

Who do older adults consider their friends?

The role of lacking core family

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Abstract

Demographic changes in fertility, union formation, and longevity have resulted in smaller, older family networks and a rising number of adults without partners or children. As opportunities for kin-based support decline, friendships may play an increasingly central role in adults' social lives. This descriptive study explores how Finns aged 40 and older define and structure their friendship networks, using data from the 2025 Family Barometer. Respondents named their friends and indicated whether these individuals were also family members, allowing examination of overlap between familial and non-familial ties. We compare the number and composition of friendship groups across individuals without children, without a stable partner, without both, and those with both core family members, and we stratify analyses by gender. Our preliminary results suggest that the mean number of close friends for men with a partner and children is significantly higher than for men who have only a partner, only a child, or no core family member. Interestingly, women without core family reported having more friends than mothers without or with a partner. Women with children or partner reported more non-kin in their friendship networks than women with at least one core family member. Cousin and sibling ties showed no systematic differences across groups. The proportion of Finns who mentioned other relatives as friends was highest among unpartnered individuals with children.

Keywords: friendship, family, social networks, middle-aged and older people, Finland

Extended abstract

Introduction

For most of human history, almost all middle-aged and older adults have been part of dense family groups (Höllinger & Haller, 1990). Recent demographic shifts in marriage, fertility, and mortality have led to larger numbers of people with fewer close family members (Verdery et al., 2019; Brown & Lin, 2012). Researchers project that the number of living kin for individuals will continue to decline dramatically worldwide: While, for example, a 65-yo person in 1950 could expect to have 41 living kin, a 65-yo person in 2095 is projected to have 25 relatives, which represents a 38% global decline (Alburez-Gutierrez et al., 2023). Family networks are expected to age considerably because of a projected widening age gap between individuals and their kin due to lower and later fertility and longer lifespans. These demographic and social changes suggest a stark contrast in the pool of family members that contemporary individuals might rely on for instrumental, emotional, and economic support when compared with same-age groups in prior cohorts. Undoubtedly, the projected growing number of individuals with smaller and older family networks, including *kinless adults* (i.e., without a partner and children), will put pressure on the already stretched institutional systems of social support (Alburez-Gutierrez et al., 2023).

Of course, lacking a partner and/or adult children does not automatically equal absence of informal social support. If these family members are unavailable, people turn to kin or friends, who, in these situations, can represent so-called fictive kin (Voorpostel, 2013). As individuals age beyond 45 years, they generally tend to contact their friends more often (Buijs et al., 2022). Friends increase well-being and reduce loneliness (Angelini & Laferrère, 2013) and can provide crucial support during difficult times, such as widowhood and divorce (de Vries et al., 2014; Guiaux et al., 2007). Studies suggest that friends can compensate for the wellbeing provided by kin, such as adult children and grandchildren, in old age (Schnettler & Wöhler, 2016). Here we hypothesize that friends will be especially important for individuals who lack a partner and/or children.

While researchers often distinguish between family members and friends, the way friendships are defined and qualified varies depending on personal perspectives and cultural norms (Wang, 2024). Based on the Family Barometer data collected in spring of 2025, we address the following research questions: Who do Finns aged 40+ consider their friends? To what extent do the number of friends and the structure of friendship group differ between those who i) do not have own children, ii) do not have a spouse or partner currently, iii) do not have either of these core family members, and those who have both? We stratify our analyses by gender.

Data and methods

The analyses are based on data from the Family Barometer 2025, a nationally representative survey conducted in May 2025 among adults aged 18–79 in Finland. Information on respondents' kin networks, friendship ties, and sociodemographic characteristics was collected online by Norstat. In the friendship section, respondents were asked to provide the number of their close friends, and then to name up to three of their closest friends, for whom additional questions were asked.

The full sample included 5117 respondents. For the present analyses, we restricted the sample to participants aged 40–79, resulting in an analytical sample 3160 individuals. Separate descriptive analyses were conducted for men ($n = 1581$) and women ($n = 1579$), focusing on variations in the number and composition of the group of close friends by the availability of a spouse (in cohabitation or marriage) or a child (biological or adopted), here referred to as 'core family members'. Sampling weights provided in the dataset were applied to ensure population representativeness.

To answer our research question, we perform descriptive analyses at this point. The regression analyses are planned for February-March of 2026.

Preliminary results

Our preliminary analysis suggests that Finns aged 40+ have, on average 3.7 (SD = 3.6) close friends. Men report more close friends than women (4.1 vs. 3.2). This gender difference remains when excluding spouses from the count of close friends, with men still reporting more close friends on average (3.6 vs. 2.8). The mean number of close friends for men with a partner and children (4.21) is significantly higher than for men who have only a partner (3.67), only a child (3.62), or none of core family members (3.37, Figure 1). Interestingly, women without core family (3.49) have more friends

than women with only a child (3.09) and women with both a partner and children (3.15). Overall, men show a modest increase in the number of friends when partnered and with children, while women’s friend networks remain fairly consistent across partner/child groups. Standard errors are relatively small, especially for partnered parents, indicating precise estimates.

