

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Divorced and separated parents during the COVID-19 pandemic

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused significant stress for individuals, couples, and families. Divorced and separated couples with children face unique stresses amid the pandemic. This mixed-methods study explored these challenges among 296 divorced and separated parents: namely 204 women formerly partnered with men, 34 men formerly partnered with women, and 58 women formerly partnered with women, who were surveyed during Summer/Fall of 2020. Participants described legal, financial, and coparenting challenges. Those who were not yet divorced described difficulties filing for or finalizing their divorce because of court closures and lack of responsiveness from legal professionals. Those who were already divorced also faced legal challenges, such as being unable to obtain a court date to modify custody arrangements. Financial challenges included renegotiating financial support obligations in the context of job loss. Salient coparenting conflicts, explored through closed- and open-ended questions, included communication issues, different views on virus risk mitigation behaviors, financial issues (especially for those not yet divorced), and transitioning between households and handling remote schooling (especially for those with shared physical custody). Participants elaborated on COVID-19-specific challenges, revealing that (a) lack of communication or agreement regarding shared strategies for risk mitigation reflected and exacerbated challenging dynamics between coparents, (b) remote schooling was often the site of disagreement when one parent felt that they were doing more

than their fair share of coordination and oversight, and (c) different perspectives on science were expected to lead to future contention when making a joint decision about whether to vaccinate children. Findings have implications for family and legal professionals working with divorced, divorcing, and separated parents.

#### KEYWORDS

COVID-19 pandemic, coparenting, divorce, parents, stress

## INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic poses risks to adults' overall stress. Adults may experience fear and uncertainty in response to the pandemic, face major disruption in their family and work lives, and assume greater caregiving and financial burdens, all of which may contribute to stress (Qian et al., 2020). In turn, both the stress of the pandemic and steps to manage it (e.g., social distancing and isolation) may exacerbate mental health challenges (Choi et al., 2020; Lebow, 2020a).

Divorce is a major life stressor that may cause at least short-term mental distress, in part due to the emotional and financial burdens associated with divorce (Amato, 2010; Hald et al., 2020). Ultimately, most divorced people adapt well, but about one-fifth experience ongoing psychological difficulties even years post-divorce (Perrig-Chiello et al., 2015). In turn, a fairly large minority of divorced people may experience significant and long-term effects of the emotional burden of divorce, which may manifest as chronic stress (Hald et al., 2020). This stress may be heightened among parents, who often must continue to engage with their former spouses for the sake of the children (Raley & Sweeney, 2020); indeed, ex-spouses' personal and financial lives may remain intertwined for many years post-divorce.

Parents have been found to experience higher levels of stress than non-parents during COVID-19 (APA, 2020). Divorced and separated parents may be at especially high risk for stress during the pandemic due to interrelated legal, financial, and coparenting challenges. Separated parents seeking to divorce may encounter legal roadblocks due to court closures and delays. Divorced and separated parents facing job loss may encounter heightened stress amid child support obligations. Divorced and separated parents may also struggle with a greater need for communication with their exes about safety guidelines (e.g., mask wearing and social distancing), child exchanges (which may be more likely to occur in-person, given school closures), and division of labor (which may shift amid telework and remote school transitions). In sum, post-separation/post-divorce coparenting during COVID-19 has the potential to be quite challenging.

This exploratory study examines the coparenting experiences of a sample of divorced ( $n = 189$ ; 63.8%), divorcing (filed or planning to file for divorce;  $n = 76$ ; 25.7%), and separated (never married but no longer together;  $n = 31$ ; 10.5%) parents ( $N = 296$ ) during COVID-19. Despite a high potential for conflict during COVID-19, many divorced and separated parents are navigating conflicts on their own due to court closures and the reduced availability of attorneys and judges. Our study provides insights to help guide therapists, attorneys, and other professionals in supporting divorced and separated parents during and after the current pandemic.

## A systems perspective on gender, family stress, and resilience

The current study draws from family stress and resilience theory (Henry et al., 2015). Family stress scholars understand families as systems (Prime et al., 2020), whereby stress is recognized

as the product of multidirectional processes which may “spill over” into multiple domains and relationships. Even after a divorce, parents and children comprise a family system; thus, the behaviors and dynamics that occur between former spouses (the parent subsystem) impact the child subsystem (Adamsons & Pasley, 2006; Lebow, 2019; Lebow & Rekart, 2007).

The COVID-19 pandemic is an external stressor that impacts families, adding to the everyday vulnerabilities and crises inherent in family relationships that require additional family coping resources (Allen & Henderson, 2017). Yet it is complex and multifaceted, involving not simply the threat of illness or death but encompassing financial worries, caregiving burden, and social disruption. Such stressors are likely to interfere with and spill into relationship processes, exacerbating tensions with ex-spouses or leading to new interpersonal challenges (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2020). Relational stress may be especially heightened among those with strained financial resources, those in frequent communication with their exes (e.g., because of shared custody and regular child transitions), and those whose coparenting relationships are tense or in flux (e.g., because they are early in the divorce process; Prime et al., 2020).

In addition to drawing from family stress and resilience frameworks, this study is informed by a gender lens, requiring attention to gender dynamics and roles in the context of divorce. Family life is highly gendered and heteronormative, reflecting power differentials that are reinforced in both private family relationships and broader societal systems that structure the organization of daily life (Few-Demo & Allen, 2020). Women are the primary parents, caregivers, emotional laborers, and housekeepers in families over the life course, and their paid labor outside the home has only moderately tempered their family labor (Allen et al., 2013; Treas & Tai, 2016). Although men—especially college educated men—now participate more in childcare and some household tasks, the lion's share of family work remains women's responsibility in heterosexual relationships (Bianchi et al., 2012). Within same-sex couples, the partner with more economic power in the relationship tends to perform less caring labor (Goldberg, 2013).

Considering divorce, despite increases in women's employment, women continue to be at a financial disadvantage. As Raley and Sweeney (2020) conclude in their analysis of recent divorce trends, divorce “persists as both a stratified and stratifying life event, deepening existing social inequalities by gender and socioeconomic status” (p. 93). Whether ending a cohabiting or married relationship, heterosexual women face greater economic consequences than men (Tach & Eads, 2015). The implications of gender play out starkly when examining relationship dissolution among lesbian couples, in that the consequences of women's lower earning power are doubled, intensifying their financial hardship as women form separate households (Goldberg et al., 2015).

Gendered norms that reinforce differential gender roles in families also play out in coparenting relationships among separated or divorced couples, including those who were never married (Kotila & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2015). Parents' relationship quality often suffers after separation and divorce, especially if they undermine each other's parenting relationships with their children (Kotila & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2015). A corollary to women's greater responsibility in childrearing is that they may also seek to control how much access men have to their children, defined as maternal gatekeeping—a phenomenon that may be enacted after separation or divorce (Pruett et al., 2007), particularly among women who see themselves as the most essential parent in their children's lives or who have concerns about their exes' competence or stability (Markham & Coleman, 2020; Pruett et al., 2007). Such behavior—which in part reflects the societal pressure on women to perform caring labor and the associated weight of responsibility for how well their children “turn out” as adults (Allen et al., 2013)—may even occur in shared physical custody arrangements, particularly if the divorce is relatively recent and/or high conflict, and mothers doubt their ex-husbands' parenting commitment or capabilities (Markham & Coleman, 2020).

