Research Article

**The constellations of child fostering in Kenya:
Considering location and distance**

Cassandra Cotton

Clement Oduor

Contents

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Cassandra Cotton[1]

Clement Oduor[2]

Abstract

BACKGROUND
While studies provide context on why mothers foster-out children, there is little discussion about where children reside, transitions in children's living arrangements over time, distance between fostered children and their mothers, and how such distance might influence mothers' relationships with children.

OBJECTIVES
We aimed to: (1) examine the geographical location of fostered children and distance from mothers, (2) establish who fosters children and the mothers' relationships with caregivers, (3) determine transitions in children's fostering arrangements, including mobility within kin networks, and (4) explore mothers' perceptions of distance, location, and barriers to contact with fostered children.

METHODS
We used innovative kinship-network data and in-depth interviews with mothers who have fostered-out children in Kenya. We mapped locations of fostered-out children using geo-coded data, determining 'hot spots' while exploring distance from mothers, and analyzed qualitative and quantitative data to examine mothers' perceptions of distance as a barrier to maternal–child relationships.

RESULTS
Fostered children live primarily in rural Kenya, and there is substantial fluidity in children's living arrangements. Mothers' relationships and contact with children are impacted by location and distance.

CONTRIBUTION
Our study highlights kinship linkages and child fostering over time and space. It suggests vital areas in future research on fostering and kinship more broadly and demonstrates the

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[1] Arizona State University, USA. Email: cassandra.cotton@asu.edu.
[2] African Population and Health Research Center, Kenya; PhD Research Candidate in Global Health at Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, UK.

possibility of narrowing the focus to collect more insightful data. It provides evidence on fostering experiences while accurately capturing children's transitions over time and within kin networks. The study paints a more complete picture of child fostering complexities and how they rely on the constellations of available kin.

1. Introduction

Child fostering, where children live separately from their mothers or both parents, is an established childrearing strategy in Kenya and throughout Africa (Cotton 2021; Alber 2018; Gaydosh 2015; Page 1989; Isiugo-Abanihe 1985). This social redistribution of children within kinship networks may allow parents to ease potential burdens associated with childrearing, provide opportunities for their children, or give assistance to kin (Alber 2018; Archambault and de Laat 2010; Madhavan and Brooks 2015; Bledsoe 1990). Kin have historically played this key role in raising 'the family's children,' though specific expectations and obligations may have evolved over time, particularly as greater internal migration has resulted in kinship networks stretched across countries and borders (Rossier et al. 2023; Cotton, Clark, and Madhavan 2022; Pillay 2020; Madhavan et al. 2018, 2017; Madhavan, Mee, and Collinson 2014). Though kin engage in supporting mothers and children in a variety of ways, some mothers, particularly those living in urban informal settlements, may find it especially useful to rely on kin living elsewhere to provide care for their children (Cotton, Clark, and Madhavan 2022; Cotton and Beguy 2021; Archambault, de Laat, and Zulu 2012; Nelson 1987).

In this paper we seek to understand several dimensions of location and distance in mothers' child-fostering arrangements. First, we document the geographic locations of children fostered-out by mothers living in two informal settlements in Nairobi. This demonstrates the spatial distribution of fostering by mothers living within Nairobi's informal settlements and shows fostering 'hot spots' throughout Kenya. We highlight the distance between mothers and their fostered-out children, showing the range of experiences between mothers who may reside close to or even in the same community as their fostered children, and those whose children reside far from Nairobi. Second, we examine the type of kin who serve as caregivers for fostered children and determine what kinds of transitions in kin care occur over time. Third, we explore how location and distance may function to facilitate or inhibit ongoing contact and relationships between mothers and their fostered children. Given the paucity of existing data allowing researchers to link mothers with their non-resident children over time and space, this descriptive paper sheds light on where and with whom non-resident children in Kenya

live, but additionally suggests opportunities for researchers to collect more thorough data on kin spread across multiple households and geographic locations.

2. Background

2.1 Child fostering in Kenya and elsewhere in Africa

Child fostering, often understood as children living away from parents or from mothers, occurs throughout Africa (Cotton 2021; Page 1989; Isiugo-Abanihe 1985). In Kenya, the focus of our research, more than 16% of mothers foster at least one child, with approximately 11% of all children under 18 living separately from their mothers (Cotton 2021). Earlier research on fostering suggests these arrangements, though varying based on cultural and kinship norms, typically arise from crises (for example, the death of a parent, or parents' divorce) or occur for specific purposes, such as allowing children schooling opportunities or connecting rural and urban households through strong kinship linkages (Goody 1982). For example, the HIV/AIDS epidemic has driven substantial child mobility and fostering due to parental illness and high mortality, particularly in eastern and southern Africa (Kasedde et al. 2014; Grant and Yeatman 2012; Madhavan 2004). In addition, many non-orphaned children find themselves in the care of kin when parents are responsible for many children, when parents migrate, or when family transitions such as divorce, widowhood, or remarriage occur (Cotton 2025, 2024; Hall and Posel 2019; Gaydosh 2015; Grant and Yeatman 2014; Greiner 2012; Bledsoe 1990). The flexibility of kinship ties and obligations may allow children to shift across households, particularly as the households of parents and of receiving kin may benefit from these moves. Though much work on child fostering has highlighted its usefulness to mothers and children, little attention has been paid to where children live and how distance between mothers and fostered-out children shape their ongoing relationships.

2.2 Fostering and children's location

Very few studies of child fostering provide any context to children's whereabouts or their distance from biological parents. Many quantitative studies have limited information on fostering and typically focus on either the household receiving fostered-in children or on characteristics of the mother fostering-out children, with little (or no) data to connect the two. Most studies categorize children in households as fostered-in when their parents are reported as not living in the household, while researchers might categorize mothers as fostering-out a child when the child is reported as living in a different household. Thus,

studies relying on the same definition of fostering – children residing separately from their mothers or both parents – by default must assume that the experience of fostering is the same, though fostered-out children might reside in the same town as their mothers or in another country and these experiences likely differ tremendously.

