform workers by minimizing their financial needs and highlighting work as a way to discover their local community. In his sample of highly educated Airbnb hosts, Isak Ladegaard (2018) finds that hosts were interested in hosting people from foreign cultures and nationalities as a way to experience the wider world. In a similar manner, the respondents in my sample relished the

opportunity to see and learn more about their neighbors and neighborhoods. Diana (White woman), for instance, talked about traveling to new areas: "[I'm doing] [DeliveryApp work] to kind of make a little bit of money, that's actually kind of fun, it's weird, but it can be kind of fun. The fun experience about it is being able to see the different restaurants, 'cause there's a lot here, like being able to travel to areas that you normally wouldn't have travel to [is] kind of nice."

Like other respondents in the Community Curious group, Diana found work as a platform provider fun despite some "weird" aspects of the job. Although the possibility of making money is undoubtedly appealing, she found pleasure in discovering neighborhoods and restaurants in her hometown that she would not usually visit.

After acquiring a small debt, Eduardo (Hispanic man) and his wife chose to work a platform job. When asked about side jobs besides their regular income, Eduardo mentioned other strategies to pay off his debt rather than discussing platform work. Like Diana, he viewed platform work as something he and his wife could do to pass the time: "My wife and I, we started doing [Delivery App]. But that's only sometimes when we don't have anything to do. Usually, we have something to do during the weekend. But we've done it a couple of times, a couple of weekends."

Schor (2017) notes that higher-income gig workers may usurp lower-income gig workers as they use platform work to augment their incomes. Although those in the Community Curious have higher household incomes than those in the Pit Stop Providers and Pathway Providers, the precarity of the contemporary U.S. economy leaves many workers seeking additional ways to meet their economic needs (Hacker 2019). For instance, many in the Community Curious group mentioned that platform work was helpful in making side money, extra money, or saving for short-term goals.

Notably, Eduardo and Diana mentioned the benefits of additional income while emphasizing motivations beyond money for engaging in platform work. This rhetorical strategy—noting the need or want for supplemental income but discussing platform work as something

done for fun or rarely done—could be a way to downplay the role of platform work in their earnings strategy. According to Sarah Damaske (2013), people often use accounts to rationalize actions they believe may be viewed negatively. Because platform work is considered lower occupational status and resembles entry-level service work, the high-income earners of the Community Curious group may also use accounts to deflect the potential stigma of delivering groceries or taking passengers across town to earn extra money (Ravenelle 2019).

When discussing her platform job, Mary (Black woman) noted the financial benefits of platform work along with the aspects she found entertaining: "It's a good way to make some extra money, and it gets me out and moving around." For her, much like Eduardo and Diana, platform work was a way to help her earn additional income while also offering the opportunity to discover more about those around her. Mary was working for a grocery delivery platform during her interview. She was fascinated by the groceries that her neighbors ordered: "It's also interesting to me to see stuff that people order. Some people will get—to me, it's weird . . . but they'll get brand name paper towels . . . and then they'll get the . . . store brand cereal, and I'm like, 'Okay what happened?' And then some of the combinations of stuff, like one order was the big jugs of vegetable oil, they asked for five of those, and I was like, 'Okay, what are you frying?' It's just sort of interesting to see certain things from people."

Working as a platform provider was more interesting for Mary because she could make light of the quirks of those she shopped and delivered for. Although grocery delivery does not provide the opportunity to interact regularly with customers, driving for a platform company allowed Kathy (Hispanic woman) to meet new people despite her husband's initial concerns. As a mother, she felt a strong need to get out of the house from time to time. During her interview, she expressed feelings of depression as she shifted from being a person with a regular job to becoming a stay-at-home parent. Describing the need to do something beyond staying at home with her children, she elaborated on the fun she had meeting other people: "So I decided to do [RideShare App] driving. . . .

It helped me to get away from the house, or hear the kids, actually speak to people. . . . It kind of brings me memories because sometimes, on the weekends, if I pick up drunkies . . . I'll be laughing with them. I'll be cracking up. . . . You see a lot of things."

Why were platform workers with household incomes above $48,000 more likely to discuss platform work as fun and as a way to explore their surroundings? My findings are similar to others that find that the less dependent gig workers are on the platform for basic expenses, the higher their satisfaction with gig work (Schor et al. 2020). Many of the Community Curious held other jobs that rendered them less dependent on platform work. They could therefore discuss motivations other than financial necessity for engaging in platform work. Additionally, their comments may reflect their class position, given that white-collar workers are more likely to discuss passion and other fulfilling parts of work (Blair-Loy 2003; Cech 2021; DePalma 2021; Rao and Tobias Neely 2019). Alternatively, accounts offered by the Community Curious may seek to downplay their reliance on platform work. Although some respondents in this group discussed earning additional income, they were more likely to talk about the joy of meeting others, getting out of the house, and encountering new places instead of a pressing need to work platform jobs to pay expenses.

The Pit Stop Providers

Gender was important in understanding platform participation for those who reported household incomes of $48,000 and under. The men in this group tended to view platform work as a short-term necessity, much like a pit stop while driving, and were drawn to platform work because they viewed it as an interim solution. I argue this is partly due to platform jobs being precarious and customer-oriented service jobs that men have historically rejected (Choi 2018; MacLeod 1987; Nixon 2009; Willis 1979). Men who feel it is their responsibility to provide for their family may consider platform work to be a temporary and inferior solution because of its precarity (Henson and Rogers 2001). Consequently, the men in this group often reframed their platform work as sometimes unpleasant or temporary, in addition to another job or as a replacement for a lost position.

To help his family financially, Gary (White man) drove for a platform company part time, though he was looking forward to working as a contractor: "Right now, I'm just doing [Ride-Share App] and trying to work on improving my skills and getting myself sold as a general contractor." In addition to transitioning to working as a contractor, Gary also had goals of receiving certifications in other lines of work. The money he made through [RideShare App] had decreased over the years; he felt that the drivers' market had saturated.

Like some other men in the Pit Stop Provider group, Alphonse (Black man) mentioned some aspects of the platform work he did not like. However, he found different types of employment difficult. Though Alphonse had a postbaccalaureate degree, he talked at length about his struggles to find a job after graduating. During his interview, he explained, "I don't like [driving for [RideShare App]], but it's a necessity. I have to do it. I don't like dealing with people in general." He would later go on to add, "So, I would say from the experience that it's a short-term job."

Benjamin (Hispanic man) worked for a company but hoped to learn more to eventually start his own business. Though he spent much time with his family after work, he would drive for a platform company when he wasn't working or spending time with his family. Like some of the other Pit Stop Providers, platform work was a way to make money in the short-term as he worked toward more long-term career goals. He also found aspects of platform work unpleasant. In describing his experiences, Benjamin explained, "I do like [RideShare App], sometimes not so much because I fight a lot with the passengers. Sometimes it has happened that they are on the other side of the street, and they don't want to cross over, and there is heavy traffic, so it's hard for me to go around to pick them up, and it's not hard for them to cross. There are times when they are drunk." In this anecdote, Benjamin noted how he refused to show deference to clients, which sometimes led to arguments. Benjamin's annoyance with clients is not unusual for men,

research having shown that men may refuse to show deference at work (Henson and Rogers 2001).

Although men were more likely to talk negatively about their experiences with platform work than women, not all of the men in the sample shared negative views. Four men expressed positive feelings about platform work. Nick (Hispanic man) turned to it when he needed extra income. He saw the positives, noting that platform work was a good option for many people trying to resolve their financial needs. Further, whereas Gary framed driving for a platform company as a job he did while he sought other opportunities and Alphonse as a job done out of necessity, Nick framed it as something that he could do if times became tough, explaining, "You put miles on that car, but it solves your issue." When discussing his anxiety surrounding work, he asserted that if he had to drive for a platform company to pay his bills again, he would make it happen: "I'll even do [RideShare App]. If I know that [my regular work will be slow] in two or three weeks . . . and that I won't make enough money, then I'll go and make . . . on [RideShare App]. I don't sit there and get anxious, waiting for something to come my way. If there is, perfect; if not, I'll go and drive for [RideShare App], you understand?"

Continuing to discuss ways he would be willing to make ends meet, Nick added, "If I have to go and wash a car, I'll do that. I don't have a problem with that." This framing suggests that platform work is not an enjoyable endeavor, but something done to pay bills during periods of financial hardship. Associating platform work with car washing as a short-term resolution to navigate financial struggle suggests a masculine ethos in which a man must do what is needed to pay the bills (Cross and Bagilhole 2002). Despite taking on platform jobs, the men in this group were more likely to discuss the downsides of platform work, bring up problems with showing deference to clients, and create backstories to account for their work. In contrast, most women in this income bracket did not discuss platform work as something to do when push turns to shove but instead, as an opportunity to make money with relative ease.

The Pathway Providers

The Pathway Providers were more likely than the Pit Stop Providers to discuss the positive aspects of platform work. The Pathway Providers comprised women with household incomes of $48,000 or less. These women were drawn to platform work because it provided a quick and easy pathway to make money. In contrast to the men in the Pit Stop Providers group, who described platform work as temporary, many women in the Pathway Providers group were more likely to describe the work as on the side or in addition to their primary job. Additionally, none of the women in the group discussed platform work as a negative endeavor. Jasmine (Black woman) was one of two women in the group who mentioned changing their jobs for their children. She changed jobs so that her schedule could be more in line with a daycare schedule. When asked about having money for her transportation needs, Jasmine answered by discussing the simplicity of making money as a platform worker, "If I need money right then and there, or if I need money anywhere else, it's [Delivery App], something I use to make fast cash." As the interview continued, Jasmine once again brought up platform work, "So, if I need gas, I would just go [Delivery App], [I'll] just go [Delivery App], make some gas money." For Jasmine, platform work was a solution to get money quickly and easily.

Other Pathway Providers echoed Jasmine's sentiments. Nancy (White woman), for instance, acknowledged the financial constraints she and her partner were under while pointing out the benefits of platform work. She admitted, "[it] is not a lot, it helps right now. . . . Money's tight right now, that's why we haven't moved yet. So, we're just trying to get things together so we can get out of here." Although she and her partner were receiving income through government assistance programs, she appreciated the ability to make money delivering food orders, "It's quick money. It's simple and easy as long as you don't mind picking people's food up. I don't touch it or anything. I don't look at it. The restaurant hands me the bag, and I take it to them." Unlike those in the Community Curious group, Nancy and other Pathway Providers were less likely to discuss

the appeal of finding new restaurants and neighborhoods while working.

In addition to appreciating a straightforward way to earn money, some Pathway Providers seemed to sincerely appreciate the income from platform work. As Zora's (Black woman) anecdote highlights, many women appreciated the flexibility associated with platform work (Milkman et al. 2021). As a mother, she felt hindered in her career and mistreated at work due to not having received a college degree. Before working as a full-time platform worker, she worked two jobs alongside her platform job. However, she eventually discovered she could make more money by only working for the platform company instead of splitting her time between three jobs: "Thank God [RideShare Apps] came around. . . . I was doing three jobs for a while, and it just wore me out. One day, I just said . . . 'Let me just see what I'll make for a week with [RideShare App]' . . . I did that. That week alone, two years ago, I'd made twice as much as I would make in one week with the company. So now I make three times as much as I made."

Like Zora, Lynn (White woman) also spoke to the interviewers about the financial benefits of platform work. She received a raise at her primary job, which helped her cover her monthly expenses. However, before the pay increase, working a platform job helped her pay her monthly bills. Indeed, she told the interviewers, "Well, normally, I'm just barely able to pay my bills, like, I'll have to go [Delivery App] just to make a payment."

In addition to appreciating the additional money that came with their platform jobs, many Pathway Providers mentioned the ability to get paid on their schedule. Securing income can add stability for workers with inflexible schedules and precarious work situations (Lambert, Henly, and Kim 2019). Moreover, earning income quickly can help to offset unstable pay in other jobs. According to Steven Vallas and Juliet Schor (2020), many platform workers use their earnings to supplement other sources of income. By doing so, platform jobs can reduce financial instability and compensate for low pay in other positions. Earning income quickly helps with immediate financial needs, especially for those facing economic un-

certainty, and promotes a sense of independence not often found in traditional employment. Many women in the platform provider group compared the freedom they experienced while engaging in platform work with the limitations they felt in the traditional economy. Zora was able to explain the ability to receive wages daily while also detailing her financial strategy: "Well, you can pay yourself every day if you want to. After each transaction, the money is linked with your bank account. So, if you need to cash out for gas or you just need the money right then, you can cash out. I can say I get paid every day. But what I do is I usually just cash out, put the money in my account, and then at the end of the week, I put everything together, and then go from there."

Flexibility was one of the main benefits this group of respondents discussed. This flexibility runs counter to the supervised roles many working-class women have had to endure (Glenn 1992; Rollins 1985; Romero 2002). Marie's interview pointed to many patterns other Pathway Providers underscored when discussing platform work. For starters, some respondents highlighted the flexibility of deciding one's own schedule. During her interview, Marie (Hispanic woman) told the interviewers, "Luckily with [RideShare App], I'm my own manager."

Further clarifying the differences between her three jobs, Marie noted, "With the [RideShare App] job, it's an independent sort of job, like self-employment, so I work the hours I want to." Marie had recently moved, and during her interview, she was able to draw attention to how some Pathway Providers viewed platform work as a quick way to make ends meet, sharing, "I had to do eight hours of [RideShare App] on my two days off just to get back at least $400 so I can survive for the week." Much like Jasmine and Zora, who made quick money and received their earnings when needed, Marie could take advantage of platform work to make money quickly as she spent much of her money moving to a new apartment.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to examine how workers describe their motivations for participation in the platform-based gig economy and analyze

how these accounts differ by socioeconomic class, gender, and race. Using a subsample drawn from a nationally representative sample, I found that class and gender significantly shaped how respondents discussed their motivations for engaging in platform work. Those with an annual household income of over $48,000 glossed over any financial needs and stated that they engaged in platform work to have fun and learn more about their communities. However, for men and women with household incomes of $48,000 or less, gender affected their explanations for engaging in platform work. Men in this group framed their motivations as jobs done in relation to other jobs—jobs they lost, hoped to pursue, or jobs they were in between. They also mentioned the downsides of platform work more frequently. They appeared drawn to platform work to earn income in the interim. In contrast, women with household incomes of $48,000 or less highlighted the benefits of platform work, namely the ease of tasks, the ability to earn money quickly, and flexibility. Their comments suggested an attraction to the relative autonomy and the hassle-free opportunity to earn money that platform work provided.

Why did workers from different social groups provide varying explanations? Several reasons may help explain my findings. For the Community Curious, platform workers with household incomes of more than $48,000 may not heavily depend on platform jobs to meet their basic needs. This may allow them to enjoy other aspects of platform work (Schor et al., 2020). The American Voice Project methodology includes income ranges instead of precise income measurements. Given that, it is difficult to pinpoint the household incomes of respondents. Further, within the AVP data, the income range that begins at $48,001 ends at $72,000. This range captures the median household income ($67,521) (Shrider et al. 2021). It may be that this range begins to capture workers better equipped to meet their basic needs and thus are less likely to rely on platform work as a significant source of income.

Though members of the Community Curious did talk about the ability to earn additional income, they also viewed platform work as an exciting way to occupy their time. In addition

to not having to rely on the extra income, it may be that higher-income workers are more likely to talk about their work in more personal ways. Reflecting their class position, individuals in the Community Curious category may be following a pattern whereby middle-class and white-collar workers discuss the fulfilling aspects of work and the role of passion as a motivator for work while downplaying the financial components of labor (Blair-Loy 2003; Cech 2021; DePalma 2021; Rao and Tobias Neely 2019). Though this group talked about engaging in platform work differently than their lower-income counterparts, unlike middle-class and white-collar workers in the traditional economy, those in the Community Curious grouping are involved in the same type of work as the Pit Stop and Pathway Providers. In other words, in the traditional labor market, middle-class and lower-income workers tend to work different jobs and discuss their work differently; however, among platform workers, higher- and lower-income workers talk about work differently despite performing the same jobs.