## The COVID-19 pandemic and divorce

Most media coverage of divorce and COVID-19 has centered on the potentially elevated risk for divorce due to the pandemic (e.g., Prasso, 2020). Relationship scholars suggest that external stressors (i.e., COVID-19), combined with existing vulnerabilities (e.g., financial stress and depression), may challenge relationships, such that even couples with strong internal and external resources may face relationship strain (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2020). As both journalists (Chaker, 2020) and scholars (Lebow, 2020b) have noted, COVID-19 has forced family members together for long periods, often in close quarters, with many parents simultaneously working and parenting, which may heighten family and relationship stress. Job losses, arguments about what is safe, and divergent views on preferred school modality are among the stressors intensifying the stress of the pandemic (Chaker, 2020). But, couples who seek a divorce during the pandemic likely already have marital issues, such as those related to commitment and communication (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2020).

Little has been written about the issues faced by divorced parents amid the outbreak, with most of the limited coverage appearing in news outlets (Decaille, 2020; Prasso, 2020) rather than empirical journals, and Lebow (2020b) offering a clinically informed discussion on COVID-19 and divorce. Finances, custody, and coparenting are often contentious domains for divorced parents in general, although most do handle these with little help from outsiders (Lebow & Rekart, 2007; Nielsen, 2017). During COVID-19, such issues may be intensified, as divorced parents cope with job loss and financial hardship, navigate altered custody arrangements amid public health risks, and try to establish shared guidelines for virus risk mitigation behaviors. Indeed, divorced parents—who, despite encompassing multiple households, constitute a family system—face unique coparenting challenges with respect to COVID-19, in part because the frequency, intensity, and stake of interactions and negotiations may be enhanced.

Coparenting, or how parents coordinate care—including timing/length of visits, decisions about medical care, and day-to-day decisions about school, hygiene, and discipline—represents one way that parents impact each other and their children (Adamsons & Pasley, 2006; Choi & Becher, 2019; Nielsen, 2017). Post-divorce coparenting tends to be described in terms of communication (frequency and quality) and emotional valence (e.g., cooperative, civil and hostile; Amato et al., 2011), with various typologies describing parents along these dimensions (e.g., high, moderate, or low; Ahrons, 1994), and some incorporating other dimensions (e.g., focus on the child; change over time; Ferraro et al., 2016).

Many separated and divorced parents do not immediately experience cooperative coparenting (Amato et al., 2011), but describe a coparenting atmosphere of anger, hostility, and tension, especially post-separation but before divorce finalization (Adamsons & Pasley, 2006; Bonach, 2005; Koppejan-Luitze et al., 2020). Over time, coparenting relationships tend to become less contentious and more businesslike, as many parents become more effective at emotion regulation (Markham & Coleman, 2012; Russell et al., 2016). Most parents reduce their conflict by 2–3 years post-divorce, although about one-fifth continue to engage in chronic high conflict, which is more likely amid mental health issues or addiction, controlling behavior, and disagreements about custody or financial support (Kelly, 2007; Perrig-Chiello et al., 2015; Russell et al., 2016). Parents who are separated but not divorced may experience more conflict during a pandemic, as they lack the certainty of finalization as well as formal legal guidance about finances and custody, and have not had sufficient time to facilitate more cooperative coparenting relationships (Allen & Goldberg, 2020).

Sources of conflict between ex-spouses vary across studies but generally concern children (e.g., access to, time with, discipline, and parenting practices) and money (e.g., child support), and often center on the ways that parents feel entitled to their children, and their place in children's lives, in terms of time and location (Bergman & Rejmer, 2017; Bonach, 2005; Kotila & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2015). Meta-analyses have documented few differences

in the level of conflict between coparents as a function of custody type (Bauserman, 2012; Leclair et al., 2019)—although Leclair et al. (2019) observed that more recent studies (which tend to define joint physical custody as involving equal time sharing, as opposed to 70%–30% time sharing; see also Steinbach, 2019) suggest more conflict under joint than sole physical custody, perhaps reflecting greater interaction between parents than in earlier studies. Other scholars have suggested that joint physical custody may be stressful for some parents because of the need to constantly plan and coordinate childcare (Bauserman, 2012; Steinbach, 2019). Thus, it is possible that amid an unprecedented, ongoing crisis such as COVID-19, some parents with joint physical custody may experience more conflict amid more frequent interactions and negotiations around residential transitions and high pressure to communicate about safety behaviors. Indeed, qualitative work suggests a diversity in coparenting relationships among parents who share physical custody of their children, with Markham and Coleman (2012) documenting three types of coparenting relationships: continuously contentious, always amicable, and bad to better, with continuously contentious mothers being characterized by a lack of desire to share custody and efforts to limit communication with their exes (e.g., to text or email) to avoid conflict. Sole custody arrangements, where the custodial parent maintains control over most daily decisions, may reduce the need for mutual interdependence and frequent communication during a pandemic (Bergman & Rejmer, 2017; Kelly, 2007; Lebow, 2020b). Significantly, however, non-residential fathers in sole custody arrangements may experience mothers as maintaining greater control over aspects of coparenting such as child exchanges, and as enacting gatekeeping behaviors—especially if the mother doubts the father's parental competence (Nixon & Hadfield, 2018; Trinder, 2008).

Thus, a pandemic introduces new challenges for divorced and separated parents. The nature of the pandemic likely necessitates more communication between ex-spouses, some of whom may have functioned reasonably well because they limit their communication to text and email, manage child exchanges in ways that minimize contact (e.g., at school or daycare), and largely parent separately (Markham & Coleman, 2012). Being forced to (re)negotiate shared rules for health and safety as well as changes to visitation and financial support amid school closures and job losses is likely to be challenging even for divorced coparents who get along well. Parents who struggle with ongoing feelings of resentment or mistrust in relation to their exes may find such negotiations to be particularly tense (Finkenauer et al., 2018; Miller, 2009). This may especially be the case if they share physical custody of children, which requires more contact, coordination, and shared decision-making—activities that may be especially challenging for those who tend to largely parent separately, with minimal communication, to avoid conflict (Markham & Coleman, 2012). Parents, and perhaps especially mothers, who have concerns about their exes' safety behaviors or competence may be particularly tempted to “close the gate” or limit their exes' time with children, even in the context of shared custody (Markham & Coleman, 2020). Negotiating safety guidelines may also be challenging for those who have not finalized their divorce and are navigating coparenting amid legal and boundary ambiguity (Gash & Raiskin, 2018). The inability to legally separate can impede parents' ability to establish new norms, expectations, and boundaries, which can amplify emotions and interfere with communication and family well-being (Emery & Dillon, 1994; Gash & Raiskin, 2018).

## Same-sex relationships, divorce, and COVID-19

Although increasingly recognized in society, LGBTQ parents are rarely acknowledged as members of the divorced population, in part because they have only been able to marry their partners since 2003 in Massachusetts (the first U.S. state to allow same-sex marriage) and

since 2015 throughout the United States. Some work has explored predictors and correlates of divorce among same-sex parents, including child factors (adopting an older child), parent factors (substance abuse and infidelity), and couple factors (unequal divisions of labor; Goldberg & Garcia, 2015; Goldberg et al., 2015). Less work has examined same-sex couples' experiences of divorce or coparenting post-relationship dissolution. Farr and Goldberg (2019) studied divorced same-sex and heterosexual parents and observed a greater tendency to share physical custody among same-sex parents, perhaps reflecting a greater valuing and expectations of egalitarianism. Allen and Goldberg (2020) studied divorced and divorcing lesbian mothers and found that many women still harbored negative feelings that made coparenting difficult, although women who had moved on to new relationships tended to have more positive feelings about their exes than single women. Thus, there are tentative indicators that relational context may shape post-divorce coparenting, but given a dearth of research, it is unclear how such dynamics may unfold during COVID-19 specifically.

