

Across the generations: Grandparents and grandchildren

by Anne Milan and Brian Hamm

The bond between grandparents and grandchildren is often considered special because it can involve a close relationship across generations. Children in touch with their grandparents learn about the elderly, gain a sense of history, and experience life from the perspective of someone older. At times children, particularly older ones, can offer practical assistance to an elderly grandparent.

In turn, grandparents may enjoy renewed purpose and the youthful enthusiasm of their grandchildren. Grandparents are in a unique position to offer love, advice and a listening ear, while maintaining an objectivity that is often difficult for parents to achieve. Their ability to provide emotional or financial help may come in particularly useful when the parents are experiencing marital problems, separation or divorce, health or disability issues, or other difficult situations.



Grandparents' involvement with grandchildren may range from simply sending birthday or holiday cards to caregiving on a part-time basis to occasionally even full-time care. The extent of emotional closeness between the generations is influenced by how far they live from each other and how often they are in contact.¹ Because there is much diversity in the frequency and type of interaction, it is difficult to make generalizations. It

cannot even be assumed that all persons in their later years want to take on the role of grandparent and the attendant social expectations. Yet for many grandchildren, grandparents

1. Ward, M. 2002. *The Family Dynamic: A Canadian Perspective* (3rd ed.). Scarborough, Ontario: Nelson Thomson Learning.

Data in this article come from the 2001 Census of Population and from the 2001 General Social Survey (GSS). The 2001 Census provided data on the number of grandchildren living with grandparents, the number of grandparents living with grandchildren, household financial maintainer status of the grandparent(s), and whether the middle generation comprised two parents, a lone parent, or no parents. The GSS interviewed a representative sample of over 24,000 Canadians aged 15 years and older living in private households in the 10 provinces. In the GSS, respondents were asked a number of questions related to grandparents and grandchildren, including “Do you have any grandchildren?” and “How many grandchildren do you have?” The distinction was not made between biological and step-grandchildren. Information was also available on respondents living in households with three or more generations. There were about 6,400 grandparents sampled in the GSS, representing 5.7 million grandparents in Canada.

Shared home: refers to grandparents and grandchildren living in the same home, which may be either a multigenerational (including the middle generation), or a skip-generation (no middle generation present) household.

are an integral part of the family, reflecting a relationship which can last from early childhood into the adult years.²

The potential, however, is for grandparents and grandchildren to be even closer when they share a home, either with or without the middle generation. With the complexity of family forms that exist in society today, grandparents can add a sense of stability to households and contribute in a number of ways. Having multiple generations in the same home may also be a source of stress as a result of varying backgrounds, values and expectations. In cases where no parent is present, grandparents may be the primary caregiver, a situation which can involve challenges as well as rewards. This study will use data from the 2001 Census of Population and the 2001 General Social Survey (GSS) to examine the characteristics of

grandparents in Canada, with a focus on those who share homes with their grandchildren.

Snapshot of grandparents

According to the GSS, there were some 5.7 million grandparents in Canada in 2001. As expected, the likelihood of being a grandparent increases with age. While grandparenthood was very rare among people under the age of 45 (2% of women and less than 1%³ of men), by one's late fifties, it was much more common. Nearly two-thirds (65%) of women aged 55 to 64 were grandmothers and over half (53%) of men in this age range were grandfathers. The average age of grandparents was about 65; some 80% of women and 74% of men this age and older were grandparents. By this age, many seniors had been grandparents for some time already. Overall, women

were more likely than men to be grandparents, perhaps partly because women live longer and marry at younger ages than men.⁴

Although there is an increasing diversity in grandparent demographics, many grandparents are seniors, and their characteristics tend to reflect those of the overall elderly population in Canada. In 2001, over two-thirds (68%) of grandparents were married while 18% were widowed. An additional 10% were divorced, separated, or never married and 4% of grandparents were living common-law. Over half (53%) of grandparents were retired, nearly one-third (30%) were in the labour force, and 11% stated their main activity as home makers or childcare providers.