Alternatively, it is possible that workers in the Community Curious are motivated by the extra income while trying to avoid the negative association with platform work, given that higher-income workers are performing the same tasks as their lower-income counterparts. Interestingly, rather than learning more about their community by getting involved in local volunteer work or adult recreation groups, they have opted for a second job that mirrors entry-level service work that some may view as a last resort (Ravenelle 2019, 161). Pursuing an additional job may be due to the widespread economic instability affecting the working and middle classes (Hacker 2019). Because of the negative perception of rideshare and delivery jobs—jobs that mirror entry-level service work—and the need for a secondary source of income, it is not surprising that some respondents might attempt to provide an account that is more optimistic than that of financial need.

Notably, most of the sample included in the Community Curious grouping are women and therefore I am unable to investigate gender differences in the group. Research has indicated that women generally exhibit higher levels of

job satisfaction than men (Abbott 1993; Kalleberg 2011). A broader sample may reveal gender differences where women are more likely to view their platform work experiences as positive and men may discuss them negatively regardless of their income. Future research is needed to clarify whether gender differences are salient among those with higher household incomes.

For the men I label Pit Stop Providers, the reality of engaging in service work where deference to customers is a crucial part of the job may lead them to view platform jobs as less than ideal. Platform work is therefore viewed as short-term opportunity while the men pursue—or at least claim to pursue—other prospects that are more aligned with traditional ideas of men's work (Bishop, Casell, and Hoel 2009; Henson and Rogers 2001). It may also be the precarity of platform work that leads men to avoid framing it as their primary long-term occupation. Given the cultural narratives surrounding men and breadwinning—that men as breadwinners should maintain secure jobs that pay a livable wage—the precarity of platform work may prohibit men from building a breadwinner identity around these jobs and thus frame them as temporary work (Henson and Rogers 2001).

Why do some men express displeasure with driving for platforms but have historically dominated similar industries, such as cab driving? Notably, app-based drivers face different circumstances than cab drivers. Historically, cab drivers have not been held to the same levels of monitoring introduced with technology, nor have they been subjected to customer ratings and encouraged to emphasize the interactional aspect of driving (Anderson 2016; Glöss, McGregor, and Brown 2016). For example, Lyft once encouraged drivers to apply fluffy pink mustaches to their cars to highlight the playful and friendly nature of their service. Rideshare drivers are monitored by their platform and evaluated by their customers, with ratings that can affect their future work—which has become a routine part of platform work. As a result, platform drivers are expected to perform and prioritize customer satisfaction in ways that traditional cab drivers have not been required to do. Thus, although men may under-

take rideshare and delivery driving to earn income, they may still express a dislike for the customer service aspects of these platform jobs.

Working-class women have long worked service jobs with a low entry barrier. However, whereas many women completed these jobs under the supervision of others—women from higher socioeconomic backgrounds or men who held more prestigious positions—platform work provides women with more perceived flexibility and autonomy (Glenn 1992; Milkman et al. 2021; Romero 2002; Wooten and Branch 2012). Given that women's opportunities for earnings and promotions are limited in comparison to men (Acker 2006; Purcell, MacArthur, and Samblanet 2010), working as a platform provider allows some working-class women to circumvent some barriers that may impede their autonomy and ability to earn, perhaps in ways that are not as labor intensive as other jobs available to them.

Given women's relationship to care work, future studies should consider the relationship between care workers and the platform-based gig economy. Care work has long been a site of gender, race-ethnicity, and class inequality (Duffy 2011; Glenn 1992; Romero 2002; Wooten and Branch 2012). As care work becomes increasingly mediated by technology platforms and apps such as Care.com, Sittercity, and UrbanSitter, it is crucial to understand who engages in platform-based care work and who does not and under what circumstances. Although women primarily perform care work, many may find that driving for gig economy platforms provides an alternative that is not devalued and underpaid in the same way as care work (England, Budig, and Folbre 2002; Folbre 2012).

I expected to find racial differences in how platform jobs were discussed among the sample of platform workers. However, to my surprise, I found none. Race has played a critical role in the labor market, where workers of color have operated in a subordinate status and have worked jobs that offer little to no control or autonomy (Kalleberg 2011). Participating in platform work could help workers of color counter precarity and discrimination as they can, at least according to platform companies, man-

age their schedules and serve as their own bosses. I suggest two reasons I did not find racial differences within the sample. First, workers of color who engage in platform work may be aware of potential discrimination and may downplay racism as a coping mechanism. Such coping strategies may include avoiding framing entering platform work in racialized terms (Evans and Moore 2015; Jackson 2018; Romero 2002; Wingfield 2010a). Second, it is possible that there are no racial differences in the reasons for entering platform work—the promise of income, independence, and flexibility cut across racial lines; however, racial differences can significantly affect the actual experiences of working such jobs. In other words, though platform workers of different racial backgrounds may not discuss differences in incentives and motivations to engage in platform work, race becomes an important factor when considering client interactions. Indeed, workers of color report more negative experiences while working platform jobs and are discriminated against as providers of platform work (Anderson et al. 2021; Ravenelle 2019; van Doorn 2017). Future studies need to further our understanding of race and accounts of motivations for participating in platform-based gig work.

As with many interviews, one shortcoming of the AVP interviews is that it is difficult for researchers to determine people's true motivations. Issues like deception, recall error, and single-motive bias (the tendency for people to report a single motive behind their choices despite multiple motivations) make it challenging to pinpoint motives from interviews alone (Small and Cook 2023). Thus this study examines how platform workers describe their motivations to participate in platform work and how these accounts differ by social background.

Another shortcoming of the data is also its strength. Because the interviews for this dataset sought to cover a wide range of topics, opportunities for in-depth follow-up questions were few. This shortage is one weakness of the data and may have limited the opportunity to discuss platform work at length. However, the broad scope of the American Voices Project represents a valuable and ambitious tool for understanding Americans' lived experiences. Additionally, the dataset's large scale enables comparisons of class, gender, and race, and their intersections. Further, the interview data within the AVP shed light on the broader domain of work and labor. For example, during moments of financial hardship, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals may turn to platform-based gig work to help meet their financial needs (Fee, Kaiser, and Wardrip 2024). However, this ability to turn to driving for work during economic hardships may be more difficult in nonmetro or rural areas where the demand may be low. In this way, the AVP can be helpful for policymakers and researchers who seek to understand the gig economy's income-generating potential and limitations.

Understanding how platform workers discuss their motivations and experiences may be useful for researchers and practitioners in a variety of ways. For example, workforce development professionals can help mentor workers on how to "translate their skills and experiences into potential employment opportunities" given that workers may be interested in moving back into the traditional workforce (Berkowitz 2022, 15). This may be especially relevant for the Pit Stop Providers, who view their time as a platform worker as temporary. Additionally, the research presented here highlights the importance of flexibility and workers' ability to affect their schedules. Given the relationship between work schedules, precarity, and job satisfaction, companies may consider scheduling practices that include more employee input to reduce precarity and increase job quality (Lambert, Henly, and Kim 2019). Employee input in scheduling may be especially useful to Pathway Providers, because the women in the sample were more likely to bring up challenges related to time and flexibility. As the gig economy continues to grow, understanding workers' motives for participating and not participating in platform work will only grow in importance.

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Pandemic Housing: The Role of Landlords, Social Networks, and Social Policy in Mitigating Housing Insecurity During the COVID-19 Pandemic

MAX BESBRIS, SADIE DEMPSEY, BRIAN MCCABE, AND EVA ROSEN

This article uses a subsample of low-income American Voices Project respondents who rent their homes to examine how households coped with housing insecurity at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. First, some renters reported more housing stability because of the expansion of existing programs. However, access to and distribution of these resources was uneven. Second, renters continued to rely on social ties to secure housing but the interpersonal and financial issues that often arise with such arrangements remained during the pandemic. Third, the pandemic provided some renters with reason to request and receive flexibility in payment plans on existing leases, though landlord largess was far from universal. Our findings reveal the limitations of temporary policy responses that are administered in uneven ways, require eligible individuals to seek out and enroll in novel benefit programs, and do not intervene directly in markets to increase supply or control prices.

Keywords: housing insecurity, social safety net, COVID-19, American Voices Project, qualitative data analysis, housing market

Housing insecurity is an all-too-common experience in the lives of poor renters. Sociologists have studied multiple aspects of this experience, including the challenges of securing, quality affordable housing that meets basic household needs, difficulty paying the monthly rent, and the consequences of unstable housing (for a review, see DeLuca and Rosen 2022). Housing insecurity is associated with a range of negative outcomes. For example, studies have shown that eviction and housing unaffordability lead to downward mobility and adverse health outcomes (Desmond 2016; Desmond and Kimbro 2015; Desmond and Shollenberger 2015; Pollack, Griffin, and Lynch 2010) and unexpected and frequent moves are correlated with children's poorer performance in school (for a review, see Garboden, Leventhal, and Newman 2017). Although poverty is a clear antecedent of housing insecurity, it is not

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the only cause, and the causal arrow may point in both directions (Desmond 2012). Housing insecurity has moved to the fore of urban scholarship, particularly in the wake of the foreclosure crisis, but more descriptive research is needed on the related social processes in which housing insecurity is embedded (see Besbris and Khan 2017).

In this article, we use a novel, large-scale qualitative dataset, the American Voices Project (AVP), to examine experiences of housing insecurity at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The public health crisis and its concomitant relief programs provide a unique window for researchers studying housing insecurity. The pandemic dramatically altered daily economic life for many Americans; at the same time, the government responded with unprecedented forms of assistance. Drawing on data from the AVP, we explore how the pandemic shaped the experience of housing insecurity, the strategies families used to navigate that insecurity, and how various state and federal support programs made a difference for those lucky enough to receive aid. This maps the web of challenges that housing insecurity creates and leverages the pandemic to offer a unique window into how safety net programs can reduce housing insecurity.

We reveal a complicated, shifting landscape of housing instability during the pandemic. On the one hand, given tremendous financial burdens experienced by low-income families even prior to the pandemic, the financial and housing challenges described by our sample were not qualitatively different during the pandemic. In fact, housing insecurity and the strategies used to weather it largely mirror those documented in research on strategies households used prior to the pandemic. On the other hand, we also find that pandemic policy responses provided some low-income households with novel forms of support that mitigated housing insecurity and bolstered short-term financial well-being. Interestingly, many of the aid programs that helped stabilize housing were not housing specific. Other forms of support, including expanded unemployment and SNAP benefits, were a boon to low-income households and relieved overall financial burdens, allowing for more stable housing. One of

our key findings is therefore that policy responses to large-scale economic disruptions can be effective in mitigating housing insecurity even when they are not explicitly designed to do so. Expanded cash transfers and other benefits stabilize household finances and thereby allow eligible households more flexibility in covering housing costs. However, we also find that the pandemic aid that allowed for more housing security for some was not uniformly accessible. Many lower-income households remained housing insecure or reported feeling that their insecurity intensified during the pandemic. This reveals the limitations of temporary policy responses that are administered unevenly, require eligible individuals to actively enroll in novel benefit programs, and do not intervene directly in markets to increase supply or control prices. Additionally, our research demonstrates both the benefits and challenges of using a large-scale interview-based sample to examine these questions.

NAVIGATING HOUSING INSECURITY BEFORE THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Even though housing is a central component of everyday experience, it has only recently moved to the fore of sociological studies of place, stratification, and social life more generally (McCabe and Rosen 2023; Pattillo 2013; Zavisca and Gerber 2016). A burgeoning literature examines how various processes in the housing market reproduce or exacerbate existing forms of inequality. This includes studies of the search and selection process (Besbris 2020; Besbris, Schachter, and Kuk 2021; Boeing, Besbris, Schachter, and Kuk 2021; Boeing, Besbris, Wachsmuth, and Wegmann 2021; Krysan and Crowder 2017), the importance of supply-side actors (Besbris and Faber 2017; Besbris et al. 2022; Garboden and Rosen 2019; Rosen 2014; Schachter, Kuk, Besbris, and Pekarek 2023; Schacter, Kuk, Besbris, and Ho 2023; Stein 2019), and how housing accumulates value (Besbris and Korver-Glenn 2023; Flippen 2004; Howell and Korver-Glenn 2021; Shapiro 2017; Wohl and Besbris 2023).

The experience of housing insecurity is widespread among low-income households. As households have become more housing-cost burdened, defined as spending at least 30 per-

cent of household income on rent (Shamsuddin and Campbell 2022), attention has increased on the process of eviction—which is deeply intertwined with housing-cost burden, as most evictions result when tenants cannot or do not pay rent (Eviction Lab 2018). Evictions can occur formally—a landlord files with a local court—or even more frequently, informally—where a landlord coerces, threatens, or incentivizes a tenant to leave a unit (Desmond 2016; Gromis and Desmond 2021; Hartman and Robinson 2003). Household demographics are key for understanding eviction processes, with non-White and female-headed households far more at risk (Hepburn, Louis, and Desmond 2020). But eviction is just one aspect of forced or reactive mobility because housing insecurity resulting from housing quality failure, nearby violence, income loss, or internal household dynamics is very common among the poor (DeLuca and Jang-Trettien 2020; DeLuca, Wood, and Rosenblatt 2019; Harvey et al. 2020; Rosen 2017).

Housing insecurity increased in the wake of the Great Recession (Burgard, Seefeldt, and Zelner 2012). Massive job losses produced high rates of financial instability which, in turn, made it more difficult for households to cover their housing costs (Dwyer and Phillips Lassus 2015). The Great Recession also increased housing-cost burden (Colburn and Allen 2018)—as incomes go down the cost of housing becomes a larger part of household expenditures and, as a result, savings are diminished and taking on debt becomes more likely. All of this leads to more housing insecurity (Lee and Evans 2020).

For the most economically precarious Americans, especially those without access to subsidized housing, residential security remained difficult to attain in the years after the Great Recession and before the pandemic (Lens 2018). When the pandemic began, rental prices dropped as cases rose (Kuk et al. 2021) but within the first year of the pandemic, housing costs overall returned to and surpassed pre-pandemic levels (Li and Zhang 2021; for historical precedent, see Francke and Korevaar 2021). More broadly, wage-stagnation, retrenchment of welfare benefits, and declines in the number of affordable units were all leading to rising

rates of displacement before the Great Recession and continued in the decade after (Desmond 2018). Under such conditions, rent burdens make more households less financially secure overall and less secure in their housing more specifically. The pandemic may have exacerbated housing insecurity since the most disadvantaged households were more likely to become unemployed and lose income (Cornelissen and Hermann 2023).

Relying on Social Networks

Social networks are key sources of support when households cannot afford their housing or are forced to move due to various shocks such as neighborhood violence, housing quality failures, or changes in income or employment (Clampet-Lundquist 2003; Edin and Shaefer 2015; Mazelis 2017). Shared housing arrangements, or doubling up, is a common strategy (Cross 2018; Harvey, Dunifon, and Pilkauskas 2021). Although such arrangements have short-term benefits, including preventing households from living on the street, in cars, or in shelters, research increasingly shows that doubling up can create fraught dynamics between hosts and guests, strain hosts' space and finances, and potentially lead to adverse effects later in life (Harvey 2020a, 2020b).

