

## Extended Abstract

### Three Generation Family Households in Early Childhood: Comparisons between the US, the UK, and Australia

Natasha V. Pilkauskas (Columbia University)  
Melissa L. Martinson (University of Washington)

#### Background

Demographic shifts that have occurred over the last 40 years, away from marriage, toward increased non-marital childbearing and increased cohabitation mean that fewer children grow up in a “traditional” biological two-parent married family (Martin et al. 2009; McLanahan 2004; Kiernan, McLanahan, Holmes & Wright, 2011). Coincidentally, another demographic shift – the aging population – has meant that increasing numbers of older individuals, many of whom become grandparents, has changed the dynamics of multigenerational ties and household structure. Today, although fewer children grow up in married parent households, many children will spend time in a three-generation family household, in which a grandparent, a parent and a child coreside. However, research on the prevalence of three-generation family households is relatively slim, few studies look at cross-national trends in coresidence and most descriptive studies are of the elderly and do not consider the children in these households.

In this paper we use data from three nationally representative longitudinal birth cohort studies to document the prevalence of three-generation family households in early childhood (from birth to age 5) in the United States (US), Australia, and the United Kingdom (UK). We focus on early childhood as research has shown that coresidence is most common when children are young (Fields, 2003) and because the family context is particularly important at early ages (Demo & Cox, 2000). We also investigate differences in coresidence by other key demographic characteristics (immigrant status, age, income) of three-generation family households to better understand the variations in the characteristics of three-generation family households cross-nationally. We extend earlier research by 1) focusing on the youngest generation in these households, 2) using longitudinal data to study patterns of coresidence in early childhood, and 3) making cross-national comparisons to help elucidate the role of policy and culture in the development of three-generation family households.

#### Literature

The link between family structure and child development has been well documented (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994) and this literature suggests that three-generation family household coresidence affects child outcomes (e.g. Dunifon & Kowleski-Jones, 2007; Deleire & Kalil 2002). Another literature has found that the family may play a particularly important role in the development of cognitive and social skills as well as physical health in early childhood when many children have yet to enter school (Demo & Cox, 2000). Despite the impact that three-generation family coresidence may have on child wellbeing, surprisingly few studies have documented the prevalence of three-generation family households and little research has considered this family structure in early childhood.

The prevalence of three-generation family households has been increasing in the US and Australia but decreasing in the UK. In the US studies have found that multigenerational family households (including both three-generation and two adult generation households) have

increased from about 12% of the population in 1980 to about 16% in 2008 (Taylor et al. 2010). Figures from Australia show that multigenerational coresidence increased by 27% between 1981 and 2001 (Liu & Easthorpe, 2012). In comparison, studies of the UK found that three-generation family households have declined in England and Wales since 1981 (from 3.5% of households to 1.6% in 2001; Glaser & di Gessa, 2012) as the elderly have moved toward independent living (Tomassini et al 2004).

Despite divergent trends, studies have found that many children across all three countries live in a three-generation family household. In 2001, 6% of children in the US lived in a three-generation family household and by 2011 this had increased to about 8% (Kreider & Ellis, 2011; Pilkauskas, 2012). Estimates suggest 3.4% of UK children live in a three-generation family household (Iacovu & Skew, 2010). Figures for Australia are less clear, but one study found that in 2001 about 60,000 children lived in a three-generation family household (Brandon, 2004).

Few studies have investigated differences cross-nationally in the prevalence of three-generation family households. Only one study to date (Iacovu & Skew, 2010) documents cross-national figures of the percent of children in three-generation households in Europe in 2007. They found large differences by region of Europe (e.g. these households are more common in Southern countries than Nordic countries). To our knowledge, no other studies have looked cross-nationally with a focus on children. A handful of cross-national studies of multigenerational (including two or three generations) households have studied the living arrangements of the elderly. Smeeding and colleagues (2008) found that 20% of the elderly in the US, 14% in Australia and 12.3% in the UK lived in a multigenerational household. Although the living arrangements of the elderly are important, research from the US suggests that studies that focus on the living arrangements of the elderly leave out significant portions of three-generation family households where the oldest generation is not over 65 (Mutchler & Baker, 2004). We build on these earlier studies to look at the percent of three-generation family households in three countries during early childhood.