## The current study

COVID-19 may be uniquely stressful for divorced/separated parents, who must interface with their ex-spouses, and possibly the legal system, within a broader climate of tension, conflict, fear, and uncertainty. The current exploratory mixed-methods study examines 296 divorced and separated parents' experiences during COVID-19 (204 women formerly partnered with men: WPM; 34 men formerly partnered with women: MPW; and 58 women formerly partnered with women: WPW) with the aim of answering these research questions:

1. What legal challenges are divorced and separated parents experiencing during COVID-19?
2. What financial challenges are divorced and separated parents experiencing during COVID-19?
3. How do divorced and separated parents navigate coparenting during COVID-19?
  - a. What coparenting issues are most salient and/or challenging during COVID-19?
  - b. To what extent are coparenting issues differentially experienced as a function of physical custody status (shared vs. sole), divorce status (divorced vs. "in limbo," among those who were married), and relational status (WPM vs. WPW)?

## METHOD

### Sample

The sample consists of 296 participants: 204 (69.0%, WPM), 34 (11.5%, MPW), and 58 (19.5%, WPW). We do not include participants who were trans (7) or whose exes were trans (5) and men whose exes were also men (8), as there were insufficient numbers to provide adequate power to examine them as separate groups in analyses.

Table 1 contains demographic data for the full sample and by participant type (WPM, WPW, and MPW). In summary, 265 (89.5%) have been legally married ( $M = 9.99$  years,  $SD = 5.48$ ). Among married parents, 175 have finalized their divorce pre-COVID-19, 14 finalized during COVID-19, 12 filed during COVID-19, and 64 have not yet filed but intended to. Another 31 (10.5%) were never married but separated. Legal custody was generally shared (265, 89.5%); 29 (9.8%) had sole legal custody, and 2 (.7%) said their ex had sole legal custody. Physical custody was shared in 221 (74.7%) cases; 71 (24.0%) have sole physical custody, and 4 (1.3%) said their exes have sole physical custody. Considering the full sample, participants have been separated for a mean of 4.08 years ( $SD = 3.77$ ). Broken down by finalization status, separation length was

TABLE 1 Demographic and divorce variables for the full sample (N = 296) and by respondent type

|                                                                                     | Sample (296) | WPM (204)    | MPW (34)     | WPW (58)    | ANOVA/Chi-square                                                                                                  |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Of Color ( <i>N</i> , %)                                                            | 38 (12.8%)   | 29 (14.12%)  | 5 (14.7%)    | 4 (6.9%)    | —                                                                                                                 |
| Ex of Color ( <i>N</i> , %)                                                         | 34 (11.5%)   | 24 (11.8%)   | 5 (14.7%)    | 5 (8.6%)    | —                                                                                                                 |
| Education ( <i>M</i> , <i>SD</i> )<br>(1–6 scale)                                   | 4.76 (1.03)  | 4.79 (1.05)  | 4.76 (1.15)  | 4.64 (.91)  | —                                                                                                                 |
| Ex's Education ( <i>M</i> ,<br><i>SD</i> ) (1–6 scale)                              | 4.24 (1.25)  | 4.08 (1.31)  | 4.76 (1.10)  | 4.52 (.99)  | —                                                                                                                 |
| Years Separated*<br>( <i>M</i> , <i>SD</i> )                                        | 4.08 (3.77)  | 3.75 (3.14)  | 5.14 (2.68)  | 4.51 (5.91) | <i>ns</i>                                                                                                         |
| Domestic<br>Partnership<br>( <i>N</i> , %)                                          | 11 (3.7%)    | 2 (1%)       | 0 (0%)       | 9 (15.5%)   | —                                                                                                                 |
| Civil Union ( <i>N</i> , %)                                                         | 6 (2.9%)     | 2 (1%)       | 1 (2.9%)     | 3 (5.2%)    | —                                                                                                                 |
| Married* ( <i>N</i> , %)                                                            | 265 (89.5%)  | 187 (91.7%)  | 32 (94.1%)   | 46 (79.3%)  | $F(2, 262) = 8.22, p = 0.017$<br>MPW > WPW, $p = 0.049$<br>WPM > WPW, $p = 0.011$                                 |
| Years Married*<br>( <i>M</i> , <i>SD</i> ) (for<br>married only; <i>n</i><br>= 265) | 9.99 (5.48)  | 10.61 (5.15) | 12.58 (6.56) | 5.99 (3.64) | $F(2, 262) = 20.59, p < 0.001$<br>WPM > WPW,<br>$p < 0.001$ MPW > WPW,<br>$p < 0.001$                             |
| Finalized Divorce*<br>( <i>N</i> , %) <i>n</i> = 265                                | 189 (70.9%)  | 126 (67.3%)  | 23 (67.6%)   | 40 (87.0%)  | <i>ns</i>                                                                                                         |
| Used Lawyer* ( <i>N</i> ,<br>%) <i>n</i> = 265                                      | 183 (69.1%)  | 130 (64.4%)  | 18 (52.9%)   | 35 (60.3%)  | <i>ns</i>                                                                                                         |
| Ex Used Lawyer*<br>( <i>N</i> , %) <i>n</i> = 265                                   | 138 (52.1%)  | 90 (44.1%)   | 17 (50.0%)   | 31 (53.4%)  | <i>ns</i>                                                                                                         |
| Used Guardian Ad<br>Litem <i>n</i> = 265                                            | 25 (9.4%)    | 15 (7.4%)    | 3 (8.8%)     | 7 (12.1%)   | —                                                                                                                 |
| Used Mediator* ( <i>N</i> ,<br>%) <i>n</i> = 265                                    | 118 (44.5%)  | 73 (35.8%)   | 13 (38.2%)   | 32 (55.2%)  | $\chi^2(2, 265) = 7.12, p = 0.028$<br>WPW > WPM, $p = 0.005$                                                      |
| Spousal Support,<br>To Me ( <i>N</i> , %)                                           | 17 (5.7%)    | 16 (7.8%)    | 0 (0%)       | 1 (1.7%)    | —                                                                                                                 |
| Spousal Support,<br>To Ex ( <i>N</i> , %)                                           | 10 (3.4%)    | 3 (1.5%)     | 4 (11.8%)    | 3 (5.2%)    | —                                                                                                                 |
| Physical Custody*<br>( <i>N</i> , %)                                                | 221 (74.7%)  | 136 (66.7%)  | 30 (88.2%)   | 55 (94.8%)  | $\chi^2(2, 296) = 22.67, p < 0.001$<br>WPW > WPM, $p < 0.001$                                                     |
| Child Support, To<br>Me* ( <i>N</i> , %)                                            | 123 (41.6%)  | 101 (49.5%)  | 3 (8.8%)     | 19 (32.8%)  | $\chi^2(2, 296) = 22.44, p < 0.001$<br>WPW > MPW, $p = 0.009$<br>WPM > MPW, $p < 0.001$<br>WPM > WPW, $p = 0.012$ |
| Child Support, To<br>Ex* ( <i>N</i> , %)                                            | 41 (13.9%)   | 10 (4.9%)    | 21 (61.8%)   | 10 (17.2%)  | $\chi^2(2, 296) = 79.29, p < 0.001$<br>MPM > WPM, $p < 0.001$<br>MPM > WPW, $p < 0.001$                           |
| Number of<br>Children ( <i>N</i> , %)                                               | 1.90 (.86)   | 1.96 (.89)   | 1.91 (.69)   | 1.67 (.78)  | —                                                                                                                 |
| Biological Children<br>Only ( <i>N</i> , %)                                         | 234 (79.1%)  | 186 (91.2%)  | 29 (85.3%)   | 19 (32.8%)  | —                                                                                                                 |
| Adopted Children<br>Only ( <i>N</i> , %)                                            | 32 (10.8%)   | 3 (1.5%)     | 4 (11.8%)    | 25 (43.1%)  | —                                                                                                                 |