Nearly five grandchildren for each grandparent

According to the 2001 GSS, grandparents have, on average, 4.7 grandchildren. This number, though, is likely to decline as fertility rates continue to fall. In fact, researchers have noted that “beanpole” families, in which multiple generations exist but have fewer members in each generation, are becoming more common. With reduced numbers of kin who can be counted on to “be there,” grandparent–grandchild relations may take on added importance.⁵

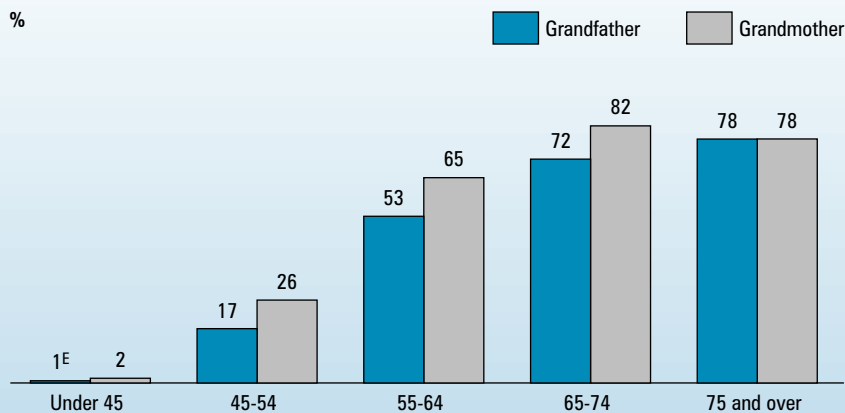
Many other factors may also influence the relationship between

2. Kemp, C. 2003. “The social and demographic contours of contemporary grandparenthood: Mapping patterns in Canada and the United States.” *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 34, 2: 187-212.

3. Use with caution.

4. Kemp. 2003.

5. Giarrusso, R., M. Silverstein and V.L. Bengtson. Spring 1996. “Family complexity and the grandparent role.” *Generations* 20: 17-23.



^E Use with caution.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2001.

grandparents and grandchildren, including changes in family composition. In particular, parental divorce or separation can severely damage the grandparent–grandchild relationship on the side of the family that has not been granted custody.⁶ While remarriages and blended families often come with stepgrandparents, this is a role which can be especially ambiguous. On the other hand, grandparents who are themselves in long-term marriages can serve as sources of stability and positive examples for grandchildren from broken or troubled homes.

Sharing a home: Grandparents and grandchildren

In Canada today, grandparents are most likely to live in a separate household from their adult children and grandchildren. Yet some homes do contain both grandparents and grandchildren; most of these homes also include at least one of the child's parents.

According to the 2001 GSS, nearly 4% of Canadians, or about 930,000 people, lived in multigenerational households; that is, households with at least three generations including grandparents, parents, and grandchildren. Strictly speaking, this

arrangement is what social historians and anthropologists refer to as the extended family. Among historical demographers, there is considerable controversy whether this family form was ever very prevalent and, despite the nostalgic perceptions, desired.⁷

Across Canada's provinces, in 2001 multigenerational households were most common in British Columbia (4.9%) and Ontario (4.8%), and least common in Quebec (1.6%). About 3.5% of individuals in each of the Atlantic provinces and in the Prairies lived in this type of household.

Immigrants twice as likely as the Canadian-born to live in multigenerational families

The higher share of multigenerational households in British Columbia and Ontario may reflect these provinces' larger immigrant populations. Previous research also found that multigenerational households were more common among the immigrant population, especially those from Asian countries.⁸ In fact, GSS data showed that less than 3% of people who were Canadian-born lived in multigenerational households in 2001, compared with 7% of those born outside Canada.

While living in a multigenerational family can offer many benefits, some families, particularly from certain ethnic or cultural backgrounds, may experience a clash in values between the traditional family ideals of an older generation and the Western values that may have been adopted by the children.⁹ Such conflicts could be even more pronounced when there are multiple generations in a home.