Many ethnographic studies focus on the distance of fostered-out children from biological parents, referencing urban foster caregivers taking children from villages, children visiting only on school holidays, or mothers sending children back to villages for care (Alber 2018; Goody 1982; Schildkrout 1973). Thus, many studies of fostering assume that either the fostered children or their parents are moving a "non-trivial distance" when fostering occurs (Ronnkvist, Thiede, and Barber 2023: 29), though the evidence is mixed. Brown's (2011) ethnographic work suggests fostering often involves long-distance separation of children and biological parents, with children fostered from rural Namibia to the capital, though shorter local moves might occur when relatives request children. Similarly, in Zambia fostered children are described as moving both within their local districts and over longer distances (White and Jha 2021). In fostering arrangements to provide labor, children in Ethiopia are often fostered in families located near their biological parents, potentially because such arrangements are often with non-relatives and can result in difficulties for fostered children (Kassa and Abebe 2016). In Verhoef's (2005) work describing the relationships between biological and foster mothers raising children in Cameroon, in some cases mothers and fostered children continued to reside in the same village (and in one case, the same household).

To our knowledge, only one study examining fostering in sub-Saharan Africa has incorporated any measures of distance or location of fostered children relative to parents. Looking at fostering arrangements between sending and receiving households in rural Burkina Faso, Akresh (2009) shows that about 60% of fostered children are within 25 miles of their parents, while nearly one-quarter are approximately 50 miles away in the capital. Much smaller numbers of children live further away or across the border in Côte d'Ivoire. This work, unique in its collection of data on distance, thus suggests that most – though certainly not all – fostering occurs within a relatively small geographic context, which may be particularly true if parents foster within kin networks and do not foster alongside migration. In Nairobi, the focus of our study, significant in- and circular migration means that large proportions of the population in the slums are migrants (Beguy, Bocquier, and Zulu 2010), though some communities have a more settled and less mobile population (Muindi et al. 2009). Migrants, particularly more recent arrivals, may maintain strong connections to their rural homes (Mberu et al. 2013; Owuor 2007; Agesa 2004), which might facilitate the transfer of children to kin who live greater distances from mothers (Cotton and Oduor 2024). Those without such connections may not foster at all or may rely on nearby relatives for this kind of assistance. Our data provide a unique opportunity to determine where both mothers and fostered-out children

live, so we can demonstrate the location of fostered children as well as the distance between mothers and children.

2.3 Mobility within households and kinship networks

As this study seeks to explore the distribution of children throughout kin networks and across geographic space, we can draw on the literature on households and translocal kinship negotiations to strengthen our understanding of connections between mothers, their children, and kin living nearby or far away. This situates child fostering as one example of the resources moving through "exchange networks" between households and within kin networks (Greiner 2012: 205).

Research suggests that families and individuals in African contexts have long been mobile and in flux, resulting in kin dispersed geographically in different locations and households who remain connected through exchanges of support, information, and family members (Madhavan et al. 2018; Yotebieng and Forcone 2018; Greiner 2012; Spiegel, Watson, and Wilkinson 1996). Thus, children's residency may not be fixed in the household of their biological parents, particularly where fostering is common and children are understood as belonging to the extended family. Indeed, studies of household composition across African countries suggest that the presence of children and other relatives and non-relatives drives variation in household size across the continent (Pohl, Esteve, and Galeano forthcoming). A substantial body of literature has questioned the standardized definitions of who is included in a household, sometimes arguing for a broader conceptualization that might capture the movement of resources and people across households and may place less importance on a fixed state of coresidence (Hertrich et al. 2020; Yotebieng and Forcone 2018; Randall et al. 2015; Kriel et al. 2014; Muniina, Seeley, and Floyd 2014). Particularly in contexts with substantial migration, individuals might be understood as belonging to and having obligations toward, or rights to, multiple households and family units (Walsham 2023; Agesa 2004; Spiegel, Watson, and Wilkinson 1996).

Randall and Coast (2015) put forward a conceptualization of "open" households, which "offer, give, receive or ask for help or support from a wider range of kin" (2015: 166), which may provide family units greater security in high-poverty contexts as they "consolidate[e] networks of obligation" (2015: 172). These open households may rely on the "translocal interdependencies" that bridge across households, linking kin in rural areas to those who have migrated to cities (Walsham 2023: 427). The porous boundaries of households and the persistent co-reliance despite spatial distance may facilitate the movement of children from one home to another, from the care of their mothers into the care of kin. Thus, we might expect to see children move from their maternal home to a

household of kin and back again to their mother's household, or even to the home of another member of a kinship network that stretches over time and space.

3. Data and methods

3.1 Study setting

This study focuses on two urban informal settlements, Korogocho and Viwandani, located in Nairobi, Kenya. The two communities, like the informal settlements that are home to approximately 60% of Nairobi residents (UN-Habitat 2020), are overcrowded, characterized by low-quality housing, few resources to support parents in raising children, and conditions that parents may prefer to avoid exposing children to if possible (Oloo et al. 2023; Archambault, de Laat, and Zulu 2012; Ndugwa and Zulu 2008). Both Viwandani and Korogocho are home to families with children, though Korogocho has a larger population of children and more long-term residents, whose connections to kin living elsewhere may be more limited (Madhavan et al. 2018; Muindi et al. 2009).

It is perhaps not surprising that mothers living in urban informal settlements might choose to have their children reside elsewhere if they have access to this form of kin support. Many mothers in informal settlements struggle to support their children and balance paid work with childcare, particularly given the low number of formal childcare options available (Clark et al. 2021, 2019; Hughes et al. 2021; Madhavan, Clark, and Schmidt 2021). The scant provision of high-quality, affordable schools in informal settlements (Ngware, Oketch, and Ezeh 2011) may push mothers to look for educational opportunities in other communities (Ngware and Mustiya 2021). Environmental and social conditions in the slums may also spur the movement of children into the care of kin who live in non-slum urban areas or even rural communities (Cotton and Oduor 2024; Cotton, Clark, and Madhavan 2022; Archambault, de Laat, and Zulu 2012; Nelson 1987).

3.2 Data

In this paper we leverage two complementary data sources to develop our understanding of (1) where fostered children live and with whom, (2) transitions in children's living arrangements, and (3) how mothers perceive the distance between themselves and their non-resident children.

We specifically focus on non-resident children and refer to them as 'fostered,' in keeping with the broader anthropological and demographic literature on children outside the parental home. There are a number of ways to conceptualize child fostering. In some

studies, children are viewed as fostered if they live separately from both of their biological parents. In others, children are considered fostered if they live away from their mothers. In this study we rely on the latter conceptualization, given that the relationship between mothers and their children is our primary focus. Our data source, unlike much of the quantitative data used to study fostering in African contexts, captures the caregiver, including biological fathers, maternal or paternal kin, and non-relatives. We are particularly interested in the implications of children living separately from their mothers, especially the role of distance and separation. Thus, all non-resident children in our samples are part of our analyses, though as we point out in our findings, some children do remain in parental care by residing with their fathers and/or step-mothers. This is important to note, given the potential for these forms of non-residence to differ substantially in duration and motivation from other more traditionally conceptualized forms of fostering. We explore this in our findings and return to this consideration in our discussion.

