

Parents with adult children living at home

by Martin Turcotte



Parents playing host to their adult children has become a more common living arrangement in recent years. Media, television and movies often portray this situation, depicting the difficulties that many parents have telling their kids that they should leave the nest. In many of these scenarios, the picture drawn is one of frustrated parents enduring a situation they had neither planned nor prepared for.

As is often the case, part of the popular view about adult children living at home is probably not without foundation. Some parents might feel trapped in an unwanted living arrangement, in which their adult children take advantage of their hospitality without offering much in exchange. But these portraits are probably exaggerated; many parents enjoy the company – and sometimes help – of their adult children;¹ others might feel, for any number of reasons, that they have a duty to help their children during this particular period in their lives.

And parents who value family ties as much (or more than) economic independence may prefer that their children continue to live with them until some other rite of passage into adulthood such as marriage is marked.

So, who are the parents whose adult children still live at home? Are they less likely to have higher incomes and more likely to be immigrants? And how do these parents view their

coresidence experience? This study uses data from the 2001 General Social Survey to compare parents whose adult children are still at home with those whose adult children do not live with them anymore. It then examines whether or not coresidence is associated with significant negative outcomes, particularly in terms of conflicts within couples. It also contrasts parents whose adult children never left the house and those whose children returned to the nest after living independently for a time.

Parents who live in CMAs are more likely to live with at least one of their children

It is not news that young adults are more likely to live with their parents now than 20 years ago. In 2001, 57% of young men and women aged 20 to 24 were living with their parents; in 1981, the proportion was only 41%. Generally speaking, young adults who live with their parents are much more likely to be single, to attend school full time and to have lower income than young adults who are not living with their parents².

However, less is known about their parents. A number of characteristics are associated with the likelihood that parents coreside with their adult child or children. For example, parents born in Asia were three times more likely to coreside with their adult children than Canadian-born parents (73% compared with only 26%); similarly,

parents whose youngest child was in their early 20s were three to six times more likely to have an adult child at home than those whose youngest child was in their early 30s. (The table presented in the appendix illustrates these associations.)

In order to identify the relative importance of these different factors to the probability that parents coreside with their adult children, a multivariate statistical analysis was conducted. Only parents whose youngest child was between 20 and 34 years old were included in the analysis;³ of this group, 32% of parents lived with at least one of their adult children.

Holding the effects of other characteristics constant, the place where the parent lived had a significant impact on the likelihood that at least one of their adult children lived with them. Specifically, parents who resided in the largest census metropolitan areas (CMAs) were more likely to have an adult child at home: 41% of parents in Vancouver, 39% in Toronto, 34% in Ottawa and 28% in Montréal. In contrast, only 17% of parents living in rural areas or small towns shared their house with at least one of their adult children.

These results do not necessarily mean that parents who reside in smaller places are more reluctant to accommodate their adult children. Most postsecondary institutions are located in larger cities and for university or college students whose

Predicted probability	
Parent's characteristics	%
Place of residence	
Vancouver CMA	41*
Toronto CMA	39*
Ottawa-Gatineau CMA	34*
Montréal CMA	28*
CMA, population 500,000 - 1,000,000	35*
CMA, population 100,000 - 499,999	22*
CMA/CA, population 50,000 - 99,999	19
CA, population under 50,000	16
Urban outside CMA	18
Rural outside CMA	17
Region of residence	
Atlantic	25
Québec	27
Ontario	30
Prairies	17*
British Columbia	21

Note : Reference group shown in italics. CMA = Census Metropolitan Area; CA = Census Agglomeration.

* Difference is statistically significant from reference group when all other factors are held constant (p < .05).

Source : Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2001.

parents already live in a CMA, staying at home can be a financially attractive option; for some students, it might even be the only option. In contrast, young adults from more remote regions generally don't have that choice and many have to leave home to pursue higher education. Another factor is the cost of living in larger urban areas, which is significantly higher than elsewhere in Canada. Young adults with low incomes and/or an uncertain job future might hesitate longer before renting an apartment if their parents can provide housing.