Culture might also be one of the reasons accounting for the high proportion of grandchildren sharing homes with their grandparents in Nunavut (9.7%) and the Northwest Territories (5.4%). These territories are home to many Aboriginal peoples, for whom the extended family has traditionally been very important.¹⁰ Indeed, Aboriginal children aged 14 and under are more likely to live with relatives or non-relatives than are non-Aboriginal children.¹¹

Nearly half a million grandparents live with their grandchildren

The 2001 Census counted more than 474,400 grandparents who shared households with their grandchildren. However, relatively few grandparents

6. Giarrusso, Silverstein and Bengston. 1996.

7. Laslett, P. 1972. "Introduction: The history of the family." In P. Laslett and R. Wall (eds.), *Household and Family in Past Time*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

8. Che-Alford, J. and B. Hamm. Summer 1999. "Under one roof: Three generations living together." *Canadian Social Trends*. p. 6-9.

9. Francis, R.D., R. Jones, and D.B. Smith. 2000. *Destinies: Canadian History Since Confederation* (4th ed.). Toronto: Harcourt Canada.

10. Ward. 2002.

11. Statistics Canada. 2003. *Aboriginal Peoples of Canada: A Demographic Profile* (Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 96F0030XIE2001007).

aged 85 and over shared a home with their grandchildren, suggesting that many of the oldest elderly are either living elsewhere or the grandchildren have grown and established their own households.

Over half (51%) of grandparents in shared homes lived with their adult child, his or her spouse and the grandchildren. This could include “sandwich” or even “club sandwich” generations¹² in which the middle generations, particularly women, care for both children and elderly parents. However, regardless of living arrangements, intergenerational exchanges of support flow not only to the older and younger generations from the parents, but from grandparents to their adult children and grandchildren as well.¹³

One-third of grandparents (about 158,200) in shared homes lived in households where the middle generation was a lone parent, most likely the mother. Lone mothers are more likely than mothers in two-parent families to be in need of support — physical, emotional and financial. Living in a multigenerational home may be one way of ensuring that women in these situations are not totally on their own.

Grandparents who share a home with a lone parent tend to be younger than their counterparts in two-parent households. Teen pregnancy across generations means that individuals could potentially become grandparents at a very young age. More than 10% of grandparents who shared a home with grandchildren and a lone parent were under the age of 45 compared with only 2% of grandparents living with a couple as the middle generation.

12. Giarrusso, Silverstein, and Bengston. 1996.

13. Connidis, I.A. 2001. *Family Ties and Aging*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.

CST One in 250 children lives with grandparents only

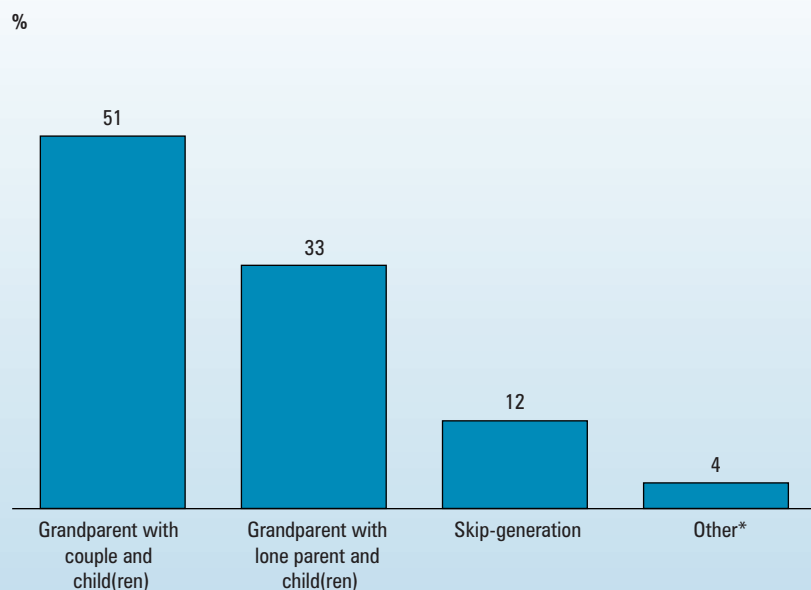
In 2001, nearly 191,000 children aged 0 to 14 (3.3% of all children in this age group) lived in the same household as one or more grandparents. However, at 25,200 (or 0.4% of all children aged 0 to 14), the number of grandchildren living in skip-generation households was much lower. While absolute numbers have increased somewhat between 1991 and 2001, the proportion has remained relatively stable during this period. The highest percentages of children in skip-generation households are found in Nunavut (2.3% of all children aged 0 to 14), the Northwest Territories (1.3%), and Saskatchewan (1.2%) while the lowest are in Quebec (0.2%). In both 1991 and 2001, a slightly higher proportion (0.6% of all teenagers this age) of older grandchildren aged 15 to 19 lived in skip-generation households.

