Dynamics of Residential Arrangements of Older Women in Mexico

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Abstract

Previous studies in developed countries regularly report that higher levels of personal income increase the likelihood of residential independence for the elderly while poor health reduces the odds. In this paper, we extend this literature to Mexico, a country where public transfer programs are lean in coverage and generosity of benefits. Many older women, and especially widows, have few residential options other than to live with the families of an adult child. In this paper we use multi-level models to analyze residential arrangements of unmarried mothers aged 50 and over. Data are from the first two waves of the Mexican Health and Aging Study (MHAS). The outcome of interest is whether each child lives with or nearby his/her mother, recognizing three levels: time, shared family traits, including time-specific attributes of the mother, and individual child traits, including past residential and migration history.

INTRODUCTION

Living Arrangements are of interest to economists and sociologists as they are perceived to be an important factor in the well-being of the elderly (Edmonds et al. 2004; Martin 1989) especially in countries which lack universal old age income security and health care. The majority of the older persons in developing countries live in multigenerational households typically with an adult child (Sokolovsky 2000). Nonetheless, there is growing concern that the traditional familial living arrangements of the elderly will not be sustained in the context of burgeoning market economics, increasing emigration of adult children, and higher labor supply of the traditional care givers to older mothers, adult daughters (Knodel et al. 1992; Martin 1989; Sokolovsky 2000). These trends, coupled with increases in life expectancy at older ages, declining fertility (Lee and Palloni 1992; Sokolovsky 2000), and the unique health dynamics in Mexico (Palloni et al. 2002), exacerbate pressures on the multigenerational family support system in Mexico.

A number of studies have shown that family size is an important structural constraint on household composition. Albeit a crude indicator of family structure, several studies

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demonstrate that the number of children per mother has a strong and positive effect on the probability of a mother co-residing with any child or receiving care from any child. Wolf and Soldo (1988) argue that it is the characteristics of individual adult children that matters more than the sheer number of living children in determining the residential outcomes of unmarried elderly women.

Changes in economic opportunities also affect household composition. Increases in old age financial security allow older parents to purchase privacy and residential independence (Burch and Matthews 1987). Michael et al. (1980) found that most of the increase in the percentage of older American widows living alone during 1950-1976 period is due to the rise in income. Similarly, other studies showed that the likelihood of elderly in the U.S living alone is positively associated with income, health, and the non-existence of unmarried children (Choi 2003; Macunovich et al. 1995; Soldo et al. 1999). Longitudinal studies of the dynamics of living arrangements of non-married older Americans found that economic resources, increasing age, and deteriorating health are the most important determinants of residential change over time (Choi 2003; Mutcher and Burr 1991). With few exceptions most of our insights in the factors affecting old age residential patterns are based on older populations in highly developed economies with well-developed methods of transferring wealth over the life cycle through pensions or savings and across segments of the populations, from current workers to elderly non-workers. Edmonds et al. (2004) show that the relationship between income and residential independence of elderly black women, however, does not maintain in South Africa. Analyses of the living arrangements of the elderly in Fiji, Korea, Malaysia, and the Philippines similarly show that co-residence is little affected by the parent's age, gender, or marital status (Albert and Cattell 1994 in Sokolovosky, 2000).

We address the generalizability of the findings in the U.S to older unmarried women in Mexico using the two waves of the Mexican Health and Aging Study (MHAS). We focus on unmarried women for a number of reasons. First, women have higher life expectancy than men and spend more years as a widow in old age (Lee and Palloni 1992; Rudkin 1993). Second, women especially those who were economically disadvantaged throughout their life have few options other than to depend on adult children. This is particularly true in low-and middle-income countries such as Mexico where structured public transfers are limited in both coverage and generosity of benefits (Rudkin 1993). In contrast, elderly men are more likely to live with and rely on a spouse and have higher levels of household wealth.

The specific objectives of this paper are to:

1) Examine the living arrangements of unmarried Mexican women aged 50 years and older and two-year changes in their residential arrangements (2001-2003);

2) Consider how the mother's characteristics (economic resources, health status and availability of kin) affect her propensity to co-reside with an adult child;

3) Describe how the characteristics of an individual child, and changes therein over 2 years affect the probability of each child co-residing with or nearby his/her unmarried mother.

METHODS

Sample

The Mexican Health and Aging Study (MHAS)/ El Estudio Nacional de Salud y Envejecimiento en México (ENASEM), modeled after the U.S. Health and Retirement Study (HRS), is a prospective panel study that provides a unique opportunity to address a broad research agenda on the effects of individual attributes, migration history, community characteristics, socioeconomic status and transfers, health, and kin availability on household composition and living arrangements of older Mexicans aged 50 years and older.

At its baseline in 2001, MHAS was representative of the 13 million Mexicans born prior to 1951. Respondents were selected in conjunction with the 4th Quarter 2000 National Employment Study/Encuesta Nacional de Empleo (ENE), a nationally representative survey conducted by the Instituto Nacional de Estadistica, Geografia, e Informatica (INEGI), the counterpart of the U.S. Census. The ENE provides coverage of both urban and rural residents in all 32 states of Mexico. The entire MHAS sample was drawn from the 64,475 ENE households of which about 40.5% contained one or more persons eligible for MHAS. Interviews averaging 82 minutes in length were conducted with 15,186 eligible respondents and their spouse/partners for a 90.1% response rate. Households in the 6 Mexican states accounting for 40% of all migrants to the U.S. were over-sampled at a rate slightly less than 2:1. All interviews were conducted in-person by full-time INEGI interviewers trained by MHAS Co-PIs and INEGI supervisors in the unique aspects of MHAS, e.g., securing appropriate contact information for follow-up, administering cognitive performance tests, and using unfolding brackets to reduce measurement error in reports of amounts (e.g., hours of time help and pesos earned or transferred).

Follow-up interviews with surviving respondents were conducted in 2003 and are now completed. As in the HRS, spouses or partners who separated are independently followed. New spouse/partners (and children from an earlier marriage or union) are also included in the second wave of MHAS in 2003. Next-of-kin proxy respondents provided information for 455 deceased respondents from the 2001 baseline. In this paper, we use data from the 2 waves and restrict the sample to unmarried women aged 50 years and older who were alive at both points in time and remained in the unmarried status in 2003.

Analyses

The dependent variable is a measure of child residence proximity to the mother and it includes the following categories: child co-resides with mother, lives in the same

community, or lives in a different community. In addition to the time variable, the analyses include two sets of variables. These are:

1. Characteristics of the unmarried mother: age, marital status (widow, divorced, separated, never married), number of education years, work status, net worth, ever lived or worked in the U.S, number of surviving children, self-rated health, disability measure, characteristics of the community in which the unmarried mother is resident.

2. Characteristics of each child (resident and non-resident): age, gender, type of relationship (own child, step-child, foster child), marital status, education, work and financial status, number of own children, and whether the child lived or worked in the U.S in the past 2 years.

Each observation in the analysis file corresponds to one line per child at time-i. There are two observations per child corresponding to each wave of MHAS. Moreover, each child is nested within a family which could have multiple observations depending on the number of children. We use a multi-level model to analyze the data with levels corresponding to time, family traits shared by all children, such as mother's health and other key background variables, and the attributes of each child. We examine both between family variance and within-family variance of offspring, as well the effects on the probability of unmarried mother living with and/or nearby her children (Goldstein et al. 2000).

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