3.3 Kinship Support Tree

We draw on quantitative kinship network data from the Kinship Support Tree (KST) project, which collected data across two waves from 462 single mothers and a coresident focal child aged 0–7 in 2015 and 2016 in Korogocho (Madhavan et al. 2017).[3] Though the KST focuses on the focal child, additional data was collected about each of the mother's other children, including whether they lived with their mother or someone else. In this study we focus solely on the relatively small number of children who are reported by their mothers as living elsewhere in either wave. Thirty-six children aged 0–17 are reported as living separately from their mothers in Wave 1 and 58 children under 18 years are non-resident in Wave 2, while a total of 15 children are fostered in both waves. It should be noted that these represent small proportions of mothers' reported children in each wave (about 4% in Wave 1 and 7% in Wave 2), as most children co-reside with their mothers. The fostered children's mean age is 11.6 years in Wave 1 and 9.7 years in Wave 2. Between 41% and 45% of fostered children in each wave are girls. We assembled all available data collected about non-resident children, combining information about women, children, and children as members of the focal child's kin network. Due to considerable inconsistencies in mothers' reporting across waves, we manually merged children's records across waves, cross-checking children's identifying information in each wave to determine which children were fostered in both waves, which were fostered in one wave but transition to/from maternal care across waves, and which children were

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[3] Due to attrition of 50 mothers, the sample in Wave 2 is 412 mothers.

only reported in one wave.[4] Using this information, we were able to determine changes in residence across waves. Additional information was also collected about non-resident children, such as who they lived with, where they lived when they were non-resident or fostered, and several measures of mothers' perceived distance, contact with non-resident children, and obstacles to contact. In addition to gathering the names of the locations of mothers' non-resident children, the KST collected geospatial data by geo-coding location to identify the GPS coordinates of each child's location via Google Maps (Madhavan et al. 2018). We explore non-residence at the child level rather than the mother level because while siblings share many characteristics, fostering arrangements are frequently unique to the child and depend on factors such as whether they share the same father, their age, and other needs such as schooling.

3.4 Qualitative interviews

In addition to the KST, we rely on data drawn from in-depth interviews collected in Korogocho and Viwandani in 2011 and 2013 with 47 mothers (single and married) who currently or in the past had children who were fostered. These mothers were interviewed as part of a larger study focused on women's experiences of migration and motherhood. Three female interviewers from the communities used a semi-structured interview guide to conduct interviews, which were conducted primarily in Kiswahili and translated into English by trained assistants. The first author used MaxQDA to facilitate analyses, using a flexible coding approach (Deterding and Waters 2021). Mothers with children who had ever lived separately were asked to give information such as where the non-resident children lived and with whom, mothers' decision-making about these arrangements, and how mothers perceived this distance influenced their relationships with their children. In

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[4] The nature of the KST's design means that it is very easy to match mothers and focal children across waves, but it is far less straightforward to match other children due to discrepancies in the number of children and in birth dates across waves. The 462 mothers present in Wave 1 reported 510 additional children (living and dead, of all ages). The 412 mothers present in Wave 2 reported 540 additional children of all ages, living and dead. While a small number of new babies were born between waves (22, one of whom did not survive), this does not account for the full discrepancy, as a close comparison suggests many mothers do not report the same children across both waves. Consider an example of one mother: In Wave 1, this mother reported her focal child plus a son, born in 2011. In Wave 2, she reported these two children, but also a son born in 2002, a daughter born in 2007, and a son born in 2015 shortly before her Wave 1 interview. While the mother is present in both waves, the inconsistency in her reporting of her children means we cannot link all her children across waves. In addition, the children's birth dates and ages are not recorded consistently across waves, further causing difficulty in merging. We conducted manual verification to merge children across waves, but a substantial number of children fostered in one wave were simply not reported by mothers in the other wave (13 fostered in Wave 1 and not reported in Wave 2, 22 children fostered in Wave 2 and not reported in Wave 1). Discrepancies in information such as children's ages, birth dates, and even the number of children ever born have been reported in other longitudinal studies in similar settings (Clark et al. 2020; Anglewicz et al. 2009; Weinreb 2006).

this paper the coding focuses on mothers' discussions of children residing elsewhere: for example, codes were developed for the child's type of kin/caregiver and discussions of distance or location in women's narratives of child fostering.

While mothers were not asked to determine geo-codes of location during their interviews in the qualitative data, we imputed GPS coordinates by inputting the information mothers provide on location and sub-location into Google Maps, as mothers often provided exact names of villages and areas where children resided. We were able to determine the location of all 85 of the 47 mothers' non-resident children. In addition, all 38 mothers interviewed in the second round in 2013 completed basic life history calendars of their children's lives until the child's present age or until adulthood, which asked whether children spent any of each year of life living with someone other than their mothers. This assisted us in exploring the fluidity in children's living arrangements and the occurrence of fostering during each child's life.

3.5 Analyses

In this paper we provide a descriptive exploration of where and with whom fostered children live. Using geo-coded location data from both data sources, we use ArcGIS to map the location of non-resident children, by location and by the type of kin the children live with. This allows us to show the distribution of children fostered-out by mothers living in Korogocho and Viwandani, emphasizing potential fostering 'hot spots' where larger numbers of their children may reside and identifying the types of locations where fostered children live (in urban informal settlements within Nairobi, in urban non-slum areas, in rural areas, or outside Kenya). For those children we are able to match across waves, we explore the fluidity of child residence, showing how children move to and from mothers' households or between homes of other kin over a short period. To calculate distances between mothers and their non-resident children, we use route data in ArcGIS to determine approximate driving distance. In the KST, geo-coded locations are available for all mothers. For the qualitative sample, we estimate the approximate location of mothers living in Korogocho and Viwandani and use a standard central location for all mothers living in each community. The different sampling strategies of the quantitative and qualitative data may result in some variation in where children reside and the distance between mothers and children: The qualitative sample included Viwandani, a highly mobile community, and Korogocho, a community with greater long-term settlement which may result in more kin living close by to foster-in children, while the KST included only Korogocho.

Using the interview data, we consider mothers' perceptions of how distance from their children is related to their mothering of non-resident children, including their views

on this distance and how they keep in contact with non-resident children. Representative quotes and cases, including mothers' approximate distance from their non-resident children, are used to demonstrate how mothers consider location and distance.