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

|                                               | Sample (296) | WPM (204)   | MPW (34)   | WPW (58)   | ANOVA/Chi-square                                                                         |
|-----------------------------------------------|--------------|-------------|------------|------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Biological + Adopted Children ( <i>N</i> , %) | 14 (4.7%)    | 2 (1.0%)    | 0 (0%)     | 12 (20.7%) | –                                                                                        |
| Biological + Stepchildren ( <i>N</i> , %)     | 15 (5.1%)    | 13 (6.4%)   | 1 (2.9%)   | 1 (1.7%)   | –                                                                                        |
| Biological, Adopted, + Step ( <i>N</i> , %)   | 1 (.3%)      | 0           | 0          | 1 (1.7%)   | –                                                                                        |
| Any Biological Children* ( <i>N</i> , %)      | 262 (88.5%)  | 200 (98.0%) | 30 (88.2%) | 32 (55.2%) | $\chi^2(2, 296) = 81.62, p < 0.001$<br>WPM > WPW, $p < 0.001$<br>MPW > WPW, $p < 0.001$  |
| Any Adopted Children* ( <i>N</i> , %)         | 45 (15.2%)   | 4 (2.0%)    | 4 (11.8%)  | 37 (63.8%) | $\chi^2(2, 296) = 134.28, p < 0.001$<br>WPW > WPM, $p < 0.001$<br>WPW > WPM, $p = 0.001$ |
| Any Stepchildren ( <i>N</i> , %)              | 16 (5.4%)    | 13 (6.4%)   | 1 (2.9%)   | 2 (3.4%)   | –                                                                                        |
| Me, New Partners No Kids ( <i>N</i> , %)      | 60 (20.3%)   | 34 (16.7%)  | 12 (35.3%) | 14 (24.1%) | –                                                                                        |
| Me, New Partners w/Kids ( <i>N</i> , %)       | 75 (25.3%)   | 56 (27.5%)  | 8 (23.5%)  | 11 (19.0%) | –                                                                                        |
| Ex, New Partners No Kids ( <i>N</i> , %)      | 56 (18.9%)   | 32 (15.7%)  | 8 (23.5%)  | 16 (27.6%) | –                                                                                        |
| Ex, New Partners w/Kids ( <i>N</i> , %)       | 65 (22.0%)   | 37 (18.1%)  | 9 (26.5%)  | 19 (32.8%) | –                                                                                        |

Note: Ten female participants clarified that their adopted children have been carried and birthed by their ex-partners; they themselves were the non-gestational parents and listed on the birth certificate.

\*Denotes the select variables that we statistically tested for differences by respondent type. We limited the number of demographic variables examined for differences in order to reduce the overall number of statistical tests and thereby decrease the likelihood of capitalizing on chance. In addition, there was insufficient power to adequately test for group differences in certain categories (e.g., domestic partnerships).

5.13 years ( $SD = 2.84$ ) for those who have finalized their divorces, 4.86 ( $SD = 2.92$ ) for those who have filed but not finalized, and 2.92 ( $SD = 6.95$ ) for those who have not yet filed.

A total of 38 (12.8%) respondents were of color/not White, identifying with one or more of the following: Asian (10, 3.4%), Hispanic (7, 2.4%), Black (7, 2.4%), Latino/a/x (6, 2.0%), American Indian/Alaska Native (3, 1.0%), Middle Eastern (1), and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (1). Thirty-four (11.5%) of their exes were of color, identifying as Black (13, 4.4%), Hispanic (7, 2.4%), Asian (6, 2.0%), Latino/a/x (4, 1.4%), Middle Eastern (2, 0.7%), Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (1), and East Indian (1). Mean educational level was high, 4.76 of a 1–6 scale (4 = Bachelor's, 5 = Master's;  $SD = 1.03$ ). Exes' level of educational was somewhat lower ( $M = 4.24$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ ). A total of 180 (60.8%) respondents have at least one male child, 179 (60.5%) have at least one female child, and 22 (7.4%) have at least one trans child. Seventy-three (24.7%) parents have at least one child under 6; 153 (51.7%) have at least one child 6–10 years; 134 (45.3%) have at least one child 11–15 years; 48 (16.2%) have at least one child 16–18 years; and 25 (8.4%) have at least one child over 18 years (and also a child under 18, per selection criteria).

Participants lived in 43 states, with heaviest representation in MA (92, 31.1%), CA (22, 7.4%), PA (16, 5.4%), NY (11, 4.7%), MO (11, 3.7%), and TN (10, 3.7%), with 10 (3.4%) living outside the United States (mostly Canada). Most (230, 77.7%) lived 1–25 miles from their ex.

ANOVAs and Chi-square analyses were conducted to examine whether demographic and divorce-related variables varied by respondent type (WPM, MPW, and WPW); significant differences are indicated in Table 1. Of note is that WPW were married for fewer years, less likely to have biological children, and more likely to have adopted children than WPM and MPW. WPW were also more likely to have shared physical custody and to have used a mediator than WPM.

## Procedure

Participants were recruited late July through early October of 2020 via email, social media, and snowball sampling to complete a 15- to 20-minute anonymous survey hosted by the online platform Qualtrics. People were invited to participate if they were “separated from your child(ren’s) other parent (even if you are still living in the same home), in the process of getting a divorce from your child(ren’s) other parent, or are already divorced from your child(ren’s) other parent.” They were asked to participate only if they had at least one child under 18, and told that the survey “examines how separated, divorced, or divorcing parents are navigating coparenting during COVID-19” and that they could leave any question blank and drop out at any time. They were given the option of being entered to win one of five \$50 gift cards. The study was approved by the Clark University Human Subjects Review Board. This mixed-methods study focuses on responses to closed- and open-ended questions, which were created by the authors for this study.

## Measures

### Couple type

Participants were categorized as WPM, MPW, or WPW based on their response to the questions “What is your gender?” and “What is your ex-spouse’s gender?”.

### Shared physical custody

Participants were identified as sharing or not sharing physical custody of their children based on their response to the question, “What is your physical custody situation?” (shared—sole, me; and none—ex has sole physical custody).

### Finalized divorce

Participants were identified as having finalized their divorce if they have been legally married and have finalized their divorce before or during COVID-19. Those who were legally married and who had not yet filed for or finalized their divorce were unfinalized.

### Sources of coparenting difficulty

Participants were presented with the prompt: “Since COVID-19, which of these items have been issues (e.g., sources of tension or challenge) between you and your ex? Check all that apply.” They were presented with 21 items (see Table 2) in four domains: legal and financial,

**TABLE 2** Sources of conflict for divorced and separated parents ( $N = 296$ )

|     | Type of Issue                                                       | Source of tension (296)<br><i>N</i> , % |
|-----|---------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
|     | <b>Legal and Financial</b>                                          |                                         |
| 1.  | Financial issues                                                    | 112 (37.8%)                             |
| 2.  | Moving ahead with the divorce (e.g., completing paperwork)          | 62 (20.9%)                              |
|     | <b>COVID-Specific Coparenting</b>                                   |                                         |
| 1.  | Adherence to safety guidelines/ precautions                         | 122 (41.2%)                             |
| 2.  | Handling remote schooling                                           | 94 (31.8%)                              |
| 3.  | Views on science (e.g., whether to get a vaccine)                   | 49 (16.6%)                              |
|     | <b>General Coparenting</b>                                          |                                         |
| 1.  | Regular communication about children                                | 128 (43.2%)                             |
| 2.  | Decisions about and interacting w/school                            | 114 (38.5%)                             |
| 3.  | Establishing and maintaining a routine                              | 108 (36.5%)                             |
| 4.  | Decisions about mental health/health care for children              | 88 (29.7%)                              |
| 5.  | Helping children transition from house to house                     | 76 (25.7%)                              |
| 6.  | Child reluctant to go to one parent's house/prefers one environment | 72 (24.3%)                              |
| 7.  | Handling child exchanges                                            | 71 (23.9%)                              |
| 8.  | Childcare                                                           | 64 (21.6%)                              |
| 9.  | Handling discipline                                                 | 60 (20.3%)                              |
| 10. | Handling holidays                                                   | 40 (13.5%)                              |
|     | <b>Interpersonal Differences</b>                                    |                                         |
| 1.  | Jealousy/tension over new relationships                             | 39 (13.2%)                              |
| 2.  | Friends and family "taking sides"                                   | 27 (9.1%)                               |
| 3.  | Political differences                                               | 24 (8.1%)                               |
| 4.  | Substance use                                                       | 24 (8.1%)                               |
| 5.  | Violence                                                            | 14 (4.7%)                               |
| 6.  | Infidelity, cheating, and sexual issues                             | 12 (4.1%)                               |