Cross-sectional estimates of prevalence provide point in time estimates of the number of children in three-generation family households but they cannot capture the significance of this family structure in the lives of children over time. Longitudinal studies conducted in the US in the 1980's found that among Black women over a 15 year span, 2/3rds lived in a three-generation family household and nearly 1/3 of White women did likewise (Beck & Beck, 1989, 1984). A recent study of US urban births found that three-generation coresidence at the birth of the child was as high as 18% but by age 9, coresidence had decreased to 9% (Pilkauskas, 2012). Three-generation coresidence in early childhood in the UK and Australia may follow similar patterns but to date no research has documented these trends. Building off of these earlier works, we study coresidence over a 5 year period.

Lastly, although a number of studies have looked at predictors of coresidence into multigenerational or three-generation family households (e.g. Brandon, 2012; Kamo, 2000; Cohen & Casper, 2001); there is very little descriptive evidence on the characteristics of three-generation family households (Glaser et al, 2010). Understanding the demography of three-generation households is an important first step to understanding differences between three-generation and other types of household structures. There are many demographic characteristics upon which we might expect to see variation in the prevalence of three-generation family households but research on predictors suggests a few key demographic characteristics: Income, marital/relationship status, mother's age, race/ethnicity and immigrant status. Three-generation households are generally less poor (due to sharing of household expenses and multiple potential

earners; Smeeding, Gao, Saunders and Wing, 2008; Mykyta & Macartney, 2011) which may have important implications for child wellbeing (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997). Research has also shown that the propensity to coreside in a three-generation family household largely varies by whether the parents are married or if the child lives with a single parent (Brandon, 2012). One study found that among children born to single parents, 60% of children had lived in a three-generation family household by age 9 (Pilkauskas, 2012). The prevalence of three-generation family households is likely to vary by mother's age as well as race/ethnicity (Hogan et. al, 1990). Lastly, certain immigrant populations are also more likely to live in three-generation family households as it is more normative culturally (Shaw, 2004; Angel & Tienda, 1982); however, if other members of their family have not immigrated they may be less likely. The current study will look at patterns of coresidence in three-generation family households by these demographic characteristics cross-nationally.

### Data and Methods

We use three nationally representative data sets to document the prevalence of three-generation family households in early childhood (birth through age 5) in the US, UK and Australia. Data come from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Birth Cohort (ECLS-B) for the US, the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) for the UK and the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) – Birth Cohort for Australia.

The ECLS-B is a nationally representative sample of approximately 10,700 children who were born in 2001. Children were sampled from birth certificates using data from the National Center for Health Statistics (Bethel et al 2005). Data were collected when children were approximately 9 months old, 2 years old, 4 years old and at the start of kindergarten. The MCS is a nationally representative survey of approximately 20,000 children born in the United Kingdom in 2000. Data were collected when children were approximately 10 months old, 3 years old, and 5 years old. The LSAC, also a nationally representative sample, is a survey of approximately 5,000 children born in Australia in 2003. The LSAC was modeled on the ECLS-B, and data were collected when children were approximately 9 months old, 2-3 years old, and 5 years old. All three studies include detailed household rosters that provide information on three-generation coresidence at each wave.

### Initial Results

Preliminary results suggest that three-generation family households are much more common in the US than in Britain or Australia. By age 5, 25% of US children and 8.4% of British children, and 11.2% of Australian children have lived in a three-generation family household. The table below shows the percent of children in three-generation family households by age of the child and by country. These statistics show large variation between the countries in terms of the frequency of living in three-generation family households and that the rates are much higher in the US during early childhood.

*Percent of Three Generation Family Households by Country and Age of Child*

	<i>United States</i>			
	<u>9 months</u>	<u>2 years</u>	<u>4 years</u>	<u>Kindergarten</u>
Percent Three-Generation	15	14	13	11

---

	<i>United Kingdom</i>			
	<u>9 months</u>	<u>3 years</u>	<u>4 years</u>	<u>Kindergarten</u>
Percent Three-Generation	8	4.3		3.8

---

	<i>Australia</i>			
	<u>9 months</u>	<u>3 years</u>	<u>4 years</u>	<u>Kindergarten</u>
Percent Three-Generation	6.7	6.1		5.2

---