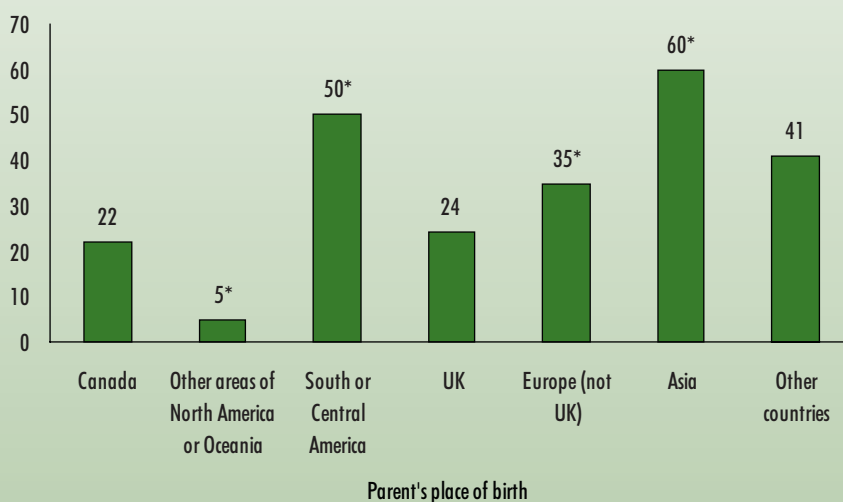
Province of residence was also associated with the likelihood that the parent of an adult child or children lived with at least one of them. In Ontario, parents had a 30% chance of living with an adult child; in contrast, the probability was significantly lower in the Prairies (17%).

South American and Asian-born parents most likely to live with adult children

The parent's place of birth also influenced significantly the likelihood that they lived with an adult child. Parents born in Europe (other than the UK), South America and Asia had much higher predicted probabilities (respectively 35%, 50% and 60%) than Canadian-born parents (only 22%). Previous studies have also documented this phenomenon⁴. In many societies, young adults are expected to live with their parents until they get married. Also in some cultures, like the Chinese culture⁵, caring for an aging parent is often considered a family obligation, while in some Southeast Asian cultures it is still very common for newlyweds to live with the husband's parents⁶.

For parents born outside Canada, place of birth was not the only factor affecting their probability of living with an adult child. Studies have found there is a relationship between the length of time spent in the new country and coresidence.⁷ Parents who immigrated to Canada before 1960 have a lower predicted probability (38%) of coresidence than

Predicted probability (%)



* Statistically significant difference from Canada when all other factors are held constant (p < .05).

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2001.

GST What you should know about this study

Individuals selected for this study were all Canadian parents whose youngest children was aged 20 to 34 in 2001. Although parents whose youngest child was younger than 20 years old could also live with an adult child, their family situation or their stage in the family life cycle is certainly different than that of parents whose children are all adults. The sample selected allowed better comparability between parents who live and don't live with their adult children.

Analytical techniques and statistical models

The results presented are predicted probabilities calculated from a logistic regression. They estimate the probability that a parent with a certain characteristic (for example, being born outside Canada) lives with one or more adult child, after taking into account – that is, after holding constant – all other factors included in the regression model.

All other predicted probabilities presented were calculated from the results of ordered logit models (except the dispute scale, see below). Control variables included in the regression model were all relative to the parent: gender, highest level of education, age, common law or married status, personal income, place of birth, province of residence, main activity during the year (working, looking for work, household work, retired, long term illness, other) and number of adult child(ren) living in the house (one, two and more, with zero as the reference category).

Specifically, ordered logit models were run for the following dependent variables, which are all ordinal level type of variables: satisfaction with the amount of time spent with the children (very satisfied to not satisfied at all); perception that the children take too much of the parents' time (strongly agree to strongly disagree); having children made the parents happier (strongly agree to strongly disagree); frequency of the different sources of conflicts (often, sometimes, hardly

ever and never) including money, children, chores and responsibilities, in-laws, showing affection. In an ordered logit model, the dependent variable takes the value (for example) of 4 for "very satisfied", 3 for "satisfied", 2 for "not satisfied" and 1 for "not satisfied at all." The model estimates the probability that an individual with specific characteristics reports being "very satisfied", "satisfied", "not satisfied" or "not satisfied." Four intercepts are estimated, taking into account the fact that the intensity of the difference between "satisfied" and "not satisfied" might be greater (or smaller, depending on the cases) than the difference between "very satisfied" and "satisfied". Predicted probabilities were calculated holding all other variables than the one of interest (presence of one, two and more or zero adult child at home) to their mean value for the sample considered.

