

Trends and Correlates of Multigenerational Coresidence, 1980-2009

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Research Statement

A convergence of demographic, social and economic changes suggests that the prevalence of multigenerational living arrangements may have increased in recent years. Recent demographic and social trends include an aging population, lower rates of mortality and marriage, and higher rates of single parenthood, children living at home longer, and contingent, insecure work. The recent economic downturn in the form of high unemployment, home foreclosures, and lower values of investment vehicles adds pressure to an already financially squeezed population of middle-class, working Americans (Mishel, Bernstein and Shierholz 2009). Bengston (2001) argues that intergenerational ties and support are increasingly important in light of these types of changes. One of the ways that family members support one another in times of need is by sharing household resources (Choi 2003; Goldscheider and Goldscheider 1999; Rohwedder 2009; Swartz 2009), including forming multigenerational households.

In this paper, I add to the literatures on intergenerational support and household structure by examining the trends of multigenerational households in the U.S. from 1980 to 2009. Specifically, the paper presents (1) trends in the prevalence of multigenerational households defined by important demographic characteristics such as gender, age, race/ethnicity, immigration status, household income, education, and marital status; and 2) an analysis of the correlates of multigenerational household structure that might help explain the observed trends.

Trends and correlates of multigenerational household formation

Multigenerational coresidence is infrequent in the United States. Twenty years ago, Sweet and Bumpass (1987) found that roughly ten percent of American households were multigenerational. The U.S. Census Bureau reports roughly four percent of households were multigenerational in 2000, although they note this figure is low because it represents only a subset of all possible types of these households (US Census Bureau 2001). Limited research suggests that when two or more generations coreside, it is usually due to the needs of the younger adult generation (Aquilino 1990; Choi 2003; Crimmins and Ingegneri 1990). Ruggles (2007) argues that the dramatic decline in rates of elder family members living with adult children between 1850 and 1980 (from 68 percent to 13 percent) was due in large part to increased opportunities and resources of the younger generation. He notes that this trend flattened out between 1980 and 2000. If the decline of multigenerational coresidence over the last 150 years was due in part to increasing resources of young adults, then we would expect a reversal of this trend as those opportunities and resources subside. The recent economic downturn, added to an already insecure working environment and stagnation of wages, suggests a possible increase in multigenerational living, if only for the short term. Additional social and demographic shifts, such as children living at home longer, declining rates of marriage, lower rates of mortality, and an aging population, suggest possible changes in patterns of multigenerational coresidence over the last 20 years.

I expect to find variation on multigenerational coresidence patterns based on several individual and household factors, including family members' gender, race/ethnicity, immigration status, education, and marital status, as well as household income. Research suggests, for example, that Hispanic and Black Americans tend to have higher rates of coresidence than non-Hispanic whites (Burr and Mutchler 1992).

A debate exists on the reasons for this variation. One perspective suggests cultural preference is the primary driver of these household arrangements, while another perspective suggests these arrangements are due more to socioeconomic status and need. For example, Van Hook and Glick (2007) note that immigrants often move in with kin as a temporary measure prior to establishing their own households. In addition, marital status is expected to be a predictor of multigenerational coresidence. Aquilino (1990) found marital status to be a predictor of coresidence between adult children and their parents (two-generation coresidence); unmarried adult children were more likely to live with their parents, whereas parents who were divorced or remarried were less likely to live with adult children. The author also notes that the number of children remaining at home with parents at adulthood or returning home after living independently increased in the 1980s. Household income should also be a predictor of multigenerational coresidence. Swartz (2009) notes that working-class and poor families are more likely to provide practical help, including coresidence assistance, whereas wealthy families support family members primarily through economic assistance. I also expect gender to be correlated with multigenerational coresidence, since women tend to earn less than men and to be primary family caregivers (Harrington Meyer and Herd 2007; Moen, Robison and Fields 1994).

Hypotheses

I hypothesize that the prevalence of multigenerational households, defined as the coresidence of three or more generations, has increased over the past ten years. I expect that gender, race/ethnicity, immigrant status, marital status, and socioeconomic status are associated with differences in multigenerational coresidence patterns. Specifically, I expect that women, immigrants, non-whites, and lower-income groups are more likely to experience multigenerational coresidence than their counterparts.

Data and methods

I use data from the 1980-2009 *Current Population Surveys Annual Demographic Files*, also known as the *March CPS*, to examine trends in the prevalence and correlates of multigenerational households. The sample sizes the CPS provides, in addition to the length of this time series and the yearly measures, enables me to analyze the trends of multigenerational household structure across time and for various subpopulations. To examine the trends in multigenerational household structure, I use descriptive statistics. To identify the correlates of these household structures, I use logistic regression models.

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