

Disparities in Loss from COVID-19: Comparing across and among First- and Second-Generation Latinx and Asian Adults

Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World
 Volume 8: 1–3
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 DOI: 10.1177/23780231221090011
srd.sagepub.com

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Abstract

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has resulted in more than 900,000 deaths in the United States, disproportionately affecting racial and ethnic minorities. The pandemic is likely leading to disparate experiences of loss, though little research to date has examined disparities in experiences of loss from COVID-19. Drawing on a nationally representative survey of 6,000 first- and second-generation Latinx and Asian adults carried out in April and May 2021, this study reveals sharp disparities between and within ethnoracial groups in the United States in the experience of losing household members or close family and friends to COVID-19. Latinx adults were 1.65 times more likely than Asian adults to experience the loss of a loved one from COVID-19 (38 percent vs. 23 percent). First- and second-generation Indian Americans experienced disproportionately high rates of loss relative to other Asian Americans (33 percent). Looking both across and within ethnoracial categories is critical for understanding how the pandemic has compounded preexisting disadvantage.

Keywords

COVID-19, loss of family/friends, ethnoracial disparities

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has resulted in more than 900,000 deaths in the United States as of February 2022. Studies of the pandemic nationally have shown that racial and ethnic minorities are overrepresented among those infected and dying (Bassett, Chen, and Krieger 2020). The pandemic is likely also leading to disparate experiences of loss. Understanding these disparities is critical, as losing a loved one has a range of negative and enduring consequences, including excess risk for mortality and poorer physical and mental health (Liu, Forbat, and Anderson 2019; Stroebe, Schut, and Stroebe 2007). Such a loss can also have profound short- and long-term financial consequences and lead to housing insecurity (Corden and Hirst 2013). Yet to date, little research focuses on those who have experienced the loss of family or close friends during the pandemic or on racial/ethnic disparities in this experience.

Drawing on data from a nationally representative study of 6,000 first- and second-generation Latinx and Asian adults carried out in April and May 2021, we conduct bivariate tests for differences in the experience of household member and close family or friend loss from COVID-19 by race/ethnicity and country of origin. (See the Appendix for more

information on the data, as well as a table presenting our full set of results.) This study received approval from the IRB at Washington University in St. Louis.

Figure 1 shows the proportion of Asian and Latinx respondents reporting the death of a household member and/or close family or friend from COVID-19 by country of origin. All point estimates include 95 percent confidence intervals.

Similar to studies of ethnic/racial disparities in individual COVID-19 mortality, we find that race/ethnicity is associated with the likelihood of experiencing the death of a household member and/or close friend or relative. Specifically, more than one third (38 percent) of Latinx respondents report the loss of a loved one from COVID-19. In contrast, just under a quarter (23 percent) of Asian respondents report experiencing such a loss. To put these figures in context, a similarly timed survey conducted by NORC found that by

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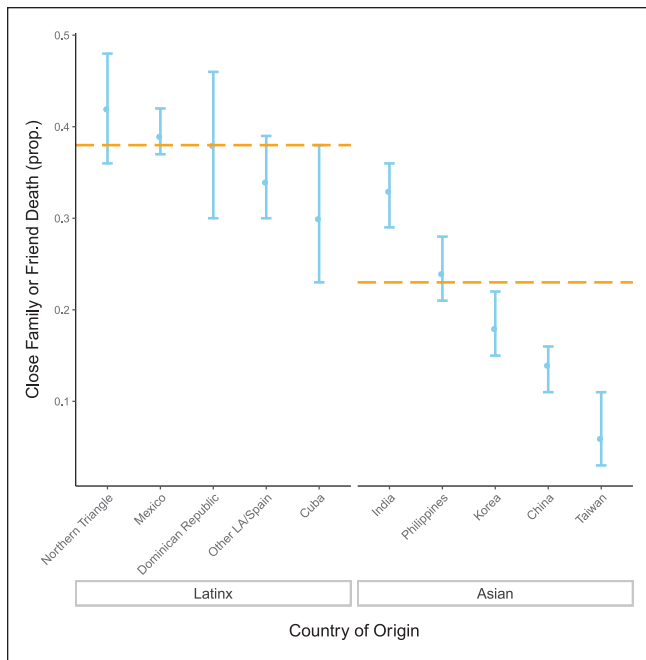


Figure 1. Rates of close family or friend death from coronavirus disease 2019 by country of origin, weighted.

Source: National Study of Fear of Deportation.

Note: Dashed lines capture the overall rate of experiencing a loss among Latinx and Asian first- and second-generation adults. Vertical bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals for weighted means. All respondents were surveyed in April and May 2021 and asked about experiences of loss from COVID-19 of (1) a member of their household and (2) a close family member or friend (nonhousehold). Respondents who indicated one or more experiences of loss are included here. The sample excludes Puerto Ricans and Asian American respondents with origins outside the five nations listed above. The plot indicates that overall, Latinx first- and second-generation adults experienced higher rates of loss compared with Asian adults but also shows large heterogeneity within each ethn racial group.

spring 2021, 19 percent of Americans overall had experienced a close social network death, underscoring the disproportionate impact of the pandemic for Latinx Americans (Associated Press and NORC 2021).

We further find that these ethn racial groupings hide substantial heterogeneity by country of origin. Among Latinx respondents, those with roots in Mexico, the Dominican Republic, and the Northern Triangle report the highest rates of loss, ranging from 38 percent to 42 percent. In contrast, Latinx respondents from Cuba, other parts of Latin America, and Spain report lower rates of loss (30 percent to 34 percent). We also observe a wide range of experiences among Asian respondents. Although just 6 percent of Taiwanese respondents report the death of a loved one, 24 percent of Filipino respondents and 33 percent of Indian respondents report such an experience. This heterogeneity underscores the importance of looking beyond race/ethnicity. Indeed, as shown in Figure 1, we find that the pandemic experiences (with respect to household member and/or close family or friend deaths) of Indian first- and second-generation adults

are closer to those of Latinx respondents than to those of other Asian country of origin groups.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and amplified long entrenched racial/ethnic and socioeconomic disparities in the United States. This study reveals an additional dimension of inequality produced by the pandemic: disparities between and within ethn racial groups in the experience of losing close family and friends to COVID-19.

Scholars and public health officials have cited the need for disaggregated data to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on specific immigrant groups. Our findings underscore this call and highlight that more research is needed to understand the drivers of disparities within ethn racial groups, including potential differences in individuals' social network ties to countries with high rates of COVID-19 mortality. India, for example, has experienced one of the highest COVID-19 mortality rates in the world (Jha et al. 2022), which may help explain the higher share of Indian American respondents reporting the loss of close friends and family members to COVID-19. Given the deleterious effects on health and well-being that can result from losing a loved one, future research on the short- and long-term consequences of these stark disparities between and within ethn racial groups in experiences of COVID-19 loss is critical.

Acknowledgments

We thank Michael Esposito for generously providing helpful suggestions and comments.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was supported by the Weidenbaum Center on the Economy, Government, and Public Policy at Washington University in St. Louis.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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Margot Moinester is an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology at Washington University in St. Louis. Her research is at

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Ella Siegrist is a PhD student in sociology at Washington University in St. Louis. She received a BA in sociology and anthropology from Warren Wilson College in 2019 and an MA in sociology from the University of New Mexico in 2021. Her work examines intersections of health, families, race, gender, and the carceral state.