Drawing on limited data from the KST, we explore mothers' subjective views of distance between themselves and their children, examining their answers to questions such as 'Do you think [your child] lives far away?' (Wave 1 only) and 'What are the biggest obstacles to visiting [your child]?' (both waves). We also examine mothers' contact with non-resident children, and their perceptions of the time, cost, and availability of transport to visit non-resident children. It should be noted that these questions, which were asked for all kin that women listed, were deliberately not asked for children less than 8 years of age. As a result, for a small number of mothers' youngest children these data are missing by design, in addition to a small number of missing observations. We include these as a descriptive example of mothers' views on these issues, but caution that these are very small samples and there are missing data across each of the variables; thus, we only show simple univariate analyses of KST data for illustrative purposes and not as a generalization for all mothers with non-resident children. The geo-coded and qualitative data are more robust and provide the majority of our findings. Collectively, these strategies allow us to build on and extend previous work exploring separation between parents and children (Cotton and Beguy 2021; Akresh 2009; Verhoef 2005) by mapping children's locations, examining subjective and objective measures of distance, and considering the fluidity and transitions that may occur in children's living arrangements over time.

4. Findings

4.1 Where do non-resident children live?

Table 1 shows the location of non-resident children. In the KST, fostered children live primarily in rural areas of Kenya (56% (20 children) in Wave 1, 61% (35 children) in Wave 2). Small numbers of children in both waves live in other urban areas of Kenya (such as Kisumu and Mombasa), and in Wave 1, two children live across the border in Uganda. Though conventional thinking about fostering envisions children and mothers living far apart, at least one-quarter of children in Wave 1 and Wave 2 live in Nairobi, in both non-slum and slum areas, including Korogocho where the mothers themselves reside. In the qualitative sample, a larger proportion of children reside in rural Kenya (about 85%, 72 children), while 7% (6 children) live in other Kenyan cities and 8% (7) reside in nearby areas of Nairobi. The geographic locations where non-resident children in the qualitative sample reside are almost entirely the 'homes' of the mothers or their

spouses. When urban Kenyans discuss their homes, they most frequently are referencing their rural homes where they grew up or where their family has roots. Given the patrilocal nature of virtually all Kenyan ethnic groups, married women typically identify their husband's rural home as their home and by extension their children's (Cooper 2018). Thus, the vast majority of non-resident children are described as living "upcountry" or "at home," primarily in rural areas.

Table 1: **Characteristics of child fostering in the Kinship Support Tree**

	Wave 1		Wave 2	
	%	N	%	N
Type of location where child resides				
Korogocho	8.3	3	7.0	4
Other Nairobi Slum	0.0	0	1.8	1
Nairobi Non-Slum	19.4	7	15.8	9
Other Urban Kenya	11.1	4	14.0	8
Rural Kenya	55.6	20	61.3	35
Outside Kenya	5.6	2	0.0	0
Missing	0.0	0	0.0	1
Who child lives with				
Father/step-mother	22.2	8	10.3	6
Maternal grandmother	27.8	10	31.0	18
Maternal grandfather	0.0	0	1.7	1
Paternal grandmother	8.3	3	6.9	4
Paternal grandfather	0.0	0	1.7	1
Maternal aunt	8.3	3	22.4	13
Maternal uncle	2.8	1	6.9	4
Paternal aunt	8.3	3	5.2	3
Sister	19.4	7	0.0	0
Non-relative	0.0	0	8.6	5
Mother reported as caregiver but not coresiding with child	2.8	1	3.5	2
Missing	0.0	0	1.7	1
Mother has ever visited child				
No	37.0	10	27.1	13
Yes	63.0	17	72.9	35
Not asked for children <8		7		6
Missing		2		4
Travel time to visit child				
<1 hour	6.7	1	36.0	9
1<3 hours	13.3	2	0.0	0
3<6 hours	13.3	2	20.0	5
6<11 hours	60.0	9	16.0	4
11<24 hours	6.7	1	24.0	6
Full day	0.0	0	4.0	1
Not asked for children not visited		10		20
Not asked for children <8		7		8
Missing		4		5

Table 1:   (Continued)

	Wave 1		Wave 2	
	%	N	%	N
Cost to visit child				
0–49 KSH	6.7	1	16.0	4
50–99 KSH	0.0	0	4.0	1
100–249 KSH	13.3	2	16.0	4
250–499 KSH	0.0	0	4.0	1
500–999 KSH	6.7	1	8.0	2
>=1000 KSH	73.3	11	52.0	13
Not asked for children not visited		10		20
Not asked for children <8		7		8
Missing		4		5
*Mother perceives child lives far away**				
No	33.3	5		
Yes	66.7	10		
Not asked for children not visited		10		
Not asked for children <8		7		
Missing		4		
Biggest obstacle to visiting child				
No obstacles	51.9	14	16.0	4
Cost to visit child	22.2	6	36.0	9
Distance	22.2	6	16.0	4
Safety concerns	3.7	1	0.0	0
Time	0.0	0	28.0	7
Other	0.0	0	4.0	1
Not asked for children not visited		0		20
Not asked for children<8**		4		8
Missing		5		5
Mother shares a warm relationship with non-resident child				
Don't agree	10.3	3	2.6	1
Somewhat agree	10.3	3	2.6	1
Agree	79.3	23	94.9	37
Not asked for children <8**		6		19
Missing		1		0
Mother shares a warm relationship with caregiver				
Don't agree	20.8	5	4.4	2
Somewhat agree	16.7	4	17.4	8
Agree	62.5	15	76.1	35
Don't know	0.0	0	2.2	1
Kin not listed in kinship network		5		8
Missing		7		4
Mother can count on caregiver in crisis				
Don't agree	12.5	3	23.9	11
Somewhat agree	20.8	5	13.0	6
Agree	66.7	16	63.0	29
Kin not listed in kinship network		5		8
Missing		7		4
Total N	36		58	

Note: *Question was not asked in Wave 2; **While these questions were not designed to be asked for children under 8 years, a small number of mothers of younger children were asked.

Figure 1 presents mapped locations of all non-resident children in Wave 1 and Wave 2 of the KST and in the qualitative sample. While non-resident children live throughout Kenya, there are clear areas of concentration, generally tied to the origin areas of migrant groups in the informal settlements. For example, we can identify a 'fostering hotspot' in Western Kenya, where many Luo and Luhya mothers in the informal settlements have strong rural–urban linkages. There are also clusters of non-resident children in Central Kenya, particularly around Nairobi and even within the same informal settlements where mothers reside.

