

Historical Trends in Multigenerational Coresidence Among Children: 1870-2016

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Bengtson (2001), in his Burgess family lecture, argued that longevity and changes in nuclear family structure result in increasing reliance between generations. Recent research focusing on one type of multigenerational bond, three-generation family coresidence (in which a grandparent, parent and child coreside), supports this suggestion. Three-generational families have increased significantly over the last two decades (Pilkauskas, 2012; Dunifon, Ziol-Guest & Kopko, 2014; Ellis and Simmons, 2014; Kreider & Ellis, 2011). Currently, 6.6M children live in a three-generation household, a 68% increase from 1996 (Pilkauskas & Cross, 2017). What is not well understood is whether this increase over the last two decades is part of a longer-term trend, an aberration, or whether it represents a return to earlier levels of multigenerational coresidence. Additionally, factors explaining trends in children's three-generational living arrangements are not well-understood. Existing research that examines historical long-term trends in the multigenerational living arrangements of the elderly (Ruggles 2007; 2011; 2015) shows that the majority of those aged 65 and older lived with their own children in the 1850s, a pattern that declined steadily until 1990. However, little is known about broad historical patterns in multigenerational coresidence among children. This paper seeks to fill this gap in the literature.

Using data from linked Censuses from 1870-2010 and the American Community Survey for 2005-2016, we examine the following questions: 1) What share of children live in a three-generation household and how has that varied over the last 146 years? 2) Do the trends in children's three-generation coresidence over time vary by demographic characteristics (e.g. race/ethnicity, parental/grandparental marital status, age)? And 3) what factors explain the trends we observe (including economic, demographic, social, and policy factors)? Addressing these questions allows us to situate current patterns and short-run trends in children's three-generational living arrangements in a larger historical context, and to investigate the shifting sources of social stratification in children's exposure to three-generation coresidence by various demographic characteristics.

Prior Research

A number of studies examine short-run trends in children living with grandparents, showing that three-generation households have increased since the early 1990s (Kreider & Ellis, 2011; Dunifon et al, 2014; Ellis & Simmons, 2014; Pilkauskas 2012; Pilkauskas & Cross, 2017). A variety of hypotheses have been put forth to explain these short-run patterns, including the Great Recession. However, such hypotheses are limited by the fact that, to date, no research has examined longer term trends in three-generation coresidence.

Long-run trends in multigenerational coresidence among the elderly (65+ years old) have been examined by Ruggles (2003; 2007), showing that intergenerational coresidence declined from 1850 to 1990, increasing again slightly thereafter. This work suggests that in the early 19th century intergenerational coresidence was most common among the most advantaged, and that

the decline in coresidence among the elderly and their adult children was due to increasing opportunities for younger generations which drove them away from family farms and into wage-earnings jobs in cities and towns (Ruggles, 2007). Ruggles' work provides important historical information about the living arrangements of those aged 65 and older, shedding light on intergenerational dependence and patterns of resource sharing. However, this research is less relevant for understanding the living arrangements of grandchildren and their grandparents. The average U.S. grandparent is 64 years old (SIPP 2009), and those who live in three-generational households are even younger (73% of coresident grandparents were under 65, compared with 52% of grandparents on average; Ellis & Simmons, 2014; Stykes, Manning & Brown, 2014). Thus, previous historical work focusing on the elderly (aged 65 and older) excludes many multigenerational families, using instead as its point of focus adults, rather than the living arrangements of children. In order to shed light on historical patterns of coresidence for children, we build on this earlier work by focusing on patterns of children's three-generational living arrangements over time.

By understanding past trends in living arrangements of children and the factors that drive coresidence we can better understand current patterns of coresidence and anticipate future trends. Additionally, research has found that multigenerational coresidence is linked with child outcomes (e.g. Augustine & Raley, 2013; Dunifon, 2013; DeLeire & Kalil, 2002), grandparent wellbeing (e.g. Chase-Lansdale et al 1994) and maternal wellbeing (e.g. Monserud & Elder, 2011). Prior research has also found that links between multigenerational coresidence and wellbeing vary by race/ethnicity and family structure (e.g. Dunifon & Koweleski-Jones, 2007; Mollborn, Fomby & Dennis, 2012; Pilkauskas, 2014). This study will examine how historical trends vary by key demographic characteristics and how demographic, economic and policy changes might have affected different groups differentially. Thus, this project builds on Ruggles' seminal research on multigenerational living arrangements among the elderly to focus on those of children. Doing so enhances our understanding of patterns of multigenerational bonds over time.

Data and Measures

We use data from the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS), which has harmonized Census data over the last 150 years. Specifically we use the 1% samples (1/100 random sample) of the Census for years 1870, 1880, 1900, 1910, 1920, 1930, 1940, 1950, 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990 and 2000. We also use the American Community Survey samples for 2005-2015 (we will add 2016 when it is released this fall).

We identify three-generation households as those in which 1) the grandparent (grandmother or grandfather) reports having at least one coresident grandchild and a least one coresident child, and 2) if a parent reports having at least one coresident parent (i.e. the grandparent) and at least one coresident child. Although three-generation households with adult grandchildren exist, this paper is focused on the living arrangements of children so we restrict our sample to those in which the grandchild is under age 18.

Method

We will conduct a series of analyses designed to understand historical patterns of children's three-generational living arrangements.

First, we will **calculate and examine trends in three-generation coresidence over time**, presenting weighted descriptive statistics for each Census/ACS year showing the percent of children living in a three-generational household. We will show trends for the U.S. as a whole as well as separately by key demographic factors that likely play a role in the ways that generations support each other, including race/ethnicity, parental/grandparental marital status, and age.