However, economically precarious households may not have well-resourced networks from which to draw help. Lacking connections to hosts who allow them to stay, households facing housing insecurity may activate weak ties, or connections to previously unfamiliar alter-households encountered through social service organizations (Desmond 2016; Mazelis 2017). These connections can provide immediate relief but are often unstable and short lived—they rarely allow for secure housing.

Relationships with Landlords and Housing Providers

Interactions between tenants and those who supply housing (landlords) can also aggravate or mitigate housing insecurity. Rental laws generally put property owners at an advantage relative to their tenants, creating a power imbalance that is central to understanding housing insecurity in the United States (Dreier 1982). Landlords have tremendous power to screen

and sort tenants, shaping their housing attainment, security, and differential patterns by race, gender, and other categories (Rosen, Garboden, and Cossyleon 2021). A lack of tenant protections and housing regulations may enable landlords to make business decisions that result in adverse outcomes for tenants (Greif 2022). Recent research documents how landlords can use the threat of eviction, eviction filings, fines, and forms of harassment to exploit and extract payment from tenants (Desmond 2016; Garboden and Rosen 2019; Leung, Hepburn, and Desmond 2020). Tenants may try to bargain with their landlords to forgive rental debt or take work in exchange for rent, to varying degrees of success (Desmond 2012). Landlords can also use the power imbalance to their advantage to attempt to control tenant behavior or lengthen tenure (Rosen and Garboden 2022). Interactions with landlords are therefore a key mediator of housing insecurity.

Even though landlords and their tenants always enter their housing arrangements with an existing imbalance, it is important to consider how the pandemic reshaped these interactions. Rents in urban areas dropped during the immediate onset of the pandemic (Kuk et al. 2021), but largely returned to pre-pandemic levels quickly, maintaining whatever market advantage landlords had. Moreover, as public health authorities advocated for less mobility, tenants may have had strong desires to stay in their current housing, further strengthening landlords' ability to extract rents and control tenant behavior. At the same time, research reveals that some smaller landlords—particularly ones who inherited their rental properties—tend to feel social closeness to their tenants and are more likely to work with them when rent is late (Balzarini and Boyd 2021; Garboden et al. 2018; Shiffer-Sebba 2020; see also Watson et al. 2023). It is possible that the pandemic increased tenants' abilities to make special arrangements to avoid housing insecurity with sympathetic landlords.

Relying on Social Safety Net Programs

Although government programs can also buffer against housing insecurity, in the United States only one in four households eligible for rental assistance receives it (CBPP 2021). Moreover, al-

though housing affordability can increase housing security, rental assistance programs are not a panacea. For example, public housing ensures that low-income renters who benefit from it do not spend a disproportionate share of their income on rent (Docter and Galvez 2020). But the number of public housing units has declined substantially in recent decades, reflecting demolition and conversions through the Rental Assistance Demonstration program, which transitions public housing units into project-based Section 8 contracts, and these units are often located in racially segregated neighborhoods (Goetz 2013; Rothstein 2017).

Unlike public housing, the Housing Choice Voucher Program enables low-income renters to select the housing unit and neighborhood of their choice. In addition to making housing more affordable by restricting tenants' payments to 30 percent of their income, housing vouchers increase residential stability and alleviate overcrowding (Gubits et al. 2018). However, there are not enough vouchers to meet the need, and even when a household is lucky enough to receive one, the barriers to using it successfully lead to low success rates of leasing up within 180 days (Ellen, O'Regan, and Strochak 2021). Because the program requires voucher households to lease within a defined period or risk losing the voucher, the program creates search burdens and stressors on recipients (DeLuca, Garboden, and Rosenblatt 2013; McClure, Schwartz, and Taghavi 2015; McCabe 2023). In addition, no national antidiscrimination law protects voucher holders and many recipients have trouble finding a willing landlord. In short, as a market-based program, vouchers leave households susceptible to various forms of predation and discrimination (Besbris et al. 2022; Faber and Mercier 2022; Rosen 2020; Rosen, Garboden, and Cossyleon 2021).

As a response to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent economic downturn, federal and state governments implemented various direct support programs designed to mitigate housing insecurity. Congress allocated more than $46 billion in emergency rental assistance funds through the 2021 Consolidated Appropriations Act and the 2021 American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) to assist households unable to

pay rent or utilities.[1] ARPA also provided nearly $10 billion in aid for homeowners and $5 billion for emergency housing vouchers.[2] The Center for Disease Control extended and expanded the federal eviction moratorium established by the CARES Act of 2020.[3] Various states and municipalities also established additional eviction moratoria. Such measures reduced evictions, disease transmission, mortality, and improved mental health for low-income tenants (Benfer et al. 2021; Hepburn et al. 2023; Keene et al. 2023; Leifheit, Linton, et al. 2021; Leifheit, Pollack, et al. 2021; Nande et al. 2021; Reina and Lee 2023; Sandoval-Olascoaga, Venkataramani, and Arcaya 2021). But implementation and access were uneven. Eviction procedures remained highly varied across states (Nelson et al. 2021) and initial evidence shows that the most disadvantaged households found it difficult to use pandemic-related resources and that their relationships with landlords were negatively affected by eviction moratoria (Tsai et al. 2022; Versey and Russell 2022).

We delve further into these dynamics to explore whether and how low-income Americans used their social networks, made special arrangements with landlords, or relied on existing housing policies to mitigate housing insecurity during the pandemic.

DATA AND METHODS

We draw on a subset of low-income renters from the American Voices Project to understand the experience of housing insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic. The AVP asked respondents how much they spent on housing each month, whether they rented their home, and questions about respondents' participation in subsidized housing programs such as public housing and the Housing Choice Voucher Program. We sought to identify a sub-

sample of low-income households who were interviewed after the start of the pandemic. We relied on a cut-off date of April 1, 2020, as the beginning point. In total, 787 households in the AVP were interviewed after April 1, 2020. In order to focus on rental households, we restricted our sample to 435 respondents who reported renting their home. Finally, we defined the sample of low-income renters as those with an annual income below $36,000. Because the AVP provides researchers only with income bands for households in the sample, we selected a threshold that loosely approximated households with an income at or below 150 percent of the poverty rate. Relying on these three criteria, we were left with an analytic sample of 290 respondents. From these, we randomly selected 120 cases (approximately 41 percent of the available cases that matched our selection criteria) for analysis. When possible, AVP interviews multiple members of the same household. In our subsample, nine interviews were of individuals who shared a household with another interviewee.

Although the AVP only asks a small set of housing-specific questions, our research team analyzed the full transcripts for each interview to better understand how housing insecurity intersected with other aspects of participants' lives. Using the entire transcript allowed us to capture all mentions of housing insecurity, regardless of where they occurred in the interview process. Indeed, one of the advantages of the AVP is its breadth: it allows us to consider housing experiences and their relationship to any number of other topics that we might not have probed on in a study that was limited to housing issues. For each interview, our research team wrote descriptive and analytic memos including relevant passages and quotations from the interviews. These memos paid

1. U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Emergency Rental Assistance Program," https://home.treasury.gov/policy-issues/coronavirus/assistance-for-state-local-and-tribal-governments/emergency-rental-assistance-program (accessed February 15, 2024).

2. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, "Fact Sheet: Housing Provisions in the American Rescue Plan of 2021," https://www.hud.gov/sites/dfiles/Main/documents/Factsheet_Housing_Provisions_American_Rescue_Plan_Act-2021.pdf (accessed February 15, 2024).

3. National Low Income Housing Coalition, "Federal Moratorium on Evictions for Nonpayment of Rent," August 2021, https://nlihc.org/sites/default/files/Overview-of-National-Eviction-Moratorium.pdf (accessed February 15, 2024).

particular attention to housing-related issues throughout participants' lives, including ways that their housing situation shifted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. As we analyzed interviews, our team met regularly to discuss emerging themes related to experiences of housing insecurity during the pandemic.

The breadth of the AVP also allows us to examine housing issues within the context of a household's broader financial situation. That housing is so deeply intertwined with other social factors is a tremendous advantage of the data. The breadth is also associated with some limitations. Given the broad scope of topics covered in the AVP interviews, the interviews often lacked depth on issues of housing. We also acknowledge that the AVP sample may not capture households experiencing the greatest residential instability. These households may be the most difficult to sample, leading to their exclusion from the AVP. It is also possible that limiting our sample to those interviewed after the onset of the pandemic could bias results—these respondents may have responded to recruitment efforts less quickly, were harder to locate, or had a more difficult time scheduling an interview.

FINDINGS

Here, we describe three ways AVP respondents reported mitigating against housing insecurity during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as how these pathways to housing security were often unsustainable.

Social Programs and the Role of Pandemic Relief Policies

Participants in the AVP sample reported struggling to make ends meet and to find and keep safe, stable housing during the pandemic. Some existing housing policies, including public housing and voucher programs, provided one avenue for low-income households to remain in or find stable housing. For example, Gus, a Black man in his late fifties living in the Midwest, said he felt lucky to be in public housing when the pandemic began. "Well, where I live at now, it's heaven," he explained. "I got central air, lights and gas included, and my rent is $229 a month." Although public housing afforded Gus stable housing despite the disrup-

tions of the pandemic, most low-income Americans were not in the same position because the vast majority of households who qualify for government housing assistance are unable to access it.

Many low-income renters relied on assisted housing programs before the pandemic, but the public health emergency spurred a temporary expansion of social programs that provided qualified households with increased financial security. Sometimes this came in the form of resources and protections aimed directly at housing, such as eviction moratoria and emergency rental assistance through legislation like the CARES Act or the ARPA. However, respondents rarely mentioned these housing-specific COVID-19 programs. Only two renters in our sample—neither of whom were housing insecure—mentioned eviction moratoria. Those who experienced eviction or the threat of eviction were seemingly unaware of any new protections. For example, Michelle, a middle-aged White woman, was threatened with eviction early in the pandemic. "They send me law papers. If I don't pay this, you got to go," she explained. "But because it wasn't anybody in court . . . I knew the court wasn't going to open up until May, so I got them what they needed prior to that." Michelle lived in a state with strong protections against eviction but attributed her ability to keep her home to the shutdown of public activity.

Of the 120 participants in our sample, only one reported receiving rental assistance during the pandemic but did not attribute the aid to any novel COVID-19 policies. Chad, a Black man in his thirties who lives in the Midwest, said, "I had . . . seen it on the news that the state or somebody was giving out . . . up to $5,000 to pay toward a mortgage or rent or what have you," he explained. "It came from some place called [redacted community organization], I'm pretty sure they are associated with the state on some level. Yeah, they paid me $2,900." This rental assistance helped cover nearly five months of rent at a time he was desperately struggling to make ends meet after losing his job at a mechanic shop and having difficulty accessing Unemployment Insurance. It is certainly possible that this rental assistance was available because of the expansion of hous-

ing aid in the wake of the pandemic, but Chad did not explicitly link it to any COVID-19 policy responses.

Given recent work showing that novel housing policies and housing-specific aid in the wake of the pandemic did indeed reduce some forms of housing insecurity (Hepburn et al. 2023; Reina and Lee 2023), it is likely that respondents did not mention such changes because they were simply unaware of them. Federal aid in general is distributed through a patchwork of state and local government and nongovernmental organizations, obscuring links between specific policies and benefits (Obinger, Leibfried, and Castles 2005). Moreover, additional research on novel housing policies reveals that they varied widely across states and municipalities, creating challenges for renters to understand, navigate, and use (Keene et al. 2023).

Even though the low-income AVP renters in our sample rarely mentioned housing-specific COVID-19 policies, many were aware of how the temporary expansion of other programs improved household finances and housing stability. These included increased SNAP benefits, Unemployment Insurance, and stimulus checks.

For Martha, a sixty-two-year-old White woman living in the South, the expansion of social programs in response to the pandemic gave her a financial stability she had not experienced in years. She was newly retired and the sole provider and caretaker for three adults with disabilities—two of her sons and her grandson. Because she was unable to work, the household used a patchwork of programs such as SNAP, Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), and private Christian charities in her city. Before the pandemic, she often had to make trade-offs between which bills to pay and was unable to consistently afford enough food for the household. However, after the pandemic began she received stimulus payments and an increase in her SNAP benefits. The novel forms of assistance were extremely helpful. Martha said,

> Because of what was going on with COVID, the governor said for everybody to get the maximum amount of food stamps they qual-

ify for. We used to only get $200, but then all of a sudden, we're getting $500. . . . So when he gave me the extra food stamps, I held on to them. . . . Instead of using cash for food, I used my extra food stamps. So I have been saving cash. . . . Up until this COVID thing happened, I didn't have money to save. . . . The extra cash meant I was able to get necessities that we've been going without. I bought towels and I bought curtains for my windows instead of having blankets over the window.

The SNAP expansion more than doubled her food budget, which allowed Martha to spend on household goods (such as towels, mattresses, and an air conditioner) and pay utility bills. It also allowed her household to make Thanksgiving- and Christmas-related purchases for the first time in years. Martha was acutely aware that the increased aid was temporary and had been trying to save money in preparation for the expected future reduction. Although the policy response to the pandemic allowed people like Martha to experience relief from chronic financial hardship, long-term economic strain and potential housing insecurity remained.

Other AVP households had more mixed experiences with increased government aid. Indeed, the means-tested design of aid policies as well as the bureaucratic hassles associated with applying and qualifying made accessing aid difficult. Tonya, a young Black mother of two in her early twenties living in the South, had trouble keeping up with bills before the pandemic. Her husband worked in fast food and the household received SNAP benefits and Medicaid. For Tonya, the pandemic was "a blessing in disguise." "Since we got [the stimulus check] we was able to pay our rent," Tonya explained. "When the check came for me, we have to pay all our bills and that was close to $500, because we had to pay the cable, and we had to get our phones back on because my doctor calls my phone, everybody calls my phone." In addition to paying overdue bills, Tonya also paid her family's rent up front for several months. This was a welcome reprieve from the constant struggle to get by. But this blessing was more complicated than it first appeared. Tonya's husband lost his job at the beginning

of the pandemic and was unable to get unemployment benefits because he didn't have a necessary form of identification. Without access to unemployment benefits, their financial struggles reemerged as soon as the stimulus checks ran out. Even though they were paid up on rent and other bills, Tonya said she didn't know how her family would cover these expenses for next month.

Although most of the low-income households in our sample experienced some financial relief during the pandemic due to the expansion of social programs, some were financially devastated. Alex, a twenty-nine-year-old first generation Asian American living in the Midwest applied for Unemployment Insurance during the pandemic. He said the program initially provided him with enough money to live, in that he received $600 per week in addition to the normal unemployment payment. However, Alex had not realized that he did not qualify for Unemployment Insurance because he had quit his last job and not been fired from it. "I found out that all the money I accepted, I had to pay back," he said. He owed the government thousands of dollars in addition to existing credit card debt, student loans, and car loans. "I wasn't working at all. I was doing Instacart here and there and food delivery. . . . That was when I took out my 401(k), got a loan and stuff that [got me] into more debt to pay for things."

Alex kept falling further and further behind on bills. At one point, he was two months behind on rent. He was only able to keep a roof over his head with support from his family and funds from a local community organization. At the time of the interview, he had found stable housing by renting from a cousin at a below-market rate. He also found employment, but said that he still struggles to make ends meet and was unsure when or whether he would ever pay off the debts incurred during the pandemic.

I'm trying to live my life so I can survive. It's like when you're put in that situation where you don't have enough money, you don't know where your food's going or you don't have enough money to buy gas or you have to keep using credit cards to pay for things, but then you're only making the minimum payments but then the interest goes up. All that shit . . . it gets frustrating to want to live in a society where, as much as you try to work and work and work, there's always something that's going to happen to fuck you over.

