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## **Families** Debates fly over whether and how to celebrate together as officials try to limit travel and gatherings

WORLD

Covid-19 Poses Christmas Quandary for

A Christmas tree near Brandenburg Gate in Berlin earlier this month. MAJA HITIJ/GETTY IMAGES

somewhere in between, planning smaller

seek with the virus.

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festivities and lowering risks by using common

sense honed by a year spent playing hide-and-

Carrie Milligan from Fairport, N.Y., is torn about

whether to spend Christmas with her parents,

who are 80 and 83, or away from them for the

first time in her life. She and her sister, their

husbands and children usually attend church

together on Christmas Eve and then sleep over

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37

Dec. 13, 2020 11:00 am ET



**CORONAVIRUS** 

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"My mother gets nostalgic, but she knows it's safer for everyone," said the 40-year-old freelance consultant, who lives in Turin.

Christmas marks the high point of the festive calendar for many Christians around the world. But this year, families face a dilemma: Whether

to reunite despite the risk posed by the Covid-19 pandemic or play it safe and scale things down, at the expense of tradition. Many try to land



at her parents' to open gifts together the next day.

Ms. Milligan. "The big concern is my parents."

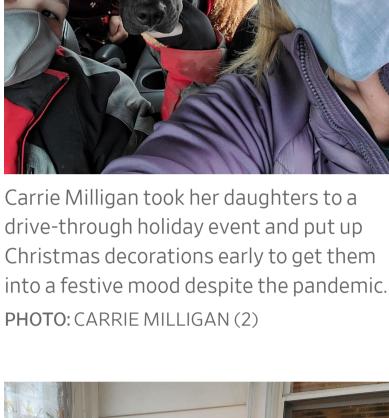
Ms. Milligan has also stayed away from her parents since case numbers started rising again.

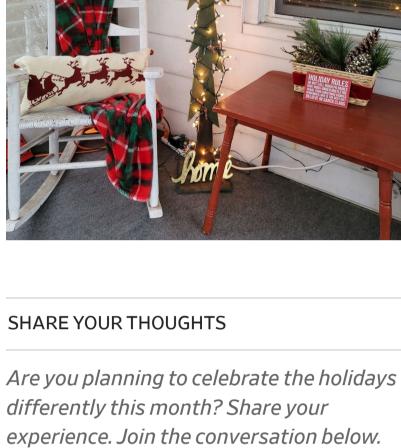
In the U.S., restrictions on gatherings vary from state to state. In Europe, many

"The thought of not doing that makes me really sad but we just don't know right now," said

governments have tightened restrictions on travel and socializing to combat an autumn surge in infections, ruling out large Christmas gatherings. Most Alpine countries have shut ski resorts and Italy even banned travel between regions from Dec. 21 to Jan. 6. But some countries such as France, the U.K., Spain and Germany are planning to relax some

of these restrictions just for the holiday. Some scientists worry that such relaxations, by deferring to people on how much Christmas should be allowed this year, will pave the way for a new surge in infections.





Amelia Martin, who was living in New York City during the early part of the pandemic, is still angry with a relative for attending a Thanksgiving lunch despite having Covid-19 symptoms. The relative later tested positive, but no one in her family in the Blue Ridge

"The problem won't be the people who will think about how to protect their families but those who don't care about all this," said Alexander Kekulé, a German virologist who thinks the government should have tightened restrictions weeks ago to help push down infections before Christmas. Germany on Sunday said it would close non-

essential shops, schools and daycares from

Wednesday until mid January, moving to a

infection numbers continue to creep up.

much stricter lockdown ahead of the holiday as

Mr. Kekulé and his relatives meeting for Christmas will isolate for a week before the holiday and he will test all on Christmas Eve before they meet, he said, a privilege not available to all in Germany, where rapid tests aren't yet widely distributed.

A survey from the University of the German

Armed Forces in Munich published Tuesday

found that while more than two-thirds of Germans agree with the country's current restrictions to curb the spread of the virus, 42% said they might break the rules for Christmas. Even within families, how much precaution to exercise on and ahead of Christmas can be a source of disagreements.

Mountains of western North Carolina seems to think it is a big deal, Ms. Martin said.