COVID-19-specific coparenting, general coparenting, and areas of tension that do not directly involve the child (e.g., infidelity and substance use); many of which are also common reasons for divorce (Scott et al., 2013). They were asked to "please explain" on COVID-19-related items: adherence to safety guidelines, remote school, and views on science.

### Open-ended questions

1. What are the biggest challenges you have had since March 2020 related to coparenting?
2. What concerns do you have regarding your divorce, coparenting, custody, or financial support, amid COVID-19?
3. Have you encountered difficulties with legal delays due to COVID-19? Please explain.
4. Has figuring out the duties of financial support become more complex since COVID-19? Please explain.
5. If you have broken up but are still living together, please explain.

## Data analysis

### Quantitative

To determine whether selected demographic and divorce-related variables (Table 1) differed by respondent type (WPM, MPW, and WPW), we conducted a limited series of ANOVA analyses for continuous variables and Chi-square analyses for dichotomous variables. For our primary analyses, we used Chi-square analyses to determine whether coparenting tensions (Table 2) differed by physical custody status (shared or not), divorce status (finalized or not, among married participants), and couple type, among women. To reduce the number of tests, we tested for group differences only on tensions that directly or indirectly concerned the child ( $n = 15$ ), not those focused on the couple relationship (e.g., infidelity). In addition, to account for the number of tests conducted, we used a Bonferroni adjusted alpha of  $p < 0.0011$ , derived from dividing 0.05 by 45 (the total number of tests based on testing 15 types of coparenting tensions in three different ways: custody status, finalization status, and couple type).

### Qualitative

We used content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004) to examine responses from the open-ended portions of the surveys. Content analysis is a standard method for examining open-ended responses to survey questions, generating new insights through a process of identifying, coding, and categorizing primary patterns or themes in the data. Through this process of exploring and classifying qualitative data, we condensed words to text into a smaller number of content categories to develop a coding system to organize the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Our analysis focused on parents' descriptions of divorce and separation, coparenting, and COVID-19, and was informed by prior literature, a gender lens, and a systems perspective on family stress and resilience, attentive to how issues of conflict were managed across households during a pandemic. The first author first read all open-ended responses to gain familiarity with the data, including overarching themes in responses. Then, responses were annotated: that is, via line-by-line coding, the first author labeled phrases relevant to the primary domains of interest (e.g., coparenting). These codes were abstracted under larger categories and subcategories, which were positioned in relation to each other, such that connective links were established in an effort to meaningfully describe parents' experiences of coparenting during COVID-19. For example, parents who lived with their exes while separated described a uniquely stressful dynamic in the context of close quarters, legal ambiguity, and financial stress. A tentative coding scheme was produced and reapplied to the data. The scheme was examined against a selection of the data by the second author, leading to minor modifications. This process ensured consideration of multiple interpretations, strengthening the credibility of the analysis. Finally, themes were explored with special attention to participants' social locations, including gender and couple type, as well as aspects of their separation or divorce (e.g., custody arrangement) to better understand patterns across, and unique to specific groups of, participants.

## FINDINGS

We organize the findings by three interrelated domains that were uniquely experienced by separated and divorced parents during COVID-19: legal, financial, and coparenting challenges.

## Legal challenges facing divorced and divorcing parents during COVID-19

COVID-19 augments the stress on divorced and divorcing parents vis-a-vis its impact on the legal system—one of the many institutions disrupted by the pandemic. Recall that among the 265 married participants, about two-thirds (175; 66.0%) have finalized their divorce pre-COVID-19, while 14 (5.2%) finalized during COVID-19, 12 (4.5%) filed for divorce during COVID-19, and one-quarter (64, 24.2%) have not yet filed but intended to. Sixty-one (23%) participants said they had encountered legal challenges due to the pandemic. Divorced parents who endorsed legal challenges ( $n = 23$ ) emphasized how legal delays have complicated their ability to address custody and financial support issues that arose during the pandemic—such as filing for custody modifications due to the challenges imposed by travel restrictions and quarantine and filing for modifications to child support due to job loss/layoffs (“I filed for child support [changes] in April and there has been no movement from the court”; MPW). Those who had finalized but not yet divorced ( $n = 30$ ), as well as those who had not yet filed but planned to ( $n = 8$ ), noted challenges in reaching attorneys and mediators, describing them as overwhelmed and/or unresponsive. The absence of a formal intermediary sometimes meant that parents were engaging with their exes more than usual, which was often not ideal amid notable conflict. The inability to connect with attorneys, combined with court closures and delays and rescheduled hearings (e.g., due to COVID-19 outbreaks in the court system), meant that they were often unable to file or finalize their divorces in a timely manner. The inability to move forward with their divorces (i.e., having them be “dragged out”) was frustrating, as many claimed a readiness to be divorced.

Some participants were able to meet with attorneys and mediators, and attend court hearings, virtually. These virtual encounters tended to occur only after significant delays (“we waited weeks to hear and then were divorced over the phone”; WPM) and were described as less satisfying, efficient, and effective than in-person. Furthermore, virtual meetings and court appearances were sometimes awkward or difficult, occurring when other family members (e.g., children) were home and sometimes with unstable internet connections. Virtual meetings with mediators were described as less effective and more contentious in a few cases, such that it was difficult for the mediator to maintain control over sessions in an online environment.

## Financial challenges facing divorced and divorcing parents during COVID-19

Divorced parents are often financially intertwined with their former spouses. In turn, financial shifts that occur during COVID-19 have the potential to impact the entire family system.

Over one-third (123, 41.6%) of participants received child support and just 17 (5.7%) received spousal support, with another 17 (5.7%) stating that their exes were supposed to pay child support but did not. Just 41 (13.9%) paid child support, and 10 (3.4%) paid spousal support. Most participants (241; 81.4%) were employed (with 210 working mostly from home); 24 (8.1%) were not working due to COVID-19 (e.g., job loss), 13 (4.4%) were not working but this was not a change, and 18 (6.1%) reported something else (e.g., they were a student). Regarding ex-spouses, 223 (75.3%) were working, 17 (5.7%) were not working due to COVID-19, and 28 (9.5%) were not working but this was not a change; 18 (6.1%) described some other situation (e.g., ex was retired), and 10 (3.4%) indicated uncertainty (e.g., “I don't know” or “He's not being forthright”).