In summary, even though the expansion of social safety net programs like unemployment and SNAP gave some low-income households more financial and housing security, these benefits were short lived and not always easily accessed.

The Role of Social Ties and Networks During the Pandemic

When long-term relief was not available through federal programs, when eligibility was unclear, or when programs did not provide enough support, low-income households in the AVP sample had to find alternative ways to buffer against housing insecurity. To do so, they often relied on their social networks.

Mary is a Latina woman living on the West Coast. Currently a DACA recipient, she immigrated with her family from Mexico when she was young. Before the pandemic, she worked as a substitute teacher and a server at a diner while taking classes for her teaching credential. However, after she lost both of these part-time jobs when the pandemic struck, she was left without any income from March 2020 through August 2020. Even though Mary was technically qualified for Unemployment Insurance, she didn't apply for it until the end of June, more than three months after she became unemployed. "I was trying not to [apply for Unemployment Insurance] because I didn't want it to affect my green card application, but I don't really have a choice now," she explained.

Mary could no longer afford her one-bedroom apartment, so moved back in with her mother and occasionally stays with her fiancé's family. Neither her mother nor her fiancé's family ask her to pay rent. In fact, they both regularly give her cash to meet her day-to-day needs. "It just felt weird because I felt like I had already reached the stage of adulthood where I was learning to be independent and then because of COVID, I have basically had to

rely on my mom full time. And it sucks because even right now . . . I can't afford to move out." Mary's younger sister, Gina (who was also interviewed for the AVP), described how their mother was temporarily laid off after a number of coworkers tested positive for COVID-19. "Our source of income was basically [my mother's] coworkers helping us out. . . . They would bring us food, they would bring us a little bit of cash [so] that we can go grocery shopping," Gina explained. "I'm extremely grateful for that. . . . They would help us with rent." The family was able to pay for housing through interpersonal assistance but their overall financial situation remained precarious, and was exacerbated by Mary's anxiety about applying for aid as a noncitizen.

Even when they qualify, members of disadvantaged communities may be reluctant to seek aid for fear of stigmatization or running afoul of other regulatory agencies (Sherman 2009), highlighting how inequalities can be perpetuated even in times of increased available aid (Cornelissen and Hermann 2023). Even though Mary did not apply for formal aid, she was able to survive because she was given cash and free housing from her wider social network. But she noted that although these coping strategies allowed her to meet many day-to-day financial demands, she had depleted her savings and was unsure whether and when she and her fiancé might be able to live on their own.

Vanessa is a twenty-year-old biracial woman living in a small town in the South who described a lifetime of housing insecurity and frequent instability. After her parents divorced when she was a young child, Vanessa and her mother went through a cycle of homelessness, staying with friends or family, and living in cheap motels. Since 2019, they had been living with family—an aunt and uncle who had agreed to let them stay indefinitely.

Although Vanessa described this housing arrangement as "a gift from God," it was not without its challenges. In addition to contributing to the rent, Vanessa and her mother do hours of housework and childcare every day. Vanessa's aunt will sometimes, unannounced, leave her children and Vanessa in the home for days, expecting Vanessa to care for her cousins.

I clean up toys, I mop, sweep, clean the kitchen, clean the bathroom, do laundry, cook for when they come home. Yeah, that's pretty much just my whole day. . . . Without a GED or a high school diploma, it's hard for me to get a job. I can't get a job to support myself or support my mom. . . . Then I don't get paid to watch my cousins and stuff like that. It's frustrating and hard, but it's something I have to deal with until things get better.

At the time of her interview in June 2020, COVID-19 was spreading throughout Vanessa's eight-person household. "I'm pretty sure at this point, everybody in the house, including me are positive for Corona," she explained. This was particularly dangerous for her mother, who has a host of medical conditions. "With everything that's going on medical-wise with my mom, she's starting to have breathing issues and stuff like that." As Vanessa's case shows, even though doubling up may provide some reprieve from deeper housing insecurity, it also introduces novel risks—particularly during a public health emergency.

Ryan is a White man living in a rural area in the western United States with his wife and children. Ryan's wife works at home caring for their four children, while Ryan, who has always wanted to be a chef, works intermittently in restaurants, construction, and manufacturing. He reported, "The cost of living here is too much. And the pay out here is not as good as it needs to be to afford to live here, so it's been really rough." Ryan said that he and his family had "struggled for a few years" before the pandemic but that they had "actually [been] able to get back up on our feet to where we didn't owe anybody money." But then he lost his job when the pandemic began and spent "a month or two" at home. Ryan did not mention unemployment benefits during the interview. The interviewer estimated that Ryan received $1,067 in SNAP benefits and child-support payments from an ex-wife, which was not enough for his family of six to make ends meet. He said, "I got behind where I owed people thousands of dollars because of having to borrow money to pay bills to make sure I had a roof over my head. . . . I sold vehicles, I had to sell personal items I

didn't want to sell. I had to sell things from my house that meant a lot to me. I had to sell other things that were worth a lot more money for less money just because I got to pay the bills."

In addition to selling his belongings, Ryan also relied on support from his family to make it through this crisis. "My mom and dad have been there for me and my wife through the years. They helped us out financially. They've helped us out with all kinds of things to where it's been, no matter what I had family to rely on." The combination of support from his parents and selling belongings allowed Ryan and his family to catch up on bills, including rent. At the time of the interview, Ryan had started a job as an executive chef at a new restaurant and said that his family was no longer behind on their bills.

Other respondents had few or no social network ties that would allow them to rely on family or friends for housing or other resources. Ellen is a sixty-two-year-old White woman living in a suburban area in the eastern United States. When she was fifty-four, her second husband left her. "After twelve years, he came home and said that he was going to sell the house," she explained. "I needed to leave, and he was moving. Since that time, eight years ago, I've been on my own." She lived on $820 in SSDI each month, which she supplemented with part-time, low-wage jobs as a customer service representative and at a pet boarding service. Ellen explained that one of the boarding service customers offered her a cheap place to rent. "I am renting a home from a former client. Because she was a former client, I have insanely reduced rent. [But] she's moving back in, in a couple months and has let me know that she doesn't want a roommate. . . . I really don't want to move again, but I don't have a choice." Despite working thirty-five hours per week and receiving SSDI, Ellen may have a difficult time finding affordable housing in her area.

Vanessa and Ellen both highlight the challenges low-income households face when relying on social ties for housing-related aid. Power asymmetry between guests and hosts remained a salient issue for the housing insecure during the pandemic (Harvey 2018; Harvey, Dunifon,

and Pilkauskas 2021). Vanessa is expected to do unpaid household labor and childcare in exchange for housing, which makes it impossible for her to gain financial independence. Ellen secured housing for a period of time, yet her housing stability rested solely on the goodwill of her former client. Moreover, a novel infectious disease created new risks for doubled-up households.

The Role Landlord Flexibility During the Pandemic

Others who had difficulty accessing pandemic relief policies tried to get financial reprieve through their relationships with landlords. With such an unprecedented crisis, many respondents reported that their landlords were willing to grant them flexibility when they had difficulty making rent. Isabel is a Black woman in her fifties living in the Midwest. She was interviewed during the first few weeks of the pandemic, when pandemic aid policies were only just beginning. Isabel was furloughed from her job and immediately felt the strain on her finances. She qualified for an additional $600 in Unemployment Insurance each week through Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation, but she found it almost impossible to get quick access to the resources she needed. "You know what? That process was . . . at first it was a little difficult because, you know, it is hard to get in touch with them." Isabel turned to a former coworker to learn how to navigate the unemployment system. With her coworker's guidance, Isabel was able to file her claim. She had not yet received checks and remained confused about the program. "I got the letter," she explained. "I was approved for a certain amount which I didn't understand. . . . [I think] I hit the wrong button, because that is not what they said—plus $600—that is not what they sent me. So we will see. I can provide. I am just going to wait until I see what I get." But she needed relief quickly in order to keep up with her bills and maintain her housing. "I am going to be totally honest with you," she said. "I am starting to worry about my future because I don't have any savings."

Isabel drew on her good relationship with her landlord. "I let them know that I am off work and for I don't know how long," she ex-

plained. "And they told me not to worry about it. I am going to get a little bit of income and I am going to certainly pay them, and they said, 'Just work. Don't worry about it.' They just want everybody to be safe and healthy at this time and that is great. I think that is wonderful." Isabel alluded to the fact that the pandemic played a role in her landlord's flexibility. "The landlords, property managers are really understanding, especially at this time," she explained. For Isabel, relief from the federal or state government wasn't quick enough but her landlord seemed to understand and she felt secure in her tenure for now.

Isabel's case illustrates a common refrain from low-income renters in the AVP. Despite the influx of government funds available for pandemic relief, individuals who qualified for state or federal aid found it difficult to maneuver through all the bureaucratic hoops needed to gain access to benefits. Even when households did successfully navigate the system, they encountered critical delays. Reports from that time estimated that less than 40 percent of people who had successfully submitted Unemployment Insurance payments had received payments within twenty-one days, a stark contrast to the more than 90 percent of filers receiving payments within that time before the pandemic.[4] For many who qualified, government programs failed to provide timely relief. Isabel needed to rely on her former coworker and her landlord for help and largess while awaiting her entitlements.

Robert is a White man in his fifties living alone in the Midwest. The pandemic drastically affected his income. Before the pandemic, he reported receiving $800 per month in overtime pay. But his work had cut overtime and he explained, "I'm having a lot harder time making ends meet. And part of that is because of where I work at, I'm not getting any overtime. So, at just straight time at $14.75 an hour for forty hours a week, I roughly take home about $448 (per week) after taxes are done." Robert said he was in a tough spot financially, leaving him to strategize which bills to pay and which to put

off each month. "There are times when I have to decide, am I going to eat? Am I going to put gas in the car? Well, I got to put gas in the car because I have to get back and forth to work, otherwise, I don't have any money." Robert's predicament highlights a different type of challenge for low-income renters during the pandemic. Although he didn't lose his job, he did lose overtime and the additional income he relied on to pay his bills. Despite this financial hardship, Robert was still working full time and therefore did not qualify for means-tested programs in his state.

However, the unprecedented nature of the crisis provided some opportunities for Robert to ask for flexibility from lenders.

[If] I'm not going to be able to pay that this month, let me call him and see if I can get them to move that. As a matter of fact, I just did that with my car payment a couple months ago. And I said, "Is there any way we can take this month's payment and move it to the end of the loan?" And the guy is like, "Let me check things out." [And he] comes back on the phone and says, "You know what? We'll do that for two months." . . . I've done that with other bills where I've called up somebody I've owed and said, "Hey, I know you have a real tough time here and it's because of COVID. Is it possible that we can either reduce the payment or move the payment to the end?" But for the most part, people have been really helpful about that and like, "Yeah, sure, not a problem."

Although the pandemic exacerbated Robert's financial precarity, he has used the pandemic in successfully negotiating for new terms on his existing debts.

In both Isabel's and Robert's cases, their landlords did not alert them to any pandemic-related rent relief policies. The landlords themselves may have been unaware of such policies, but it is also possible that landlords were more willing to make informal arrangements with tenants who kept some portion of rent pay-

4. Greg Iacurci, "He was stuck in unemployment 'limbo' for four months. Then came $23,000 in benefits," CNBC Personal Finance, August 15, 2020, https://www.cnbc.com/2020/08/15/coronavirus-mans-23000-in-unemployment-pay-delayed-four-months.html (accessed March 10, 2024).

ments flowing. Landlords may have preferred new terms on existing leases in lieu of informing tenants of pandemic policies, such as eviction moratoria, that would have empowered tenants to make other decisions about when and how much rent to pay.

Tom is a divorced White man in his mid-thirties living with one of his two sons in an apartment in the western United States. Throughout his adult life he had experienced bouts of financial strain. He reported being heavily in debt and owing child-support payments. The pandemic had thrown his household into crisis when his hours working at a furniture company were cut. To stay afloat, Tom often strategically pays a portion of his bills, even if he cannot pay them in full. "So, for instance, in order to pay what I could with the more essential things, I would pay half on the phone bill. Then out of my next check, [I] pay the other half plus the late fee. It's more expensive that way, but it's the only way that I can balance my budget with what I have to work with when I have it," Tom explained. "So, for instance, I didn't pay utilities last month. So [now] I'm gonna try to chip away at that. These are all things that I was expecting with the tax return [and stimulus check] to be able to at least break even on and start afresh for the year." Both his tax return and his stimulus were garnished to pay child support for his second son, of whom he is a noncustodial parent. Like Robert, Tom is also strategically managing late payments on a variety of bills and debts. Many states, including the ones both men live in, provided protections for certain types of bills in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Tom's state in the Northwest provided some utilities assistance programs and put policies in place that prevented utilities from disconnecting clients for nonpayment. However, late payments continue to accumulate and eventually need to be paid in full when protections end. Although these pandemic-era programs provided crucial short-term relief for low-income renters like Tom, they are temporary.

In addition to struggling to pay his bills, Tom relies on flexibility from his landlord to stay housed. At the time of the interview he was behind on rent, owing $600. He explained that his landlord "knows I'm good for it. She sees me get up and go to work every day. I communicate with her regularly. . . . She's actually been very cool through all of this, understanding that I have to cycle some debt for a little while until I can stabilize when things hopefully go back to normal. . . . If it weren't for the fact that my landlord is being good and working with me, we'd probably be on the brink of homelessness." Tom knows that his landlord's generosity has limits. When asked whether he thinks she will continue to be understanding, he replied, "Depends on if I continue to live up to the plan that I proposed to her." He is hoping for a large tax return in the next year to reset and "start afresh." Although some landlords can occasionally set aside profit maximization to work out plans with tenants, Tom's situation is fundamentally unstable in the long term, depending mostly on his landlord's largess.

The stories of Tom, Robert, and Isabel highlight the importance of considering how the pandemic shaped housing insecurity and household finances. Their experiences suggest that the pandemic indirectly shaped strategies to address housing insecurity by mobilizing their loose ties with landlords and lenders. These relationships provided immediate relief, but they also put tenants in a precarious long-term position. Unless their household finances change, their housing stability depends on the good will of others.

DISCUSSION

Housing insecurity was on the rise before the COVID-19 pandemic, but the public health emergency deepened patterns of instability. Acknowledging the dramatic changes in the housing market and the economy in 2020, this article used AVP interviews to examine how low-income households experienced housing insecurity during the early part of the pandemic. We find that the nature of housing insecurity did not fundamentally change. Low-income households continued to be anxious about paying rent and were forced to move for similar reasons documented in pre-pandemic research (see DeLuca and Rosen 2022). Furthermore, we did not find that the pandemic changed low-income households' strategies for mitigating housing insecurity. Households relied on their social networks in various ways to

avoid eviction or buffer against major housing-related changes to their finances. There were some differences in how low-income renter households navigated their relationships with their landlords during the pandemic. Additionally, low-income households in our sample benefited from novel state expenditures during the public health crisis.

Research before the pandemic indicated that government housing assistance was generally effective at reducing housing insecurity for households who could get it. Public housing and Housing Choice Vouchers can provide affordable and stable housing but are simply not available to most households with acute housing needs. Rental assistance made available through the CARES Act and ARPA, as well as the expansion of the existing social safety net programs, helped some low-income households in the AVP sample avoid housing insecurity during the pandemic. Collectively, COVID-19 related policies made more than $46 billion in emergency rental assistance available to eligible renters and allocated billions more for emergency housing vouchers.