Grandparents can serve as crucial buffers between parents and teenage grandchildren. Their age and years of experience, coupled with an often stable lifestyle, enable them to act as anchors in the fast-changing and chaotic world of the teen. Their presence and support is even more important for teens in volatile family situations. However, parental conflict and other family problems are not the only reasons why older grandchildren live with their grandparents. These children may be attending a school that is located far from the parents’ home but close to where the grandparents live.

	Grandchildren sharing a home with at least one grandparent	Grandchildren in multigenerational households	Grandchildren in skip-generation households
% of all children aged 0 to 14*			
Canada	3.3	2.9	0.4
Newfoundland and Labrador	5.3	4.6	0.7
Prince Edward Island	3.5	3.0	0.5
Nova Scotia	3.8	3.2	0.6
New Brunswick	3.9	3.4	0.5
Quebec	1.8	1.6	0.2
Ontario	3.6	3.3	0.3
Manitoba	3.9	3.0	0.9
Saskatchewan	3.9	2.7	1.2
Alberta	3.2	2.6	0.6
British Columbia	4.4	3.9	0.5
Yukon	2.6	2.1	0.5
Northwest Territories	5.4	4.1	1.3
Nunavut	9.7	7.4	2.3

* In private households.

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2001.



* Middle generation may include both a couple and a lone parent, and/or adult children who are not the parents of the grandchildren.

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2001.

When grandparents replace parents

For many grandparents, later life is a time for enjoying the benefits of an empty nest and retirement, while having fewer responsibilities than during their childrearing years. Yet about 56,700 grandparents, or 12% of those in shared households, lived with only grandchildren and no middle generation. These households are commonly referred to as skip-generation households. According to GSS data, most skip-generation grandparents in 2001 were women (67%) and were married (57%), and many were retired (46%).

Grandparents' willingness to take in their grandchildren reflects the importance of family, particularly when faced with difficulties. It is generally the parent's inability or unwillingness to care for the children that leads to full-time grandparent caregiving. Possible reasons include substance abuse, divorce or separation, mental health problems, teen

pregnancy, child abuse or neglect, or death of an adult child.¹⁴

This creates a situation in which grandparents are raising some of the most at-risk children in society at a time when they were probably expecting more rest and relaxation. These grandchildren may have experienced physical or emotional abuse, have special needs, been exposed to parental conflict or toxic substances, and, consequently, might require much care and guidance. They might also feel divided loyalties if tensions exist between their parents and grandparents. In addition, because of problems encountered by their adult children, grandparents might have to contend with the skepticism of others regarding their parenting abilities,¹⁵ and perhaps even their own self-doubt.

While grandparent caregivers may find it rewarding to be involved in rearing their grandchildren, they may also experience challenges related to social isolation, financial problems, or

health issues.¹⁶ Adapting to the caregiver role could necessitate changes in employment, living arrangements, social networks, as well as other lifestyle adjustments.