Despite the fact that only 13.8% reported lost jobs due to COVID-19 (8.1% self and 5.7% ex), more than one-third (109, 36.8%) said that figuring out the duties of financial support had become more complex since COVID-19, which they explained in terms of job loss, loss of income (e.g., due to being furloughed), reduced hours, and fear of job loss. A WPW said, “After being furloughed, my ex had trouble obtaining unemployment benefits. Since the beginning of the pandemic I have not received any child support.” A WPM detailed, “Ex has lost his primary

income, which means he can't contribute his 50% to expenses like braces, clothing, therapy." Speaking about the stress of losing one's job, one MPW said, "I was paying child support. I lost my job due to COVID-19 and have been waiting two months for unemployment." Even when support was paid, it was not always in a timely manner. Said one WPM: "He doesn't pay his support on time, and this has been worse since COVID." Financial stresses were often magnified amid the pandemic: "My ex has mismanaged the mortgage payments for two years post-separation, and this likely can only be settled with a mediator or lawyer, which I cannot afford with no income due to COVID," said a WPM. COVID-19 also introduced new expenses, such as hiring tutors, and it was not always clear how these would be managed. One MPW, for example, was unsure how they would afford to "pay a 'teacher' [to oversee] virtual school."

Negotiating changes to child support, especially out of court, was especially challenging for those who described strained relationships with their exes. Eleven women described how their less powerful status vis-a-vis their ex (e.g., in health, immigration status, education, and abuse history) rendered them especially vulnerable in the context of financial negotiations. A WPM who had lost her job, whose ex was reportedly constantly angling for more time with their child, worried that if she filed a modification for child support, "he will respond by filing a modification of physical custody." One WPM said that her ex had asked to reduce his level of support, claiming that "COVID constitutes a material change in circumstance"; however, she was fearful of making changes and going to court because it "opens up the whole case. In the past he has threatened to take our child away from me and he is in law school." One WPW named multiple vulnerabilities that amplified her dependence on her ex:

I lost 50% of my income due to COVID. She refuses to revisit support guidelines. I am an immigrant mama and immunocompromised. My ex and her new girlfriend are my pod in light of child share and I do not wish to "rock the boat" for fear of retaliation.

One group for whom legal and financial issues were uniquely complicated were those who were currently still living together while separated (12), several of whom had filed for divorce during COVID-19, and the remainder of whom intended to file. Even more than those living separately in legal limbo, they were unable to move on emotionally or financially. Living together during the pandemic in part because they could not afford two households, but also for physical safety/health reasons, they continued to be financially and physically interdependent with their exes. Said one WPM: "We decided to separate/divorce very recently and he'll be moving out in the next month. It's financially very scary to live separately. I lost my job and have taken huge pay cuts... We're trying to support each other." These parents viewed their situation as necessary but unpleasant ("we are currently in a purgatory of sorts"; WPM) and struggled to navigate shared space and coparenting. As one WPW said, "Nesting has been extremely challenging for us, but given COVID related unemployment we cannot afford two households."

## Coparenting challenges during COVID-19: sources of conflict

Sources of potential tension were assessed that spanned legal and financial issues, coparenting issues (general and COVID specific), and relationship issues that do not involve the child (e.g., substance abuse and infidelity) (Table 2). The most common sources of conflict were communication about children (128, 43.2%), views on adherence to COVID-19 safety guidelines (e.g., mask wearing, exposure to non-household members, and rules for social gatherings) (122, 41.2%), decisions about/interacting with school (114, 38.5%), and financial issues (112, 37.8%). The other COVID-specific sources of conflict were handling remote school (94, 31.8%) and beliefs about science (e.g., willingness to get a vaccine) (49, 16.6%).

Follow-up exploratory Chi-square analyses examined whether overall number of and sources of conflict varied according to physical custody status, finalization status, and couple type. There were no differences in overall number of conflicts according to custody status. Those with shared custody were more likely to identify transitions between households as a source of conflict during COVID-19,  $X^2(1, 296) = 8.94, p < 0.001$ , compared to those in sole custody arrangements. Those with shared custody were also more likely to indicate remote schooling as a source of conflict,  $X^2(1, 296) = 8.91, p < 0.001$ . Compared to those with finalized divorces, participants who have not finalized endorsed a higher number of conflicts overall,  $F(1, 264) = 13.09, p < 0.001, M = 5.86, SD = 4.14$  vs.  $M = 3.89, SD = 3.71$ ; and were more likely to identify finances as an area of conflict during COVID-19,  $X^2(1, 265) = 11.18, p < 0.001$ . None of the differences between WPW and WPM reached significance at the Bonferroni adjusted  $p < 0.001$ .

Next, we discuss COVID-19 coparenting challenges that participants described in response to several open-ended questions. The general issue of communication pervaded all COVID-19 challenges. For example, participants described their exes as avoiding or lacking transparency when coordinating their approach to risk mitigation, remote schooling, and/or future vaccinations.

### Clashing views on adherence to safety guidelines and precautions

Again, 41.2% of the sample cited different views on adherence to safety guidelines as a source of conflict. These parents described disagreements related to the necessity and frequency of mask wearing, participation in social gatherings (e.g., inside or outside, with masks or not, and large groups or not), and travel (e.g., out of state to see family and air travel). They highlighted struggles to establish a set of shared rules regarding reducing risk exposure, or declared that their exes simply would not engage with them on this topic. Women tended to depict their exes, male and female, as less strict about virus risk mitigation than they were: "He does not make them wear masks and takes them to social gatherings. He seems to not view COVID as a risk," said one WPM. Many women characterized these conflicts as grounded in different perspectives on risk and safety more generally, often describing themselves as more risk averse. A WPW said, "We have different levels of acceptable risk and... safety standards. She is more lax about health and safety risks." A WPM said, "My ex has a libertarian outlook and is not swayed by public health concerns." Several men depicted themselves as having a somewhat higher tolerance for risk, while describing their ex-wives as anxious and strict, resulting in controlling behaviors (i.e., closing the gate). As one MPW said, "She refuses to fly or let him fly to come to see me." Another MPW shared that he had contracted COVID, resulting in him losing "5 weeks of visitation." He elaborated: "Despite me being cleared to return to work two weeks before I asked to resume visitation, she still refused for proclaimed COVID safety reasons."

Many parents did not trust their exes to adhere to safety guidelines surrounding masks, hygiene, and social distancing—even those who have agreed verbally (or in written form) upon a shared set of practices. Participants emphasized their lack of control over what their exes did when their children were not in their care—including going to a trampoline park, attending indoor gatherings, and traveling to see family. "I have expressed my views and he has listened patiently and affirmed his agreement, but I'm pretty sure he does what he wants regardless of what I think and public health says you should do," said one WPM. "We agree in principle but he doesn't enforce our agreements and hides information from me," said another WPM. Parents were unable to monitor their exes' practices, but some learned from children when agreed upon rules were broken: "While my ex will tell me one thing, my son will tell me that they're doing the opposite... nothing that we agree on is respected or carried through" (WPM). Such disclosures were viewed as confirmation that they should not trust their exes, fueling

frustration and helplessness as they worried about their own and their children's health. As one WPW said, "[I don't know] what to do [if] her behaviors push the extremes of my risk comfort levels or put our son in harm's way."

Although many parents described disagreements on, or agreement followed by lack of enforcement of, safety protocols, some said they were unable to come to a shared understanding of risk mitigation because they simply did not communicate ( $n = 30$ ). A WPM said, "The challenge is in talking about it, since my ex doesn't want to have to answer to me about his choices and wants me to just trust him." Another WPM said, "He refuses to discuss this with me and won't answer questions when I've asked him about work precautions." Several said this lack of communication was consistent with their pre-COVID relationship ("We parallel parent; we don't communicate"; WPW; and "She doesn't verbally speak to me and hasn't for 4 years. She text messages me orders and rarely will respond to questions I text her"; MPW). Ten of those who said their exes refused to engage with them about safety, all women, described this behavior as deliberately controlling or manipulative, feeling that their exes flaunted their disregard for their preferences and tried to "fan the flames" of their anxiety and provoke pain. Said a WPM, "My ex knows how concerned I am and has made sure I'm aware he's not following suggested safe procedures. He enjoys my anxieties and anger." One WPW shared how her ex had "exposed us to many more people than I am comfortable with in ways that feel spiteful." Several WPMs with sole physical custody noted that this lack of communication was "not a problem" since they were "in charge": "I declared myself the boss since he's only seen them a handful of times this year. I make all the rules and he rolls his eyes and complains."