Despite this influx of billions of federal dollars to alleviate housing insecurity, renters in our sample rarely mentioned these programs as they discussed their housing situations. Similarly, they rarely discussed policies such as the eviction moratorium, rental assistance, and pauses on utility disconnection. By contrast, many participants talked about the impact of other social programs that did not directly target housing, such as expansions in Unemployment Insurance, SNAP benefits, and stimulus payments. There are at least two potential explanations for this absence. On one hand, it is possible that despite all of this public investment in housing programs in the wake of COVID-19, many of the participants in the AVP sample simply did not access these programs, which therefore did little to improve housing insecurity. On the other hand, it is possible that people received these benefits without knowing or parsing the direct source. Interviewees may refer to resources they received without attributing it to any particular program. For example, programs providing health insurance were routinely described as medical assistance rather than specified as Medicare, Medicaid, or another government-specific program. Because federal dollars are often distributed through state and local government and organizations, and the amorphous character of these programs produces a fragmented constituency where recipients are unable to identify the sources of their aid, rental assistance flowing through COVID relief funds may not have been understood as such. This could have policy feedback effects and potentially limit future public pressure for federal aid, particularly surrounding housing.

Taken together, our work demonstrates how pandemic increases in government aid, by providing more financial stability overall, gave some households, though not all, a reprieve from the constant stress of living paycheck to paycheck. However, the means-tested nature of these programs and their administrative burdens left many people in need without crucial support.

Limitations

Although the data from the AVP enabled us to peer into the lives of low-income households as they address housing insecurity, the analysis has two important limitations: the trade-off of breadth versus depth and the limited size of the final sample.

AVP interviews provide a great deal of breadth in understanding the financial lives of respondents but limited opportunity for researchers to explore processes of housing insecurity in great depth. Most interviews touched on housing issues, but only a handful explored them in detail. Where we, as housing scholars, may have asked follow-up questions at specific moments during the interviews, AVP interviewers largely kept to the script. This limitation is significant. Opportunities were ample for interviewers with deeper knowledge of housing programs and policies to ask follow-up questions that could have provided more data on housing insecurity. When interviewees were confused about the source of their assistance or the types of government program used, a more experienced housing researcher might have clarified confusion with the interviewee. A more housing-centric research project could have drawn on theories and research, including those presented in this article, to ask more di-

rectly about housing insecurity and the effect of public policy on housing outcomes. In short, the AVP's greatest strength turns out also to be its weakness. The breadth of the survey left little room for in-depth probing on all of the many topics that interviews covered.

In contrast, a distinct advantage of the AVP is its sample size and sampling logic. In a typical qualitative research project, the research team is unable to interview such a large, nationally representative sample of respondents. That said, given the subsample that our question required, we ultimately relied on a relatively small number of respondents: low-income renters who were interviewed after the start of the pandemic. Given the time-intensive nature of reading these transcripts and coding the full transcripts for housing-related issues, especially given that members of our research team were not involved in the data collection process, the large sample of the AVP was ultimately of limited use. In fact, given the resources invested in reading and coding transcripts, our research team may have been better off conducting fewer in-depth interviews, building from our first critique, than relying on the larger, broader sample of the AVP. Too often, the transcripts contained very little information about housing and the breadth of topics covered meant few opportunities to probe on housing-related topics when they arose. This limited our ability to make systematic claims about variation (such as by race-ethnicity, location, household composition, age, documentation status) in the experiences of low-income renter households. We were unable to understand more systematically the ways that demographic characteristics or geographic locations affected the ability of sample households to maintain stable housing during the pandemic. Nevertheless, the interview database may prove to be a treasure trove for topics that are more prominently featured in the interviews.

Even with these limitations, the AVP stands alone as a unique large-scale qualitative dataset using careful national sampling, transparent data collection processes, and the best practices of interviewing. Future work with this dataset will be most successful if it is guided by questions that are centrally featured in the interview guide and make use of the large sample size to take full advantage of the strengths of the dataset.

CONCLUSION

Using a novel large-scale qualitative dataset, we examine experiences of housing insecurity during the pandemic. Interestingly, even though housing insecurity increased during this period for many low-income renters, households' responses to the instability did not change dramatically. That is, households relied on many of the same strategies documented in the literature: social ties and doubling up, negotiating with landlords, and reliance on housing and financial assistance programs. Despite this continuity, some key differences related to each of these strategies during the pandemic were apparent. Doubling up proved especially difficult and straining on both guests and hosts during the public health emergency; landlords were at times more willing to negotiate than in nonemergency times; and respondents reported that increased nonhousing aid created new opportunities for housing security.

Ultimately though, our findings demonstrate that even an enormous public health shock did not fundamentally change the nature of housing insecurity in the United States. We argue that this is the case for two reasons. First, housing insecurity was already dire among low-income Americans. The housing affordability crisis predates the pandemic and low-income renters have been crafting strategies to find and keep affordable housing for quite some time. So, although housing insecurity threatened many more Americans than it had in the past, it did so in fairly nonnovel ways. Second, federal and local programs launched to address housing insecurity may have actually accomplished some of what they set out to do: prevent a tsunami of evictions and mitigate some of the worst housing outcomes.

Our findings show that challenges to maintaining stable housing are deeply intertwined with household finances more generally. Low-income households face a great deal of financial strain and the cost of housing is a central component of this strain. Increased direct cash support via non-housing-related programs helped stabilize housing for many of our re-

spondents, demonstrating the need for and viability of expanding existing cash transfer programs. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic showed that the government can expand aid that helps stabilize low-income households. It should continue to do so in the effort to combat housing insecurity and poverty more generally.

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Caregiving in a Crisis: Mothers' Parenting Experiences and the Persistence of Class-Based Parenting During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Mounting research has revealed how the labor of caregiving and parenting in the United States fell disproportionately to mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic, with negative impacts on mothers' personal and professional well-being. Here, we advance this growing body of work by examining how mothers' pandemic-related parenting and caregiving experiences differed across socioeconomic status. We ask the degree to which mothers' class-based parenting approaches persisted or dissipated in the wake of the pandemic. Drawing on in-depth interviews conducted with 130 mothers caring for children under eighteen in 2020–2021, we find that these parenting patterns largely continued into the pandemic, with mothers' socioeconomic and employment status shaping how they experienced and navigated this disruption and particularly how they managed competing paid and unpaid labor demands.

Keywords: motherhood, caregiving, parenting, socioeconomic status, COVID-19 pandemic

In February of 2021, just under a year after the COVID-19 pandemic began to sweep through the United States, the *New York Times* published an article with the headline "America's Mothers Are in Crisis." The piece echoed mounting research documenting the pandemic's negative impacts on mothers (Heggeness 2020; Landivar et al. 2020; Qian and Fuller 2020), including

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how it had exacerbated long-standing gendered inequalities in household work, caregiving duties, and labor-market participation (Cohen and Hsu 2020; Lewis 2020; Weber and Fuhrmans 2020).

Indeed, although the pandemic shook the entire U.S. labor force, it was mothers who disproportionately suffered the negative personal and professional consequences of pandemic-induced disruptions, including increased caregiving demands in the face of daycare shutdowns and school closures (Alon et al. 2020; Petts, Carlson, and Pepin 2021). As mothers consistently assumed more unpaid domestic labor during the pandemic—in particular, parenting and childcare responsibilities—they also underwent some of the steepest declines in employment and wages, highest levels of burnout, and heightened amounts of stress and anxiety (Calarco et al. 2021; Thomas et al. 2021; Collins et al. 2021). At the same time, the pandemic's harms to mothers were inequitably distributed, with low-income, Black, and Latina mothers—who were disproportionately represented in low-wage positions within the frontline service and hospitality industries—experiencing some of the steepest declines in employment and earnings as well as the slowest rates of recovery (Goldman et al. 2021; Lim and Zabek 2021; Moen, Pedtke, and Flood 2020; Thomas et al. 2021).

Over the past four years, robust quantitative and qualitative scholarship has documented the pandemic's varied negative impacts on mothers, including variation in their pandemic-related experiences and outcomes across society (Averett 2021; Hertz, Mattes, and Shook 2021; Racine et al. 2022; Radey, Langenderfer-Magruder, and Brown Speights 2021; Rinaldo and Whalen 2023; Zanhour and Sumpter 2020). Here we build on this mounting literature to advance a more nuanced understanding of the diversity of mothers' pandemic experiences, with a focus on how their parenting approaches in particular were patterned and shaped by their resources and broader contexts. Drawing on in-depth interview data with 130 mothers caring for children under eighteen collected through the American Voices Project (AVP) in 2020–2021, we ask two questions. First, how did mothers across socioeconomic status (SES) ex-

perience disruptions to their caregiving during the pandemic? Second, as mothers navigated those disruptions, to what degree did class-based parenting approaches (Hays 1998; Lareau 2003) persist or fall away?

BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered significant disruptions to mothers' work and caregiving responsibilities. In this section, we discuss pandemic-related trends in mothers' employment and caregiving throughout the pandemic, as well as research on classed patterns of parenting before and during the pandemic.

The Pandemic and Disruptions to Mothers' Employment and Parenting

In the United States, mothers bore the disproportionate burdens of job losses and reductions in paid work hours (Dang and Nguyen 2021; Carlson, Petts, and Pepin 2022). In April 2020, maternal employment plunged by 15.7 percent, versus 9.6 percent for fathers (Landivar and DeWolf 2022), and even when mothers remained in the labor force, their average time in paid work decreased (Woodbridge, Um, and Duys 2021). From February 2020 to April 2020, the average number of hours worked per week fell by a factor of more than 1.5 for employed mothers with minor children, relative to little change among working fathers (Collins et al. 2020).

Gendered labor-market outcomes and trajectories during the pandemic stemmed in part from the fact that mothers took on most of the caregiving amid sudden school and daycare closures (Carlson and Petts 2021). Not only were mothers seen as the "natural" and "practical" caregiver over fathers (Calarco et al. 2021), but their jobs were also viewed as more flexible than fathers', leading to the expectation—and reality—that mothers would leave their jobs or reduce their work hours to accommodate more childcare needs during the workday (Rinaldo and Whalen 2023; Heggeness 2020). Even when mothers continued to work full time, they still provided the majority of pandemic childcare (Zamarro and Prados 2021). Although married couples with children became slightly more egalitarian in their caregiving early in the pandemic (Carlson, Petts, and Pepin 2022), moth-

ers significantly increased their caregiving as the pandemic continued (Goldin 2022), spending fifteen more hours per week on caregiving and household tasks than fathers (Krentz et al. 2020).

Mothers' pandemic caregiving experiences were also patterned across socioeconomic status. Mothers from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were especially likely to lose their jobs or have their shifts cut (Alon et al. 2020; Tüzemen 2021). Also, despite an initial cash income infusion through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act in Spring 2020, families with children near, at, or below the poverty line fared worst (Parolin et al. 2022). Latina and Black mothers also had the largest initial declines in employment rates, falling 21.2 percent and 15.2 percent respectively in April 2020 relative to February 2020 (DeWolf and Landivar 2022). Also, mothers of young school-age children (age six through twelve) experienced the steepest declines in employment rates and greatest reductions in work hours (Collins et al. 2020; Kocchar 2020). These paid and unpaid labor inequities were partially related to mothers' varied pre-pandemic employment and caregiving situations, including long-standing occupational segregation that has resulted in women's overrepresentation in service sectors and industries—all of which were more likely to close, reduce workers' hours, or lay workers off entirely (Alon et al. 2020; Ruppanner et al. 2021). Low-income, Black, and Latina mothers were also most likely to be employed in vulnerable industries (Gemelas and Davison 2022), and White and Asian women had greater access to remote work (U.S. Department of Labor 2022).

Mothers' Experiences of Caregiving and Parenting During the Pandemic

These disruptions to mothers' employment, work hours, and work arrangements affected their caregiving experiences. On the one hand, the pandemic upended normal and reliable parenting routines, with the sudden closure and ongoing unreliability of in-person school and daycare options in 2020 and 2021 driving families to turn to more informal types of childcare, including nannies, tutors, older children, and extended family members while working (Zang, Yang, and Calarco 2022). Just under two-thirds of parents in one study reported relying on some form of informal childcare during the pandemic (Zang, Yang, and Calarco 2022).

For mothers with school-age children, unprecedented school closures and a move to virtual schooling also generated a new responsibility for mothers themselves to shoulder, namely, the monitoring and supporting their children's schooling (Clark et al. 2021; Garbe et al. 2020). For mothers working remotely, such workplace flexibility was a double-edged sword (MacEachen, Polzer, and Clarke 2008; Noonan and Glass 2012; Towers et al. 2006; Chung 2022) that resulted in more responsibility for managing children's schooling as well as more work-family conflict by blurring boundaries (Glavin and Schieman 2012). Given mothers' disproportionate responsibilities at home, working from home appeared to widen gender gaps in housework and childcare by providing mothers with even more time to engage in these tasks—particularly if they were the only parent working remotely (Alon et al. 2020; Chung et al. 2021). In fact, during the pandemic, mothers with less flexible work schedules appeared to share childcare more evenly with their partners than mothers with more flexibility (Martucci 2021).

Managing children's schooling from home presented new and significant challenges for mothers. Although some reported enjoying bonding with their children while assisting them with school, mothers also felt overwhelmed and underprepared to supervise their children's learning (San Jose, Concepcion, and San Jose 2021). Additionally, mothers who found themselves unexpectedly homeschooling their children were less able to work themselves (Petts et al. 2021). Parents described difficulties with balancing responsibilities, childrens' motivation, content accessibility, and learning outcomes (Garbe et al. 2020). Remote-working mothers and single mothers reported feeling additional strain in managing paid and unpaid labor demands and increased feelings of guilt and stress (Smith 2022; Hertz, Mattes, and Shook 2021; Zanhour and Sumpter 2022). Low-income mothers continued to rely on informal support networks during the pandemic; however, when they faced financial con-

straints, their family and friends did as well, limiting the support their networks could provide (Radey et al. 2022). They were thus forced to make childcare arrangements they felt increased their children's risk of COVID-19 infections, which contributed to feelings of frustration and fear (Radey et al. 2021).

Intensive Mothering, Natural Growth, and Concerted Cultivation in the COVID-19 Pandemic

Although mothers with the greatest access to financial, social, and institutional resources were arguably best poised to adapt to the challenging circumstances of the pandemic, they also reported ongoing stress related to trying to meet the normative ideal of intensive mothering (Cummins and Brannon 2022). This ideology remains the prevailing standard in the United States for "good" motherhood; it specifies that mothers must be children's primary caregivers, regard their children as priceless, and use child-centered, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive childrearing methods (Hays 1998; Damaske 2013). Mothers' embrace of these standards has tended to occur among middle- and upper-middle-class families and has been associated with the hands-on concerted cultivation approach to childrearing through which mothers ensure their children are involved in a multitude of age-appropriate extracurricular activities to teach them important life skills (Lareau 2003). This cultivation can also be ensured by employed mothers through extensive mothering, whereby mothers outsource some of their child's development while reframing good mothering as maintaining their role as the orchestrator of their childrens' lives, which allows them to remain in the paid labor market and maintain their standing as a "good mother" (Christopher 2012).

Yet because intensive and extensive mothering standards are largely informed by neoliberal, Western, White, middle-class values, their availability to and resonance with mothers across society varies. Although some research suggests that mothers of all socioeconomic positions would prefer to raise their children intensively or extensively (Ishizuka 2019), other work has found that mothers' real-life parenting practices can diverge from intensive expectations due to a host of structural and economic circumstances or different community standards (Lankes 2022; Bennett, Lutz, and Jayaram 2012). Scholars have identified defensive and inventive mothering as ideologies more often used by lower-income mothers, allowing them to use resourceful and inventive strategies to provide for their children's basic needs and deflect stigma amidst ongoing financial scarcity and insecurity (Elliott and Bowen 2018; Randles 2021). Such ideologies also tend to be associated with the accomplishment of natural growth approach to childrearing, whereby mothers give their children more self-directed time and close extended family connections, allowing children's development to unfold in more freeform and unstructured ways (Lareau 2003).

