



It is Time to Acknowledge That Many American Children Live in Shared Households

Natasha Pilkauskas, University of Michigan-Ann Arbor

A “shared household” is a living arrangement in which a child lives with someone who is not their sibling, parent or parent’s partner. A child who lives with an aunt, uncle, cousin, grandparent, or with a non-relative is in a shared household. Often referred to as “doubling up,” shared living arrangements are common. Almost a fifth of American children live in shared households and nearly one in ten live in a multigenerational household. In U.S. cities, in fact, nearly half of children have lived in a shared household by age nine. Policymakers and researchers rarely recognize these facts – and the oversight has important implications for how policies and interventions are crafted.

Why the Rise of Shared Living Matters

Doubling up and shared living arrangements matter for many reasons:

- **Resources** – The resources available for children are influenced by who is in the household. An additional adult might bring in extra money, or might be able to help with child care or homework. But an extra adult might also be sick, unemployed, or in need of extra assistance.
- **Interventions** – To design effective interventions to help children requires an understanding of who is in the household and who is caring for the child. For example, research finds that mothers living with their parents breastfeed at lower rates. Interventions that target mothers and partners might be missing out on the most influential member of the household – the grandparent.
- **Policy** – Understanding who children live with is important for crafting effective public policy. Social policies define families differently, and policies can also influence living arrangements. Recent research suggests that the Earned Income Tax Credit, a refundable tax credit aimed at low-income families, reduces the likelihood of shared living.

Trends in Shared Households

The share of children living in shared households has increased slightly over the last 20 years in large part, according to new research, because of the increase of multigenerational (or “three-generation”) households where a grandparent, parent and child live together.

- In 1996, 5.7% of children lived in multigenerational households; today 9.8% of children – about 7.1 million – live in such households. For comparison, about 7% of children live in cohabiting families, where two unrelated adults share a housing unit. Other types of shared living arrangements (with aunts and uncles, other relatives, non-relatives) have been stable over the last two decades.
- Multigenerational co-residence is more common in early childhood, when family influences may be most important. Today, more than 14% of infants live in a multigenerational household. Economically disadvantaged and minority youngsters and children born to single mothers are much more likely to live in these households.
- These arrangements are quite unstable and many children make multiple transitions in and out of living with a grandparent. Among a cohort of children born in the 1980s about one quarter lived in a multigenerational household at some point before age 18 – but fully 24% of children born in 2000 lived in a multigenerational household by age 5. Just under two thirds of these children are living in their grandparent’s home and one third have a grandparent living in their parent’s home.
- Multigenerational co-residence for children is much higher in the United States (24% by age 5) than in peer countries like England (8%) or Australia (11%).

Why is multigenerational living on the rise? More fragile marriages, more single parents, shifts in the racial and ethnic makeup of the U.S. population, and a rising share of Americans getting Social Security all help to explain increases in shared living arrangements. Other likely causal factors that have not been fully explored – including aging and longer life spans, the changing structure of the economy and the social safety net, and the costs American households' must pay. How people live – and with whom – are all affected by these conditions.

Whether or Not Shared Households are Beneficial, Policies Should Recognize Them

The jury is still out on whether people benefit by living in shared households. Specific studies have found positive or negative effects for children – or no effects at all. Mixed findings occur because it is very hard to study the effects of living arrangements for individuals. People might decide to live together because of otherwise harmful crises such as divorces, health problems, or job losses. There are certainly economic benefits to shared households, but they can also be crowded and experience more chaos or conflict than other arrangements – troubling conditions that are not good for children. Researchers honestly do not yet know if multigenerational shared households are, on balance, a good or a bad thing for children and other inhabitants.

What we do know for sure is that the number of people living in U.S. multigenerational shared households has increased dramatically over the last two decades. Policy makers and researchers alike need to recognize the incredibly high prevalence of these living arrangements, and they must work to figure out why such households have been increasing so rapidly. As more research is done, policymakers must consider these living arrangements when crafting policies and interventions to help children. Most social policies and interventions target mothers and their children. But to ensure that policies are targeted effectively, we need to recognize that many children in the United States are also living with a grandparent.

Read more in Mariana Amorim and Natasha V. Pilkauskas “The Magnitude and Timing of Grandparental Coresidence During Childhood in the United States” *Demographic Research*, 37, no. 52 (2017):1695-1706; Natasha V. Pilkauskas “Three-generation Family Households: Differences by Family Structure at Birth” *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 74, no. 5 (2012): 931-943; Natasha V. Pilkauskas and Caitlin Cross “Beyond the nuclear family: Trends in Children Living in Shared Households” *Demography* (Forthcoming); and Natasha V. Pilkauskas, Irwin Garfinkel, and Sara S. McLanahan “The Prevalence and Economic Value of Doubling Up” *Demography*, 51, no. 5 (2014):1667-1676.