Who Becomes a Multigenerational Grandmother?
Selection into Multigenerational Households

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Short Abstract

Who becomes a multigenerational grandmother? Multigenerational coresidence is increasingly prevalent among adult single mothers with children. Research on the effects of multigenerational coresidence on children, however, is equivocal, though our recent study (DeLeire and Kalil, 2002) found that teenagers in multigenerational families has better educational and behavioral outcomes than even teenagers in 2-biological parent families. Understanding issues of who chooses to form a multigenerational household is necessary for understanding whether observed positive benefits of multigenerational coresidence are merely the result of selection. To address this question, we use data on a sample of 640 grandmothers from the NLSY-CS, 44% of whom have co-resided with their daughter and grandchild.

Extended Abstract

Multigenerational coresidence is increasingly prevalent among adult single mothers with children (Bryson & Casper, 1999). In 2000, about 5.6 million children, or 8 percent of the total, lived in a household that included a grandparent. Research on the effects of multigenerational coresidence on children, however, is equivocal. In our recent study, DeLeire and Kalil (2002), we used a large-scale national data set and found that, despite having demographic characteristics associated with disadvantage, teenagers who lived with their single mothers and their grandmothers in a multigenerational household had better developmental outcomes (higher educational attainment, lower use of alcohol and drugs, later initiation of sexual activity) than their teenage counterparts in married, 2-biological parent families. Other research based on small samples is mixed (for example, Halpern 1999; Entwisle and Alexander 1996; Thompson et al. 1992; Aquilino 1996; Leadbeater and Bishop 1994; Pope et al. 1993; East and Felice 1996; Unger and Cooley 1992; Chase-Lansdale, Brooks-Gunn, and Zamsky 1994).

A question that is important, unanswered and (to our knowledge) unaddressed is, who becomes a multigenerational grandmother? In this research area, it is easy to imagine that any positive effects of multigenerational coresidence are a function of selection. For example, single mothers may opt to live with their own mothers only when the grandmother has skills or resources that would benefit the grandchild. Similarly, the children whose good outcomes we observed in DeLeire and Kalil (2002) were teenagers, and it could be that they were the highest-functioning multigenerational households, to the extent that they had "survived" until the child's teenage years. While some data would allow implementation of standard econometric techniques for dealing with selection bias (e.g., fixed effects regression techniques) and many high-quality data sets contain an unusually large number of relevant control variables, selection into multigenerational families remains a concern.

We use data from the NLSY-CS (1979-2002) to examine who becomes a multigenerational grandmother. The original women of the NLSY, who were 14-21 in 1979, are ages 37 to 44 in 2002. 640 of these women have daughters and have become grandmothers by 2002. Among this sample of grandmothers, we compare the characteristics of those that chose to form multigenerational households (44%) with those that did not. These data provide a wealth of information on adult women's economic, cognitive, behavioral, and psychological characteristics prior to their own childbearing, and prior to their becoming a grandparent. If these two groups of grandmothers do not differ in terms of these characteristics (many of which would be unobserved in most data), then we can be more confident that any differences in child outcomes resulting from multigenerational coresidence is not the result of selection.