In some cases, parents may be relieved to have the grandparents assume caregiving responsibility, and grandparents can apply for legal custody or guardianship or pursue adoption. But if contested by the adult children, this then can increase any existing conflict between the generations.¹⁷ And without guardianship, there are certain decisions, such as the education or health care of grandchildren, that grandparents cannot make. They might also be ineligible for some types of financial assistance, such as support payments or other child benefits.

Two-thirds of skip-generation grandparents are financial providers

In addition to assuming responsibility for raising a grandchild, some grandparents are also providing for them financially. Overall, about 35% of grandparents in shared homes were household maintainers (or primary financial providers). An earlier study found that grandparents who are the

14. See, for example, Waldrop, D.P. and J.A. Weber. 2001. "From grandparent to caregiver: The stress and satisfaction of raising grandchildren." *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Human Services* 82, 5: 461-472.

15. Minkler, M. 1999. "Intergenerational households headed by grandparents: contexts, realities, and implications for policy." *Journal of Aging Studies* 13, 2: 199-218.

16. Roe, K.M. and M. Minkler. 1998. "Grandparents raising grandchildren: challenges and responses." *Generations* 22, 4: 25-32.

17. Jendrek, M.P. 1993. "Grandparents who parent their grandchildren: Effects on lifestyle." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 55, 3: 609-621.

	% who are financial providers
Total grandparents in shared homes	35
Total multigenerational household	30
Middle generation – couple	16
Middle generation – lone parent	50
Middle generation – other*	54
Skip-generation household	65

* Middle generation may include both a couple and a lone parent, and/or adult children who are not the parents of the grandchildren.

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2001.

primary financial providers for their grandchildren tend to be younger, healthier, more highly educated, and more apt to be employed than grandparents living in parent-maintained homes.¹⁸

In the remaining homes, the maintainer is another household member or even someone from outside (e.g. a parent providing financial support while the grandchild stays with the grandparent to attend school). Even though grandparents living in parent-maintained homes are typically older, in poorer health, and less likely to be in the labour force, they can still contribute to the household in the form of income or unpaid help such as child care.¹⁹

The number of parents in a shared household matters considerably in who is responsible for finances. Only 16% of grandparents in multigenerational households where the middle generation was a couple were primary financial providers, compared with 50% where the middle generation was a lone parent. In skip-generation households, where there were no parents present in the home, nearly two-thirds of grandparents (65%) were financially responsible for the household.

The likelihood of being a household maintainer decreases with the age of

grandparents in shared households. Nearly half (49%) of grandparents under 45 years were maintainers. This percentage declines with every age group. By age 75 to 84, about one-quarter (25%) of grandparents were maintainers, as were less than one in five (18%) of those aged 85 and over.

Summary

Whether they are primary or occasional caregivers, reside in the same household or not, live nearby or on the other side of the country, grandparents have the potential to be very influential in the lives of their grandchildren. Although they represent a small proportion of the overall population, about 930,000 individuals lived in a multigenerational household in 2001.

In some cases, grandparents are the financial maintainers of households containing not only the grandchild, but also at least one parent. Given that multigenerational households are more common among foreign-born individuals, their numbers will likely be influenced by levels of immigration. In skip-generation households, grandparents are faced with additional responsibilities. These grandparents may be able to provide a safe haven for vulnerable grandchildren whose own parents may be experiencing problems.

In return for their efforts, grandparents may enjoy a sense of purpose and may be in a position to both give support to, and receive it from, their grandchildren. The motives for living in a multigenerational or extended family may be mixed and may change over time, with a blurring of grandparents as caregivers and care recipients. But whatever shape the roles take on, it appears that the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren is here to stay.

18. Bryson, K. and L.M. Casper. 1999. "Coresident grandparents and grandchildren." *Current Population Reports* P23-198. Washington, DC: US Bureau of the Census.

19. Bryson and Casper. 1999.



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