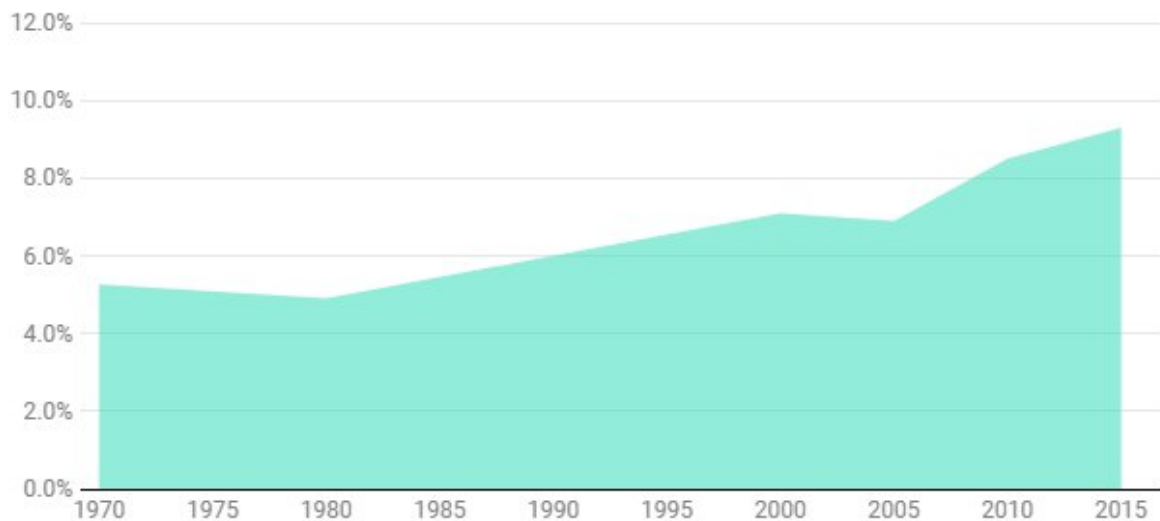


What's behind the dramatic rise in three-generation households?

November 7 2018, by Natasha Pilkauskas

Three-generation households

More than 7 million children in the U.S. now live in three-generation households -- homes with at least one child, parent and grandparent. Such living arrangements have become more common over the past two decades.



Credit: Chart: The Conversation, CC-BY-ND Source: Population Association of America (2018)

[In a recent study](#), I discovered that the number of kids living with their parents and grandparents – in what demographers call a three-generation household – has nearly doubled over the past two decades.

Why has this been happening? And is it a good thing or a bad thing?

The answers are complex. The reasons for the trend are as broad as social forces – like a decline in marriage rates – to unique family circumstances, like the loss of a parent's job.

The trend is worth studying because by better understanding who [children](#) live with, we can design better policies aimed at helping kids. Programs targeting kids usually overlook these other people living under the same roof. But odds are that if grandma's there, she matters, too.

The flexible family unit

A three-generation household is just one type of a living arrangement that falls under the umbrella of what demographers call a "shared household" or a "doubled-up household."

In a shared household, a child lives with at least one adult who isn't a sibling, parent or parent's partner. It could include a cousin, aunt, uncle, grandparent or family friend.

In 2010, about [1 in 5 children](#) were living in a shared household, a 3 percentage-point increase from 2007. In a 2014 study, I tracked the same kids over time and found that by age 10, [nearly half](#) of children in large U.S. cities had lived in a shared household at some point in their lives.

Then, to probe further, [my colleague](#) and I used two large census data sets to study trends by the type of shared living arrangements.

[We found](#) that, overall, the percentage of children in shared households had increased since 1996.

But the rise was nearly entirely driven by an increase in just one type of household: three-generation households – sometimes referred to as multigenerational households – in which children live with at least one grandparent and one or both parents.

We also found that the share of children living in three-generation households has risen from 5.7 percent in 1996 to 9.8 percent in 2016.

In other words, roughly [1 in 10](#), or 7.1 million, kids lives in a multigenerational household. At birth, about [15 percent](#) of U.S. kids now live with a parent and grandparent – a rate that's double that of countries like the U.K. and Australia.

Meanwhile, there was no real change in the percent of children living with aunts and uncles, other relatives or non-relatives. [Nor did we find](#) any evidence of an increase in "grandfamilies," also known as "skipped-generation households." These are homes in which a grandparent is raising a grandchild without the child's parents living with them. Counter to [some media reports](#), the share of children living in grandfamilies has held steady at roughly two percent since 1996.

A trend rooted in more than the recession

What propelled the rise in multigenerational households?

We found that shared living arrangements did increase during the recession, but it wasn't just because of the recession. Research on unemployment during the Great Recession has found that [the economic downturn didn't have much of an effect](#) on whether [parents expanded their household ranks](#).