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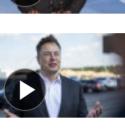
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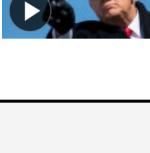
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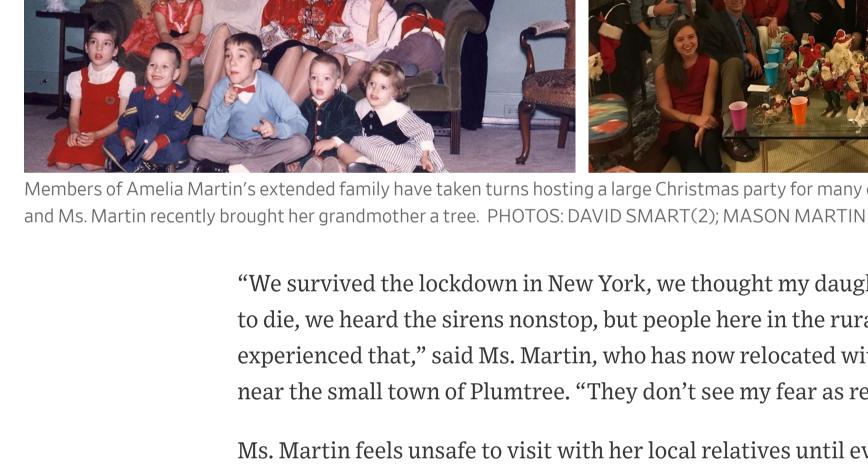
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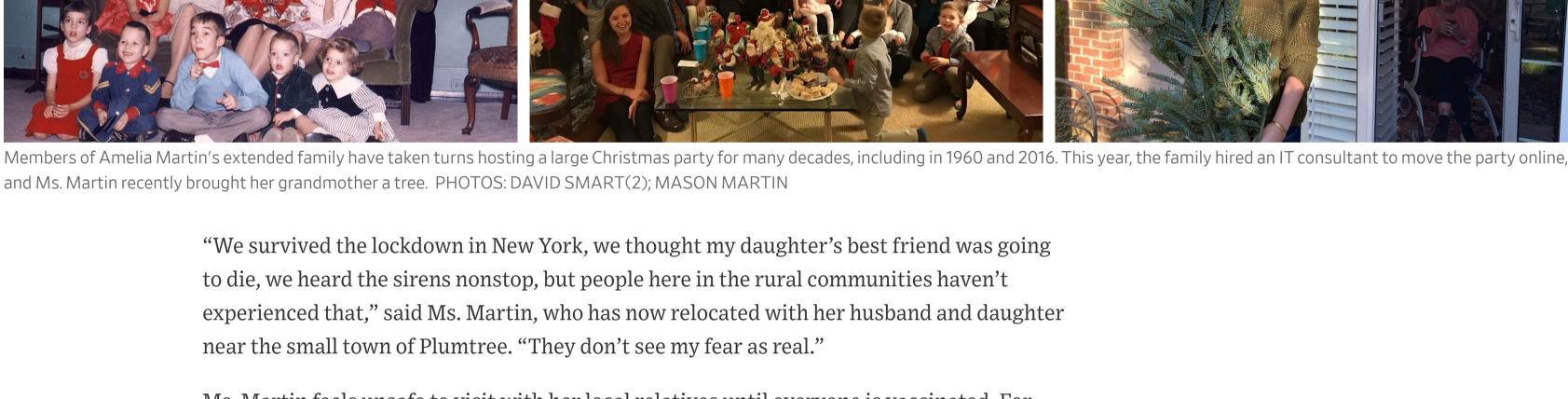
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have hosted at least 20 people at her new home and would have attended her family's Christmas party, a tradition since 1952 which this year will take place virtually. The recent steps toward distributing vaccines in many countries for now isn't changing many family decisions over Christmas. Some people, like Ms. Martin, say there are still too many uncertainties over when vaccines will be available to all to make decisions based on them.