Figure 1:   Non-resident children's locations by data source and wave (single data points and heatmap)

Panel A

▲ KST Wave 1   KST Wave 2   ● Qualitative Sample

Panel B

KST Wave 1   KST Wave 2   Qualitative Sample
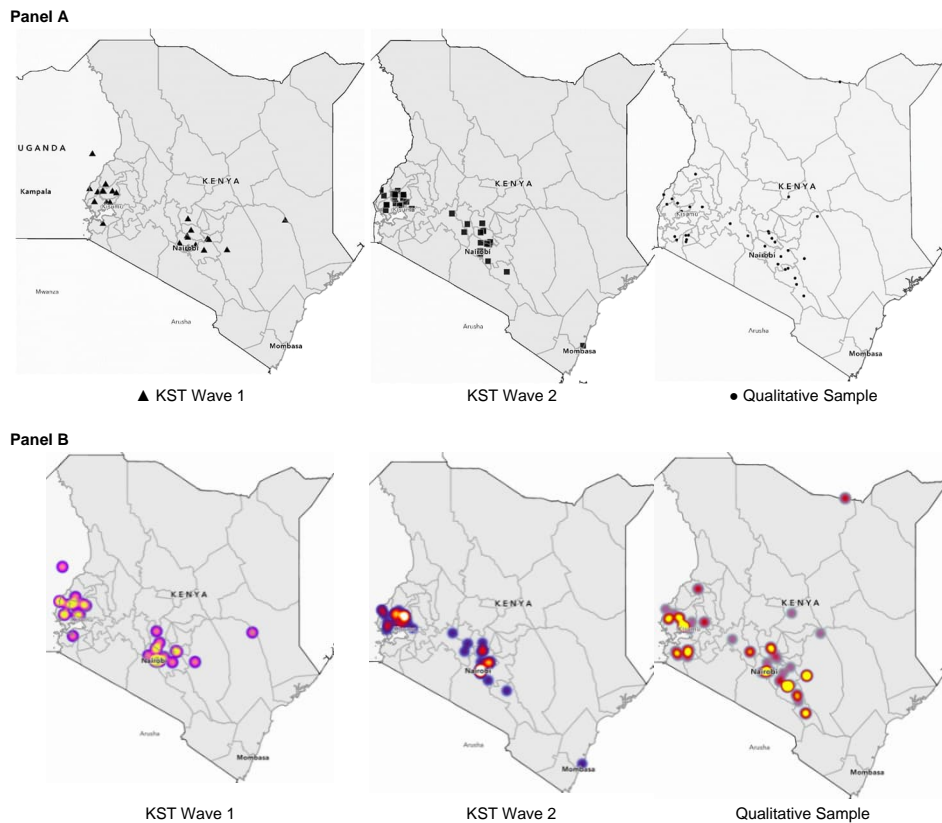
Using the qualitative data, we estimate the approximate driving distance at the child level (using road data in ArcGIS) to get a sense of the distance separating mothers in Nairobi from their non-resident children. Distances range from 3.1 km (1.9 miles) to 769.5 km (478.1 miles). The mean distance between mothers and children is 237.5 km or 147.6 miles, while the median distance is 191.1 km or 118.8 miles. In the first wave of the KST, children live between 0.17 km (0.10 miles) to more than 633 km (393.5 miles) driving distance from their mothers in Korogocho. The mean distance separating mothers and non-resident children is approximately 220 km (137 miles), while the median distance is 116.5 km or 76.7 miles. For children who are non-residents in the second wave of the KST, distances separating children from their mothers range between 0.06 km (0.04 miles) and 506.5 km (314.7 miles). The average distance is just over 208 km (129 miles); the median distance is 133.4 km (82.9 miles).

4.2 Who do non-resident children live with?

Table 1 presents the caregivers of non-resident children. Across both waves of the KST, maternal grandparents (primarily grandmothers) care for between 27% and 33% of non-resident children (10 in Wave 1, 18 in Wave 3). Far fewer children are cared for by paternal grandparents (roughly 8% in both waves, between 3 and 5 children). While about 22% (8) of non-resident children live with their fathers and/or stepmothers in Wave 1, 10% (6) do in Wave 2. Other relatives such as aunts and uncles also care for children, though larger numbers of maternal relatives do so (11% or 4 children in Wave 1, 29% or 17 children in Wave 2) than paternal relatives (8% in Wave 1, 5% in Wave 2, 3 children in each wave). In Wave 1, about one-quarter of children (7) are under the care of their sisters, while in Wave 2 a small number (5) are cared for by non-relatives. For small numbers of children (1 in Wave 1, 3 in Wave 2), the specific caregiver is not indicated as mothers report they are the caregivers but do not co-reside with (or near) the child.

In the KST, mothers are asked to provide their level of agreement with two statements of closeness with members of their focal child's kin network.[5] Mothers are asked 'Do you share a warm relationship with [kin member]?' and 'Can you count on [kin member] in a crisis?' with a three-point Likert scale (agree, somewhat agree, don't agree) as responses. The majority across both waves agree that they have a warm relationship and can count on their child's caregiver in a crisis, though more than 20% of children's mothers in Wave 1 do not have a warm relationship and nearly 24% in Wave 2 do not feel they can count on the caregiver in a time of crisis. This might suggest that their children's living arrangements do not stem from a crisis or are contentious. With

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[5] Because mothers were asked to report only the kin of their focal child, their children from other unions have different fathers and paternal kin than the focal child, and these kin are not recorded in the KST.

regard to having a warm relationship, nearly all the children whose mothers somewhat agree or do not agree that they have a warm relationship with the caregiver are cared for by fathers, step-mothers, or paternal kin (just one with maternal kin, an uncle). Only 3 children who live with paternal kin in Wave 2 have mothers who share a warm relationship with these kin. There is greater variation regarding mothers being able to count on the caregiver during a crisis. In Wave 2, for example, among the 11 children who live with a caregiver that mothers cannot count on in a crisis, 7 reside with paternal kin but the remaining children live with maternal grandmothers, aunts, and uncles.

