

# **Three Generation Family Households: Prevalence and Correlates among Fragile Families**

Natasha V. Pilkauskas (Columbia University)

## **Extended Abstract**

This paper uses data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing study to examine the prevalence and correlates of living in three generation family households.

## **Background and Significance**

Vern Bengtson (2001) in his Burgess Award Lecture to the National Council on Family Relations boldly stated: “For many Americans multigenerational bonds are becoming more important than nuclear family ties for well-being and support over the course of their lives” (Bengtson, 2001: 5). Whether more important than nuclear family ties, multigenerational ties are an essential part of the family system (Swartz, 2009) and in particular, multigenerational family households have increased in prevalence over the last few years. In 2008, 16% of the population lived in multigenerational family households (defined as having two or more adult generations or a grandparent and one or more generations in the family household), up from 15% in 2000 and 12% in 1980 (Taylor et al, 2010). In 2001, 4.8 million children lived with at least one grandparent and parent, representing 6.6% of all children (Kreider and Fields, 2005). Documenting the prevalence and correlates of three generation family households is particularly important to understanding the wellbeing of children and intergenerational bonds. In this study I use data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FF) to document the prevalence of three generation families in a recent urban birth cohort (1998-2000) using five waves of data.

## **Literature**

Demographic studies of multigenerational families often focus on particular subgroups or do not distinguish three generation family households from other multigenerational households. Numerous studies look at older adults (i.e. Ruggles, 2003, 2007; Choi, 2003; Taylor et al, 2010). Focusing on the elderly leaves out a significant portion of three generation families that include grandparents who are younger than 65. Mutcher and Baker (2004) find that nearly half of the multigenerational family households in their study included grandparents under 50. Other studies of multigenerational families do not distinguish between two generation and three generation families (Kamo, 2000; Ruggles, 2003, 2007, Choi, 2003, Taylor et al, 2010), focus exclusively on two generation family households (Cohen and Casper, 2002) or only look at skipped generation households (Bryson and Casper, 1999). Approximately 47 million individuals live in multigenerational households and about half of those include three or more generations (Taylor et al, 2010). Not distinguishing between three generation and two generation family households ignores important differences between these types of households, especially as three generation households are more likely to include children.

A handful of studies distinguish three generation family households from other multigenerational households and do not exclusively focus on the elderly. The two most recent studies look at specific types of three generation family households – one where the grandparent is the householder (Pebley and Rudkin, 1999) and one where grandparents report being primary caregivers for their grandchildren in the Eastern and Southern U.S. (Mutcher and Baker, 2004). Both of these studies compare three generation households to skipped generation households and find that children in three generation households are younger and less poor. Most studies of multigenerational family structure can only provide cross sectional estimates of prevalence. Two studies by Beck and Beck (1989 and 1984) look at the prevalence and correlates of three generation family households using 15 year panel data

(one uses data on women and the other men). They find that panel data suggest that the prevalence of three generation family households is much higher than cross sectional estimates<sup>1</sup>. Beck and Beck also find that three generation families are more common among blacks than whites, among the unmarried, and the majority of three generation households last for less than two years. Both of the Beck and Beck studies end in the early 1980's when multigenerational households were at their lowest rates (Taylor et al, 2010). The present study seeks to update the information provided in these papers by looking at a more recent cohort of children and not restricting to a particular subgroup of three generation family households.

Much has been written on the reasons for changing trends in coresidence. Explanations for the change in the prevalence of coresidence include economic or health needs (or independence) of the grandparents or of the children, cultural preferences, and changes in economic opportunities (Kamo, 2000; Choi, 2003; Ruggles, 2007; Gonzales, 2007; Smits, van Gaalen and Mulder, 2010). A number of demographic changes also account for this shift including delayed age at first marriage which may postpone leaving a parent's home, steady immigration from Latin American and Asian countries whose families often have multiple generations in one home (Glick, Bean and Van Hook, 1997; Glick and Van Hook, 2002) as well as the recent economic downturn which has resulted in more "doubling up" (Taylor et al, 2010). Previous research has found that income, race, physical disability, age, presence of a child, marital status, and language and immigrant status are all related to living in a multigenerational household (Kamo, 2000; Alquilino, 1990). This study will add to this literature by looking at the characteristics and correlates of three generational family households.

#### Data and Research Methods

The Fragile Families study (FF) is a nationally representative survey of about 4,900 children with follow up data collected one, three, five and nine years after the child's birth. The FF study oversamples births to unwed parents and as a result, these data represent a relatively disadvantaged population (three quarters have no high school education). Census data show that children who live with a grandparent are more likely to live in poverty 22.9% versus 17.6% of all children (Kreider and Fields, 2005). The FF data allow me to look at prevalence of three generation family households and changes over time in a largely low-income sample. This study provides a unique opportunity to also examine differences in prevalence between families who are unmarried at the time of the birth of their child and those who are married, an increasingly common arrangement (approximately 40% of births are to unmarried mothers, Ventura, 2009). The FF data also allow for comparisons between cohabiting and single parents. In addition to looking at demographic correlates such as race/ethnicity, mother's age, immigration status, income, education, employment, the data allow for an investigation of other socio-emotional factors such as health, depression, religious attendance, and substance abuse. I will be able to compare households where the grandparent is the householder to those where the parent is the householder to allow for comparison to earlier studies of three generation households.

This study is descriptive in nature and will utilize descriptive statistics (bivariate) to document trends or cross tabulations showing both the weighted (which adjusts for marital status, age, education and race) and unweighted frequencies. I will estimate logistic regression models using the unweighted data to investigate the correlates of three generation family households. This study will aim to answer the following questions: What is the prevalence of three generation family household structures among a recent urban birth cohort? How does prevalence differ by relationship (married, cohabiting, single) status at birth? How does prevalence differ by the age of the child and how stable are these living

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<sup>1</sup> Retrospective data also show that about 40% of adults return to live with their parents at some point (Goldscheider and Goldscheider, 1994).

arrangements (tenure and transition)? What characteristics of the mother, father, child or grandparent are correlated with living in a three generation family household?

#### Expected (Initial) Results

Initial results show that at the time of the focal child's birth 26% of the sample is living in a three generation family household (18% if the data are weighted to be nationally representative). Differences by marital status at the birth are marked; 31% of unwed mothers at birth live in three-generation family households versus 9% of married mothers (30% and 7% respectively if the data are weighted). Preliminary analyses show that the prevalence of three generation family households decreases as the age of the child increases. Using the unweighted data, at birth, 26% of children in three generation family households, by year 1 the prevalence decreases to 20%, by year 3 it decreases to 15% and it has decreased to 12% by the time the child is 5 years old. Transitions in and out of the three generation family households is high as only 3% of the sample lives in a three generation family household consistently from birth through age 5.

A preliminary look at correlates that predict living in a three generation family household shows that mother's younger age at the birth of the focal child is related to living in three generation family when the child is one. Households with mothers who are of Hispanic ethnicity or are of "other" racial identity are more likely to live in three generation family households than Whites, as are mothers who are immigrants. Relationship status at the time of the birth also predicts living in three generation family households with mothers who are single being the most likely to live in these types of households; cohabiting couples are also more likely to live in three generation family households than married couples. Interestingly, neither income nor education appears to be associated with living in a three generation family household. In this work, I will further explore the predictors of living in a three generation family household, document prevalence of three generation family households over time, and will discuss the implications of the results for future research and public policy that aim to improve the wellbeing of children.

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