Growing research suggests that the pandemic challenged and complicated how mothers worked to achieve good motherhood and childrearing. Mothers who practiced intensive mothering during the pandemic were especially likely to report increased feelings of stress, anxiety, and guilt, and frustrations with themselves and their children (Calarco et al. 2020). Intensive mothering applied to new domains during this time, including managing children's remote schooling; this became a source of conflict as mothers created elaborate schedules and held their children accountable for staying on top of their schoolwork and homework (Calarco et al. 2020). In comparison, mothers who did not feel pressured to intensively mother their children, or did not have work and family conflict due to losing their jobs or experiencing childcare disruptions, actually reported additional time with their children as a source of joy (Calarco et al. 2020).

Research suggests that one central way mothers dealt with the new realities of caregiving during the pandemic was to adapt aspects of their parenting, be it through finding a new routine, or carving out more time with their children when everyone was stuck at home (Cummins and Brannon 2022). Additionally, mothers adapted by choosing to "give in" to screen-time requests from their children, and accepted the fact that their children's usage of screens would be elevated to deal with the

stress of the pandemic and the social distancing restrictions in place (Findley et al. 2022). Technology, in addition to limited physically distanced in-person interactions, also allowed mothers and their children to stay connected to family and friends outside the home (Miller et al. 2022). Indeed, amid pandemic-induced challenges, it is also important that mothers' experiences of the pandemic were not exclusively negative. Mothers have reported that the pandemic allowed them the opportunity to spend more time with their families (Haskett et al. 2022) and deepen connections with their children and people in their support networks (San Jose, Concepcion, and San Jose 2021; Radey et al. 2022).

The Present Study
Taken together, the literature points to considerable nuance and variation in mothers' pandemic caregiving experiences across socioeconomic statuses. Here we extend this literature by asking the degree to which mothers' well-established class-based parenting patterns persisted or fell away in the wake of the pandemic. Indeed, research points to two plausible answers. First, work on parenting adaptations suggests that the pandemic likely disrupted these patterns by making intensive parenting too difficult for higher-SES mothers or easier for lower-SES mothers to engage in concerted cultivation because they had more time with their children at home. However, research highlighting the durability of the intensive mothering ideology into the pandemic suggests the opposite—that these patterns largely persisted through the pandemic because higher-SES mothers remained better equipped

to practice concerted cultivation than their lower-SES counterparts. Although the latter possibility suggests a resilience of classed parenting approaches, even in times of crisis, the former suggests that such patterns can be more easily disrupted by contextual forces.

DATA AND METHODS
This study uses data from the American Voices Project, a large-scale, mixed-methods study of everyday life in the United States. A joint initiative of the Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality, Princeton University's Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, and the American Institutes for Research, the AVP aimed to deliver a comprehensive portrait of life in rural, suburban, and urban communities. It is a stratified address-based sample, with households randomly drawn from selected census block groups and high-poverty sites oversampled (for more detail, see the introduction). In this article, we use the in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted between March 2020 and May 2021 with all 130 mothers caring for children ages seventeen or under in their home.

The sample is racially, geographically, and socioeconomically diverse (see table 1). Among the mothers in our sample, 44.6 percent are non-Hispanic White, 21.5 percent are non-Hispanic Black, 26.2 percent are Hispanic of any race, and the remaining are non-Hispanic Asian, two or more races, or missing on race-ethnicity.[1] Mothers vary in their geographic location, with 16.9 percent residing in the Northeast, 13.1 percent in the Midwest, 23.1 percent in the West, and 46.9 percent in the South. Two-thirds are married (46.2 percent) or cohabiting (20 percent).[2]

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1. Respondents gave a wide range of responses when asked with which races and ethnicities they identify; we describe individuals as Black if they stated Black or African American, White if they stated White or Caucasian, and Hispanic if they stated Hispanic or Latina.

2. There were a few notable key sociodemographic differences between lower- and higher-SES groups. First, the higher-SES group had a higher proportion of non-Hispanic White mothers than the lower-SES group: roughly two-thirds of higher-SES mothers were non-Hispanic White, with the remaining third split largely split between non-Hispanic Black, Hispanic of any race, and non-Hispanic Asian. In contrast, the lower-SES group was roughly split evenly between non-Hispanic White, non-Hispanic Black, and Hispanic of any race; additionally, a few mothers in the lower-SES group were multiracial or non-Hispanic Asian. Second, among lower-SES mothers, more White mothers were married than Hispanic or Black mothers, and more White and Hispanic mothers stayed at home than Black mothers. However, when it came to income, lower-SES Black mothers had higher incomes than lower-SES Hispanic or White mothers.

Table 1. Sample Sociodemographic Characteristics, *N* = 130

	Percent		Percent		Percent
SES		**Age**		**Employment status**	
Lower	67.7	18–34	41.5	Full-time	36.2
Higher	32.3	35–44	40.8	Part-time	13.8
		45 or older	>16	Unemployed or out of workforce	50.0
Race-ethnicity					
Non-Hispanic White	>43.8	**Region**		**Household income last month**[c]	
Non-Hispanic Black	21.5	South	46.9	$0–2,000	45.4
Hispanic of any race	26.2	West	23.1	$2,001–4,000	17.7
Other[a]	**	Northeast	16.9	$4,001–6,000	>10
		Midwest	13.1	>$6,000	16.2
Marital status					
Married	46.2	**Born in United States**		**Employed mothers' work format**	
Cohabiting	20.0	Yes	86.2	In person	60.3
Single, never married	17.7	No	13.8	Remote or hybrid	39.7
Other[b]	>13				
		Education		**Age of children**[d]	
Number of children		Less than high school	12.3	0–5	33.5
1	30.8	High school or GED	29.2	6–11	33.5
2	28.5	Some college	25.4	12–17	32.9
3	25.4	Bachelor's degree or	>30		
4 or more	15.4	higher		**Receipt of federal benefits**	
				Yes	73.1
				No	26.9

Source: Authors' tabulation.

Note: SES = socioeconomic status. Not all values for each category add to one hundred due to missing data. All counts less than eleven not specified to protect confidentiality (**).

[a] Includes non-Hispanic Asian, Other, and two or more races.

[b] Includes, divorced, separated, or widowed.

[c] For households that failed to report all component income variables, the value for "income last month" was imputed. Multiple imputation was used, with fifty implicates. The regressors were a quadratic in respondent age, race, household size, education, homeownership status, employment status, urban status, and region of residence. The household was assigned to the most common bracket among the fifty implicates.

[d] Many mothers have multiple children; *N* of children = 194. Of the 194 children in the sample, ages are roughly equally distributed among age groups.

We rely on mothers' education to proxy families' socioeconomic status. Although education and income are often considered together to do so, we chose to only use maternal education for two reasons, one theoretical and one practical. First, maternal education is highly theoretically relevant for class-based parenting approaches and child outcomes (McLanahan 2004; McLanahan and Jacobsen 2014; Harding, Morris, and Hughes 2015; Prickett and Augustine 2016). Second, because our sample had 10 percent missingness on income (and some of the reported incomes introduced validity concerns for this measure), education served as a more reliable indicator of SES than income in this data set. Mothers with a bachelor's degree or higher were designated as higher SES (32.6 percent of the sample), and those with some college or less were designated as lower SES (67.1 percent). Full-time employed mothers make up 36.2 percent of the sample, part-time employed mothers make up 13.8 percent, and unemployed. Mothers or those who were out of the workforce make up 50 percent. Among

mothers in the labor force, 60.3 percent work in person and 39.7 percent work remotely or on a hybrid basis.

Following institutional ethics approval, individuals were recruited in a letter mailed to their address and follow-up phone calls. The interviewers, all of whom received training in best-practices of in-depth interviewing and other qualitative methods, were a mix of advanced degree-holders, graduate students, college graduates, and undergraduate students. All interviews from March 2020 onward were conducted over the phone, audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and deidentified. All respondent names in this article are pseudonyms. When foreign-language interpreters were required, interviewers administered a shortened protocol. Respondents' economic and demographic data were recorded by hand and digitally entered after the interview. Depending on the wave of data collection, respondents were paid between $60 and $140 for participating.

Following informed consent, the interview began with a prompt, "Tell me the story of your life," and continued with questions about individuals' daily patterns, routines, neighborhoods, and lived experiences. Data for this article emerged primarily in the protocol sections focusing on family, daily routines, and stress, worry, and emotional well-being. Certain questions in the protocol were particularly generative for our analysis. In response to the question "What has life been like since the coronavirus/COVID-19 became an issue in the United States?", mothers discussed pandemic-related changes and disruptions in their lives, including specific challenges at home and work. When asked about recent changes in their daily routines and their children's routines, mothers described their detailed, day-to-day experiences which informed our understanding of classed differences in mothers' lives during the pandemic. Mothers were also asked, "Tell me about each of your children's experiences in school," which elicited responses about the virtues and difficulties of virtual and in-person schooling. Three questions that focused on mothers' mental health revealed how mothers were coping with pandemic-induced stressors.

Data Analysis

We began our analysis by conducting a full review of the relevant 130 interview transcripts, paying particular attention to the protocol sections that delved into mothers' life histories, family and supports, daily routines, and stress, worry, and emotional well-being, as well as the specific COVID-19 questions on recent changes. Our first read involved open coding the interviews to identify insights related to our central research questions on mothers' experiences caregiving during the pandemic. Given our expectation that different stages of the pandemic were qualitatively different for mothers, we classified transcripts into five pandemic seasons based on when the interview was conducted: spring 2020, summer 2020, fall 2020, winter 2020–2021, and spring 2021. Our team divided the interviews among ourselves to code them chronologically, from spring 2020 through spring 2021, enabling an analysis of trends and patterns in mothers' experiences as the pandemic evolved over time.

We then coded the interview data using the qualitative analysis software NVivo. We approached data analysis abductively, through a process in which we moved iteratively back and forth between data and theory (Charmaz 2006; Timmermans and Tavory 2012). Conducting an abductive analysis meant that we were sensitized by previous research and theories about how and why mothers' pandemic experiences might be stratified across social groups; at the same time, we remained open to surprising or unexpected findings to emerge organically (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Given its appropriateness and efficiency for large-*N* studies and team-based qualitative work, we used a flexible coding approach (Deterding and Waters 2018; Gerson and Damaske 2021), beginning with an initial exploration of the data through indexing transcripts with broad codes related to motherhood and pandemic parenting and working to generate more specific conceptual categories, such as work and family conflict, pandemic schooling, and classed approaches to childrearing. We used the coding capabilities in NVivo to tag relevant sections of the interviews with high-level themes we developed based on our research question, such as classed parenting. This was

followed by more detailed coding where we applied more fine-grained, analytic codes—such as concerted cultivation and natural growth—to subsections of the text and used the index as a data reduction tool. We then divided transcripts into groups according to characteristics we found to be substantively important to caregiving and parenting approaches: respondents' socioeconomic and employment statuses. We read transcripts in these thematic categories for patterns within and across multiple groups. Through this process, we determined that one key dimension of variation in mothers' parenting pandemic experiences was employment status; based on this, we coded mothers as employed full time, employed part time, stay-at-home, or unemployed. For our analysis, we chose to group mothers who worked part time with stay-at-home mothers, given that their characteristics (including greatly reduced work hours) and parenting pandemic experiences were more similar to that group than to mothers who worked full time. As a final step in the analysis, we grouped respondents together into four categories and reviewed data on parenting experiences from respondents in each of the following categories to confirm our findings: higher-SES mothers working full time, higher-SES mothers working part time or staying at home, lower-SES mothers working full time, and lower-SES mothers working part time or staying at home.

FINDINGS

We begin by laying out the unique parenting context that mothers across socioeconomic status experienced due to the unprecedented nature of the pandemic, including worries about children's well-being and concerns about children and family members catching COVID-19. We then illuminate how the pandemic disrupted lower- and higher-SES mothers' caregiving and employment arrangements. Next, we show how mothers adapted their parenting approaches after these disruptions, and how these adaptations were shaped by both mothers' socioeconomic positions and their pre-pandemic parenting approaches. In doing so, we reveal how, despite the changed environment of parenting in the pandemic, mothers retained certain classed parenting practices—

that is, natural growth and concerted cultivation—based on inequality of resources and environmental characteristics that persisted into the pandemic. Throughout, we demonstrate how the challenges mothers across SES encountered and the work-family trade-offs they were forced to make varied by mothers' employment status.

The Unprecedented Context of Parenting Across Socioeconomic Status During a Pandemic

Mothers across the sample shared worries about children's well-being in the midst of social isolation and changing school modalities, as well as concerns about children and family members catching COVID-19. Consistent with prior work (Carlson et al. 2022; Gildner et al. 2021; Duh-Leong et al. 2022), mothers described being forced to make ongoing parenting decisions that demanded weighing the risks for their children. For all mothers, assessing these particular risks was emotional labor unique to pandemic times. Emily, a White higher-SES mother who worked as a government administrator, described her parenting as "making risk assessments all day long." She worried: "You know, is this safe? Is this a healthy choice for my child, for my husband, for our friends that we're close to?" Mothers also described feeling in a bind when considering the choice between their children's safety and in-person education. They were concerned about learning loss when children were enrolled in remote or hybrid schooling, but had to think about this in relation to continued health risks. Anna, a White higher-SES mother and special education teacher, lamented, "In trying to protect their safety from this virus, I worry that they will be forever affected and further harmed by the loss of education."

Mothers across backgrounds and geographic locations experienced difficulties figuring out how to keep their children busy amid institutional closures and stay-at-home directives. A central pandemic-related change mothers described was the inability to use public spaces and in-person educational activities that, before the pandemic, had been important to their children's development. Mothers expressed frustration that institutions such as li-

braries and zoos and extracurricular activities such as sports, musical ensembles, and clubs were no longer available for entertaining and occupying their children. This was particularly true during the first six months of the pandemic, and though schools returned to some in-person operational status in many states where mothers were interviewed by September of 2020, mothers across the country noted that other facilities and programs were slower to open. Mothers across the socioeconomic spectrum sought alternative options for their children, which ranged from educational to those designed primarily "to fill the time." Amy, a White, higher-SES stay-at-home mother of one shared, "COVID's definitely hampered a lot of our plans and ability to go out. Prior to COVID, we had a regular stream of play dates." Now, she explained, "I try to keep our activities different but basically, I'm entertaining her during the day while my husband's working." Efforts to keep children safe by limiting their time outside the home also demanded difficult trade-offs, most notably the loss of family gatherings with grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins, which had before the pandemic served as key forms of childcare, socializing, and joy (Miller et al. 2022).

Yet alongside these agonizing trade-offs, mothers also reported aspects of the pandemic as having some benefits, such as offering them more time with their families and children (San Jose, Concepcion, and San Jose 2021). Carly, a lower-SES Black mother of two, referred to the pandemic as a "blessing in disguise." One White lower-SES stay-at-home mother, Becca, described this silver lining: "We went into this year with the hope and the desire to spend more time together and to get to know each other better and just learn, as a family, who we are. This year has been awesome because we've been able to do that."

Other mothers shared how the pandemic allowed them time to stop and think as well as connect with family members. Angie, a higher-SES White mother of two, said the pandemic brought "life into perspective," and gave her more time for "reflection and pause"; meanwhile, Andrea, a higher-SES Black mother of three, noted that the pandemic provided an opportunity to "regroup and reconnect" with fam-

ily. Overall, even though the pandemic introduced new challenges and concerns for mothers across the spectrum, the interruptions it generated also afforded mothers the chance to reassess certain aspects of their parenting.