"Dispute scale"

Respondents to the survey were asked: *Do you and your (spouse/partner) often, sometimes, hardly ever or never have arguments about...*

- chores and responsibilities
- your child(ren)
- money
- showing affection to each other
- leisure time
- in-laws

For each question, a score of 1 was attributed if the respondent answered "never," 2 if the respondent answered "hardly never," 3 if the respondent answered "sometimes" and 4 if the respondent answered "often." The scores for all questions were summed, resulting in an overall score ranging from 6 to 24.

Results reported in the text for the "dispute scale" come from an ordinary least squares regression, with the "dispute scale" as the dependent variable.

probability (38%) of coresidence than those who arrived between 1980 and 2001 (66%), holding constant all other factors, including place of birth.⁸ For those who came in the 1960s and 1970s, the likelihood was 43%. This indicates that, independent of place of birth, time spent in Canada decreased the likelihood of parent-adult child coresidence; in other

words, that both place of birth and length of residence in Canada play an independent role. For example, the likelihood that an Asian-born parent who immigrated between 1980 and 2001 lived with at least one adult child was 82%, holding other factors constant.

Parent's income and education not associated with coresidence...

Some authors have argued that parents in higher socio-economic positions may have a greater tendency to expect their children to be independent earlier than those with less education and income;⁹ others have said that parents with

greater incomes might use their resources to help their older adult children to leave home.¹⁰ In contrast, it has been said that some parents with fewer economic resources might encourage their children to stay in order to benefit from the presence of more earners at home.¹¹

However, the analysis of GSS data does not show support for these interpretations. Parents with a higher level of education were neither more nor less likely than less well-educated parents to live with their adult children. Nor were parents with high personal income any less likely than those with lower personal income to provide accommodation for their young adults.¹² It is quite possible, as sociologist Lynn White suggests, that "children's resources are much more likely than parent's resources to buy them independence."¹³

...but the type of family home is

If the parent's socio-economic status does not significantly influence the probability of living with an adult child, their house does make a difference. After holding all other factors constant, parents in a single detached house had a greater chance of sharing their home with at least one adult child (probability of 28%) than those in a low-rise apartment building (11%). Parents residing in a semi-detached, row house or duplex also had a significantly higher likelihood of having an adult child at home. Generally speaking, people who live in single detached houses or who own their homes also have higher socio-economic status. However, many parents with average incomes also own a single detached house. The multivariate analysis shows that what matters the most when it comes to accommodating an adult child is not the parental income, but the type of house the parents live in – having more space available increases the likelihood that parents and adult children will coreside.

Generally, the disruption of family structures by divorce or separation is associated with leaving home early.¹⁴

The results of the GSS analysis are consistent with these conclusions: married parents were more likely than divorced parents to live with their adult children. However, these results should not be misinterpreted. Many divorced and separated parents might live separately from their adult children not necessarily because the children have left home to live on their own, but simply because they were living with the other parent (the mother, in most cases). Indeed, the predicted likelihood for divorced or separated mothers to live with at least one of their adult children was more than twice as high as that for divorced or separated fathers, at 23% compared with 9%.

Being widowed was also associated with adult child coresidence. After accounting for other factors, widowed parents were almost as likely as

married parents to live with an adult child. It is quite possible that this type of living arrangement responds to the needs of the parent more than to the needs of the adult child.¹⁵ For example, some researchers have suggested that "children living with widowed parents may have closer emotional ties with parents and feel a greater pressure to live longer with parents who otherwise may be left alone."¹⁶

Households in which at least one parent is retired or ill might not be well-suited for parent-adult child coresidence. Indeed, compared to those who worked for pay, parents who were retired or ill were significantly less likely to live with their children (predicted probabilities of 28, 21% and 18%, respectively, while holding other variables constant).