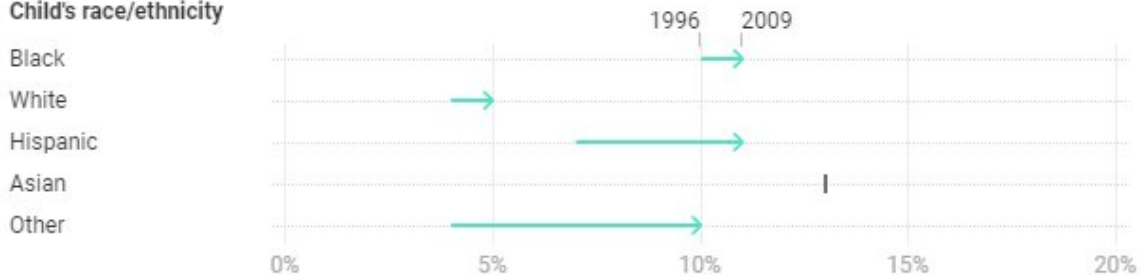
In fact, the share of multigenerational households was rising before the Great Recession – it actually [started in the 1980s](#).

Furthermore, these shared living arrangements continued to increase even as the economy recovered.

Three-generation households, by demographics

Between 1996 and 2009, rates of three-generation households grew across almost all education levels, socioeconomic levels and races/ethnicities. (For Asian families, there was no change.)

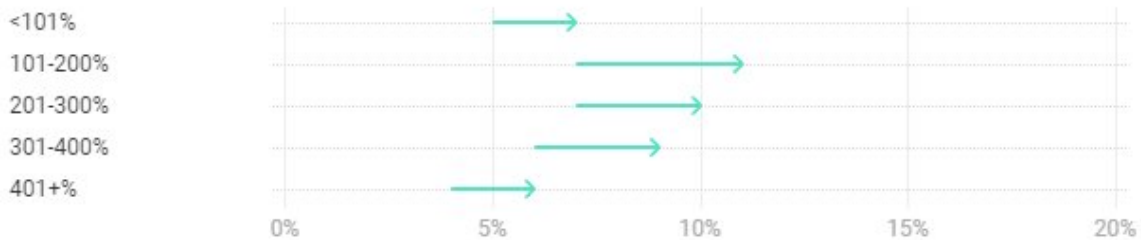
Child's race/ethnicity



Mother's education



Family income as a percent of federal poverty level



Credit: Chart: The Conversation, CC-BY-ND Source: Demography (2018)

All of this suggests there other, more deeply rooted, reasons for the increase.

[My study identified](#) three possible drivers.

[Declines in marriage](#) and [increases in single parenthood](#) mean more moms and dads are living with their parents, who can help with childcare and paying the bills.

Next, a growing share of U.S. children are non-white. Because minority families [are much more likely to share households](#), this population shift seems to explain some of the increase.

And finally, there's the fact that more people are receiving Social Security. Because Social Security gives grandparents a steady source of income, it could be that these grandparents are stepping in to help their grandchildren if their own children's incomes are too low.

But this only explains some of the increase.

There may well be a range of other factors at play: [rising housing costs](#), [growing inequality](#), [increased longevity](#), or even just an increase in the number of [grandparents](#) and [step-grandparents](#).

We also know that [low-income](#) parents, younger parents and parents with less education are more likely to live in a three-generation household.

At the same time, some of the [fastest growth](#) in these households has been among more traditionally advantaged groups – children with married mothers, higher income mothers and older mothers.

More research is needed to really understand why these households have increased and the extent to which public policies, like [reduced welfare availability](#) or [declines in the real minimum wage](#), are driving this trend.

Not an ideal arrangement

While the exact reasons for the trend are still unclear, the fact remains that more kids are living in three-generation households.

What should we make of it?

Studies have found [positive](#), [negative](#) and [no effects](#) of three-generation households on children.

For example, sharing a household has [documented economic benefits](#), like rental savings. But it can also make households crowded, which isn't [the best](#) environment for kids.

The findings are [mixed](#) because living arrangements are a complex topic. Motivation is difficult to distill. Sometimes people live together by choice – say, to be closer to family. Other times it's by necessity – prompted by a crisis like a divorce, health problem or job loss.

From a policy perspective, who is in the household will likely impact the effectiveness of programs designed to help [parents](#) and kids. For example, programs that seek to improve the parenting skills of low-income moms generally focus only on moms. They'll teach mothers to use positive parenting skills, like avoiding spanking their kids. But what if grandma still uses corporal punishment?

We also know that, in general, people would [prefer](#) to [live independently](#) and that it can be challenging to [negotiate responsibilities](#) when living with others.

In other words, it's a situation that most families would probably avoid if they could. So the fact that more people are living together suggests other larger societal and policy shifts are driving this trend.

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