Differences in risk mitigation views, and issues of trust, control, and communication related to parenting practices across households, were especially salient when participants or their exes had new partners. Many parents have new partners with (75; 25.3%) or without (60; 20.3%) children, and many of their exes have new partners with (65; 22.0%) or without (56; 18.9%) children; also, 12 said they were "dating" and 8 were unsure of their ex's dating status. Such arrangements meant an expansion of parents' "bubbles" to include people they did not know. They faced higher exposure risk due to children having contact with multiple households yet could do little to mitigate this, especially when their exes refused to communicate about or adhere to shared guidelines. Noting that her ex's girlfriend also had children, one WPW said, "Nobody is talking about what to do when you have a 5-house railroad track of possible transmission."

## Frustrations with handling remote schooling

Remote schooling was an issue of conflict for almost one-third (31.8%) of participants—particularly those with shared custody. In a few cases, parents have different perspectives on remote schooling: whether to choose a remote, hybrid, or fully in-person option; and, a few parents detailed differences in expectations about the amount or quality of work that needed to get done. Most conflicts centered on the division of labor related to remote schooling, with parents stating that responsibility for overseeing school fell to them, often because they were working at home. These individuals typically have shared physical custody. In turn, their narratives reveal the frustration and anger that they were expected to shoulder school responsibilities when, pre-pandemic, they had equal time with children.

WPM were especially likely to note their responsibility for remote schooling ("I do it all while also working full time"), commenting that their exes "did not participate." "My ex does nothing other than tell child I'm doing it wrong," said one WPM. "He expects me to handle all logistical issues, with no adjustment to child support," said another WPM. One WPM detailed: "I have the kids every other week. I monitor everything and send updates to him for continuity. He does nothing, basically leaves them to their own devices and sends me no info." For 15

women, all but 1 of whom was a WPM, their oversight of remote schooling was part of a larger issue: they felt their exes were using COVID-19 as an excuse to offload parenting duties (“he’s using the pandemic to shirk all parenting responsibilities”), which typically resulted in children staying mostly with them. Said one WPM, “The decision to have the kids with me 100% of the time was under the guise of ‘health and safety.’” A WPM commented, “She claimed she needed COVID tests 3 times and insisted I keep the kids on her time.” In contrast, a few men and women said that their exes were using the pandemic as a means to gain more time with children and assume total control of their schooling: “She has tried to say that the children should stay with her every day since she has the time to tutor them because she does not work” (WPM).

## Tensions surrounding different views on science

Although just 16.6% of parents identified different views on science as a key source of tension, the nature of this tension was described as intense. Participants, particularly WPM, sometimes depicted their exes as “anti-vaxxer[s],” “anti-science,” “skeptical of Western medicine,” or “believer[s] in herd immunity,” and as endorsing theories regarding COVID-19 as a hoax or conspiracy. Stated one WPM, “This is the area of greatest discord between us... my ex believes conspiracy theories, discredits sound research and science... and actively rejects the likelihood of a vaccine.” A MPW said, “I follow science; she follows the media and her anxious gut.” A few participants worried about what would happen once decisions have to be made regarding vaccination—an important aspect of medical decision-making that is generally shared by parents with joint legal custody. One WPM said bluntly, “I will almost certainly have to take him to court to be able to vaccinate her if a vaccine becomes available.” These differences in beliefs were often linked to political values. Said a WPM: “I’m very liberal and he is very conservative so I worry that he’s not taking the virus seriously.” Another WPM said of her ex, “He does seem to think that COVID-19 has been overblown and more people have recovered from it than died... it has created endless conflict.”

## DISCUSSION

The stress of the COVID-19 pandemic may exacerbate individual, relational, and family tensions (APA, 2020; Choi et al., 2020; Lebow, 2020b). Divorced and separated parents not only face financial and/or legal issues but must also engage more often with their exes about finances, childcare, school, and safety rules, all with little guidance from legal professionals. In addition, such communications may be particularly intense given the general threat surrounding the virus, and the increased interdependence of the two parental subsystems, whereby one parent’s behavior (e.g., wearing masks) has implications for the other’s well-being.

This study included divorced, divorcing, and separated parents, most of whom were White and well educated. The majority were mothers formerly partnered with men, but a substantial minority were women formerly partnered with women, followed by men formerly partnered with women. The findings, then, predominantly represent the perspectives of well-educated White women—but offer insights that may be relevant to a broader array of individuals.

Amid prior work indicating that custody, finances, and coparenting are often challenging and contested domains for divorced parents, we surmised that such issues may be intensified in unique ways during a pandemic, particularly for parents who do not enjoy cooperative relationships with their exes (Adamsons & Pasley, 2006; Lebow, 2020b). Legal issues emerged as especially complex for parents who have not yet filed or finalized their divorces at the onset of the COVID-19 outbreak, as this led to a delay in the process of moving on that was emotionally

challenging. This imposed stagnation (feeling “stuck”; Allen & Goldberg, 2020) was especially salient for parents who were separated but living with their exes, thereby requiring a continual comingling of their personal, financial, and parenting lives that inhibited their ability to establish new boundaries surrounding intimacy and privacy (Emery & Dillon, 1994). Court closings and attorney unavailability meant that both divorced and separated parents were on their own in navigating the uncharted territory of coparenting during a pandemic. Parents managed the financial challenges associated with COVID-19, such as job loss, largely on their own, without legal professionals to guide them (e.g., regarding implications for child or spousal support). Some parents—and, specifically, women (Raley & Sweeney, 2020)—were in a less powerful position than their ex-partners due to intersections among gender, income, immigration status, abuse history, and the like; and, thus, felt that they have to tread lightly regarding their efforts to request continued, or changes to, financial support amid the pressing realities of COVID-19.

Parents with shared physical custody arrangements were more interdependent with their ex-spouses than those in sole custody arrangements, introducing more tension when navigating issues such as children's transitions between homes (especially amid the health risks associated with such transitions) and remote schooling—tasks that require coordination and cooperation. Parents who have not yet finalized their divorces reported more coparenting conflicts overall, and with regard to financial issues specifically. This group was “in limbo” and may have experienced greater uncertainty and stress as they tried to navigate potential changes in financial support without established norms to guide their behavior amid their newly reconstituted family system (Allen & Goldberg, 2020; Crabtree & Harris, 2020; Emery & Dillon, 1994).

Considering issues specifically related to COVID-19, important dynamics emerged when navigating adherence to safety standards, remote schooling, and views on science. Women were sometimes cast by their exes as “stricter” and more unreasonable regarding safety precautions, whereas women often described their exes, men and women, as more “lax.” These findings are somewhat consistent with gender differences in coparenting and gatekeeping (Choi & Becher, 2019; Kotila & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2015; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2015) as well as in responses to COVID-19, such that women take more precautions (e.g., masks and social distancing) and are more anxious about COVID-19, mirroring larger trends showing that women are more risk averse than men (Frederiksen et al., 2020). When views on science were a source of contention, this often manifested in disagreements about vaccination, which tended to be tinged with political undertones, with participants (especially women) describing their exes (often men) as anti-science. Disagreements regarding remote schooling often centered on the perception that (typically female) participants were doing more than their (typically male) exes with regard to monitoring and overseeing their children's education. This echoes broader trends regarding the tendency for women in particular to take on more unpaid labor during COVID-19, which may ultimately cost them in terms of their employment outcomes (Collins et al., 2021; Goldberg et al., 2021). Some parents, mostly women, felt that their exes took advantage of their working at home to “offload” parenting and homeschooling on them. Unknown is whether their exes share this perception; indeed, a small number of participants spoke of an opposite dynamic, detailing how their exes were overly controlling and took over homeschooling.