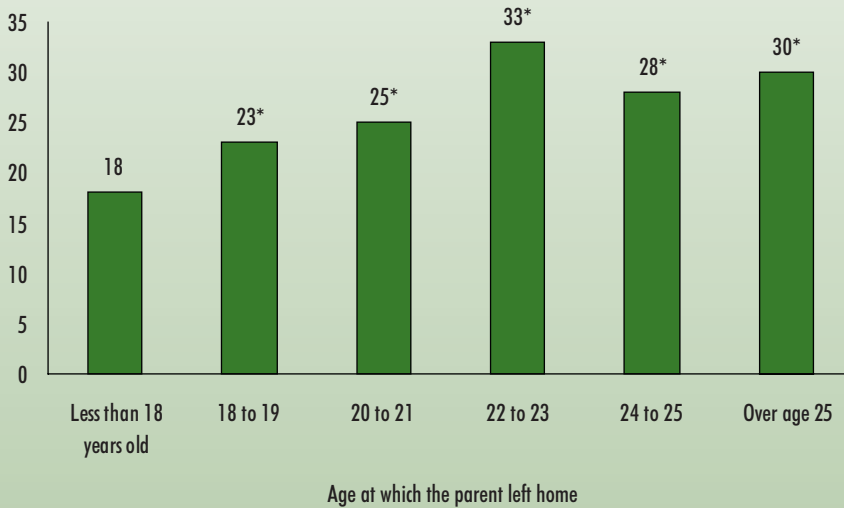
GST Parents with houses, as well as those who are married or widowed, have a higher predicted probability of coresiding with adult children

Parent's characteristics	Predicted probability
	%
Type of dwelling	
Single detached	28*
Semi or duplex	27*
High rise	17
Other	13
<i>Low rise</i>	11
Marital status	
Common law	11
Married	28*
Widowed	27*
Separated	18
Single	24
<i>Divorced</i>	17
Main activity during the year	
<i>Working</i>	28
Looking for work	28
Other	24
Housework	29
Retiree	21*
Illness	18*

Note : Reference group shown in italics.
 * Difference is statistically significant from reference group when all other factors are held constant (p < .05).
 Source : Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2001.

Parents who left the nest after age 21 were most likely to coreside with adult children

Predicted probability (%)



* Statistically significant difference from "Less than 18 years old" when all other factors are held constant ($p < .05$).
Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2001.

The last variable of interest is the age at which the parent left home when he or she was young. Taking all other variables into account, parents who moved out of their own parents' house before age 18 were significantly less likely to live with an adult child than those who did so at an older age. It appears that those parents who left the house early may have provided an example for their own children. Alternatively, it might mean that they applied more implicit or explicit pressure on their children to leave the house earlier.

In sum, parents who were most likely to live with at least one of their adult children lived in a large urban area in Ontario, were born in Asia or in South America, lived in a single detached house, were married and left their family home after age 21.

The consequences of living with an adult child

Sometimes, the coresidence of parents with their adult children is portrayed in very negative terms. Many of these adult children are said to stay at home without contributing much, have a newer car than their parents and, to complete the picture, are as messy as when they were teenagers. Stress, discouragement and eventual conflicts between parents are said to be part of the routine in these households. Are these perceptions overstated?

GSS respondents were asked if they strongly agree, agree, disagree or strongly disagree with the following two statements: "I am often frustrated because my children take so much of my time."; and "Having children has made me a happier person." They were also asked whether they were very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, not very satisfied or not satisfied at all with "the amount of time I spend with my children."

An analysis comparing parents living with at least one adult child with those who did not supported, at least in part, the idea that sharing the house with an adult child might come with some frustrations. After holding constant other variables like

Parents have a high predicted probability of living with an adult child if the child is in their early 20s

Parent's characteristics	Predicted probability %
Number of children aged 20 to 34	
<i>One</i>	20
Two	27*
Three or more	32*
Age of the youngest child	
<i>20 to 21</i>	64
22 to 23	47*
24 to 25	34*
26 to 27	22*
28 to 29	11*
30 to 31	13*
32 to 34	11*
Ratio of boys and girls	
All girls	23
All boys	28*

Note : Reference group shown in italics.