There are similar patterns in the qualitative sample, although it should be noted that several children spent time in the care of multiple different relatives during the time they did not co-reside with mothers. Fifty-five of the 85 non-resident children spent some or all of their time away from mothers with maternal grandmothers (some of these also resided with maternal grandfathers, though mothers rarely discussed their caregiving). Another 15 lived with maternal kin, primarily mothers' sisters and brothers, but also occasionally the mothers' great-aunts and great-grandparents. Paternal grandmothers cared for 17 children, while paternal aunts cared for 2, and 3 children resided primarily in the care of their fathers; a small number of children spent periods of time in the care of their step-father's kin. Thus, maternal kin are the primary caregivers of most non-resident children across both data sources.

4.3 What transitions in location and caregiver occur over time?

Figure 2 presents details of the location and caregiver transitions that occur between waves of the KST for the 45 children whose residential transitions were captured in both waves. These data demonstrate both how frequent transitions in children's living arrangements might occur, and the importance of collecting information on both the location of fostered children and their caregivers. Of these 45 children, only 4 remained in the same location with the same caregiver over the 6-month period between waves. Nine children who were fostered in Wave 1 returned to their mothers in Wave 2, while 21 children who lived with their mothers in Wave 1 had left to live with other kin by Wave 2. The majority of these children (18) left Korogocho, while 3 remained in Korogocho near their mother's household. Nine children moved from one kin to another across waves, with more (6) changing both caregiver and location, while a small number (3) remained in the same location but transitioned to different kin. Another 2 children moved with their non-maternal caregivers to a different location between waves. Thus, when children live separately from their mothers there is substantial fluidity in their living arrangements regarding both the locations they reside in and their caregivers. Of particular note is the transition of children between the care of their biological parents.

Of the 8 children in the care of fathers and/or step-mothers in Wave 1, 3 returned to the care of their mothers in Wave 2, while 2 are not captured in Wave 2 and another child moved within its paternal kin network to live with a paternal aunt.

Figure 2:   Transitions in locations and caregivers across waves of the KST
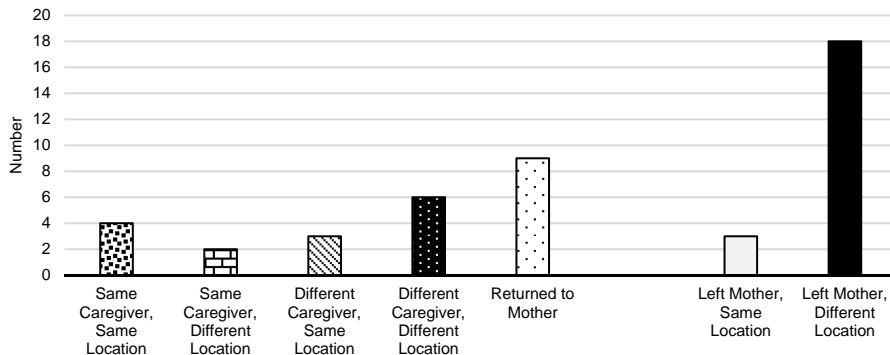
For several mothers in the qualitative sample, fluidity characterized their children's experiences living elsewhere, both in terms of caregiver and location. In Esther's case, she returned home to give birth to her son, and her mother suggested Esther leave the child at home so Esther could go back to Nairobi to work. Esther did so, leaving her son in Naivasha, about 100 km (60 miles) away from her Nairobi home, for 4 years. She notes "I used to visit them frequently." After Esther's mother died in 2005, Esther's son only joined her "in 2006, because he stayed with my grandfather [in Naivasha] for a year [more] before I took him." Grace also relied on her mother to take care of her oldest son on and off throughout his childhood. She explained: "There is a period when [my son] was with my mother in our rural home [in Ruai, about 15 miles/25 km away]. He stayed with her for 3 years from the year 2001 [at age 4]." Asked whether her son had come to live with her, Grace explained: "He came in 2005 while in Class 8. After doing his Class 8 here, he went back to my mother and he is still there. He has not come to stay with me again." Grace primarily sees her son during school holidays, despite the relatively short distance between them, though she also tries to go back at Christmas and Easter.

Yvonne, a mother of 7, fostered all of her children at different periods, sometimes with her own mother and sometimes with her mother-in-law (who is biological grandmother to 5 of her children). Her children oscillated between maternal and paternal grandmothers and Yvonne's home in Nairobi. Yvonne's mother lived in Mbooni, a rural village about 100 km away from Viwandani, while her mother-in-law resided in Machakos, a town about 60 km from Viwandani, slightly closer than Yvonne's rural

home. Yvonne's experience highlights how children might move from place to place and from caregiver to caregiver based on parents' and children's needs and the willingness of caregivers. When she first married her husband, her two daughters stayed with their maternal grandmother until the new couple was settled. Later on, Yvonne chose to leave her three oldest girls behind when she first came to Nairobi, explaining "they were in school and I couldn't take them out of school to come with me. I talked to my husband's mother to stay with them." Yvonne made this choice of caregiver due to disagreement with her own mother, noting "the first time I left my children with my mother, [but this time] she refused to stay with them and so I took them to my husband's mother." Later on, after Yvonne had come back to stay with her children, she went back to Nairobi to find her husband, but this time "his mother refused to stay with the children. Since our [her mother's] home was close, I went with them to my mother's place." Years later, Yvonne brought her children to live with her and her husband in Viwandani, after she felt her mother-in-law and mother were no longer caring for her children properly. While Yvonne found it difficult to bring her children to Nairobi to live with her, she "realized that it's really wrong to stay away from your children and that it is better for me to stay with them even though we were having a hard time."

We also note, in the qualitative sample, the fluidity of children's living arrangements between the care of mothers, fathers, and other kin. While some children went to live with their fathers, particularly following parental divorce, and stayed in their care indefinitely, other children moved between the home of their father and other paternal kin. For example, Wendy's son was "stolen" from her care by his biological father when the boy was in primary school. While Wendy was no longer able to see him due to her acrimonious relationship with her ex-husband, she heard through family members that her son went to live with "the aunty to his father" (the child's great-aunt) and that "the father visits the home where the child is."