Pandemic Disruptions for Lower-SES Mothers

However, alongside these shared experiences was important variation across SES in how the pandemic disrupted mothers' lives. Relative to higher-SES mothers, for whom pandemic-induced financial concerns were discussed less often if at all, lower-SES mothers expressed more concerns about financial stressors (Kalil, Mayer, and Shah 2020). Unless they were on a fixed income from disability payments, they largely regarded lost wages or reduced shifts for partners or family members as contributing to household expenses. Mothers experienced such financial stressors as disruptive to their parenting, particularly because scarce financial resources made providing for children more challenging. Maria, a newly unemployed Hispanic mother, shared the economic impact of her layoff, noting that "I lost my job. Basically, the financial situation is not good. I'm having financial struggles and me and my kids constantly are getting sick." Lupita, a Hispanic mother of two, explained: "It's been tough, since we're at home without getting any income and . . . the little money we have, we're using it for food." Mothers reported difficulties getting bills paid, expressed frustrations over food stamps not covering the amount of food they needed, and described stress over waiting for unemployment payments that had not yet arrived.

Yet despite the financial challenges they described, lower-SES mothers varied in their characterizations of the pandemic's disruptiveness to their caregiving. Surprisingly, most did not describe or characterize the pandemic as uniquely disruptive from a parenting perspective. Instead, even though mothers reported the pandemic as challenging, they did not characterize it as the greatest challenge they had encountered in caring for their children. This was clearest among full-time employed, lower-SES mothers. Most (88 percent) of these mothers in our sample worked in-person jobs during the pandemic. Those whose jobs required them

to work in person described making adaptations that resembled the kinds of adaptations they had been making even before the pandemic. For instance, mothers took on night shifts to be available during the day for children, alternated with spouses to always have someone home with the children, or dropped their children off with family and friends during the day while they worked. That is, even when mothers' caregiving and work were in direct and clear conflict, they did not experience it as particularly unusual. For instance, Michelle, a Black mother who worked as a restaurant manager, decided after her shifts were cut early in the pandemic to just take time off and get unemployment benefits rather than work ten hours a week. She explained: "If I can't work during the time while they're in school, I prefer to work overnight. Most of my jobs have been overnight so that way I can have my days to do appointments, if I need to go because, you know, sometimes the school would call and you know, they're sick and I need to do that." Such adaptive strategies were familiar to these mothers from long before the pandemic began.

In particular, lower-SES mothers who continued to rely on family members or friends to watch their children described that little changed during the pandemic for them. These mothers did not have the option to leave their jobs in order to care for children because, as Jimena, a Hispanic mother of three, explained, "I have to work . . . I have to go out every day and see what we can do to save our household and our family." Jimena, like other mothers, relied on her family to provide crucial caregiving support. In her case, it was her elder son who offered this care; other mothers reported turning to grandparents, aunts, and neighbors. These mothers drew on their informal support networks to take on caregiving during irregular work hours, multiple jobs, or long shifts. Janae, a Black mother who worked as a certified nursing assistant, explained that her grandmother was her childcare: "I literally just get up, get ready for work, drop my sisters and my son off to my grandmother's house to be watched while I'm at work, get off work, maybe stop at a store or something, and pick them up." Similarly, Alicia, a Hispanic mother of three and cashier, related, "childcare is hard here. . . . but I

leave [my children] with my friend or my niece because they don't have school."

For lower-SES mothers who reported the pandemic as disruptive to their caregiving, it was less often because their jobs or work hours changed and more because the informal (and less expensive) childcare safety net they had relied on—that is, family, friends, and neighbors—came undone (Radey et al. 2022). Multiple mothers identified that the central challenge was that they were used to family members caring for their children, and the pandemic disrupted that. Daniella, a Hispanic mother of three who had left her job during the pandemic, explained that she "didn't work last year because we didn't have anyone to look after [the kids] due to the pandemic." Contrasting the pandemic to pre-pandemic times, she elucidated, "We would be able to go out to work with more ease, because we didn't have to think, 'who am I going to leave the kids with?' since we used to be able to resort to any friend or relative to look after them. But not anymore, since they don't want to get infected, we don't want them to get sick." Although most lower-SES mothers were familiar with challenges finding care for their children, the pandemic had a negative impact on their flexible strategies for securing that care.

Lower-SES Mothers and the Persistence of Natural Growth Parenting

Lower-SES mothers discussed a parenting style largely adaptive to the daily struggles engendered by the pandemic. Lower-SES mothers reported parenting broadly in line with a natural growth approach and adapted it to meet the unique constraints of the pandemic. Natural growth parenting allowed for more unstructured leisure time for children and fewer activities monitored or directed by adults. Lower-SES mothers described relatively independent children and few daily parental interventions, largely emblematic of a natural growth approach. For example, Coreen, a lower-SES Black stay-at-home mother, explained how her children basically kept their own daily schedules: "Their daily routine is like every day, certain time when they want to play the game and have certain time when they want to watch TV, have certain times when they want to eat again. . . .

[and] they're always on their phones." Similarly, Olivia, a Hispanic mother of three, illustrates that one natural growth-aligned parenting approach was to allow children to spend time on screens or playing outside if the living arrangement allowed: "They will just go and play outside. I let my son play his video game but to an extent. . . . He takes care of his pets. And the girls, my oldest, she always liked to stay in her room." However, not all lower-SES mothers kept to this free-range approach all the time, and some recounted efforts to find educational activities for their children while at home. For instance, Jazmin, a lower-SES White mother, described offering educational direction through mutual activities in the home: "I like to keep educational things around the house. . . . Do you guys want to draw? Do you want to do a puzzle? Do you want to, you know, do you want to play hangman, we'll play chess, we'll do different things like that."

A benefit of the natural growth parenting approach was that it was largely available during the pandemic as well as compatible with daycare shutdowns and remote schooling. Indeed, lower-SES mothers of school-age children generally noted that they left their children to manage schooling on their own, even trusting them to handle their school logins and assignments. They discussed relying on educational institutions to manage the bulk of the responsibility to teach children with minimal parental supervision or intervention. This was true among both employed and stay-at-home lower-SES mothers who reported counting on their children's teachers to manage children during online lessons and largely expecting their children to handle school, work, and virtual schooling themselves. Jill, a Hispanic employed mother of three, described her thoughts on monitoring education economically: "I even tell the teachers, well, if I was getting paid, like to make sure that my child is in school, then I don't have to work. But I'm not getting paid. I need to go to work when I need to go to work with my clear mind, like not worrying about [school]."

Significantly, lower-SES mothers who maintained their jobs from the beginning of the pandemic often did not have the availability and flexibility to supervise children's virtual schooling or activities because they worked outside the home. In these cases, there were few alternatives to natural growth; mothers simply could not be at home to constantly monitor children's schooling. Thus, lower-SES mothers relied on their informal network to be present for this schooling; mothers described children being supervised at a relative's or babysitter's home, by older siblings, or by the school-age children themselves. Full-time employed, lower-SES mothers also reported focusing more of their energy on arranging the patchwork of care necessary for them to keep their jobs—few of which had remote options—rather than on monitoring children's schooling. Jimena, a Hispanic mother of three, described the mental energy she devoted to ensuring someone could be with her daughter when she worked during the day: "My daughter is nine and I can't stay with her because if I don't go out and work, I can't pay household expenses, so I do pay for someone to care for her, not every day because since my son doesn't work right now he helps me with that."

Lower-SES mothers often described pursuing their pre-pandemic model of parenting as more challenging under the unique conditions: accomplishing natural growth is difficult in an environment where children do not have the freedom to be in shared public environments. Mothers related that being at home with their children all day could feel claustrophobic and boring, and even lead to negative interactions among family members. Mothers like Aliya, a Black mother of three, equated being stuck at home to being stuck in prison, noting the need to escape every so often: "And then when we absolutely can't take it anymore, we will go for a little ride in the car." Eliana, a Hispanic mother of one, reported that all of the extra time at home "does stress me out sometimes, thinking about, wow, I have a whole day and I have no idea what I'm going to do to entertain the small, needy human." During the summer in particular, when not even virtual school structured at least part of the day, mothers shared that their days lacked a routine. This was especially true for mothers who, because of their geographic locations, financial constraints, or both, lived in smaller apartments with little access to outdoor space. This relative

lack of daily structure became oppressive for some lower-SES stay-at-home mothers amid the need to socially distance and keep children safe.

Indeed, although some aspects of a natural growth approach to schooling and enrichment were largely achievable during the pandemic, many lower-SES mothers also expressed concerns about the absence of informal socialization in the neighborhood and community that had been important before the pandemic. They lamented the loss of family gatherings with grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins due to concerns about spreading COVID-19 during the pandemic. Lower-SES mothers were particularly worried about the transmission of COVID-19 to vulnerable relatives because so many of them personally knew someone who had died from the disease. Thus they found themselves without consistent and rich interaction with extended family. Daniella, a Hispanic stay-at-home lower-SES mother of three, described her children's loss of consistent interaction with extended family: "They don't interact with their cousins or friends now, we don't either. . . . The worst thing that happened to us this year was not being able to see my parents. My kids are the kind who love spending the holidays with their grandparents and due to this, they weren't able to."

Overall, almost all lower-SES mothers discussed concerns about their children feeling isolated, cooped up, and bored.

Pandemic Disruptions for Higher-SES Mothers

Unlike lower-SES mothers, higher-SES mothers rarely mentioned financial stressors as chief among their pandemic-related concerns or disruptive to their caregiving. Even after her husband's layoff, mothers like Kayleigh, a White mother of five, described the pandemic as an inconvenience rather than financially devastating. Similarly, Nicole, a White mother of two, explained about her family: "We're really lucky. It hasn't affected us financially at all. I wasn't working and my husband, although he worried it would affect his work, but it really didn't. . . . I think he actually earned more money last year than the previous year."

In contrast, the collision of work and family

in the home rose to the top of these mothers' list of concerns; relative to lower-SES mothers, a greater share of higher-SES mothers described the pandemic as uniquely disruptive to their caregiving. In particular, they reported that school shutdowns and daycare closures—which resulted in their children being home all day—made it impossible for them to both get their work done and give the right kind of care to their children. Higher-SES mothers felt that they were burning the candle at both ends and falling short as both employees and caregivers. Particularly those who worked remotely, and therefore were responsible for supervising children's schooling while working, reported that the pandemic was overwhelming and challenging. As Jennifer, a Black mother of two and a professor, explained, "I think a good word would be just overwhelmed, overall, very overwhelmed. There's just a lot going on, and you're just not able to get really anything done." Jennifer related feeling as if she wasn't "getting enough work done. You know that you need to do more, but you just physically can't do any more than what you're doing." Similarly, Andrea, a Black mother of three and an accountant, added how much more difficult her life at home became when she started working remotely and her children were doing remote school from home: "That became a little bit more difficult because, again, you're trying to homeschool now and then you're trying to work while you're at home because you're not off and then you're still trying to cook breakfast, lunch, and dinner and manage the home and then clean the home."

Andrea, echoing other higher-SES employed mothers, described the pandemic as a "stressful, stressful time" especially when it came to helping her children complete the school work packets their teachers sent home. Indeed, words such as *stress* and *stressful* repeatedly emerged among higher-SES mothers—even higher-SES stay-at-home mothers—as they described the new demands of having their children at home all day. When asked to explain why exactly she was feeling stressed, Elena, a Hispanic mother of three who left the workforce a few years before the pandemic, explained that it had to do with having her children home all day and being home herself: "My

kids being home all day, dealing with our new life, juggling taking my son to therapy, going to doctor's visits and stuff like that, making sure she's on Zoom at specific times, handling the massive load of homework. It's just a lot and then trying to deal with my own personal issues trying to, oh, I need to lose weight, I need to eat healthy, that kind of stuff."

Similarly, mothers said that having their children and spouses home all day significantly increased their housework and stress loads because others expected caregiving and household tasks from them during work hours. Martina, a Hispanic mother of three and managerial assistant, explained that "I think I'd be happy if work was to reopen again. Working from home I just have to be very selfish with my time on the clock. And that is a point of stress because my family sees I'm there and they expect me to be available to them for whatever it is."

Higher-SES employed and unemployed mothers' pre-pandemic experiences shaped their views and experiences of pandemic parenting. Compared with lower-SES mothers who reported being accustomed to continually making adaptations to navigate work and caregiving, higher-SES mothers were accustomed to having stronger boundaries between their work and caregiving and more consistent childcare, such as an arrangement where they worked while their children were at school or daycare. Most of these mothers did not describe making changes such as leaving children with family or taking on night shifts; instead, because of pandemic closures, they discussed navigating— many for the first time—trying to manage their jobs and caring for their children simultaneously and often under the same roof.

Overall, it was higher-SES stay-at-home mothers who seemed best structurally poised to navigate the challenges brought on by virtual schooling and childcare closures. This is not to say that higher-SES stay-at-home mothers didn't experience challenges: indeed, they echoed mothers across the socioeconomic spectrum in sharing their frustration with not having as many places to visit or activities to engage in with their children—as well as the ways that having family at home increased their workload. However, these mothers were less likely than their employed counterparts to de-

scribe these pandemic-related changes as stress-inducing and more likely to describe life as relatively normal and their daily routines as similar to the way they were before. When asked about recent changes in her daily routine due to the pandemic, Nicole, a White stay-at-home mother of two, said, "Oh, I don't know. It's pretty normal. They get up, they have breakfast, they do what they need to do in the morning. Now I'm driving them to school, but normally they would take the bus if we weren't in a pandemic. Then I pick them up and we hang out after school and they do their homework and I make dinner and a couple of nights a week, my son has soccer practice." In this case, the lack of transportation caused by the pandemic was not an issue for Nicole—she simply structured her day so she could do school drop-offs and pick-ups herself.

Overall, most higher-SES stay-at-home mothers reported that having children at home meant being able to spend more time with them than had been possible before the pandemic. Because tthey did not have to navigate the conflicting demands of paid work and care, they were better able to see the silver lining in the moments of togetherness with immediate family or spend an additional hour preparing for the week of virtual schooling with their children without a sense of guilt that they should be back on their own computer catching up on work.

Higher-SES Mothers and the Persistence of Concerted Cultivation Parenting

Higher-SES mothers discussed their childrearing in ways that were largely consistent with a concerted cultivation approach to parenting— and with how they had sought to parent their children before the pandemic. Yet concerted cultivation was less available and in many ways misaligned with the realities of pandemic parenting for working mothers. The blurring of lines between work and caregiving made it difficult for mothers to achieve concerted cultivation while carrying out their jobs the way they wanted; this led them to experience caregiving and work as being in the most direct and clear conflict. As Kathryn, a White mother of two, noted, she and her children were "often at the dining room table together. So, I will be doing

work and then when they need help, I just kind of stop whatever project I'm working on and go help them." Mothers who worked from home were particularly prone to interruptions to their work in order to help troubleshoot virtual schooling.

Yet these barriers did not lead mothers to abandon a concerted cultivation approach and adopt another approach more in line with natural growth and the challenges of the pandemic. Instead, higher-SES mothers described seeking to cultivate their children during the day while they were working. One way higher-SES mothers practiced concerted cultivation was enriching children's learning experiences. Mothers maintained concern about all aspects of their children's growth, whether social, emotional, or academic. As Julia, a Black mother of three, explained, "I spent a lot of time thinking about [my] kids, developmentally . . . we do things that match when they can understand developmentally." Other mothers echoed Julia in spending time providing academic enrichment opportunities to children. Veronica, a White mother of two, explained that she always spent time with her son, "reading books, and reading a magazine, National Geographic for kids, that sort of helps him . . . improve his reading skills." In fact, she reported how this additional investment led to a boost in his school performance: "His grades being in lockdown improved, because we were the ones who were like paying attention now to actually what he studies and also making sure he understands all the topics, whether it's math, or it's some other science, social science, social studies, so I think it was definitely more beneficial for him."