* Difference is statistically significant from reference group when all other factors are held constant ($p < .05$).

Source : Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2001.

the level of education, age, gender and income, parents who were living with two adult children were twice as likely to report that they often felt frustrated because their children took so much of their time; the predicted probability that these parents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement was 8%, compared to 4% for parents whose adult children did not live with them. That being said most parents, whether or not they lived with their adult children, disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement.

While some parents living with their adult children might experience some kinds of frustration, they might also be rewarded, for example when the adult children contribute to the household by doing housework or providing emotional support and companionship¹⁷. They might also be more satisfied with the amount of time they spend with their children. Overall, the majority of parents whose youngest child was aged 20 to 34 said that they were very satisfied with the amount of time that they spent with their children (54%). However, that proportion was significantly higher for parents who lived with at least one of their adult children. Holding other factors constant in a statistical model, 64% of parents living with one adult child at home reported being very satisfied with the amount of time they spent with their children, compared to 49% for other parents. Some of the parents who lived with their adult children could have felt that the amount of time they spent with their adult children was just "too much" – and therefore could have said that they were not very satisfied with it. However, as the results show, a little "too much" time could be better than "not enough" for many parents.

Most parents agree that having children has made them happier people. Does coresidence with an adult child persuade parents to change their minds? Apparently not: parents living with their adult children were equally likely to say that having

children made them happier. In summary, it can be said that parents who live with an adult child were more likely to express some frustration, but that they were no more likely to express regrets about having had children. On the contrary, a greater proportion of parents living with at least one of their adult children were very satisfied with the time they spent with their children.

Marital quality

What about couples' relationships? In that respect, the coresidence of parents with their adult children seems to have more consequences. But again, they were far from being disastrous.

The presence of adult children at home slightly increased the frequency with which the parents reported having arguments with their spouse over various issues such as money, children, chores and responsibilities, in-laws and showing affection. A higher score on the dispute scale (low score equals 6, high score equals 24) indicates a higher frequency of disputes. Everything else being equal, married parents¹⁸ who lived with one adult child were significantly more likely to report greater frequency of conflict than married parents whose children had left home (0.4 points higher on the scale). Parents who were living with two adult children scored 1.4 points higher, a difference that was also statistically significant.

Why should couples living with an adult child be more likely to be involved in conflicts than others? Some authors have argued that the departure of an adult child lowers the level of conflict that often accompanies the arrival of a child in the marriage;¹⁹ this new stage in life is also said to provide parents with the satisfaction of having completed "successfully" the responsibility of childrearing. When the adult children delay their departure from home, it is possible that the frequency of conflict within couples remains higher a little longer. Results, while not proving

that this is necessarily the case, are somewhat consistent with these interpretations.

However, not all types of conflicts included in the scale were similarly frequent sources of arguments between married parents. The following possible conflict issues for couples were examined separately: chores and responsibilities, children, money, showing affection to each other, leisure time and in-laws.

The likelihood of arguing often or sometimes over questions of money was greater when there were two or more adult children at home (predicted probability of 31%). This compares to 23% when only one adult child was living at home and to 21% when all children had left the house. The greater frequency of conflict is understandable since living with two other adults certainly implies some additional costs for the parents, even when the children contribute to the family economy. For some families, more costs may imply greater risk of conflicts over money.

Parents who lived with two or more adult children also had a higher predicted probability of reporting arguments often or sometimes with their spouse about their children (40%, after taking into account other factors). This rate was twice the likelihood recorded for parents whose children had left home.

Finally, the presence of children was related to conflicts about chores and responsibilities. The likelihood of having arguments often or sometimes with their spouse about this issue was 39% when married parents coresided with two or more adult children, and 33% when they coresided with one; in contrast, it was significantly lower (28%) for parents whose adult children had left. Whether the adult child participates or not in the chores, additional people in the home generally increases the total amount of household work, which in turn can increase the risk of disagreements for parents. However, other types of conflicts that can arise between all

couples – about showing affection to each other, about leisure time and about in-laws – were neither more nor less likely to occur between parents who had adult children living with them than between those who did not.