Effective discussion about, and negotiation of shared practices surrounding, virus risk-mitigating behaviors such as mask wearing and social distancing appeared to be undermined by mistrust and lack of communication (Miller, 2009), which may be especially heightened among ex-spouses during the stress of a pandemic (Prime et al., 2020), and is consistent with the erosion of positive coparenting relationships after dissolution (Kotila & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2015). It is clear from the findings that divorced parents may view one another as untrustworthy regarding their safety mitigation practices, or as withholding information or refusing to communicate. Based on these (mostly women's) descriptions, it is possible that their exes might perceive their efforts to ensure compliance as overstepping boundaries or even a

form of gatekeeping, perhaps prompting counter-behaviors such as withdrawal and assertion of boundaries, or being less willing to accept input about or share information about safety behaviors, which may amplify this frustrating dynamic (Emery & Dillon, 1994; Markham et al., 2017). Mothers in particular may feel a sense of primary responsibility over children's safety, even in the context of shared custody arrangements (Steinbach, 2019), prompting behaviors that they view as protective but which their exes may view as controlling (Markham & Coleman, 2020; Nixon & Hadfield, 2018), and echoing broader dynamics that may occur in the context of post-divorce coparenting (Pruett et al., 2007).

Several descriptive findings relevant to relational context are worth noting. WPW tended to have been married for fewer years prior to divorce (likely reflecting the recency of legal marriage, but not the length of their relationship). They were also more likely to have used a mediator and to share physical custody, echoing limited research suggesting a child-centered and democratic approach to post-divorce coparenting (Allen & Goldberg, 2020; Farr & Goldberg, 2019). More attention in the future should be paid to how such differences may not only lead to positive adaptations to post-divorce life but also introduce tensions (e.g., sharing physical custody during a pandemic creates unique stresses, as we saw).

## Limitations

This study is limited by its reliance on a sample of mostly White, well-educated women formerly married to men, most of whom were employed—and just 14% of whom reported job loss by themselves or their exes—reflecting the ongoing need to pursue more assertive measures in obtaining samples for family research who are diverse in terms of gender, race, social class, and other forms of social stratification (Few-Demo & Allen, 2020). Divorced and separated parents with fewer resources face greater, and different, stressors—for example, they may be more likely to consolidate households and live together to save money, thus, exacerbating conflict. Furthermore, we excluded from our subsample men formerly partnered with men, trans individuals, and individuals formerly partnered with trans individuals because of their small numbers. Future work should explore their perspectives and experiences, given that gender and relational context may be salient in post-divorce coparenting. In addition, a small percentage (3.4%) of the sample was from outside the United States, mainly Canada, where public health messaging surrounding COVID-19, as well as ideas and definitions of shared versus physical custody, may differ in subtle ways. We did not address or explore this potential variability or its impact on our findings.

Our findings also disproportionately reflect the experiences of parents who have joint physical custody—an arrangement that varies widely in practice (e.g., many parents do not share “50–50”) and which, although increasingly common, varies by family demographics and by state (Cancian et al., 2014). Indeed, an additional limitation is that we did not ask parents about the precise breakdown of time children spent in the two households but, rather, simply distinguished between shared and sole physical custody. Nor did we provide definitions for these terms, which is a limitation in that participants' views or ideas of what constitutes shared versus sole physical custody may have varied in ways that are not consistent with how researchers typically conceptualize them.

Finally, the depth and nuance of our findings are limited by the fact that we obtained our data via an online survey. Although this approach yielded more data than we would have been able to obtain via open-ended interviews, there are certainly losses associated with not being able to solicit additional details or probe for more information, for example (Goldberg & Allen, 2015).

## IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Despite the above limitations, the current study provides valuable insight into divorced and separated parents' experiences navigating the financial, legal, and relational ambiguities of coparenting during a pandemic. These parents are coping with high levels of stress, which they bring to their roles as parents, coparents, and ex-spouses. There is a need for COVID-specific professional guidelines for divorced/separated coparents related to moving between households and child exchanges, enforcement of custody arrangements and guidelines around changing visits, enforcement of financial support and guidelines around changing of support guidelines, and managing exposure risk. Parents who are dating or living with new partners, and/or whose exes have new partners, need specialized guidance regarding how to manage communication and transparency about risk mitigation behaviors across several different households, especially when those new partners have children (and are themselves spending time in multiple households). Such conversations may be especially tricky amid larger challenges navigating privacy rules and boundary management (Miller, 2009). Tools may be developed to guide these parents in discussing and hopefully reaching agreement upon safety protocols consistent across households.

Divorced and separated parents also need guidance about the division of remote schooling responsibilities and suggestions for divorced families where both parents work either inside or outside of the home. They also require clearer guidance from state and/or legal professionals regarding whether COVID-19 represented a "material change in circumstance" (e.g., to warrant changes to financial or child custody obligations), as well as guidance regarding child exchanges (e.g., suggestions for intermediary and/or neutral territory for child exchanges).

Therapists, mediators, and other support professionals can play an important role in helping divorced and separated parents to communicate and coordinate about the needs of their children. Lebow (2020b) emphasizes "safety first", structure, and combining special adaptations for divorcing families with general therapeutic skills in order to help families during the pandemic. In particular, access to virtual supports (therapists and mediators) may help to reduce stress and enhance communication during a highly stressful and "unprecedented" time. Other online supports, such as private Facebook groups with other divorced parents navigating coparenting during COVID-19, might also be beneficial.

It is clear, then, that COVID-19 presents financial, legal, and relational challenges for divorced and separated parents, who must navigate the reality of ongoing interdependence with their ex-spouses and coparents during a scary, stressful, uncertain, and indeed unprecedented time. This group, in particular, would benefit from strong and clear public health messaging regarding the legitimate threat that the virus poses—and, in turn, guidelines for risk and safety management which encompasses families that comprise multiple households.

Finally, the current study also has implications for our understanding of post-divorce coparenting challenges and dynamics in general, beyond the specific context of a pandemic. First, the findings point to the discomfort and burden of being "stuck" in divorce proceedings, or unable to initiate them, amid circumstances that are beyond one's control. In particular, the findings point to how although continuing to live together was for some a solution to the financial and legal uncertainty they faced, this strategy came with trade-offs (Crabtree & Harris, 2020).

The findings also highlight the potential for boundary and power issues to emerge amid any situation or crisis that lacks clear and widely agreed upon rules, as well as the importance of communication and trust in navigating coparenting in such situations (Lebow, 2020b; Prime et al., 2020). Indeed, the findings point to how prior strategies of parallel parenting may be less effective when there is a sudden need for more communication and interdependence to ensure children's and each parent's safety. In the case of a child being diagnosed with a serious and/or chronic health condition, such as diabetes or Crohn's disease, for example, divorced coparents

will need to agree on a shared set of safety behaviors and precautions, insomuch as not doing so places their child's well-being at risk. Divorced coparents who struggle with high conflict, lack of effective communication, and fragmented trust should work with a therapist or parenting professional to receive education and guidance surrounding the creation of such a set of rules, as well as the need for compromise and respect when there is "room for interpretation" surrounding a particular health guideline (e.g., consumption of certain foods). Flexibility and radical acceptance can also be powerful relational assets for divorced coparents to engage, especially during times or situations marked by intense uncertainty (Lebow, 2020b).

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