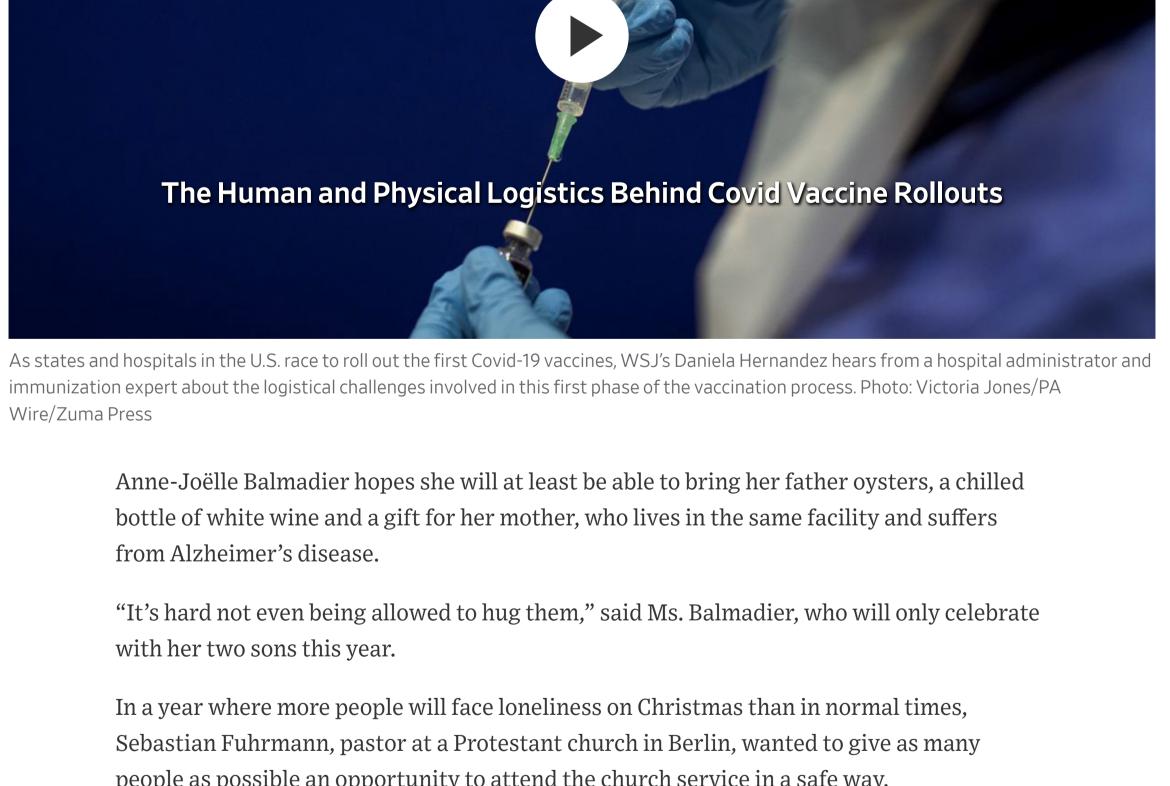
isolate for two weeks and get tested before they meet. In normal times, she said she would

"In the Western world, Christmas is traditionally associated with closeness, togetherness, family and friends and in those times of restrictions we realize even more so how we miss that," said Ms. Jochim.

Étienne Balmadier, 85, won't be able to join the traditional French Christmas dinner with

southwestern France. He isn't allowed to leave his retirement home and visits are tightly

seafood and foie gras his daughter usually hosts at her house in the suburbs of Bordeaux, in



"To cancel Christmas is a big sacrifice for many people," said Mr. Fuhrmann. "I want to offer people at least a piece of normality." Write to Ruth Bender at Ruth.Bender@wsj.com

can fit up to 500 people with plenty of space between them. Trombonists will be

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By Ruth Bender PRINT AA TEXT

> Every year for Christmas, members of Mariachiara Montera's family converge from all corners of Italy on her birthplace in the south, where they share stories and regional favorites from spaghetti with clams to fried fish and the classic dessert panettone.

This year, Ms. Montera will spend the holiday alone. Her mother, aunts, uncles and cousins will stay put, too.

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To increase the chances of spending Christmas together, Ms. Milligan's mother canceled the family's annual Thanksgiving dinner that usually brings together some 50 relatives.



near the small town of Plumtree. "They don't see my fear as real." Ms. Martin feels unsafe to visit with her local relatives until everyone is vaccinated. For Christmas, she is still hoping to have her two younger sisters over and they are planning to

clashing expectations in the midst of a pandemic can do the opposite, piling emotional stress on already strained households, said Christina Jochim, a psychotherapist in Berlin.

While planning the holiday might normally evoke joyful anticipation, balancing safety and

"We still have to get through winter, it's not behind us," she said.



Appeared in the December 14, 2020, print edition as 'Coronavirus Caution Chills Europe Christmas Spirit.'

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