The boomerang kid phenomenon

Adult children who return to live in the parental home after having left to live independently are sometimes referred to as “boomerang kids.” One-quarter (24%) of parents who lived with adult children were in fact living with a boomerang kid. For these parents, a returning child may have different consequences than for parents whose adult children had never left home, since they may have thought their children had left for life. Supplementary GSS analyses supported, at least in part, the suggestion that it is a different experience.

First, parents who were living with at least one boomerang kid were more likely to express frustration because their children took so much of their time (8% versus 5% of parents living with non-boomerang children). After the return of an adult child, many mothers may experience a return to the “second shift,”²⁰ which might affect their satisfaction. Also, parents of boomerang kids were less likely to agree strongly with the statement “*Having children has made me a happier person*” (predicted probability of 57% versus 68%). However, for married parents, the frequency of conflict between the couple was not significantly greater with a boomerang kid than with an adult child who had never left home.

Summary

Parents of children at least 20 years old are much more likely than others to be living with at least one of their adult children if they live in a large CMA, own a single detached house, and were born in Asia, South America

or Europe. Socio-economic status is not associated with coresidence with an adult child. Parents are more likely to express higher frequency of conflicts within their marriages; however, the difference between them and parents whose adult children had left the house are probably smaller than they are sometimes perceived to be. The most frequent causes of conflict included money, children, and household chores and responsibilities.

Since the GSS data were collected in 2001, better labour market conditions have developed across the country, improving employment opportunities for new labour force entrants; as such, the proportion of parents living with an adult child may have decreased. It would be interesting to assess whether, as general economic conditions become more positive, the presence of an adult child in the home has more profound consequences on parental well-being than shown by the results of this study.


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Characteristics of respondent parent	% of parents with youngest child aged 20 to 34	Characteristics of respondent parent	% of parents with youngest child aged 20 to 34
Total	32	High rise apartment	28
Place of residence		Low rise apartment	15 ^E
Vancouver CMA	46	Other	F
Toronto CMA	54	Marital status	
Ottawa-Gatineau CMA	37	Married	35
Montréal CMA	32	Common law	17 ^E
CMA, population 500,000 - 1,000,000	36	Widowed	24
CMA, population 100,000 - 499,999	29	Separated	27
CMA/CA, population 50,000 - 99,999	23	Single	33 ^E
CA, population under 50,000	21	Divorced	23
Urban outside CMA	23	Main activity during the year	
Rural outside CMA	20	Working	39
Region of residence		Looking for work	36 ^E
Atlantic	22	Other	30 ^E
Québec	28	Housework	33
Ontario	39	Retired	19
Prairies	25	Illness	22 ^E
British Columbia	31	Age at which the parent left home	
Place of birth		Less than 18 years old	22
Canada	26	18 to 19	27
Other areas of North America or Oceania	F	20 to 21	32
South or Central America	59	22 to 23	39
UK	32	24 to 25	39
Europe (not UK)	43	Over age 25	38
Asia	73	Age of the youngest child	
Other countries	53	20 to 21	65
Gender		22 to 23	49
Male	32	24 to 25	38
Female	32	26 to 27	28
Age		28 to 29	15
Under 50 years	46	30 to 31	16
Age 50 to 59	34	32 to 34	11
Age 60 and over	22	Number of children aged 20 to 34	
Highest level of schooling		One	20
University	36	Two	37
College	34	Three or more	43
High school	35	Ratio of stepchildren	
Elementary	25	Zero	32
Personal income		All	15 ^E
Under \$20,000	26	Ratio of children adopted	
\$20,000 to \$39,999	31	Zero	32
\$40,000 to \$59,999	37	All	18 ^E
\$60,000 and over	35	Ratio of boys and girls	
Type of dwelling		All girls	24
Single detached house	34	All boys	29
Semi-detached or duplex	36		

^E Use with caution.

F Sample too small to produce reliable estimate.

Source : Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2001.