UNIVERSITY of SOUTH FLORIDA

FLORIDA POLICY EXCHANGE CENTER ON AGING

Research Brief   **January 2023**

THE MENTAL HEALTH BENEFIT OF FRIEND NETWORKS IN OLDER KOREAN AMERICANS: THE CONDITIONING EFFECT OF FAMILY TYPE

Keywords: social convoys, family dynamics, friendship, immigrants, Korean American, Asian American

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study is to better understand family dynamics among older Korean American immigrants, and how those dynamics may impact friendships.

Key Findings:

✓ 86% of participants had functional family types (close-knit and intimate but distant), while 14% had less functional types (detached, connected but dysfunctional, and dysfunctional).
✓ Friend networks took on a heightened role in reducing mental distress among participants with dysfunctional family types.

Major Policy/Practice Implication: Remember to challenge stereotypes that all older adults, particularly Asian immigrants, have supportive and positive family relations.

IMPORTANT BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Social convoys are one way to describe an individual's network of family, friends, and others with varying degrees of closeness throughout their lifetime. Often, family members (e.g., partners and children) comprise the closest network to an individual and provide critical support, such as personal care, whereas friends are more typically sources of social and emotional support. However, this stereotypical model of social convoys may not be appropriate for individuals who do not have close-knit families. This study aims to challenge the stereotype that older adults have universal, close-knit family support, particularly older Korean American immigrants. Even more, the study evaluates how family dynamics can impact an individual's relationship with friends.

STUDY METHODS

Data were collected from 2017 to 2018 using a survey from the Study of Older Korean Americans (SOKA) conducted in Korean. Participants included 2,070 Korean Americans 60-years-old and older who reside in five US states (CA, NY, TX, HI, FL). The SOKA survey collected sociodemographic information, as well as data about family structure, family relationships, friend relationships, health status, and mental distress. Researchers used statistical methods to identify five types of family groups, and to ensure data were appropriately categorized into these groups. They then used statistical methods to assess the relationships between family types, friend networks, and mental distress controlling for participant characteristics.

KEY FINDINGS

✓ **Researchers identified five family types.**
  ○ 60% of participants had ***close-knit*** families. Overall, they were more educated, more likely to be married, younger, more acculturated to American culture, and had larger family networks than other participants.
  ○ 26% of participants had ***intimate but distant*** families in which they were emotionally close, but physically distant. Overall, they were unmarried and/or lived alone, and reported large family networks with positive interactions.
  ○ 3.7% of participants had ***detached*** families. Most of these participants were unmarried, living alone, had small family networks with limited positive interactions, and seemed to give less meaning to interpersonal relationships.
  ○ 3.6% of participants had ***connected but dysfunctional*** families. None of these participants lived alone, and most were married. They reported small family structures, high negative interactions, and high rates of mistreatment.

The connected but dysfunctional group is uniquely characterized by those who are structurally embedded in a family system with marriage, co-residence, and contacts but have experienced negative interactions and even mistreatment within the family. This group demonstrates that obligated family ties in the absence of emotional bonding could be harmful.

  ○ 6.9% of participants had ***dysfunctional*** families. Overall, they lived alone and were unmarried. They reported small family networks with high negative interactions and high mistreatment. They were more likely to have disadvantaged characteristics, such as lower financial status and multiple chronic health conditions.

✓ **Overall, participants with more optimal family types had larger friend networks and lower mental distress.**
  ○ Participants with close-knit and intimate but distant family types had larger friend network and lower mental distress than participants with detached, connected but dysfunctional, and dysfunctional family types.
  ○ Participants with higher mental distress were also more likely to be female, have lower finances, and have more chronic conditions and disabilities.

✓ **Friend networks had a greater positive impact on participants with dysfunctional families than participants with close-knit families.** While participants with close-knit families reported having the largest friend networks, participants with both dysfunctional family types demonstrated a greater reduction in mental distress with larger friend networks.

PRACTICE AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This study challenges the stereotype that older Asian adults are universally supported structurally and emotionally by their families. It provides more context into the diverse and nuanced family dynamics among older Asian Americans, particularly Korean immigrants. Providers should consider inquiring about older adults' family dynamics, and give particular attention to providing mental health resources and social opportunities for older adults with dysfunctional family types.

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Jang, Y., Park, N.S., Park, J., Chiribonga, D.A., Haley, W.E., & Kim, M.T. (2023). The Mental Health Benefit of Friend Networks in Older Korean Americans: The Conditioning Effect of Family Type. *The journals of gerontology. Series B, Psychological sciences and social sciences, 78*(1). doi: 10.1093/geronb/gbac109

This policy brief was written by Chelsea Goldstein, MGS and Lindsay Peterson, Ph.D. of the University of South Florida, School of Aging Studies and Florida Policy Exchange Center on Aging. For further information contact the study author, Yuri Jang, at yurij@usc.edu.