4.4 How do mothers regard the impact of location and distance on their relationships with their children?

In Table 1, we highlight several measures of subjective distance and contact with non-resident children in the KST.[6] In Wave 1, about 63% of children's mothers had visited their non-resident child; in Wave 2, about 73% had done so. Among children whose mothers had visited, about two-thirds in Wave 1 and 40% in Wave 2 indicated it would take a minimum of six hours to travel to visit the children, and the majority suggested

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[6] In Table 1, we report all missing observations in the columns indicated N, including those missing by design through skip patterns and true missing values. When referring to proportions, we rely only on the non-missing observations.

transportation costs would exceed 1,000 KSH (about USD $7 in 2024). Mothers who had visited children in Wave 1 were asked if they felt their child lived far away; about two-thirds of children's mothers agreed. Unfortunately, only mothers who visited their children were asked these questions. In Wave 1, half of the children's mothers said there were no obstacles to visiting their children, while other mothers reported cost, distance, and safety concerns; mothers who had not visited their child were also asked about potential obstacles. In Wave 2, just 16% of children's mothers who had visited their child reported no obstacles; listed obstacles included cost, distance, and time. Despite this, the majority of children's mothers (79% in Wave 1, 95% in Wave 2) agreed that they had a warm relationship with their non-resident children.

Mothers in the qualitative sample also highlighted the role of distance – and proximity – in structuring their relationship with fostered children. Habiba, for example, left her two oldest sons with their grandmother in Moyale, a town at the northern Kenyan border with Ethiopia, a distance of approximately 770 km (480 miles) by road from Habiba's home in Korogocho. Though her oldest son recently joined her as an adult, her second son, aged 16, remained fostered-out far away. Asked whether she was in touch with her non-resident children, she said: "No, because I did not have money for transport and so I could not go to see them… I could only call but never visited them." While this was not very common, a total of 7 mothers reported never visiting their children; the others, however, suggested their lack of visitation had more to do with conflict with their children's caregivers than the distance that led to Habiba's long separation. Other mothers, like Nadine, discussed the combined difficulty of distance and traveling with their other children as making visits to fostered children difficult. Nadine, a mother of four, has one daughter living in Kitale, about 400 km (250 miles) from where Nadine lives with her husband and her other children. Nadine explained the infrequent contact with her fostered child, saying: "Since I moved to Nairobi [two years earlier], I have only been back once. I would like to go more, but it's difficult to travel with the children."

Distance, particularly the time and cost of long travel, made visits infrequent for many mothers, the majority of whom tried to visit several times per year. Anne's two oldest daughters live with her mother in Machakos, about 60 km (37 miles) away from her home in Viwandani. Discussing the oldest, she explained that "we stayed with her for a little while then she went home [to my mother's]", and that her second daughter is also "staying at home." While she speaks to them regularly over the phone, a combination of the distance, her job, and caring for her youngest daughter means that she sees them infrequently, noting "sometimes I pay them a visit, after two to three months." Conversely, some mothers had little distance to negotiate, like Linda, whose daughter lived with her maternal grandmother for about three years in Dandora, roughly 2 km (1.2 miles) from Korogocho. Linda described going "weekly to see my daughter" during the three years of separation.

While no other mother visited as frequently as Linda, several mothers tried to visit at least monthly or every two months, to ensure their children were well and had what they needed, though this was easier for mothers whose children lived in counties near to Nairobi. Marion, whose now-adult sons grew up with their maternal grandmother in Gatundu, about 50 km (31 miles) away, explained that while she missed them, she "used to pay them a visit after every month" to maintain connections with her children and her mother. Distance was not always a barrier to frequent visits, particularly when mothers did not trust their children's caregivers. Though Vivian's two older children lived in Kisau, about 128 km (80 miles) from her home in Viwandani, she mentioned that she prioritized regular contact as she was sometimes concerned about how her children were treated by their maternal grandmother. She said: "I visit them twice in a month. We also communicate through the phone." In addition, she took her youngest daughter along for these visits to ensure her children knew each other. For mothers like Vivian these visits are not without difficulty, given the time and expense of travel, but they feel that contact is important to facilitate relationships with children and kin, who might be reminded that parents are watching out for their children despite distance.

5. Discussion and future research directions

Child fostering is an institutionalized part of childrearing and kinship exchanges throughout sub-Saharan Africa, embedded in broader webs of kinship norms, expectations, and obligations. Kin have historically participated in collaborative childrearing alongside biological parents, and while specific practices may shift alongside changes in union formation, migration, and economic stresses (Cotton and Oduor 2024; Cotton, Clark, and Madhavan 2022; Alber 2018), mothers continue to rely on kin to foster-in children when they want or need assistance raising their children (Cotton 2021; Alber 2018; Gaydosh 2015). Though a substantial body of research suggests fostering is frequently practiced in Kenya and elsewhere, little is known about where and with whom fostered children reside, what transitions in living arrangements occur over time, and how the distance – or lack thereof – might affect relationships between mothers and their non-resident children.

In this study we seek to explore the location and caregivers of fostered or non-resident children in Kenya, and consider the role of distance between biological mothers and fostered children through geospatial, survey, and interview data. First, we examined the geographic locations of non-resident children, mapping out their locations within Kenya and beyond and determining the range and average distance between mothers in Nairobi's informal settlements and their fostered children. Second, we established who non-resident children lived with, breaking down caregivers into maternal and paternal

grandparents, other kin, or non-relatives, and exploring mothers' relationships with caregivers. Third, we explored transitions in children's arrangements over time, capturing mobility between mothers' households and the care of kin as well as geographic mobility and transitions from one kin member to another. Finally, we investigated mothers' perceptions of distance and location, visits, and barriers to ongoing contact with fostered children. By using a mixed-method approach, combining geo-coded, survey, and interview data, we highlight the important role of kin over time and distance in mothers' reliance on child fostering to assist with raising children.

We find that fostered children reside throughout Kenya, with average distances of between 129 and 147 miles (208 to 237 kilometers) between non-resident children and their mothers. We see clear concentrations of children in fostering 'hotspots' around Western Kenya, home to many Luo and Luhya migrants to Nairobi, as well as in Central Kenya, where many Kikuyu and Kamba in Nairobi maintain rural connections. While some children live several days' travel from their mothers, others reside within the same Nairobi settlement, just minutes away from their mothers, or in nearby non-slum areas of Nairobi. Mothers who have kin nearby may turn to these family members for rapid and easier assistance with childrearing, which may facilitate regular contact between mothers and children, as well as supervision of the relationship between caregiver and fostered child. Mothers without kin in close proximity may instead rely on those in rural homelands or kin who have themselves migrated to elsewhere in Kenya.