As Veronica noted, her child's academic performance actually improved during the pandemic thanks to the additional attention he received at home. Indeed, higher-SES mothers were often able to leverage the additional access to their children during the school day and provide further academic enrichment activities.

Pandemic closures meant that the majority of mothers were left with only outdoor or virtual activities for their children. Higher-SES mothers reported working within these constraints to find suitable outside extracurricular activities, such as swimming or park playdates for kids and their friends. Veronica noted that her older son had, in addition to soccer, "at least three different activities. He does Taekwondo once a week, . . . he does karate, then he does basketball." Rachel, a White mother of one, noted that she bought thousands of dollars of ski equipment for her family so they could exercise outside because there was little else to do outdoors in the winter, and the ski mountains were open.

Mothers also reported that virtual activities appealed to them because they could be attended without leaving the house and children were often able to log on their own. Mothers described children logging on remotely to attend Boy Scout meetings, Bible study, church, virtual therapy, and physical therapy. Mothers sought out educational videos online about cooking and cake decorating to develop their children's interests and talents. Mothers also talked about the in-person pods they set up with their children's friends for playdates and group activities to allow them to see their friends while mitigating the risks that COVID-19 infection posed. For example, one mother, Sejal, an Indian-American mother of two, noted that her children logged onto Zoom to take Indian dance classes, while Claire, an Asian mother of two who worked remotely, explained that her kids "do take piano and violin, but again, they're self-sufficient where they know when they have to be logged in and get on those Zoom meetings." That her children could manage and attend these virtual sessions independently allowed Claire to keep working while periodically checking in on the children as needed.

Relative to their lower-SES counterparts, higher-SES mothers generally described the open time provided to their children by the pandemic as an opportunity and sought to fill it with enrichment activities. They reported organizing more scheduled and busy days for their children, both on weekdays and weekends. For instance, while Kathryn, a White mother of two, explained that after school and work, "we have the rest of the day to do whatever we want or nothing, because there's really not much to do," she then listed the daily and weekly virtual meetings and activities her chil-

dren participated in, including gymnastics, clubs, and playdates. Similarly, Tonya, a Black mother of three, shared that when it came to her children, she worked to "always keep them occupied. Because I feel I want to make sure they are on point for the academic and stuff, and I want them to have fun, not just be home and not have a plan each day."

There were, however, exceptions to this broader pattern. Some higher-SES mothers—especially those who were working—described experiencing challenges around keeping children occupied and engaged in adaptive parenting (Cummins and Brannon 2022), which generally involved less hands-on interaction and more screen time (Findley et al. 2022). As adaptive parenting aligned more with a natural growth approach (highlighting the congruency between natural growth and pandemic parenting), following it could drive feelings of guilt for mothers whose class status favored an approach of concerted cultivation. For example, a White higher-SES mother, Nicole, reduced screen-time restrictions for her children during the pandemic. Yet she felt badly when she compared herself with other mothers who seemed to be excelling at concerted cultivation without the use of screens: "I was seeing Facebook posts of like all these well-organized crafts that these families were doing at the table and I couldn't get my kids off their iPads."

Higher-SES Stay-at-Home Mothers and the Easier Enactment of Concerted Cultivation

Overall, in our sample, stay-at-home higher-SES mothers experienced the pandemic as the least challenging and disruptive to their parenting. Because they did not face caregiving-work conflict or financial stressors, they were best poised to navigate the increased caregiving demands of the pandemic and also achieve classed parenting ideals around concerted cultivation. Kristina, a White mother of one with another on the way, explained how the pandemic did little to change the enrichment activities she could offer her daughter: "And so, me and my daughter, we went places a lot. We would go to the zoo. We had memberships anywhere you could have a membership just so we could have something to do. So, we went to the zoo a lot. And we had memberships to the sci-

ence museums and the planetariums and all those things."

Thus, although stay-at-home higher-SES mothers reported the same psychological struggles as their lower-SES counterparts with having children around so much—and faced limited options with which to occupy their children outside the home—they also described finding creative ways to introduce structure into their children's lives during the pandemic. As Kristina detailed, "we started to do a lot of virtual things. My daughter does ballet class. And so, they did a virtual class, so her and I used to do it together. We started virtual yoga. . . . we're just going to do this for a little while."

Higher-SES stay-at-home mothers described schedules and routines that were slightly altered due to the pandemic but largely similar to pre-pandemic schedules. Also notably, these mothers reported that any necessary schedule shifts were manageable. Higher-SES stay-at-home mothers did not experience the same weekday time crunch that working mothers faced. For instance, Kayleigh, a White stay-at-home mother of five, stated that she had time to run errands (such as going to the grocery store) when her youngest child was in preschool. She also organized activities for her youngest daughter throughout the day until her older children were done with school: "when she's home, is when we do play and go for walks and pickup, sit at the library and walk around the little pond there, but then all the kids get home and then it's the same as usual. So it's, 'Okay, get dinner on the table. Let's go.'"

Similarly, Amy, a White mother of one, said that things were pretty much the same before and during the pandemic, except that her husband worked from home so he got to spend time with her and her daughter during lunch breaks. She described it as helpful to have him pitch in, especially since she was now pregnant with their second child and felt more tired.

Overall, stay-at-home higher-SES mothers were best equipped with the time and financial resources to support their children's remote schooling, facilitate activities at home, and find opportunities for children to engage in extracurricular activities online. Although some mothers in this group reported frustrations

about having everyone home all day with nothing to do, they faced few additional stressors, and had comparatively more bandwidth and resources to ensure that children had a range of pandemic-adapted activities to pursue.

DISCUSSION

Drawing on in-depth interviews conducted with 130 mothers caring for children under eighteen in 2020 and 2021, we found that mothers' socioeconomic and employment status shaped how they experienced and navigated competing paid and unpaid labor demands and performed classed forms of parenting. Mothers from all backgrounds experienced pandemic-related disruptions and stressors. They also tried to do the best for their children given their circumstances (Lareau 2003). Mothers experienced novel pandemic-related disruptions around balancing carework and paid work, but the nature of those disruptions varied; whereas lower-SES mothers reported challenges due to decreased informal family supports, higher-SES mothers reported stress and anxiety related to trying to perform their jobs while at home alongside caregiving. Classed parenting during the pandemic similarly manifested—and persisted—along expected lines, with lower-SES mothers reporting more of a natural growth approach and higher-SES mothers reporting more pandemic-adapted concerted cultivation parenting (Lareau 2003). Because a natural growth approach was more compatible with the constraints and challenges of pandemic parenting, higher-SES mothers seeking to engage in concerted cultivation—particularly those who were also employed—reported a great deal of stress, worry, and frustration while facing pandemic-related constraints.

Overall, our study advances a growing literature showing how mothers' pandemic-related experiences with parenting and caregiving were far from uniform. Instead, they were heterogenous and fundamentally shaped by the broader contexts. Across 130 mothers in our sample, only one demographic—the higher-SES stay-at-home mothers—was structurally poised to navigate pandemic-induced childcare and school shutdowns. All mothers faced disruptions in their daily routines at the beginning of the pandemic, but higher-SES stay-at-home mothers reported being most easily able to adapt to the new reality of lockdowns and reduced educational and recreational offerings. This was due largely to their ability to focus on their children (without competing paid work demands) and their access to financial and educational resources. This is not to say that these mothers did not also experience challenges; indeed, they reported difficulties providing structure for their families and an increased workload at home. However, these mothers' lack of competing demands on their time and resources meant that they were in the best position to successfully pivot their lives around the pandemic's challenges. Higher-SES stay-at-home mothers' experiences reveal that when crisis hits, there is no fallback societal or institutional care infrastructure; instead, mothers operate as that infrastructure, and their work exists as a private, unpaid, and undervalued undertaking.

A central, novel contribution of this study is that it reveals the durability of classed parenting approaches, even in times of crisis (Hays 1998; Lareau 2003). Higher-SES mothers, while striving to engage in concerted cultivation, struggled in unprecedented ways to do so because of pandemic-related restrictions. The intensity of this struggle, however, was bifurcated by employment status. For mothers engaging in full-time, paid employment, concerted cultivation added an additional layer of complication to the already Sisyphean task of balancing work and caregiving. For stay-at-home mothers, continuing a path of concerted cultivation often required a great deal of thought and creativity, but became integrated into pandemic life more seamlessly. As they were before the pandemic, families' financial and social resources were essential to mothers' abilities to concertedly cultivate their children; mothers who could afford to do so paid for virtual enriching experiences and continued to closely monitor their children's development, but employment status mediated how easy this was to do. At the same time, most higher-SES mothers reported feeling a degree of stress related to the need to intensively parent in an environment where children's activities—and even mothers' time—were much more limited than before.

Even though lower-SES mothers lost resources important to their natural growth parenting approach because of the pandemic, including some public spaces and close connections to extended family, the natural growth approach was more in line with the structure of daily life during lockdowns and school closures. Whether or not they were engaged in paid employment, lower-SES mothers often relied on choices made and schedules set by children, or on their children's educational institution. They worried about their children's lack of socialization and their health, but less about how their inability to curate developmentally appropriate experiences in a pandemic world would disadvantage their children. Indeed, even a handful of higher-SES mothers turned to forms of natural growth as a survival strategy during the pandemic. As Erin Findley and her colleagues (2022) find, higher-SES mothers who adopted some natural growth strategies—about things like increased screen time or time playing outside instead of participating in enrichment activities—were more relaxed, and could therefore better enjoy the extra time with their children. Although experimental research has shown that parents across the socioeconomic spectrum may aspire to a more intensive parenting model (Ishizuka 2019), our analysis suggests that lower-SES mothers' experiences with alternative forms of parenting—including inventive mothering—may have allowed them to more easily engage in natural growth parenting, which was more compatible with pandemic constraints.

This study has several important strengths. First, the breadth and diversity of the AVP sample allowed us to directly examine variation in mothers' experiences across SES and employment using a large, national sample. The inclusion of stay-at-home mothers in our sample is a unique and critical study feature; to our knowledge, no research to date has investigated these mothers' experiences. Yet doing so helps reveal the lived reality of a large number of mothers during the pandemic who forwent paid employment to care for their children. As many families discovered, without a functioning system of formal care and education for children, stay-at-home mothers became the first line of defense (Chung et al. 2021; Collins et al. 2021).

The study has some notable limitations. First, because the AVP was not designed specifically to examine pandemic-related parenting experiences, the number of interview protocol questions and probes on these topics was fewer than would have been in a study focused on these experiences. This likely limited the depth of discussion among interview respondents—and the depth of our analysis—of their pandemic parenting experiences. Second, despite being relatively large and inclusive, the sample is likely slightly biased toward mothers who had more time or greater resources to balance work and caregiving responsibilities, because these were probably the most likely to answer the phone or reply to the AVP recruitment letter. Thus we may have missed hearing about the most problematic cases of caregiving and work clashing, and the voices of the mothers who could not spare the time to participate in the study. That interviews were conducted over the phone rather than in person limited researchers' abilities to observe for themselves and develop paradata from mothers' home environments; our analysis may therefore have missed important paradata, such as the cleanliness of the home or the interactions respondents actually had with their children in the presence of researchers. Our ability to conduct a temporal or longitudinal analysis of mothers' caregiving trajectories is also limited by the sampling strategy and data collection procedures, which focused on conducting cross-sectional interviews with mothers throughout the first year and a half of the pandemic. Future research should longitudinally assess how changes in employment, school closures, and social norms over the full course of the pandemic affected parenting styles and experiences, including across geographic locations. We also focused our analysis on the experiences of mothers; future scholarship should examine the critical roles of other caregivers, including grandparents and fathers. In addition, although our data—and other research (Greenway and Eaton-Thomas 2020; Rakap et al. 2023; Dobosz, Gierczyk, and Hornby 2023)—suggested that parents of children with disabilities faced unique pandemic caregiving chal-

lenges, our subsample of parents who were caring for children with disabilities was too small to adequately examine these experiences and how they differed from parents who were not engaging in the same caregiving; this is an important topic for future research. Finally, because we chose to focus only on socioeconomic and employment statuses—as these were two characteristics uniformly discussed throughout interviews—our analysis did not intersectionality examine other key sociodemographic characteristics that likely shaped caregiving experiences, including race-ethnicity, nationality, or immigrant status.

Our findings contribute to building a more robust understanding of how the incongruent combination of work and caregiving contribute to the persistence of gender inequality. Other research on the pandemic has shown how this inequality persists given that mothers have been disproportionately responsible for childrearing and household management responsibilities (Collins et al. 2021; Chung et al. 2021; Cummins and Brannon 2022). The pandemic further exposed the disconnect between the expectations of work and parenting, especially because both existed within close proximity to each other for many mothers, and qualitative research has exposed how mentally, emotionally, and physically taxing such conflicting responsibilities were (Chung et al. 2021). This study builds on prior work and shows that classed expectations of good parenting for higher-SES mothers were incongruous with the realities of combining paid work and caregiving at home, in a context of few institutional resources. Indeed, the group of mothers who seemed to be best equipped to address the demands of pandemic caregiving were those who had private financial resources and no competing time commitments from paid work.

We show that the daily impossibility of integrating work and caregiving was, for lower-SES employed mothers, not a sole product of the pandemic. Instead, this incompatibility in many ways preceded the pandemic. However, lower-SES mothers in our sample expressed more worry about the financial precarity the pandemic had brought to their families—not to mention the health consequences of the COVID-19 illness—than about how they would balance their lives as a paid worker and unpaid caregiver. Whereas some higher-SES mothers experienced conflict between carework and paid work for the first time, this conflict was already well known to lower-SES mothers, and most often registered behind other sources of pandemic-related stress.

Overall, our findings suggest that policies to promote work-life balance and well-being among mothers cannot be one-size-fits-all; instead, they must be tailored to mothers' work arrangements and caregiving setups. Higher-SES mothers—many of whom may continue hybrid and remote work moving forward—may benefit most from workplace flexibility, which allows them to work hours that work for their families, and in a location most beneficial to their scheduling needs. Yet lower-SES mothers—more of whose jobs will remain in person—may benefit most from workplace stability. As Daniel Schneider and Kristen Harknett (2021) show, low-income workers are most disadvantaged by inconsistent and last-minute scheduling practices, and these practices are detrimental to the ability to arrange quality, stable care for their children. Policies aimed at requiring employers to be consistent and predictable in their scheduling practices may best support lower-SES working mothers. In addition, investing in social institutions that bolster the development of children of lower-SES mothers will ensure that childrens' well-being is prioritized, regardless of whether mothers are able to provide those resources themselves, or whether they are engaged in paid employment. In times of crisis, organizations and communities that provide support to lower-SES mothers and their children should have a plan in place that will allow them to continue to extend public resources critical to children's well-being.

One of the most consequential experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic has been a renewed discussion about the importance of carework and its centrality to the persistence of intersecting gendered inequalities. We found that the disruptions and stressors mothers experienced in both their paid- and care- work during the pandemic—and the adaptations they were forced to make—were shaped by their unique social locations. We also found that mothers

across all of these social locations shared a common gendered parenting burden of ensuring their children's and families' well-being. Ultimately, in exposing just how vital mothers' labor is to families' and children's well-being and societal flourishing, the pandemic has centered the urgency of reframing carework as a public responsibility rather than a private undertaking; these findings echo this urgency and speak to the need for policies that ensure all mothers have the resources and supports to care for and raise their children.

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