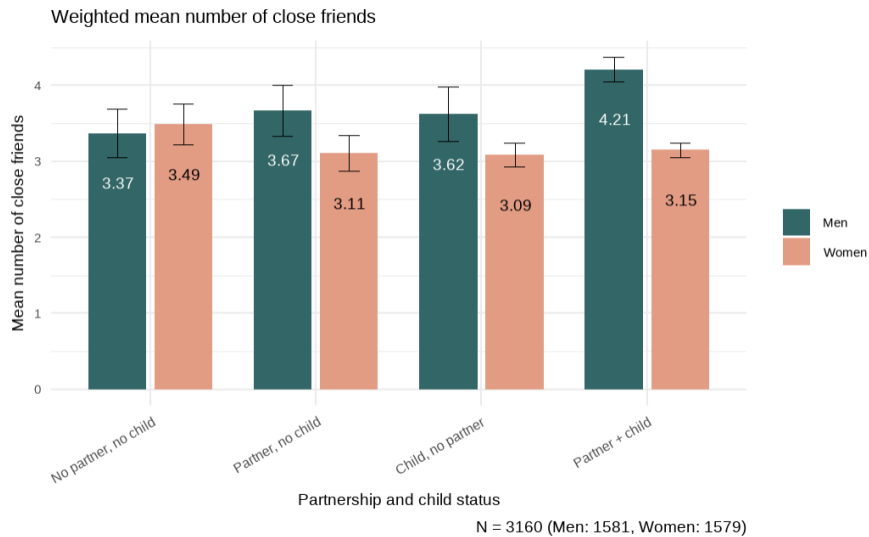


Figure 1. Average numbers of men’s and women’s close friends by availability of a partner and children

Respondents furthermore name up to three of their closest friends. For these friends, we asked whether the friends are also their partner/spouse or other type of relative. Figure 2 shows the weighted proportions of kin and non-kin as close friends for people with or without core family. Chi-square tests revealed differences in network composition by partner/child availability and gender. As expected, partner/spouse and partner’s relative were named by respondents in a partnership, particularly those with children. Friendship ties showed a gender-specific pattern: Women without children and a partner reported more non-kin in their friendship networks (Chi-square = 10.86, $p = 0.013$). Siblings were more often named as close friends by men without core family members than by men with other configurations of availability of a partner and children, but the differences were marginally significant (Chi-square = 7.56, $p = 0.056$), while we found no differences for women. The proportion of those who mentioned other relatives as friends was highest among unpartnered individuals with children (Chi-square = 14.35, $p = 0.003$ for men and Chi-square = 9.92, $p = 0.019$ for women). Cousin ties showed no systematic differences across groups.

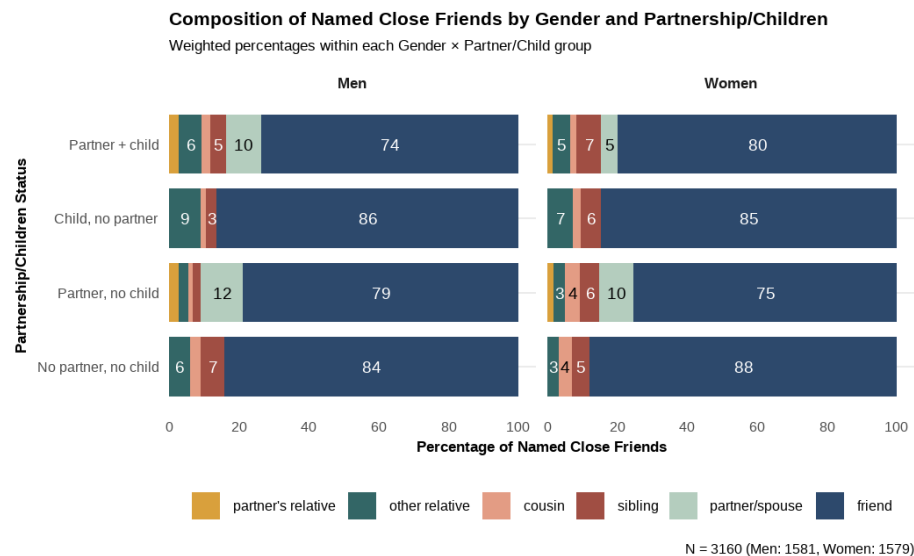


Figure 2. Structure of men’s and women’s friendship groups by availability of a partner and children

Our study will contribute to understanding how social support systems adapt amid demographic change, highlighting the compensatory and complementary roles of friendship in social networks of middle-aged and older Finns.

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