In both data sources, the role of maternal kin as caregivers is clear. Mothers rely heavily on their own parents and siblings, particularly their mothers, to take in fostered children. This is in line with studies suggesting increasingly matrifocal kinship networks, where women's own kin take on sometimes new roles in the support of women and their children (Oleke, Blystad, and Rekdal 2005; Notermans 2004). These findings may reflect the nature of the KST data, as this sample includes only single mothers who may have looser ties to paternal kin following union dissolution, or in some cases may not know the kin of their children's fathers; unknown kin can naturally not be relied on for fostering support. In the qualitative sample, however, there are both single and married mothers; both groups show a marked preference for maternal kin in most of their fostering arrangements. Thus, mothers might be turning to their own kin due to their personal preferences for caregivers, unavailability or refusals of support on the part of paternal kin, or willingness of maternal grandmothers, aunts, and uncles to take in the children of their daughters or sisters. Some of these arrangements might relate to mothers' need for day-to-day support in the care of their children in very difficult urban settings (Madhavan, Clark, and Schmidt 2021; Clark, Madhavan, and Kabiru 2018; Clark et al. 2017), which might explain why some fostered children reside with kin who live in the same community as the mothers. Other arrangements might be linked to mothers' desires to

maintain kinship ties and relationships with their kin across geographically dispersed kin networks (Madhavan 2024; Madhavan et al. 2018; Nelson 1987).

Though maternal kin are the dominant caregivers to fostered children, our findings related to fathers' care and caregiving by paternal kin suggest an important nuance in our understanding of children residing away from their mothers. Across each data source, small numbers of children reside with their fathers and/or step-mothers, meaning not all children who live away from their mothers are without parental care. In many studies of fostering these children are categorized as 'fostered' given the paucity of data on caregivers for mothers' non-resident children, but our findings serve as a reminder that such categorizations miss the variation in children's experiences. These arrangements might be better conceptualized as informal shared custody. What is particularly noteworthy are the transitions between mothers' and fathers' care, or from fathers to the homes of other paternal kin. This provides a strong argument for higher quality data on children's living arrangements, which are evidently deeply embedded in kinship networks, even when connections may shift with parental union dissolution or migration.

Substantial fluidity in children's living arrangements is apparent across both our quantitative and qualitative data. Even within the relatively short 6-month timeframe of the two waves of the KST, there are many transitions in and out of maternal care and mobility both geographically and within kin networks. Very few of the children whose living arrangements could be determined across both waves did not experience a transition in either caregiver or geographic location, suggesting such mobility is common. We note that this is not likely to be tied solely to the movement of children for educational reasons, as both waves of the KST took place during the academic year. Thus, children are moving from caregiver to caregiver and from place to place for other reasons. Unfortunately, a key limitation of the KST is that we do not have data on the reason for children living separately from their mothers or for their moves between kin members. However, the qualitative data provide some context for these transitions, showing that they are often linked to changes in children's needs over the life course (for example, to begin school or to transition to secondary school), mothers' requests for assistance in supporting their children, and kin's willingness to care for children, which is sometimes rescinded based on mothers' own relationships with kin. The limited data available in the KST suggest that mothers may not always have strong or positive relationships with those caring for their children, which may spur disagreements between mothers and kin and encourage further transitions in children's living arrangements.

Finally, we find that mothers' relationships and ongoing contact with children are impacted by the geographic location of their fostered children and the distance separating them. A sizeable proportion of mothers do not visit their fostered children, and even among those who do visit, substantial barriers such as travel time, distance, and cost of transport prevent frequent physical contact. Mothers report poverty and their own living

circumstances in Nairobi as limiting their financial capacity to visit their children, especially those who live far away. Conversely, mothers whose children live within Nairobi report greater contact with their children, suggesting that mothers who experience fewer barriers to visiting their children are able to maintain strong physical connections. This highlights that while researchers may use a universal definition of fostering – living away from parents – the actual experiences of mothers and their children may vary tremendously based on the ways these arrangements exist in reality.

Collectively, these findings suggest that mothers mobilize important kinship connections both near and far to facilitate the transfer of their children from maternal care to the care of others. These mothers – and their kin – may have the "open households" described by Randall and Coast (2015), rather than the "bounded, largely impermeable, unit[s]" (2015: 162) often conceptualized as households. Indeed, the bonds of kinship may allow mothers to enact kinship ties as needed to help care for their children in the face of often extreme vulnerability and urban poverty, providing opportunities for mobility and flexible childrearing across space. Kin may also be relying on mothers and their children for a variety of support that might be strengthened by fostering-in children. In line with Madhavan's (2024) innovative conceptualization of kinship on a space–time continuum, our work suggests the importance of considering a variety of dimensions of kinship and intergenerational relationships, including relative distance or proximity, exposure to kin, and how families execute kinship norms and expectations in practice.

Like all research, this study is not without limitations. Our sample sizes for both qualitative and quantitative analyses are relatively small. Eligibility requirements for the KST restricted participation to single mothers with a focal child younger than 8 years in Korogocho, meaning that we are not able to speak to the fostering arrangements of married mothers or those whose children are all older. The information gathered about non-resident children is limited, suggesting a number of areas for deeper investigation. We lack information about when siblings of the focal child (i.e., of all but 9 fostered children in the sample) began living elsewhere, why, and how long mothers expected their children to be fostered. In addition, matching children across waves was complicated by mothers' discrepant reporting of birth dates, ages, and even of individual children across waves. The qualitative data gathered location names but not more detailed geo-coded data that would allow for more precise understanding of distance. In addition, not all mothers spoke in detail about their experience of distance from their fostered children. Finally, our data are drawn from mothers residing in informal slum communities in Nairobi. Patterns of fostering might be very different for Kenyan mothers living in non-slum urban areas or rural areas, and fostering arrangements vary substantially across countries, meaning the fostering constellations identified for these mothers and their children may be unique to the Kenyan context. Indeed, they may be unique to the specific context of Korogocho and Viwandani, given the potential for different patterns of in-

migration to the various informal settlements in Nairobi. Other settlements, whose populations might be migrating from other regions of Kenya, might have different fostering 'hot spots' based on their place of origin.

Despite these limitations, our study contributes to the literature on kinship linkages and child fostering. Importantly, it also suggests vital areas where scholars focused on child fostering and kinship connections more broadly might focus their data collection. For example, in addition to basic questions about child residence collected from mothers in many demographic surveys, detail might be collected about who lives with and cares for the child, the location of the child, and objective and subjective measures of the distance mothers experience from non-resident children. Information could additionally be gathered on the duration of children's fostering experiences; a life history calendar approach similar to that used in our qualitative data collection might allow for more accurate capturing of children's fostering at each stage of childhood and any transitions between maternal care and kin care over time. Such data would provide a more complete picture of the complexities of fostering arrangements and how they rely on the constellations of kin available to mothers and children.

6. Acknowledgements

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