Second, in order to put trends in three-generational households in context, we will also estimate and **examine trends in other domains** that may have co-occurred with the trends we observe in three-generation coresidence. These include economics (wages, labor, occupation, mobility), education, cultural values, policies (such as social security or welfare), and other demographic factors (life expectancy, family structure, fertility, generation length, and the like).

Third, we will investigate **predictors of three-generational coresidence** over time with logistic regression models, using as key predictor variables the same factors noted above (economics, education, values, policies and demographic changes).

Finally, we will use **demographic decomposition techniques** to assess the compositional and contextual changes within the U.S. population that underlie trends in children's exposure to three-generation coresidence, utilizing an extension of the Blinder-Oaxaca method developed for binary outcomes (Fairlie 1999, 2003; Yun 2004; for examples of its applicability see Van Hook et al 2004).

Preliminary Findings

Figure 1 below plots the share of children living in three-generational households between 1870 and 2015. In 1870, nearly 8% of children lived with a grandparent and a parent. This rate remained relatively stable until about 1930, when it increased to about 9%. The peak of three-generational coresidence occurred in 1950 when 10.2% of children lived in such a household, representing approximately 4.7M children. After that time, the share of children living in three-generation households declined until 1980 to less than 5% of children. Three-generation coresidence increased back to 6% in 1990, and increased further through 2001 and 2010. Currently, 9.3% of children live in a three-generation household, representing 6.6M children. While some of these patterns echo Ruggles' (2003; 2007; 2015) examination of multigenerational co-residence among the elderly (for example, reaching a low-point around 1980-1990), others differ significantly (the increase in children living in three-generational households up to the 1950s, which stands in contrast to Ruggles' finding of a steady decline in multigenerational living arrangements among the elderly from 1850-1990), highlighting the importance of examining historic patterns of three-generational co-residence among children.

Next steps

Future analyses will examine trends by demographic groups to see if the patterns shown in Figure 1 hold. Using the strategies outlined above, we will also seek to explain the factors leading to the patterns shown in Figure 1, such as the peak in three-generational living arrangements in 1950, the valley in 1980, and the return of three-generational coresidence since 1980. Doing so will not only inform our understanding of the long history of family living arrangements, but will also put current trends in context and shed light on contemporary research linking family living arrangements to family well-being. By better understanding patterns of the past we can increase our understanding of contemporary family complexity.

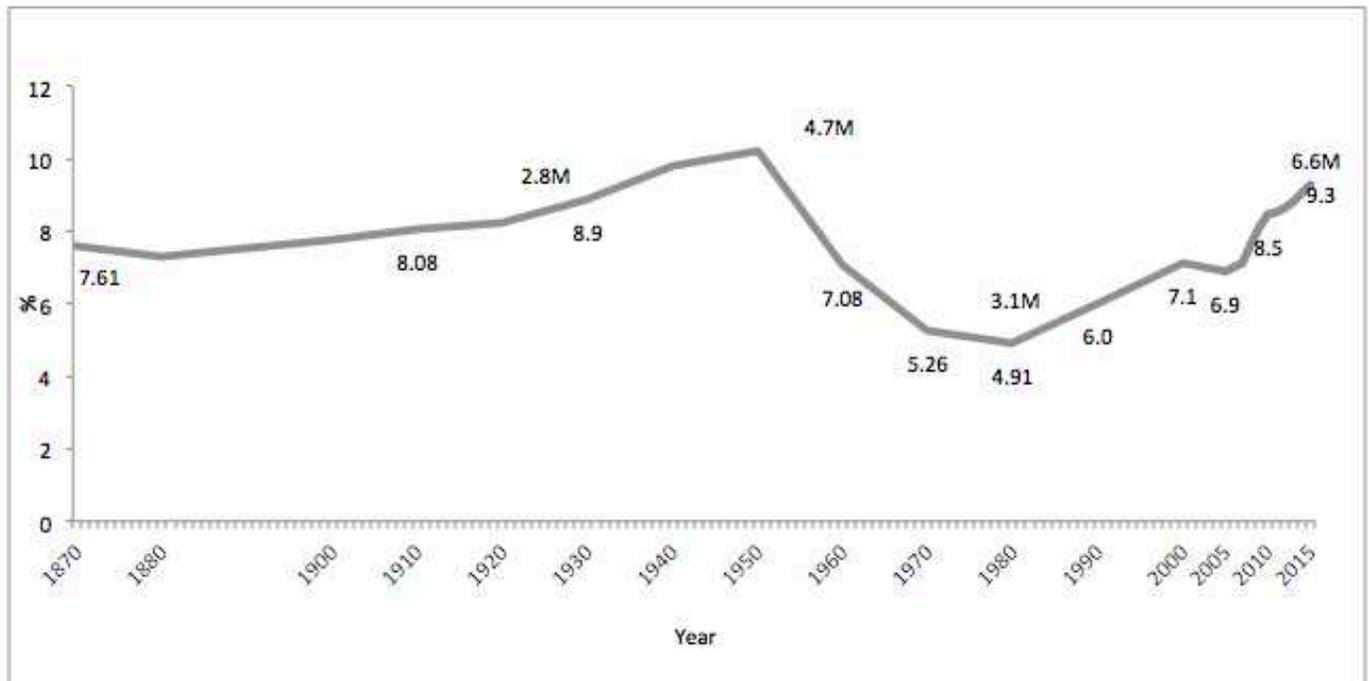


Figure 1: Percent of Children Living in Three-Generation Households Over Time - Census and ACS

Note: Statistics are weighted. Data come from the 1870, 1880, 1900, 1910, 1920, 1930, 1940, 1950, 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990 & 2000 Censuses; 1996, 2001, 2004, and 2008 SIPPs; 2005-2015 ACS.

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